**C**

**Mama and the Idle Roomer**

Finances were low for many months after the Strike.

Not that we were to worry, Mama told us, but would we mind having to move the davenport into the kitchen so that we could rent the front room?

We didn’t mind, especially after Mama promised that with the money she got she would buy herself the warm coat she needed so badly.

Mr. Hyde called in answer to the neat “Room for Rent” sign in the window.

Mama and I showed him the room. Probably because it was Mama’s first experience in “renting,” she forgot to ask for references or payment in advance.

“The quarters are eminently satisfactory.” Mr. Hyde had such a refined way of speaking. “I’ll have my bags sent up this evening. And my books.”

Mr. Hyde fitted smoothly into our midst. True, he didn’t seem to have any regular hours of business. But he always spoke pleasantly to the children, and whenever he passed Mama in the hall he bowed gallantly.

Papa liked him, too. Mr. Hyde had visited Norway once and could talk with Papa about the wonderful fishing there.

Only Aunt Jenny, who had a boardinghouse of her own, disapproved. “When,” she asked, “is he going to pay his rent?”

“Is hard,” Mama said, “to ask. Surely he will pay soon.”

But Aunt Jenny only hmphed. She’d seen his kind before, she told us darkly. Mama needn’t think she’d be able to buy any new coat with the rent she’d get from *that one*. Gentleman?

Hmph!

Now that worried us children. But Mama smiled at our long faces. “Such talk,” she scolded, and made coffee for Aunt Jenny to stop her grumbling.

When the rainy weather came, Mama worried that Mr. Hyde’s room was cold in the evenings, so she had Papa invite him into the warm kitchen to sit with us. Christine, Nels, and I did our homework under the big lamp, and Papa and Mr. Hyde smoked their pipes by the stove. Mama worked quietly at the sink, setting the bread or making clabber cheese.

Mr. Hyde advised Nels on his high-school courses and sometimes helped him with his Latin. Nels became interested, his grades improved, and he stopped begging Papa to let him quit school and go to work.

After we finished our schoolwork and Mama had settled down in the rocking chair with her mending, Mr. Hyde would tell us of his travels and adventures. Oh, he knew so many things! It was like history and geography coming to life and marching around the room. Mr. Hyde had gone to Oxford and had sailed all around the world.

One night he began to read Dickens to us. Soon it became an accepted fact that after our homework was done, Mr. Hyde would bring down one of his books and read aloud. And strange new worlds were opened to us.

“They are like sagas,” Mama said. “Wonderful.”

After *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Mr. Hyde gave us Shakespeare. He had a fine deep voice and sounded as we imagined a great actor would sound.

Even when the warm weather came we children didn’t beg to go out in the evenings to play one-foot-off-the-gutter. I think Mama was glad; she never liked us running the streets.

Best of all, Nels went less and less to the street corner to hang around with the neighborhood boys. The night they got into trouble for breaking into Mr. Dillon’s store Nels was home with us. He’d wanted to hear the last chapter of *Dombey and Son*.

Mr. Hyde had taken us deep into *Ivanhoe* when he got the letter.

“I must go,” he told Mama. “I shall leave the books for Nels and the children. Here is my check for all I owe you, madam, and my profound thanks for your hospitality.”

We were sorry to see Mr. Hyde leave, but it was with great excitement that we brought his books out to the kitchen. There were so many of them!

We read some of the titles: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Mama dusted them reverently. “So much we can learn,” she said. Nels, she added, could read aloud to us each evening, just as Mr. Hyde had done, because Nels too had a fine voice. I could see that made him very proud.

Mama showed Mr. Hyde’s check to Aunt Jenny. “You see?” she said. “The warm coat I shall have after all.”

It was too bad that Aunt Jenny was still there when Mr. Kruper came. Mr. Kruper owned the restaurant and bakery down the street and he was angry.

“That man Hyde was a crook!” he shouted. “Look at this check he gave me. It’s no good! The bank people tell me he cashed them all over the neighborhood.”

Aunt Jenny’s triumphant nod said as plainly as words—I told you so.

“I’ll bet he owes you folks plenty, too, eh?” Mr. Kruper asked.

Mama looked around at all of us. Her eyes rested longest on Nels. “Read,” she told him gently, “read to us from *Ivanhoe*.”

Then she walked to the stove and put the check into the flames.

“No,” she answered Mr. Kruper. “No. He owes us nothing.”

(966词)