

[One Thing I Have]

Roaldus Richmond ONE THING HAVE He was dressed a gray suit, striped tie, and white shoes, for it was the Sunday before Memorial Day. The seasonal rush in the granite business was over for another year, and there was no more work until Wednesday. Freeman was young, in the early thirties, his face fresh and boyish, his head bald except for fringes of blond hair. It was a good clean Swedish face, very solemn. He spoke slowly, carefully, with an accent that was nearly a lisp. There was a certain dignity about him.

He lived in a pleasant well-furnished rooming house and took his meals there. It was a good place to live, almost like home — except for the landlady. “She’s an old maid, crabby, always in the way,” Freeman said, raising his eyebrows in a peculiar expression of suffering. “She won’t let you alone. She has to know everything that goes on. It’s all the fun she gets in life.” There were only a few other boarders: A gay and bitter young secretary who called Freeman her boy friend, mockingly, because Freeman always insisted he felt like a brother to her; a red-faced gray-haired old man of eighty-four, childlike in his simplicity, who wanted to die; a large soft young business man, dissipated and obsessed with the pursuit of pleasure... Strange companions for the hard-muscled young granite-cutter with the sad face.

“I had my bag all packed to go away,” Freeman said, shaking 2 his bald head and shrugging his shoulders. “I didn’t go anywhere... Like my friend Jensen said last winter: ‘I bought ski-boots and ski-pants. I don’t go skiing. I get dronk.’ But I didn’t got drunk this time. I stayed up all night though. We went to a dance in Groton. Best time I ever had, I think, and I was sober. I didn’t care to drink — for once. Two quarts in the car but I didn’t touch it. Let the others get plastered. Last time I went I was so tight the girls wouldn’t dance with me. But last night I had a wonderful good time, you know. Oh yes, wonderful. Today I am so sleepy. Maybe I’ll get drunk today.

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“No, I don't talk about the girls I go with. I respect women. In the poolroom I hear them talking about the girls they had last night. I don't like that. I like to shoot pool but I don't like that. A man doesn't talk about those things. Sometimes I stop in the middle of the game, hang up my stick and walk out. I respect woman. I would like to get married if I find the right one, but it's not so easy today. I don't want to make a mistake in that.

“I am proud of my race. Sweden is the cleanest country, you know. The Swedish people are clean, they have high principles and standards of living. There are no slums in Sweden. No slums at all. And the lowest percent venereal disease of any country. This country is the worst for that, you know. Yes, and here is the worst in Vermont for that. In Sweden they cleaned it right out in ten years. The government did it. It's the only way. You know how they did it? By making it public, everything out in the open. By teaching people and conquering ignorance. It is not to be hidden and a shamed of. That's what causes disease like it in this country. Over there the government instructs the parents, fathers instruct their sons, mothers instruct their daughters. If a case is not reported you can go to jail for two years, you knew. Yes, I am proud of my race.

“I come from southern Sweden — near Goteborg. All flat agriculture land there, flat like out west in this country. Some industrial towns, some seaports, but the land is all flat for agriculture. I was twenty when I came with some others. There was a depression in Sweden and men were leaving. We had jobs before we started. An American agency was getting jobs for all the men who come over. I never thought I'd cut stone, but I have for eleven years. When I saw stones in graveyards at home, you know, they meant nothing; just stones. I didn't want to be a stonecutter but it's the only thing here. If you have no education you must have a trade. You got to have a trade. Then you have something they can't take away from you, see?

“We sailed to Halifax, then down to New York. [Halifax?] was all foggy, just like London. We were three days in the fog getting into port. There were lots of Swedish men, a few Swedish girls, mostly Finnish girls on the boat. One of them said when we got to Halifax:

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“If I had the money I'd go right back.” Most of them went to Canada. Only a few came down to this country. Most of them had no jobs, no money, didn't know what they would do. Just take a chance with employment agencies. It took courage, you know. Absolutely it took courage. But we 4 had our jobs already.

“With us it was different. This man met us in New York. He had to sign papers we would be no burden on the United States. If we had run off or something he wouldn't be fixed so good. He was responsible for us. In Barre the jobs were waiting for us. They still needed men after the strike. That was eleven years ago, you know — 1928. In 1921 they had a big strike here. We didn't have any real trouble when we got here, a few hard looks maybe, some talk against us. But there were only a few of us. The feeling was against the French-Canadians they had brought in, hundreds of them. Yes, I am Union, you have to be in my shed.

“I learned to be a polisher, to finish the stone after it's sawed and surfaced, before it goes to be carved. Most of the finishing is done by machine, you've seen the big machines they use. I run one of those. Sometimes the stone has to be hand-polished afterwards. Yes, eleven years of it for me now.

“And I never thought I'd be a stonecutter. But after you get started you don't want to take something with lower pay, you know. I'm glad I've got a trade. It's not so bad in the sheds now. The vacuums are safe. There's no need of a man being killed in the sheds now — if he's careful. Some of the old men don't care, they won't try to be careful. Probably it's in them already and they know it, because when they started the dust was very bad.

“I learned the trade here in Barre. I worked three years here, then I went to Concord for three years. I worked for 5 Swenser in Concord, the biggest shed in the country. They had vacuums there fifteen years ago, you know. But they never got them in Barre until five-six years ago, I think. Old Swenser was in the shed all the time; always in the shed. One day a man beside me didn't use his vacuum. Swenser asked him why not. The man said he

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didn't have time to turn it on. Swenser said: "They cost me "150,000 to put in here and I want them used. Give me five minutes and I'll give you time.' He went into the office, came back with the man's check, fired him right there. Swenser didn't care so much about the man maybe. He was afraid for his own health, being in the shed all the time that way.

"I learned English here in night school. I started as soon as I got here. That's another thing the Swedes do, you know. If you're going to live in a country you should know the language. The Italians and Spanish come here and it's two generations before they're speaking English, see? But the Swedes want to learn it right away when they get here.

"I like it here, I have a good time. I have learned more here than I would in Sweden. No, I don't want to go back to Sweden to live. I'd like to go back to see my mother, she's still living over there. I'd like to see her and other people of mine. But I like it all right here to live.

"You know Krueger, the Match King. He came over here from Sweden, too, he learned the language here just like me. He was in Texas for awhile. He was an engineer, built buildings, and then his big fortune he built on matches. Funny, a little 6 thing like a match. How many you throw away every day. I can't understand a man like him. I don't understand how he did it, all by himself too. You have to be ruthless, absolutely ruthless. You have to be merciless, heartless. You have to step on your best friend maybe. Absolutely ruthless... I can't be that way. I can't even step on people not my friends, you know.

"I met an old friend of mine today — Varick. He used to be here. We used to drink and go around together. Now he is an organizer for the CIO. I asked him to have a beer. He said: 'No, no, I can't do it, Freeman, I just been to church.' That was all right. It's all right to go to church. I go myself sometimes. But then he said: 'And I have an engagement to play golf.' That was enough for me. That was too much. If you had known Varick before. He had changed so much. For heaven's sake, how do people change so much in such a little

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while? He was like a stranger to me. I didn't know him any more. I don't want to know him. I have just been to church, and I have an engagement to play Golf...' Varick! After all the times we had together. I couldn't talk any more to him. I left him right there.

“This Krueger, he must have been a great man. You saw the movie they made of him? Some people think Krueger is still alive. Nobody knows for sure. A doctor in Stockholm who knew him well swears he saw him alive — after the funeral. Krueger had forests in Northern Sweden. His matches came from there. He had gold mines, too, diamond mines in South Africa, everything. He had luck. But he must have had brains too, he must have had something up here, you bet.

“He came over just like I did, with nothing. He built a great fortune for himself. Some different from me there. I will never build any fortune. But I will live my life — and perhaps I will enjoy it more than Krueger.

“And one thing I have. Nobody can take it away from me. That is my trade.”