As he settled three hoofs back into their notches, he noticed that his seams had burst here and there and he had lost some of his wooden-horse beauty marks. Then suddenly he saw he was no longer red! He had stretched and stretched until the gray spots had become bigger and bigger and the red spots littler and littler until — he was a gray horse with red spots. When he thought about this he was even more dejected. “Not only am I old and broken, but now I’m no longer Different,” he whinnied sadly. “I’m only one of the Common Herd.”

But when the full rays of the dawn fell upon the carnival grounds, the dingy mirrors of the Merry-Go-Round showed the tip of his nose to be gold — pure gold.

GRANDPA’S STORY

MARY MARGRETTE SCHORTEMEIER

Third Prize, Short Story Division, Butler Literary Contest, 1943

Grandpa was coming in. Leaning on his cane, she thought. She’d look around and see. Yes, leaning on his cane. And ready for his lunch. Noon meal was always dinner to him, though, even if it was only a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk.

“Well, how’s dinner coming along? Is there anything I can do to help?”

He was hungry. Men were always hungry. Even if they were old. Help? What could he do to help? Just what? Get on out of the kitchen. But she couldn’t say that. Not to Grandpa.

“Are you slicing cheese? The butcher knife’d be better. I’d be glad to do it for you. More than glad. Yes, sir, just mighty glad.”

She certainly wasn’t slicing up the moon. It was green cheese. And this was very evidently rich and golden. Right there before him and he wondered if it was cheese. His questions were just habit. They meant nothing. And she was very well able to slice the cheese. She was no baby. She was old enough to be married and keeping house for a husband instead of for him. But he forgot that.

“Yes sir, it’s a good thing I came in when I did. You needed some help. I always was a hand to help out the women folks. Yes sir, I’m mighty glad to slice this cheese. Just more than glad.”

How could he go on that way? She hated to hurt his feelings. She wouldn’t tell him how much of a nuisance he was. If he just didn’t talk so much he wouldn’t bother her so. Just as well stop the sun from shining, though. Grim and bear it. Well — anyway, bear it.

“Slicing cheese for you like this makes me think of a long time ago—”

Everything made him think of a long time ago. That was part of growing old, maybe. She hoped she’d never bore her grandchildren with reminiscences from times that would seem long ago to them. If ever she had any grandchildren — and any memories . . .

“Reminds me of a long time ago when me and my sister — the oldest sister, the one you never saw — we two were left out on the ranch together while the family went somewhere. Can’t remember where, anymore. May have been a family funeral. That was about the only time they would so many of them go at once. Might have
been a wedding or a baby born — but I'm not sure. Then just my older brother and Ma would've gone. Ma to do the family proud and my brother to drive the rig — Yes, yes, I remember I'm cutting cheese. Sure I'm cutting cheese.”

He went right on living in the past, telling her these long tales about people she had never seen. They were all just names. His old red plush-covered family album had pictures of some of them. But what was a picture in an album — what were they to her but faded faces and queer clothes? Why dwell with them? There were people — a person — whom she did know and did love — but what would that get her?

“Don't get impatient, now, I'm almost done. It's a little stiff when it's just out of the ice-box. Well, about my story. My sister and me were out there on the ranch five days and nights. Mighty lonesome days and nights they was, too. We'd get along all right in the day time — there were always plenty of chores waiting to be done then. But at night when the dishes were done and then it was time to sit down — here's your cheese all sliced. I reckon that'll be enough.”

Yes, and enough of his chatter, too. She could have sliced the cheese in half the time with half the trouble. She had to humour him, though. Now he would sit down on the kitchen chair and lean it back on two legs against the wall until it tottered crazily. He was in a story telling mood. He was, though, whenever he got any one to listen to him. She couldn't help seeming to listen. She could think of her dreams while he rambled on, and he'd never know.

“Guess I'll sit down here. Seems like there's nothing to be did right now. Let me know, though, if there's anything you want me to do. I'll be right glad to.”

There went the chair leaning back on its two legs. There was that gleam in his eye. She wondered when he would get back to his tale.

“Did I ever finish my story about the cheese? It's not such a long story, not very interesting anymore. But it was interesting back in the old days. Used to be folks would just sit around and swap yarns. Folks didn't all the time need a radio or a phonograph blatting in their ears in those days. That racket all the time keeps 'em from thinking, seems to me. Nobody can tell you a good old fashioned, honest-to-goodness story these days. It's a lost art. It's all phonograph and radio, nowadays. I remember, though, the first victrola in our town. Why, folks were so excited about it. And nobody understood how it was made. It seemed mysterious to us all. But we liked it. I remember On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine — musta' played it a thousand times, myself. And I remember the first radio, too. It had a great big inside aerial that stood up in the living room — that's about the time we quit calling it the parlor — anyway, this diamond shaped thing stood out like a sore thumb in the front room. Everybody that had one was so proud. And we listened all the time.”

The point — the story — was he ever going to finish? She knew what it would be. But she mustn't let him know that. She must keep him in suspense, the way he thought he was keeping her. It was like playing a game. Playing like she was listening to some one else say other things. He would surely fall off of that chair. She'd have to tell him to be careful.

“Yes, yes, — I know what I'm doing. Sat this way for years and never yet fell off. I'll sit down flat, though, if you like that better. Always aim to please the women folks. I'll sit on all four legs and tell my story. Does that suit you now? Well, my sister and I—I've been all around Robin Hood's barn telling this thing — my sister and I got along all right in spite of
being lonesome and everything. Right then I wouldn't have minded a radio or victrola. It was pretty doggone lonesome. But our trouble started on the fourth day. My sister always was a good cook. I told your grandma before I married her that she'd have to be as good a cook as this oldest sister of mine. She was, too; don't let anybody tell you she wasn't. They got to meet once and swap recipes — neither one outsmarted the other, either.”

More album leaves. He droned on and on. And she wasn't listening very closely. She wondered if HIS sister was a good cook. Anyway, she had experience. Some people got married without knowing how to boil water, as Grandpa would say. Imagine her quoting Grandpa. She had listened to him enough. She ought to be able to.

"I'll move out from the table so's you can put the cloth on. I like a big white cloth like that with sharp creases even when we eat in the kitchen. It reminds me of old times before there was any oilcloth. Out on the ranch we didn't know what oil-cloth was. I can remember how the big white table cloths looked on the clothes line. Well, that time I was telling you about — my sister and I ran out of food. Maybe you think that's a funny thing to happen on a farm, but that's just what did happen. You try having nothing but milk, cream, and butter for two whole days and you'll be sick of it, too."

Sick of it — how expressive for her feelings. Lunch was almost ready and he wasn't through with his story. And he wouldn't start eating until his story was finished. By then the meal would be ruined. Here he was off again.

“Yessir, all we had to eat was what was in the ice house. We went down together and looked. It was always so cool and refreshing inside. Usually I wanted to start right in and eat a whole pound of butter. But having the chance, for once, I kind of out-did myself. I kinda' lost my taste for butter after that. Well, we looked around and Sis found a big cheese. The two of us lifted it off the shelf. I took a big knife — sort of like that one you're cutting the bread with there — and sliced some of that cheese off. Then — now this is the funny part — Sis took that sliced cheese to the house and put in a skillet over a low fire and fried that cheese. It was the funniest stuff I ever tasted. It got real soft and sticky and its flavor altogether changed. I didn't like it at all, but I ate it just to please her. But I was sure glad when the folks come back — don't know where they'd been anymore — when they came back with food — meat and potatoes. Mighty glad — Yessir, just more than glad.”

He was going to get up and shuffle over to wash his hands in the kitchen sink and then back again to the table. There wouldn't be much longer to wait, surely. She was glad the man she was going to marry was young. He'd never tell her the same old story over and over. She'd have to tell Grandpa about him right after lunch. Feed a man first and then tell him. She had experience. Grandpa was ready for dinner.