

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## AUNT LORENA'S CHRISTMAS PACKAGE.

"The oysters will be as tough as leather," wailed Mollie, mournfully.

"And mamma ought not to wait for her supper another minute," added Katrina, flattening her pretty nose against the glass as she peered out into the darkness.

"I'm in no hurry for supper, children," put in the sweet low voice from the couch, where all the little mother's days were passed of late, "and I'm sure Rene will be here soon."

Even as she spoke, swift light footsteps sounded outside, and then the door flew open and Rene burst in, her dark bright face flushed with cold, and her eyes shining like stars.

"You poor dear people—I've kept supper waiting again, haven't I? But I couldn't help it—truly I couldn't." She was throwing off her wraps as she spoke, and running across the room to drop half a dozen sweet kisses on her mother's forehead. She was like a fresh mountain breeze, and the faces of the others brightened in instant reflection of her radiant life.

"Was it Aunt Lorena again?" questioned Mollie blithely, as she dished the steaming oysters.

"Of course it was Aunt Lorena. Isn't it always Aunt Lorena?" retorted the other merrily. "But, oh, girls, you can't guess what she's going to do now!"

"Then we won't tax our brains trying to," returned Katrina, as she deftly tucked the pillows behind her mother's back.

The little round supper table was pushed close to the couch and the three girls gathered about it as Rene, with her way bubbling laugh went on.

"No, you never could guess and I won't keep you in suspense. Listen, my sisters!" She flung out her hands with a merry dramatic gesture. "Aunt Lorena—is going—to send us—a Christmas package!"

"Rene Burch, you don't mean it!" exclaimed Katrina, pausing with a spoonful of oysters in mid-air to stare at her sister.

"Is she sick or anything?" queried Mollie, doubtfully.

The mother said nothing. Rene went on:

"No, she isn't sick, and 'the leopard has not changed her spots,' so my dear sisters, I don't think I need warn you not to place your expectations too high. That Christmas package won't contain a new piano for you, Kit, nor a check for painting lessons for you, Mollie, nor—the merry light died suddenly out of her eyes and for an instant her lip quivered as she glanced towards her mother, "nor the whole world of beautiful things that we are all just longing to get for you, you precious little mother, you! No, girls, I can't imagine what has moved Aunt Lorena to this unwonted action, but she solemnly informed me to-day that we might expect a Christmas package from her—she would send it 'round to-morrow—and she added that she did hope that I would show some slight appreciation. I am the family scapegoat—don't fail to make a note of that fact."

"I'm afraid, dearie, that you forget sometimes and say irritating things to her, don't you?" questioned the gentle voice from the couch.

Rene laughed.

"Now, motherdieu, how can you imagine such a thing!" she protested. "No, it's my nose. Aunt Lorena never can get over it that I—her namesake—should have a little freckled snub nose instead of a beautiful straight one like Kitty's.

As sure as you live, mamma, she holds me responsible for my nose," mocked the girl lightly.

"But I do wonder what she will send us, don't you, Rene?" Mollie's big blue eyes opened wide as she spoke and a beautiful color glowed in her cheeks. Rene always said that Mollie's face reminded her of apple blossoms and blue skies.

"Wonder?" she returned, lightly. "No, indeed. I can tell you what she'll send. There will be an old dress—silk probably—to make over for one of you, and some bit of antediluvian jewellery for the other; and for me—well, it's sure to be something useful for me, because Aunt Lorena doesn't at all approve of my love of pretty things. Probably it will be two or three yards of unbleached muslin for me to make into pillow slips." The merry mockery died swiftly out of her eyes once more as she added, impulsively: "I wouldn't care if she sent me—dish cloths—if she'd only send something lovely to mamma."

Across the table mother smiled at her.

"I've something that all her money will not buy—my three girls," she said, softly, and to that Rene's eyes and not her tongue made swift response.

"Well," sighed Mollie, later, as she wiped the dishes that Rene washed, "I can't help being glad that that Christmas package, Rene, for it will be something anyhow, if it isn't much, and a Christmas without anything would be just dreadful, wouldn't it!"

"Rather dreadful, Mollie," Rene answered, "and Aunt Lorena's package will help a little because it will give us something to laugh over—that's all."

"But maybe it will be better than you think." Mollie's voice was so wistful that her sister leaned over the dishpan and gave her a quick warm kiss.

"Don't hope it, Mollie, you'll only be disappointed if you do," Rene warned.

The package arrived early the next morning. It was brought by Dennis, Aunt Lorena's dignified coachman, and Mollie, who opened the door, received the bundle and deposited it on the table.

"Shall we open it now or keep it till to-morrow," she cried, eagerly.

"Oh, open it now, 'han't we, little mother? It isn't worth keeping till to-morrow," Rene answered promptly. She felt as if she couldn't bear to see that hopeful light in Mollie's eyes.

Nobody objecting Katrina brought the scissors and cut the cord. A mischievous light flashed into Rene's eyes at the sight of an old gray silk, marked with Katrina's name.

"Will you acknowledge me a true prophet?" she laughed, as Katrina gazed in mournful silence at the dress.

Then came an old-fashioned silver bracelet and a shell comb for Mollie, and a pretty knitted shawl of soft white wool for the mother. When she saw the shawl Rene's scornful face softened a little.

"It isn't much, but it's new and warm, and will be nice for you to throw over your shoulders, mamma," she said. "For that at least, I'm grateful."

"But there isn't anything for you, Rene—how queer!" cried Katrina.

"Then I'll not have to say 'Thank you' for some old thing that's no good," retorted Rene, with a slighting glance at the gray silk. But as Katrina lifted the dress and shook it out a little package fell from the folds.

"Oh, here is something for you—your name is on it," exclaimed Mollie, springing forward eagerly to pick it up.

Rene opened the tiny package and found a pair of black kid gloves. They

had been worn once or twice, but they were perfectly good.

"They were probably too small for Aunt Lorena," the girl laughed. "I believe, in spite of my nose, I've fared better than you, Mollie, for I can wear these, and I did need a pair awfully."

She was pulling on one of the gloves as she spoke. Suddenly she jerked it off, and turning it wrong side out, a folded bit of paper dropped out. Mollie snatched it up and unfolded it. It was a hundred dollar bill.

"Oh, Rene; Oh, Rene!" she cried, and then stood holding out the bill, and gazing with wide incredulous eyes at her sister. For an instant Rene stood motionless, staring in bewilderment at the precious bit of paper, then she snatched it and examined it with anxious care. The next moment she was on her knees beside the couch, sobbing out:

"Oh, mamma, mamma! I'm so glad—and so ashamed of myself! But it did seem awfully unfair for Aunt Lorena to have so much money and everything, and never do anything for you. I didn't really mind for us, girls—but for you, dear. And to think that she was planning this yesterday, and I all the time thinking her so stingy and heard-hearted! Now we will have a Christmas, little mother!" She sprang to her feet. "Girls, girls, get on your things this minute. We must go right down town and do our Christmas shopping. I'll run over and get Miss Martin to stay with you while we're gone, mamma."

Such blithe, joyous Christmas shopping as that was! The unexpectedness of it made it doubly delightful. As the girls walked down town through the crisp, windy air, they planned it all. Ten dollars for each of them, and all the rest for mother. Fifty to pay for that treatment that they had so longed to have her try—the other twenty to buy every lovely thing they could think of to make a happy Christmas for her; for it might be—not one of them would admit it to herself, yet the dread hung over them all—it might be her last Christmas with them—only of course it couldn't be—it shouldn't be, now that she had that new treatment.

"We've each got to have shoes," cried Katrina, sticking out a much-worn specimen in evidence. "Shall we buy them for ourselves or give them to each other?"

"Oh, give them," returned Mollie, quickly. "Let's have everything we buy a Christmas gift."

"Even the chickens and the plum cake?" questioned Rene. "All right, then. Mollie's the cook—the head cook, that is—so we'll present her with the provisions."

"And I'll represent them to you after they're cooked," laughed Mollie, joyously. It took so little to make them laugh to-day.

Suddenly Rene stopped short. "Girls," she cried, "let's get a Christmas present for Aunt Lorena."

The others stared at her, bewildered and doubtful.

"Why, Rene, what could we get her? She can buy anything she wants," Kitty said, slowly.

"I know she can, but she can't buy the feeling that would make us give it to her." Rene's voice was a bit tremulous. "Girls, I never felt this way to Aunt Lorena before. I almost love her for sending that money to mamma. Of course she knew that we'd use it for her."

"But what can we get her?" Mollie repeated Katrina's question.

"Oh, I don't know—it doesn't matter what. It's the spirit of it that will do