

Miss Sybilla's Convert

(By E. C. Shipman.)

"Sybilla! Oh, Sybilla!" called Mrs. Sprigg, "who is that coming up the garden walk?" Mrs. Sprigg was eighty and felt justified in spending most of her time close to her window looking out upon the prospect. And, indeed, there is not a prettier prospect in the world than at St. Blaise's Bay. It was too bad, for Mrs. Sprigg, who was a cautious and observant, that few creatures came within her range save her own ducks waddling contentedly for the blue water or old Uncle Jason, the negro, scalping up oysters. Miss Sybilla understood perfectly the note of excitement in her voice and even shared it a trifle as she came to the window.

"I don't know, mother," she said, glancing between the muslin curtains, "I never saw him before." "I reckon it is some one who has put up at the wharf for vegetables," suggested Mrs. Sprigg.

But Miss Sybilla did not confirm her in this surmise. She let the curtain fall and turned back to her work.

"Sybilla, it can't be the tax-collector. That man's not coming back for more money!" Indignation mingled with the excitement. "No, indeed, mother. The taxes are paid and they aren't due for another six months now." Miss Sybilla went on measuring the breadths of gingham. She was terribly matter-of-fact, her mother felt, and emphatically belied her mystic name; she had been matter-of-fact in her youth when she insisted upon wearing thick-soled, high shoes instead of delicate sandals such as her mother delighted in; she never worked herself into a fever of surmising as Mrs. Sprigg did, she waited until matters solved themselves, and now having attained the age of forty odd and gray hairs, she was still matter-of-fact. Such a solid quality is often a trial to a mother who feels that her years justify her in re-voicing to the delightful inconsequence of earlier days.

"Well, I'm thankful you've got your father's head for calculating; I never could keep track of such details. In my young days there was always a man handy to look after those things. Well, Lucindy," she added sharply, "why don't you speak up and not stand there with your mouth open like a chicken with the gapes?"

Lucindy was waiting for her breath which she had outrun in her rapid scamper upstairs. She stood just inside the door casting alternate glances from one lady to the other.

"Please'm, a man downstairs wants to see Miss S'v'illa."

"A man, a man, Lucindy!" "To see me, Lucindy!"

The sentences were simultaneous, but Lucindy was polite enough to address herself to the elder lady.

"A gentleman, Miss Jane, downstairs on de porch."

"That's something like! Anybody would take you for a field hand, Lucindy, instead of the great-granddaughter of my father's own body servant, one of the politest negro men I ever saw. 'Gen-tle-man' is the word, Lucindy."

"Yass-m. 'Gen-tle-man,' Miss Jane."

"Why didn't you ask the gentleman into the parlor?"

"He 'clar he wouldn't come, Miss Jane, so I ast him to take a cheer on I brung him a pa'm-leaf fan." Lucindy felt during her recital a comforting conviction that her mistress could find no field-hand behavior here.

Miss Sybilla had gone to the little dim, mahogany-framed mirror to smooth her shining hair; she looked steadily at the grayish locks, or at the brooch beneath to see that it was straight and did not glance at her large, cheerful features. Then she went out of the room composedly.

Mrs. Sprigg, sitting in her great chair, felt more fluttered at the thought of the stranger downstairs; she bobbed up to take a glance at the rows of little white curls falling from under the cap on either side of her face and pulled up the ruffle of lace around the neck of her white gown.

As Miss Sybilla stepped out on the porch, a gentleman, sitting on one of the side benches in the shadow of the vines, rose and took off his broad-rimmed hat with a deferential bow.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning, madam," said the stranger in his turn. "A fine morning," they both sat down.

"The weather is delightful," answered Miss Sybilla.

"And one of the prettiest views here I ever looked at, madam, and I have seen some of the finest sights our American continent affords."

Miss Sybilla looked at him with some interest. He differed slightly from the St. Mary's type; he was more expansive, more exaggerated, with an air of provincial cosmopolitanism, if one may say so, about him, although an unprejudiced observer would have found, I think, a St. Mary's basis to the man. The heartiness in his voice was also on his bluff, middle-aged face.

"Our view is very nice," again observed

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Who of us can forget that view—the green lawn sloping under its locusts to the waters of the bay, a long slope well planted with flowering shrubs and soft to the foot with its thick, close-shorn, homely grass; beyond, almost as far as the eye can reach, a vast, unquiet, shining plain of bluish silver water?

"I called to see, madam, if you could show me through the church today?"

Miss Sybilla brightened perceptibly; above her independence, above her delight in farming, above her unaffected pride in her own ancestry, rose superior her pride and delight in the church, where she was sexton and where more than once at Benediction when no boy was handy, she had swung the censor outside the altar-rail, as correctly as an acolyte.

"Certainly," she said, "if you will kindly wait a minute while I get my hat."

She ran upstairs more lightly than the agile Lucindy and came into her mother's presence a little flushed with haste. Mrs. Sprigg let a beam of approval brighten her blue eyes.

"Who is it, Sybilla, child? Not a photographer, I hope. I won't have a picture of the house taken while those chimneys are uneven. They have been uneven ever since they were built, a hundred years ago, but I won't have a picture taken. You may as well tell him no."

"It is not a photographer, mother; it is a gentleman who wants to see the church. I don't think he lives about here."

"To see the church! Well, I reckon he can't live about St. Blaise's. Why didn't he wait till Sunday?"

"I don't know, mother," Miss Sybilla was trying on a huge, black hat, known as "sundown," because of its edging qualities.

"Mercy, child, don't wear that fright!" urged her mother. "Do, pray, Sybilla, put on your hat with the black lace and yellow roses."

"Why, mother, just to cross the fields."

"Certainly. You're going with a gentleman, remember."

"He wants to see the church, mother. He won't know whether I wear lace or straw."

She went out and presently Mrs. Spriggs saw them crossing the meadow to where the church lifted its spire airily from the flat expanse of field. St. James the Less was not an imposing building, but it was new and had Gothic windows (a late American Gothic, in pine), and a spire, besides other points that were as unusual in the square, evangelical churches of the county as its ritual was different. Miss Sybilla, in addition to her duties as sexton, was man-of-all-work for St. James'. If the churchyard presented an appearance of having triumphed over weeds and broomsedge, it was owing to the efforts of Miss Sybilla, together with the wielding of Uncle Jason's scythe. If the fence and tree-trunks dazzled one's eyes in the hot sun with a coat of brilliant whitewash, you knew that Miss Sybilla, her sunbonnet on her head, and brush in hand, had spent Saturday decorating the beloved domain.

The stranger stepped apologetically about the building trying to soften his footsteps to a semblance of Miss Sybilla's hushed gliding. The brilliant summer light was chastened by the papered windows (artfully deceiving one into the belief they were stained glass) and tinted the white walls delicately with color; the altar stood withdrawn into its recess and clear of all its ornaments which were laid away until next Sunday. The visitor looked with awe at the crucifix on the top of the little Gothic tabernacle, genuinely interested and holding his hat against his breast boyishly enough. He clumsily irritated Miss Sybilla's swift, reverent genuflection and was absorbed in her softly spoken explanations of the stations, or about the organ, which the Archbishop had given them; he even peered up into the belfry to see the dark open mouth of the bell yawning over him, till something of pride rose in his guide's breast at her own powers of conversation.

When they had come out into the yard, the chirp of the birds, the droning of the insects, even the rustling of the leaves seemed too noisily cheerful. The visitor put his hat on and smiled at the wide, green landscape; he resumed his ordinary expression and turned to Miss Sybilla.

"You have a mighty nice little church here. I've seen 'em some, thing like 'his in California."

"You have?" she tried to keep the pride out of her voice. She knew it was as pretty as any church.

"Yes, I am very glad I saw it, for I don't mind confessing, now you have been so kind, that I made a bet I could see it on a week day."

The reaction was too great; Miss Sybilla sank down upon the church steps.

"A bet! A bet about the house of God! Don't you know that the church is a consecrated, a holy place?"

She was white with indignation, whether at the trifling with herself or of the church she did not clearly know then.

"Indeed, Miss Sprigg, I oughtn't, perhaps, have mentioned the fact to a lady—I have always thought a bet a very harmless little thing, and my brother-in-law, a good fellow—"

"You have done a very wicked thing, I consider," she interrupted, "and I was very wrong to show you the place. Don't you know that this is a sacred spot, where men come to pray, where children are baptized, where people are married, and where the last blessings are given to the dead?"

She let her hand fall into her lap and looked up at him very bitterly. He hung his head.

"I wish you would let me explain, Miss Sprigg," he said, scraping the turf with his embarrassed foot.

"Explain! You cannot explain more fully. I know what a bet is—it is pure gambling. That is what it is!"

"But, Miss Sprigg—," he began.

"Don't try to soften it, sir," she said, severely; "if a church is not a sacred spot to you, it is to me, and I have been more shocked than I can say. I shall content myself with saying good-morning, sir, hoping that you will some day look into a church with a vastly different intention from today."

She made him a majestic bow and walked down the steps. He followed close behind her, dismay written on his florid, wholesome face. At the gate he began again, humbly.

"Indeed, Miss Sprigg, I beg your pardon; but it was a very innocent little bit of a bet. However, my brother-in-law Calderwell has lost a new saddle by it."

Miss Sybilla stiffened instantly on detecting a faint note of triumph.

"A bet, sir, is a bet, and it is all gambling."

He was gratified at the sound of her voice, even such a frosty sound as that, and took heart enough to say: "I won't, madam, I vow I won't use that saddle!"

"Don't add swearing to your gambling, sir. I wish you good-morning." And Miss Sybilla marched across the meadow, holding her shoulders very erect and letting her frock trail over the stubble instead of holding it up thriftily as was her wont, for it behooved the Spriggs to be thrifty—a new dress was not to be had every season.

But in spite of Miss Sybilla's disdain she was destined to see every Sunday near the right hand aisle, the large figure of the man, Mr. Alexander Brewer, as she found him to be named. At first, it distinctly angered her, the sight of those square shoulders and thick gray hair; she used to stiffen her back perceptibly and walk to her pew holding up a very haughty head upon which reposed her black lace and yellow roses. The yellow roses would quiver with sympathetic indignation too. It was almost as vexatious as the Latin pronunciation of the choir which Miss Sybilla (her own pronunciation was not above reproach) drilled into it on Saturday, only to hear poured out on Sunday with a strong Maryland tide-water infusion. And Father Yorke, who, if he couldn't sing, knew a discord when he heard it, invariably asked after Mass, who had sung G instead of C, and each member as invariably refused to take upon himself the responsibility.

Meantime, during the week, they heard, as one does hear in the country, as from the air about, that Mr. Alexander Brewer was the rich brother of Mrs. Calderwell, that he had gone away from St. Mary's when very young, and now came back from Oregon, having made his fortune there; that he was a bachelor, and was desirous of settling in his native country. Mrs. Sprigg was interested hugely. She made Miss Sybilla describe him again and again, and wanted to know all he had said and why he had not called since. But Miss Sybilla was discreet and made her descriptions as short as possible.

"Mercy, child! you might as well go into a convent at once. Don't you know how he looked?"

"He is rather portly, mother."

"I hope he is at his time of life, and as comfortably well off as he is. A pretty figure he'd make thin! I knew his mother intimately. Maria Brewer, and I would like to know what her son looks like, but young women, it seems, have no eyes nowadays."

A further surprise was in store for Miss Sybilla. One Saturday morning early, as she came from the church where the children sat in attentive, miserable rows (it was Father Yorke's day for examining them, which that hard-worked missionary priest had to snatch when he could get it), she saw looming up at one end of the pew Mr. Alexander Brewer. His ruddy face was serious as he bent over the little, dog-eared catechism he had borrowed from the nearest child. Her heart beat for a moment with sincere respect for his earnestness and simplicity. He looked at her quietly as she walked along surveying her charges, for Miss Sybilla was also superintendent of the Sunday school, but he did not explain his appearance. There he sat as the questions came along the shuffling embarrassed line.

"What do you mean by grace?"

No answer. Father Yorke shook his head and repeated his question, but there was still a profound silence.

"By grace I mean a supernatural gift of God bestowed on us through the merits of Jesus Christ, for our salvation," supplied Father Yorke, adding, "That was very badly said, very badly said. Sybilla, these chil-

dren will never be ready for confirmation next spring."

Half a dozen pairs of eyes looked expostulation at Miss Sybilla, but the mouths below did not open even in protest. The shyness of the little rustics would not relax; to Miss Sybilla alone they could have repeated their questions "word for word without the book," now the combined presence of their pastor and Mr. Brewer was too much for them. Wise Miss Sybilla! who began the preparation at least a year in advance, so that the sheer force of knowledge cured their dumbness. The questions went on down the pew sometimes answered, sometimes not, as the child was able to find his tongue, till one was flung at Mr. Brewer, and Father Yorke, lifting his spectacled, absent eyes, found they rested on a broad, cloth-clad chest, and was obliged to lift them higher.

"Why, what is this?" he asked, a little bewildered.

"I came for instruction, sir," answered the other, "I understood it was to be had in the Sunday-school."

"I am glad to see you, Sybilla, you never told me of this gentleman in your report."

"I didn't know, Father Yorke." A distinct flush was mounting to Miss Sybilla's face. "This is Mr. Alexander Brewer, who has only lately returned to St. Mary's."

So Miss Sybilla found herself with a special pupil on her hands, a docile and tractable one, who had only one drawback, that what he apprehended so perfectly one week seemed to have vanished by the next. Perhaps all would have gone smoothly had not Miss Sybilla, in her zeal, undertaken to initiate him in Church history; at least the defect did not appear till then. He was genuinely moved by the stories of the martyrs and the catacombs, but the list of popes seemed to weigh upon him. He studied conscientiously the names and dates, yet when Miss Sybilla bent her brows upon him with an inflexible query as to certain great characters among them, every name fled except the first and last.

"To which of the popes is out beautiful chant attributed, Mr. Brewer?" Miss Sybilla would ask in a short, business-like tone.

"To which of the popes? Ah—ah—," stammered Mr. Brewer, "it couldn't have been the first one, could it, Miss Sybilla?"

"The first one, Mr. Brewer!" Rigid disapproval arched Miss Sybilla's eyebrows by way of emphasis.

"Oh, no, no; of course not," he hastily corrected himself, "I ought to have known. It must be our present one, Pope Leo the—"

"Now consider, Mr. Brewer, do!" urged Miss Sybilla, "our Gre-go-rian chant."

"Gre-go-rian chant," repeated the pupil still unlightened, "now let me see."

At this point a fifteen-year-old girl who had been bobbing up and down in great impatience mouthed half audibly to Miss Sybilla:

"Pope Gregory the Great."

"That is correct, Rosa," said her teacher as severely as ever, "but it was not your question nor did I call on you. As a punishment for your impolite behavior, be prepared to stay after the others have gone and repeat the chapter on the articles of the Creed."

As for poor Mr. Brewer he looked at Rosa with a mixture of admiration for such attainments and of compunction for her punishment. There is no knowing how many more fragments of history he might have had to learn had not Father Yorke changed unexpectedly on the scene as he was blundering among the list of popes.

"Tut, tut, Sybilla!" was his comment. "Mr. Brewer will have plenty of time afterwards to learn that. There are more essential things just now. I'll examine him a little," and the kindly gentleman took up the examination which resulted in pronouncing Mr. Brewer ready and fixing the day for his baptism.

On the morning before that event he walked up Mrs. Sprigg's garden path as he had done six months ago. His face was thoughtful and preoccupied for he considered that he had a duty to discharge. He did not notice the autumn change in the trees and flowers nor how the leaves of the sheltering vine over the porch had vanished save a few which hung like vivid scarlet shreds; behind him the level, shining floor of the bay was dulled by an imperceptible mist which softened almost to effacement the sharp blue lines of distance. Lucindy appeared in answer to his knock, grinning and in her chronic state of breathlessness. She knew him now as did the others of the household, and wished him a good morning as politely as the most well-bred servant in St. Mary's county. He presented his compliments to Mrs. Sprigg and desired to see Miss Sybilla; he would wait for her on the porch as the morning was mild.

"Yaas sah," and Lucindy sped away showing a pair of very flat heels in her swift retreat.

Miss Sybilla was washing the breakfast china at a table in the dining-room, a task she left to no one.

"Please'm, Mr. Brewer's out on de porch," announced Lucindy, "he say give his compliments to Miss Jane and he want to see you, Miss Sybilla."

"Why didn't you ask him in, Lucindy?" Miss Lucindy was wiping her hands in some agitation.

"He wouldn't come in; I ast him."

"How is my hair?" asked Miss Sybilla smoothing its satin folds.

Lucindy rolled her eyes up to Miss Sybilla's height.

"Hit's jes' glass, Miss S'v'illa."

"And, Lucindy, don't you touch that china till I come back. Now mind!" was the final command as Miss Sybilla opened the door.

"No'm," Lucindy murmured guiltily, she was meditating that very minute the delight of fingering the delicate, fine stuff her mistress had never yet entrusted to her hands.

Miss Sybilla walked out in stately leisure upon the porch, but inwardly she was quaking; Mr. Brewer had not since his offence called upon her alone, what could be the occasion to-day, she wondered.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning, madam," Mr. Brewer bowed humbly.

"Beautiful weather," she remarked.

"Beautiful, indeed," he answered. There was the customary silence for a second and Miss Sybilla was about to inquire concerning his health and his sister's health, according to the rural code which is, apparently, as fixed as the laws of the Medes and Persians, when Mr. Brewer began with some hesitation:

"I came, Miss Sybilla, to ask your pardon for—for the wager I made last summer. I apologize most deeply," he looked at her earnestly.

Miss Sybilla's face crimsoned, then tears came into her eyes, tears that increased every minute.

"At first I could not understand how I hurt you, it seemed such a little thing," he went on, "but now I see, it was an insult to your devotion and reverence, not to you personally, and it was coming to understand the force of that piety and reverence that made me wish to enter the church."

Miss Sybilla's tears came in a gush now.

"Oh, Mr. Brewer," she sobbed, her words muffled by the handkerchief, "you must not ask my pardon, it—it is I who beg you to forgive. Oh, I have been wicked; wicked—than I ever thought I could be. I made a personal affair of that—that bet. Not that I don't think betting harmful, I do," coming out of her handkerchief to enforce her principles and giving Mr. Brewer a glimpse of reddened eyes.

"My dear Miss Sybilla!" he said, distressed beyond measure at the outburst his words had occasioned.

"Yes; I have been heartless and full of pride," Miss Sybilla sobbed on. "I even hardened myself against your humility, which, let me say it here, Mr. Brewer, I reverence and admire. I said to myself it was for effect and I determined to punish you and tire you out. It was partly that which made me give you such hard lessons. Can you forgive me?"

"My dear madam, I have nothing to forgive, nothing. I came this morning to tell you that it was your example of reverence and strong sense of right that put me where I stand now."

"Don't say that, sir," she interrupted, "I have had a wholesome glimpse into myself. I have seen that I have absolutely no humility—none at all. I don't know what it can be unless it is having authority over so much, the farm, the Sunday-school, mother, old Uncle Jason, Lucindy and all of them. It has bred sternness and pride in me. I've been almost un-Christian. Will you forgive me?"

"Will you forgive me?" he asked, in his turn, smilingly.

"If you insist upon my repeating the words, I will do so; I forgive you."

"My words are only a repetition too," he warned her. "I have nothing to pardon, I forgive you."

They shook hands and he went away while Miss Sybilla stole upstairs with such a very deep flush and a look of agitation that they bred the liveliest and most pleasurable curiosity in her mother, who chanced to catch a glimpse of her. Lucindy, having waited in vain, washed the china contrary to orders and was delightedly surprised when Miss Sybilla, at dinner, said not a word of disapproval, but remarked to her mother that Lucindy was growing very neat and really fit to be trusted.

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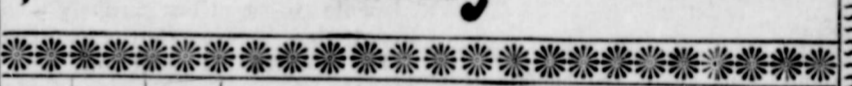
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Besides being rebuilt in brick, it has an ample churchyard well set with trees, some beautiful new statues and delicately sculptured Stations; it has real painted glass windows, and a fine organist from Baltimore, who, by dint of daily classes in Latin, has been able to introduce a more correct pronunciation among the choir. The choir, too, has changed; for when I was last there, at Easter, a train of surprised boys sang the triumphant words of the Gloria in Excelsis with fresh and vibrant voices. But these innovations, pronunciation as well as music, are, I believe, frowned upon by the more conservative parishioners of St. James. Mrs. Sprigg, I knew, says that boys' voices are only fit for shouting at play, and that as for her, the chanting sounds rather dull, and if it hadn't been Alexander Brewer's choice, she would speak her mind rather more frequently. It is no noticed, too, that there are thick volumes of Church History in the library which are seldom troubled by the frequenters of that neat little room; indeed I think it is chiefly the donor who consults them to read ever now and then with zest the long list of Pontiffs, although he does not attempt to pronounce the names aloud. The saddle, won in Mr. Brewer's never-to-be-forgotten wager, was bestowed upon Father Yorke's young assistant, who had to ride often and far between his three mission churches, and Mr. Alexander Brewer himself is universally acknowledged to be the good genius of St. Blaise's Bay. It is he who finds work for the poor in winter upon his great farm; it is he who first took up the idea of a mission among the barbarous oystermen; it is he who is ever good tempered and cheery in the worst of times. They whisper—the long winter evenings in the country encourage such whisperings—that Miss Sybilla will some day marry her "convert," but no one has yet dared mention it in her presence and, as before, Uncle Jason and Lucindy feel the weight of her authority. Her mother, however, acknowledges frankly that it would set her mind at rest if there were some one else than Uncle Jason about the place to depend on in case of fire or thieves and any how to look after Sybilla when she is gone.

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