

What Priscilla Missed

(Isabella Gay, in 'Good Cheer.')

Aunt Clarissa had returned from the station, where she had gone to see her sister, Mrs. Pell, start on her homeward journey, and was now sitting before the fire, pondering deeply. Her thoughts were not pleasant, because Sister Lucia—Mrs. Pell—had said that Priscilla was utterly selfish. Priscilla was the niece of both ladies, and the darling of Aunt Clarissa, who had had entire charge of her for eight years, and who in all humbleness had tried to do her best for the child in every way.

'She is very pretty, very dainty, takes very easily to accomplishments and all that, but she thinks only of herself; she doesn't even dream that anybody else could be of as much importance as she is. It is a sad fault,' said Aunt Lucia.

Naturally this verdict was depressing to Aunt Clarissa. 'I have made a grave mistake somewhere,' she concluded.

Just then Priscilla came in from school. She glanced around the room with a look of relief.

'Aunt Lucia has gone, I see,' she said in a sweet, clear voice.

'Yes,' said Aunt Clarissa mechanically.

Priscilla smiled. 'Has the postman been here?'

'Yes; there is something for you in the library.'

Priscilla danced out of the room like a bit of thistledown, and flitted in again in a moment.

'It has come,' she said joyfully, holding up a thick cream-colored envelope. 'It is an invitation to Elsie's Stapleford's party. Some of the girls got theirs this morning. I was just a little wee bit scared; I thought maybe I wouldn't get one. But here it is, and the next question is, what shall I wear?'

'You'll wear your blue silk, won't you?'

'That old thing! wear it to a party at the most splendid house in town?' exclaimed Priscilla softly. 'No, indeed, auntie. I would stay at home first.'

'I don't see how I can get you a new dress,' said Aunt Clarissa very gravely, looking at her niece's flushed, pretty face. 'You know how straitened we are for money this winter, dear. If I had gotten my dividends as usual it would be different. As it is we have enough to live on comfortably and no more.'

Priscilla turned, holding her head very high, and looked at the fire.

'Every dollar has been given its place,' went on Aunt Clarissa; 'so much for meat and groceries, light and fuel, church and charity—'

'Aunt Clarissa,' interrupted Priscilla eagerly, 'why need you give anything this winter to charity when you have less than usual for yourself? I have heard it said that charity begins at home.'

'We will not talk about it, but remember this, Priscilla, that only under great pressure of circumstances will I take one penny from what I have set aside for the poor.'

Priscilla sat down and let her eyes rest on her boots. She had detected a new note in her aunt's tones.

'I'd be perfectly willing to do without meat for a month or two,' she murmured.

'I would not,' was the dry rejoinder, and again Priscilla's fine ear heard the new

sound. She looked at her aunt, who was looking at her in a new, strange way.

Priscilla rose. 'I will send regrets to Elsie,' she said simply, and nobody would have called her voice and face sweet then.

She went out of the room, and Aunt Clarissa sat before the fire and thought long and hard.

At last she rose to her feet quickly. 'I'll do it,' she said. 'I simply can't bear to see her so disappointed. Why didn't I think of it before?'

She went to the door and called Priscilla, who came in presently, very pale and quiet.

'Priscilla, I have a little fund of twenty-five dollars in the Agriculturists' Bank. It is really a little more than that, for I put it there two years ago, and it must have earned a couple of dollars by this time. It had all but slipped my mind. Would twenty-seven dollars get you a party dress?'

'Yes, auntie,' said Priscilla pensively. 'Perhaps we can make twenty-seven dollars do, but it is not very much, you know. Now, when shall we buy the things?'

'To-morrow would suit me very well.'

'Oh, I can't go to-morrow; I'm going to the park to skate.'

'Suppose we say Saturday morning, then?'

'That will do.'

Priscilla was very happy. For the next day or two her talk was of tints and tones, silks and satins, lace and chiffon, until Aunt Clarissa was weary. But she would not say a word to mar Priscilla's pleasure.

On Saturday morning, after breakfast, Priscilla remarked that she would run over to see why Grace Miller was not at school the day before; it must be that she was sick.

'If you do, remember not to stay very long; we must go down town before noon,' said Aunt Clarissa warningly.

'I won't be gone but a little while.' A moment later Priscilla was skimming along the street.

It was half-past ten before Aunt Clarissa had finished her tasks and was about to get ready to go down town. Priscilla had not yet returned.

The bell rang. A gentleman, who was Aunt Clarissa's business adviser, called to say a few words of caution. What he said made her look very anxiously at the clock. Immediately after he had gone she went upstairs and dressed herself for shopping, even to putting on her gloves. And still her niece was absent. It was a quarter past eleven.

At a quarter of twelve Priscilla rushed in.

'Did you think I was never coming?' she asked, laughingly. 'I had no idea it was so late. Grace wanted me to play duets with her, and Will wanted me to accompany him on his violin, and the time slipped away before I knew it. But we'll go now.'

'It is too late.'

'Too late! Why is it, Aunt Clarissa?'

'The banks close at noon on Saturday.'

Priscilla stood mute in astonishment.

'I would have called for you, but you had taken my rubbers, and I can't walk two yards on such ice.'

Priscilla flushed; she turned, and went into the library without a word.

The flush was still on her cheeks when they sat at the luncheon table.

'Perhaps we can go down town on Monday after school?' she ventured to her aunt.

'No; that is my afternoon for going to the Reading Club.'

'Would you mind very much if you didn't go, just this once, auntie?'

'Yes, Priscilla, I would mind it very much. We are to read from Carlyle this time, and afterward there is to be a discussion of him.'

Priscilla looked down and said nothing. Her disappointment was evident.

On Monday afternoon when she came home from school she found that Aunt Clarissa had gone to her club. Priscilla had hoped that she would not in spite of the discussion of Carlyle, knowing that she, Priscilla, wanted so much to buy her dress. Still she had gone, and her pretty niece felt a little injured.

It was six o'clock when Aunt Clarissa came home.

Priscilla looked up at her and smiled a little.

'Oh, my dear child!' exclaimed Aunt Clarissa, sitting down beside her.

'What is it?'

'I am so sorry, so very sorry, but, Priscilla dear, Mr. Miller sent word this morning that the Agriculturists' Bank has failed. They closed their doors at noon on Saturday and will not open them again.'

Priscilla looked startled, then she comprehended, and burst into tears. She laid her head in her aunt's lap and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Aunt Clarissa smoothed her hair tenderly. 'I do not like to say anything to add to your trouble, dear, but tell me this: who do you think is to blame for it?'

'I am,' wept Priscilla. 'I am to blame from beginning to end. Oh, auntie, I've been a horrid, selfish girl. I deserve this. If I had done as you asked me to do I would have my dress now. It's right that I should be the only one to suffer.'

'But you are not the only one to suffer. You are so dear to me that whatever pleases or grieves you must please or grieve me. Can't you see this?'

'Oh, yes, yes, auntie.'

Then there was a long silence. Priscilla's sobs grew less and less frequent and finally ceased. At last she lifted her head and looked at her aunt.

'Auntie, I've been hideous. It has come over me like a flash. It's not your fault; you've always set me the sweetest example of kindness and gentleness and charity, and I've never profited by it. But I will. I'm glad this disappointment has come to me. I'll remember it all my life, and it will do me good.'

Then Aunt Clarissa wept a little too. 'I'm afraid I have not been very wise with you, Priscilla.'

'You haven't lectured me as much as I needed, and when I have been bad to you you haven't told me of it very often. But you must tell me in the future, auntie, you really must, else I'll never be half as nice and good as you are, and I do so want to be. Now give me your cloak and bonnet, and I'll put them away, and then we'll have tea. And I'm going to be just as cheerful, and we won't even think party again.'