

A Kitchen Romance

Written for The Western Home Monthly by W. R. Gilbert

Sadie Preston was adding up accounts. No attractive occupation on a brilliant June day, when flowers and waving trees and bird music called one insistently to come away from bricks and mortar out into the summer world.

Pounds, shillings and pence, addition and subtraction, and the odious task of trying to make one shilling go as far as four, seemed doubly sordid and detestable. But the thing had to be done.

But for Sadie no accounts would have been kept in that delightful household, presided over by young Mrs. Finch, who had inherited from her Irish forbears a pleasant happy-go-lucky temperament, and whose favorite argument was, "When the money is gone, what is the use of writing down sums about it?"

But Sadie, who was burdened with a troublesome conscience, insisted that accounts must be kept.

She lived with the Finches in the dual capacity of secretary to Finch, who was a writer of some growing popularity, and companion to his wife, while he was away on long foreign exploration tours connected with his work.

It was a pleasant household, and Sadie had often congratulated herself on having secured such a good post.

She had a delightful home in the rambling old house. She had a certain amount of liberty, and the chance now and then of meeting interesting folk. And she was very fond of Biddy, with her Irish loveliness of face and voice, and her harum-scarum outlook on life.

Of course, Sadie ought to have had a home of her own to manage—Biddy always said that. And Sadie in her inmost heart echoed the thought.

A home of her own! Such an alluring picture was conjured up by the words before the lonely girl's eyes. For she was lonely—singularly bereft of relatives.

But somehow marriage had never come her way. Only once had she met a man who had power to move her to deeper feeling than mere casual friendship, and he went away. She never knew quite why. He wrote once, she replied; there ensued after that—silence.

And five years had slipped away into the past since then. It was a mere episode in her life; nothing to dream about, and yet, she did sometimes think of old times.

She frowned over her task.

This would never do. Biddy's personal expenditure was larger than her allowance. She must pull in. Poor Biddy! It was hard to tell her that, harder, perhaps, to make her realize the gravity of things; when there was money in her purse she spent it. It was quite simple.

There was to be a dinner party that night, a sprinkling of celebrities and some old friends, a celebration of a birthday anniversary.

Sadie had been busy doing flowers and other little household matters, while Biddy hung in ecstasy over a new frock of shell-pink satin, a frock that exactly matched her rose-leaf complexion. It was to be a party of twelve, and Sadie had begged off appearing—they could not sit down thirteen to dinner. She reminded them of this, that ended the argument, and Sadie got her way. She usually did with Biddy.

A faint smile flickered in the girl's dark eyes as she added up that last column of figures. If Biddy—

The door flew open and the subject of her thoughts came in with a rush, an open letter in her hand.

"Sadie!"

"Well?"

"You must dine to-night, otherwise we shall be thirteen."

"Why, has someone failed you?"

"No, but Mr. Henderson asks if he may bring a friend, a celebrity of some kind. I can't make out his name, because George Henderson's writing is atrocious. Can you make it out?"

Sadie took the letter and looked at the scribbled contents.

"It begins with a P," she said doubtfully, "or it might be an R. I can't get any further than that."

"It's a bother, but I don't like to refuse to have him, he might be useful to Jack. Sadie, you'll have to go in to dinner with the unknown. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not, dear, but I think it distinctly unfair to the unknown celebrity to send him in with a nobody."

"Nonsense! As if anyone could call you a nobody. In your grey frock with your lovely amethysts you look like a queen."

"You absurd creature! Cinderella would be a much more suitable name!"

Biddy flew away, a light, graceful creature, all fire and animation, with the true Celtic temperament—up in the clouds one day, down in the depths the next. It was Sadie who managed to keep things on a solid basis, calmed her in one moment, raised her spirits in another. They could not do without Sadie, they both said.

And she found plenty to occupy her, even when the accounts were done with and put away in the bureau in the delightful untidy room sacred to Biddy's personal affairs.

It looked out on a wide stretch of lawn, backed by a shrubbery, beyond which rose undulating meadowland and belts of firs. Biddy always tried to conjure up a line of frowning purple mountains beyond

the realization that she had by no means lost her looks, though thirty years lay behind her. Not that good looks had been much use to her. But all the same—

She was disturbed in her thoughts by the door flying open to admit a distracted figure in shell-pink satin. It clothed Biddy's lithe figure like the sheath of a flower; out of it rose her snowy neck and shoulders. A wild rose flush was in her soft cheeks, her eyes shone like stars.

"Sadie, what shall I do? Anastasia is going; dinner ought to be served in a quarter of an hour, and Mary has hysterics in the pantry!"

"Biddy!"

"Anastasia can't help it; she's had a telegram to say her mother is dying. She can just catch the mail to Fishguard if she goes immediately. Mary does nothing but cry and apostrophise the saints; and though she'll do her best, she can't dish up dinner and wait at table as well. What's to be done? I so particularly wanted this dinner to be a success, because Sir Gregory Hazel is interested in Jack's last exploring expedition, and may be such a help to him in the future. Suggest something, Sadie, or I shall go mad!"

The two girls looked at one another for a moment in silence; then Sadie laughed,

She heard Mary hurrying to the front door as the bell pealed loudly through the house. The kitchen clock struck eight.

Biddy cast an anxious glance at the clock.

The guests had all assembled, the thirteenth proving to be an interesting-looking man with a pleasant, tanned face, and the look of one who had spent his days out of doors.

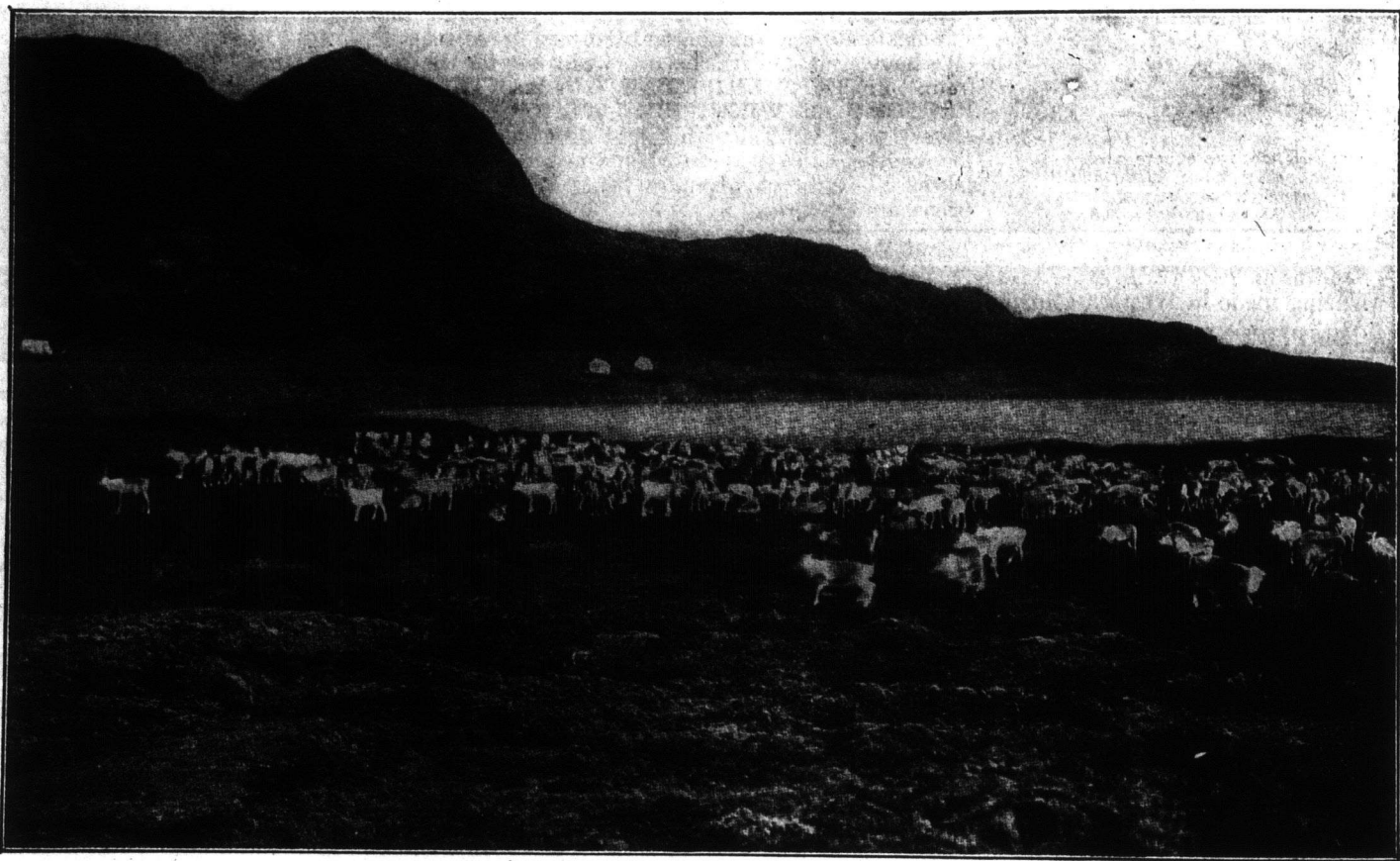
Penrose, so Henderson told her, had just come back from Canada—but not to stay; he would return in a month or two. He had done great work out there, establishing a colony from his property in Cornwall, founding a new country for the working man, and working with them himself as hard as anyone. More than that, he was writing a book on the subject which would prove of great value to the prospective emigrant.

"They do their own work out there," Henderson told her—"domestic and everything else."

"Oh, what a solution!" said Biddy, with another distracted glance at the clock.

"Look here, what is wrong?" said Henderson's voice in her ear.

"Nothing much, only my cook has had to go off at a moment's notice to her home in Ireland, and that accounts for



A portion of Dr. Grenfell's Reindeer Herd at St. Anthony, Newfoundland

that again—her beloved Connemara mountains, behind which she had lived for so long, far from the outer world.

Lilacs drenched the air with their clean scent, laburnums shed a rain of gold over path and lawn. Sadie got up with a sigh. There was no time for dawdling, for in that household there were many things to be seen to on the rare occasions of dinner parties to supplement the efforts of the two willing maids, both of them imported from Biddy's distant Irish home, and both sincerely attached to their young mistress.

Her husband often twitted her with her reasons for engaging the cook, a good-looking girl with the delicious name of Anastasia.

"She has such heavenly eyes," Biddy had sighed.

"My dear, one doesn't engage a cook on account of her heavenly eyes! The one question is—can she cook?"

"Of course she can! Irish people cook potatoes better than anyone in the world!" Biddy had flung at him.

"And we are to live on potatoes as cooked by the fair Anastasia?"

"Of course not, goose! There are other things."

There were. Anastasia of the heavenly eyes cooked really well, and Biddy always spoke of her with conscious triumph, as an example of her immense capability in the matter of engaging servants.

Sadie, gowned in grey, a string of amethysts round her creamy throat, a twist of tulle in the same shade in her bright bronze hair, looked at herself in the glass, and felt a natural pleasure in

and flung her gloves and fan on to the dressing-table.

"It's all right, Biddy; trust to me to manage things."

"But how—how?"

"I'll dish up. Mary will be all right once she realizes somebody is there to direct her. I'll go down. And for once you must dine thirteen! It can't be helped."

"But, Sadie—"

The words fell on empty space. Sadie had gone.

Down she flew to the kitchen, pausing a moment to look in at the pantry, where Mary was wiping her eyes.

"Mary! Come along; I'm going to dish up the dinner. I know all about it. Give me one of Anastasia's aprons. Everything is ready, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss—barrin' a sauce for the pudding."

"All right; I'll do that. I haven't learnt cooking for nothing. Hurry, Mary, and we'll show what we can do when we're put to it! Has Anastasia gone?"

"Yes, miss; she went in the cab that brought the master from the station. She'd just catch the train at Paddington, the master said."

"That's good. Now we'll get to work."

Sadie, her pretty grey fawn shielded by one of Anastasia's big white aprons, hurried to the range where saucepans and pots were all set in array.

She peeped into each, looked at the list she herself had carefully written out of the courses, and set to work to make the sweet sauce.

the delay. Miss Preston is taking her place, and dishing up the dinner."

"Can't we help? Old Penrose is a tophole cook, if that's any use to you."

"Oh, the dinner is cooked, practically, but—"

"Look here, Penrose, here is something quite in your line," Henderson chaffed. "The cook's gone—what about lending a hand, eh?"

"By all means."

"The lady you were to take in—isn't that right, Mrs. Finch? — is dishing up the dinner."

Penrose laughed.

"It sounds serious. Mrs. Finch, please let me help the new cook. I assure you, I mean it."

Biddy looked at him hesitatingly.

"I don't like to let you; it's too bad, really, but—"

"Not another word. I shall enjoy it."

Just at that moment the door opened, and Mary announced:

"Dinner is served."

But Penrose disappeared, went down the hall, and through a swing door of green baize which looked as if it led to the kitchen departments.

A savoury smell floated to him from an open doorway. He passed through it into a spotless kitchen. At the centre table a girl was standing with a basin in one hand, while with the other she stirred and beat something very carefully.

She looked up. A cry escaped her lips. He was conscious of softly ruffled bronze hair, threaded with mauve; of a gleam of amethysts against a creamy throat; of eyes—startled, lovely, welcoming eyes!