

❖ ❖ The Story Page. ❖ ❖

The Heat of Battle.

The minister's kitchen, because it undertook to serve too many purposes, was only a qualified success. As a dining-room it brought tears to the eyes of the mistress of the manse. Because it lacked a sink and several other conveniences, its career as a kitchen was in no wise brilliant. Sometimes the minister's wife mumbled strange things as she skillfully dodged between the dining-table and the stove.

She possessed a temper—a weird, skittish temper that on occasions flashed up in a manner calculated to inspire terror in the uniformly peaceful soul of her husband. It caused him the wonder, uneasily concerning her spiritual condition. Its skittishness, however, was confined mainly to the perplexities of the combination room where cooking well and dining comfortably seemed to clash. The congregation, the stand-elders and deacons, remained in happy ignorance of the righteous indignation which sometimes flashed and flamed in the region of culinary mysteries.

For nearly two years the minister's wife had conducted an unsuccessful campaign under a banner bearing this device: "A new kitchen with a really and truly sink."

Repeatedly the banner had gone down in humiliation and defeat. The perversity of the three trustees who stood guard over the church treasury compelled the minister and his family to partake of their daily bread in the confines of the heated kitchen. There amid clouds of steam from the kettles, spouts and various odds and ends heavily upon the air, the pastor of the Millville Presbyterian church munched his portion, while little rills of perspiration coursed hither and yon over his stupid ministerial anatomy.

The trustees stubbornly insisted that a manse with three rooms on the first floor and four on the second, furnished ample accommodations for a modern defender of the orthodox faith. The prophet Elijah, they said, had only one little room upon the wall. In vain the little woman with the banner endeavored to convince them that when the parlor had to serve as the minister's study and the living room as a reception hall, and the kitchen as dining-room, there was perplexity and discomfort beyond a reasonable measure of Christian resignation. She reminded them also that Elijah was not burdened with the cares of a family in his limited quarters on the wall. With the aid of a stumpy pencil chewed into ragged utility, she exhibited a plan of the dear little home she could fashion, if they would build her another apartment to serve as a kitchen. But the trustees were set on their ways. They listened to her good-naturedly, smiled a little, but refused even to seriously consider the proposition. Young Mr. Cummings, the junior member of the official body, finally undertook to champion her cause, but mainly because he was young, his minority report received scant attention. Then the mistress of the manse retired to the kitchen and sputtered. She told the hot kettle and frying pan just what she thought of those wooden trustees.

A month had passed since her last defeat. She was considering the question of serving a wedding anniversary dinner. The proposition made her heart sink. "Oh, I just can't do it," she whispered under her breath. "This terrible kitchen makes mother nervous, and his people always look at me as if I was to blame for it. I'll just let the day go by like any other day until I can have things half-way decent."

She suggested the dish-cloth and hung it on a line stretched across the corner of the room. Then she dipped her hands into a basin of warm water to remove all trace of the soapy fluid in which the dishes had been washed. The fire in the stove was dying out, but the place was still uncomfortably warm. "They never could stand it," she exclaimed. Then she paused, her dripping fingers suspended over the basin.

"I wonder—"

There was a quiet in his voice and a bit of a smile appeared at the corners of his mouth. Perhaps it was five minutes later when she entered her husband's study.

"Percy, our wedding anniversary is on the seventeenth."

"Is it?" he asked in a tone that indicated surprise at the recurrence.

"Yes, and I thought of having mother and some of our other relatives to dinner."

"An excellent plan," he commenced.

"But couldn't we do something different this year? We had them last year, you remember. Do you think Mr. Cummings and the other trustees would care to come? We have been at their homes so often, and perhaps it would help to keep up the good feeling in the church if we did a little special entertaining. I can prepare a good dinner when I try."

"Yes, yes, certainly," the good man agreed. "Certainly, ate the trustees this year and the others next time. Have we chairs enough, Maggie?"

"Oh, yes, if you drive a nail in the one that wiggles. And will you attend to inviting the men? Be sure to have Mr. Crowles come. I know he has been mean about our kitchen; as mean as ever he could be, but we won't slight him on that account."

"No, no, we must show a Christian spirit."

Then the good man delved again into the mysterious black books on the table which told of creeds and other things found in sermons. When her husband turned to his books, the little woman knew that the interview was at an end. Always it was the same. Next to the abominable kitchen she dreaded the black books. But somehow this time she hardly gave them a thought, so intent was she on the entertainment she had suggested. During the succeeding days her busy intellect fairly teemed with clever plans for the diversion of her prospective guests, the trustees of the Millville Presbyterian Church.

The members of that body were vastly pleased to be invited to dinner at the manse. They believed that such cordiality indicated that the minister's wife bore no ill-will toward them on account of their refusal to entertain her proposition. Mr. Crowles, the leader of the opposition, was so intensely gratified that he arrived fifteen minutes in advance of the other guests. He and the minister at once entered into an earnest discussion of the condition of the church, leaving the mistress to her own devices in the kitchen.

In that region things were reeking hot. The table, which of necessity stood near the stove that was doing its level best to raise the temperature still higher, was spread with a snowy cloth, each crease of which told of feminine energy on ironing day. The silver glistened in the lamplight, dully reflecting the vivid red of a spreading center piece.

For once in her life the minister's wife was happy indeed. Her face was flushed with excitement and with the fierce external heat. A tasteful white apron protected the front of her gown and she smiled to herself—a grim, contented smile—as she glanced at the windows now reeking with the condensed humidity of the room.

"There now, everything is ready," she murmured, giving a last deft touch to the apartments. Then lifting the coal hod she dumped into the stove a liberal supply of fuel, carefully distributing it with the poker. Her entrance to the parlor carried with it the smell of savory dishes, and the men recognizing it as a goodly favored omen, arose with alacrity, prepared to do full justice to the bountiful spread.

"You will please take this place, Mr. Crowles," she said sweetly, when they had followed her into the seven-fold heated furnace. The chair she indicated was scarcely two feet away from the roaring stove. Mr. Sawyer was deposited hard by, while young Mr. Cummings was conducted to a place on the opposite side of the table. The minister and his wife occupied either end of the board.

"We thought of serving dinner in the sitting room," explained the little woman, "but that blessed husband of mine was late getting home this afternoon, and really I couldn't drag this heavy table alone. It is a heavy task for two. We always have our meals here, and I hope you don't mind, do you? It is our only dining room, you know."

"No, mom, we don't mind," responded Mr. Crowles, hitching his chair nearer the table.

"It is snug and home-like here," explained the minister, beaming upon his guests.

"Right pleasant place," commented Mr. Sawyer behind whom the kettle hummed and sang as it gave off a steady cloud of hot steam.

Young Mr. Cummings began to tell of a new soprano who had recently come to town and who promised to be of value to the choir, but Crowles and Sawyer found it difficult to maintain a show of interest.

The minister poked at the platter of fried chicken.

"Will you have light or dark meat, Mr. Crowles," he asked.

"Oh, anything, anything," Mr. Crowles settled in his chair and threw open his coat, thereby freeing the garment from its clinging proximity to his back.

She can sing clear up where there aren't any more notes," continued Mr. Cummings, "and if we get her the Methodists won't be anywhere near it."

"My dear, isn't it just a trifle?" began the minister, but the inquiry died away in the sprightly voice of his wife.

"And what is her name, Mr. Cummings? Of course we must secure her, if such a thing is possible. Don't you think so, Mr. Crowles? Good singers are so difficult to find and so necessary to the church. We must call on her soon, Percy."

"Yes, yes," returned Percy. "What do you think of it, Mr. Crowles; shall we ask her to sing in our church?"

"Eh?" asked Mr. Crowles, whose face was now moist and very red. The lamplight shone upon dozens of tiny glistening drops on his forehead.

"Eh?" he asked again.

"I was speaking of the new soprano," the reverend host explained.

"Oh, yes—well, yes, better get her if possible. I may be wrong about it, but it seems to me, the room is very warm."

"Why, is it?" inquired the sweet little woman in surprise. "Perhaps you had better open a window, Percy. Are you uncomfortable, Mr. Cummings?" As she said this, the aspirator looked straight into the eyes of the junior trustee.

He thought he detected a ghost of a wink in her gaze, and immediately arose to the occasion.

"No," he answered, "on the contrary, I was sure I felt a draught from that window and I was somewhat concerned. I take cold so easily."

"Never mind," hastily interjected Mr. Crowles. "I am perhaps dressed a little too warm for the season."

"Do you use this room as a dining room all the year round?" inquired Mr. Sawyer, fidgeting in his chair.

"Yes, all the year through," returned the minister. "Won't you let me help you to more peas?"

"No, thank you."

"Do let me give you more hot coffee," purred the sweet woman.

"No, thank you, nothing more," said Mr. Sawyer, casting an uneasy glance at the stove which was as fervent as a summer sun. The films of moisture on the window panes were breaking in places into streaky rivulets indicating the departure of the overflow. The water in the kettle bubbled and splashed in its activity. An uncertain hazy vapor arose from sundry pots and pans on the back of the stove. The minister's dog, which had been snoozing at one side of the furnace, slumbered sleepily to his feet; then he went to the door and whined. During pauses in the conversation the low steady humming of the fire rushing beneath the stove lids could be heard. Every damper was open. Presently an odor stole out on the stuffy air. Very much like the burning of a rag it was, and with it a dim suggestion of incinerated cookery.

Mr. Crowles drew forth his handkerchief and mopped his brow. His associate, Mr. Sawyer, snuffed and looked about him, breathing deeply. Then with a startled look the minister's wife sprang up, exclaiming:

"Mercy! my biscuits are burning!"

She hurried to the oven door and flung it wide open. An infernal draught of hot air laden with smoke swept full against the unprotected back of Mr. Crowles. A reserve detachment swooped aside and enveloped Mr. Sawyer. In an instant a thin veil of smoke enveloped the table.

"Oh, dear!" came the voice of the little woman as she clawed and clutched frantically at something within the oven, "they're ruined."

A blackened mass slid from her hand to the floor, and with it was a small square smoking thing that had once done duty as an iron holder.

"I must have forgotten and left it in the oven when I turned the biscuits," she managed to explain.

Mr. Crowles coughed and passed his hand over his dripping forehead. The upper buttons of his waistcoat were unfastened. He was very warm indeed.

"Shall I open the window?" he asked, half rising.

"Oh, no, please sit still; I can open it easily," she answered. But before doing so she stirred the fire into one final effort. Her face was a study of sweetness and peace as she again seated herself at the table.

When the meal was ended, the minister and his guests executed an almost pell-mell retreat into the cool living room. Both Mr. Crowles and Mr. Sawyer bore evidence of the radiating power of the parson's stove. The pride had forsaken Mr. Crowles' collar, which now hung dejectedly about his neck. Mr. Sawyer's celluloid survived the torrid atmosphere shining and placid, but his cuffs were sadly wilted and his linen bosom flat and flabby.

Mr. Cummings opened the front door and peered long and earnestly into the great cool outside world, while he whistled softly, "There'll be a hot time in the old town to-night."

The following Sabbath morning the minister made this announcement to his congregation:

"The board of trustees authorize me to state that certain improvements are to be made in the manse, including the erection of a kitchen. This addition has long been needed and will be greatly appreciated by your pastor and his family. And—"

But the minister's wife heard no more. She glanced across the church at Mr. Cummings. He thought he detected the ghost of a wink in her right eye, and rose to the occasion with a squint of his left. The little woman's banner was floating high and triumphant. She laughed like a girl when she told the good news to the frying pan, and declared "There is nothing better than baked trustee except a trustee that needs no baking.—The Interior."

The Curse of Discontent.

An Arabian guide once told an American traveler a story, which, in condensed form, is related in an exchange. Its application the reader can readily make.

There lived on the banks of the Indus river, an ancient Persian by the name of El Haffed. From his beautiful and comfortable cottage on the hillside, he could look down upon the gleaming river, and over the glorious sea. He was a man of wealth. His fields and orchards yielded plentifully, and he had money at interest. A beautiful