

## STORY OF A MINISTER'S WIFE

### THE SILVER KEY

The wide parlor of the parsonage was very cool and dim and restful after the glare of the June sunlight outside. White curtains swayed at the open windows. Roses in a glass bowl dropped their petals on the polished top of the table, which was heaped with books. The walls were covered with a delightful paper whereupon scenes from the Orient ran one into the other and repeated themselves from floor to ceiling—minarets and turbaned pilgrims and boats floating on winding rivers.

The child, who had been sitting motionless in one of the chairs against the wall, turned and rather timidly began to trace the pattern of the paper behind her with her finger.

"Don't Ettie!" impatiently said the young woman who sat opposite her.

Esther Blake was a pretty young woman, very neat and trim in her close bonnet shawl, with her dark hair looped smoothly over her ears in the fashion of the time. The sombre expression on her face was lightened now by an occasional gleam of vague expectancy.

The child desisted, and sat swinging her little feet in dogged patience.

Upstairs a door opened, and there came the sound of laughing voices and the quick patter of childish feet. Then their light footsteps on the stairs, and the minister's wife, cool and fresh in her white gown and lilac ribbons, entered the parlor.

"I am sorry," she said in answer to her visitor's question. "Mr. Barclay has gone out, and I don't know where the papers are that he wanted copied. He told me that your brother was to do them, and how glad he was to find so good a copyist."

She knew that Esther's brother was no less glad to have the work to do. Still a young man, strong and active, he had lost the use of his lower limbs through an attack of paralysis, and depended upon his quick brain and his clever fingers to support his little family. His wife had died three years before; since then Esther had kept his house and taken care of his children.

"Let me see," said Lucy. "Mr. Barclay might bring the papers round to you himself, or—"

"I could call again," said Esther, with half-veiled eagerness.

"I will have them ready for you, then. I am going away, you see."

"You are going away!" repeated Esther, blankly.

"Yes. I am going home—to my own old home, you know, at Rivermouth. It is ever so long since I have been there, and all my old friends are planning to give me the greatest good time—tea parties and sailing parties and picnics. I shall be so gay I shall not know myself!"

Esther looked at her enviously. "I had a home like that," she said, "I'd stay there."

"Oh, no!" said Lucy laughing. "My work is here. You can't imagine how many things I have to do all the time—meetings and committees and classes and calls—something every minute. But for a little I mean to run away from it all. Must you go?" Esther had risen suddenly. "I am so sorry you had the long walk in the heat. Don't come again; I'll see that your brother has the papers."

"Ettie!" said Esther.

Her voice was sharp; but the child ran to her and confidently taking her hand, looked up with shy eyes at the minister's wife.

"This is your namesake—a dear little girl," said Lucy, warmly. "She is a little older than my Mary, I think; and the youngest must be about my baby's age. I remember you told me he was three."

The girl's face softened. "Yes, he's real cunning," she said. "If you could come—"

"I will. Of course I will come and see you all—when I get back from Rivermouth."

Lucy did not understand the look, half of appeal, half of disappointment and defiance, that came to Esther's face as she turned abruptly and went out. Upstairs, going to and fro in the cool rooms with the things for her trunk, Lucy remembered it, and wondered.

"There's another reason why I shouldn't go away," she complained to good Aunt Persis, who was to take charge of the parsonage and the parson and the parson's children while the minister was away. "That girl will be on my mind all the time."

"Nonsense! You need a change from having people on your mind."

"You are all so sure," said Lucy, "and so good about my going, I haven't fairly stopped to think whether I ought to go or not. There's the mother's meeting on Tuesday—you'll have to run that, Aunt Persis—and the Monthly Missionary in the evening, and the Teachers' Conference and the choir rehearsal to-night, and the meeting on Sunday; and Wednesday's my day at the Boy's Home, and Thursday's mornings I always read to old Mrs.

Sullivan; and the Apron Sale and Sociable Friday evening, and the Ladies' Aid and the Girls' Guild—besides William and the babies!"

"Never mind—once you get out in a boat on the bay with your brother John and the others, you'll forget about your meetings and your mothers, my dear."

Through the white dust of the sunny road Esther Blake walked homeward with a dragging step. Her heart was a dull weight within her. The vague hope of help that had throbbled in her suddenly the Sunday before as, sitting in church, she had gazed at Mrs. Barclay's lovely and serene young face, had left her. She was thrown back upon the troublous waves of her own doubt and discontent.

One thing only was clear to her mind; the minister's wife was glad to escape from the irksome round of duty; she was so full of her expected pleasure that she had no ears even for the confidence that Esther had very mistily imagined possible. The girl scorned herself now for the thought. She had supposed that the minister's wife, at least, was satisfied with her lot; she had thought that perhaps the minister's wife might even hold in her gentle hand the silver key that should unlock the door of content for another, who was struggling blindly and bitterly to find the way. But no!

"If she can't stand it," Esther said to herself, walking faster in a kind of fierce triumph, "if she wants to get away from home and have a good time, I guess it isn't strange that I do. The same old things every day,—the same people, no fun or variety,—always just the house and Robert and the children."

The thought of Robert laid a painful grip upon her heart; but she shook it defiantly. Because he was tied to his chair and his crutches, was it fair that she should be tied to him? And the children were not her's. Why should she be responsible for other people's burdens? She had borne them long enough.

In the home that Cousin Susan offered her in the city, there would be work, of course; but there would be change and novelty,—perhaps the pleasures that she had dreamed of. Why should she not take her chance and go?

"Ettie, come and put your bonnet on!"

She saw that the sun was beating hot on the child's bare head. She stooped and tied the bonnet herself and smoothed back the damp hair from the rosy face. The habit of protection was strong in her. But—the minister's wife was going away, too!

Gloved and bonneted, Mrs. Barclay looked in at her husband's study on her way down stairs. It was Saturday, and the minister was battling with one of those doctrinal sermons that he conscientiously preached from time to time instead of the more practical, personal appeals that his soul—and his people—loved.

"Good-by again, dear!" she cried to him. "No; you are not to go to the station with me. Maggie is going to carry my bag down, and I won't have you disturbed. The children seem very good, and I think you and Aunt Persis will be able to manage all right just for these few days."

"Of course we shall," said the Rev. William valiantly, although the grimmest doctrinal difficulty seemed to him a stumblingblock not worth considering when compared with the household problems that loomed fearfully on his immediate horizon. Nevertheless, when he had closed the door on his wife's sunny face, he found his sermon so plunged in gloom that he threw it aside, and set patiently about finding a more inspiring theme.

Lucy walked on to the station. She was early for her train. Going out on the platform to wait, she found a solitary figure already there, sitting, bag in hand, on a bench.

"Why, Esther, you are going away!" she began; and then something in the girl's attitude, in her furtive, startled look, and perhaps something in her own half-reproachful memory, smote her with an instant conviction.

"I wish that we were travelling together," she said quickly, and sat down beside Esther. The girl moved away a little.

"You needn't be kind to me, Mrs. Barclay," she said suddenly. "Because—you'd know it sooner or later, anyway,—I am running away!"

"Oh, are you?" said Lucy. "And where are you running to?"

She spoke brightly, trying to think what she should do.

"I am going to my cousin's in the city," Esther answered defiantly. "I'm sick and tired of it here; it's dull and stupid, and Robert nags me—I won't stand it any longer! It's alright for me to go, and I'm going; but I didn't tell Robert. I've left a letter for him to get tonight. He'll make a fuss, but I can't help it—he doesn't understand."

## THAT NIGHT COUGH

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# PEPS

"No," said Mrs. Barclay, in a gentle tone, "people don't always see things the way we do ourselves. He can get along without you, I suppose."

"He'll have some one else," said Esther curtly. "I told him I needed some help, and he hired a woman; she's there now."

"You're very fortunate," said Lucy. "It is generally hard to find just the right person for such a place. Are the children fond of her?"

Esther winced. "They'll get to be."

"Oh, yes!" said Lucy cheerfully. "Children miss a person they love—at first; but they will forget you after a while, of course. We have to choose sometimes between different things, and one compensates for another. The city is always gay and lively; and if you lose the children's love, and your brother's, and your place here as mistress of your little home, why, there are the shops, you know, and things like that, to make up."

Esther's face was white. She had been prepared to argue, but not to be argued for, like this.

"The woman you have hired," Lucy went on, "has she learned your brother's little ways? I suppose he has them—men always have. Mr. Barclay thinks if he hasn't his table and chair just so, he can't write a word of his sermon."

Esther smiled a little, off her guard. "Robert's like that, too. He wants his coffee always in the same cup; and when we read evenings he has to have the little old lamp with the painted shade."

"It's hard to tell just what gives us the feeling of coziness—the home feeling," said Lucy softly. "I suppose that gives it to Robert—just that—the little old lamp, and you on the other side of it. He would miss it, of course, if it were taken away from him."

Esther looked off along the railway track. Her eyes were near to tears.

Lucy leaned forward and laid her hand on the girl's arm. "Don't you think, Esther, that you might sometimes miss it, too?"

Esther turned upon her suddenly. Her defiant eyes met Lucy's, grave, compassionate, and the veil fell from between them.

"Perhaps I shall miss it. But I can't help it. I've made up my mind to go. And you're running away too!"

"I," said Lucy, astonished. "Why, my dear—"

"You want a good time, too, if you are a minister's wife. You are tired of it here, always doing things for other people. Oh, I don't blame you; it's stupid, tiresome. You want to get away, and leave it all behind."

Lucy could not speak for a moment. The girl's words had brought a sudden light to her. She realized with a keenness that was almost a pang how much her work really meant to her—the home, the life that had come to be her own, into which her heart had struck its roots deep—deep. Tired of it, that work, that life! It stretched before her now, fair, gracious—busy, to be sure, and demanding every faculty of body and of brain, brain, but filled with interest, warm with love, rich with opportunity!

With that realization came another. Not without travail had she won her contentment. In a flash she saw that experience is for inspiration, that power is born of pain and that out of struggle grows the passionate desire to help.

The rush of an incoming train startled her. Esther sprang from her seat with a cry. At the other end of the platform two little figures approached, stopped, bewildered by the sudden noise, loosed hands and ran apart. The train was coming swiftly, the platform was narrow, and other passengers hurried to and fro. Lucy ran toward one little figure and Esther

pursued the other. When the train passed on after a brief stop, the two women met, each with a child, safe, dusted and disheveled, in her arms.

"They followed me!" said Esther, half sobbing. "Ettie ought to have known better. I shall have time to take them to the corner, and from there they can go back alone."

"Oh, no!" said Lucy. "Don't send them right away. Let them stay a little."

"I'm going!" said Esther; her face was set sharply.

"Of course. But you may as well see what you can of the children first. They can go back alone; they will have to learn to take care of themselves now, anyway. Or I can take them when I go."

She sat down again on the bench. Esther watched her jealously as she gazed at little Robby's chubby arm.

"You needn't," she began, and then started. "Mrs. Barclay, that was your train? You've lost it! You can't go home!"

"Home! Lucy could have smiled at the gladness in her heart. It was absurd—childish; but it was there. She might still make her visit some time; but this was a reprieve. She turned to the girl, who still regarded her with a look of doubt and wonder in her eyes.

"There isn't another train today that makes the connection, and I'm glad I can't go," Lucy said. "I believe I have been homesick all the time at the thought of going. I'd rather have the Mother's Meeting and my morning with Mrs. Sullivan and my choir, to say nothing of my husband and the babies, than go to forty picnics." She laid her hand on the girl's arm. "Esther believe me, there isn't any pleasure in the world like that of having people need you,—I've learned that,—like having a little place of your own and being wanted in it. That is home, and that is happiness. If you leave your brother and these children, who love you, who will forget you if you will let them—"

She stopped; for Esther's defiant head had dropped upon her breast. It was not so much what Lucy said—it was the conviction that spoke in her eyes and her voice—the conviction of experience of passionate sincerity. And the minister's wife had lost her outing—she had let the train go by—she cared enough for that! But Esther had made up her mind—if only the children were not there!

Catching little Robby up in her arms, she lowered her face to his curly head. "Don't cry, auntie!" said Ettie, pressing tenderly into the circle of her arm.

Lucy leaned nearer.

"If you would stay and try a little longer," she said, "and I could help you, Esther?"

The Rev. William Barclay was sitting in a somewhat perturbed frame of mind with Aunt Persis at the supper table, when a visitor called.

"Blake!" he said, hurrying into the parlor. "I'm glad to see you. Sit down."

The young man did not return the minister's greeting.

"It's about my sister, Mr. Barclay," he said. "She's gone away—I've had a letter from her, gone to stay with her cousin in the city. She's often spoken of it, being tired of looking after me and the children; but I'd no idea she really meant it. And now—I'm sorry to bother you, but I thought maybe you or your wife—I don't see how we're to get along without her, Mr. Barclay."

"Dear, dear, I'm sorry!" said the minister, whose sympathy was quickened by the feeling that he, too, had been abandoned to some lonely and untoward fate.

"I suppose it isn't strange," Robert blundered on in pathetic self-reproach, "that she should have found it dull here. And I've been impatient often enough, I dare say. I could manage by myself; but there are the little ones. She's been like a mother to them. I—"

"Hush!" said the minister.

The front door had opened and steps were coming along the hall. Lucy stood in the doorway, with her hand on Esther's shoulder.

She had gone home with the girl, hoping to find Robert there, and to help her make her peace with him. But finding him out, they had come straight to the parsonage.

The low sun streamed in at the parlor windows. The roses dropped their petals on the polished table top. Upon the wall the turbaned Orientals bowed before their minarets and the boats floated along the winding rivers. Lucy looked at it all with the joy of one who sees again things familiar and dear.

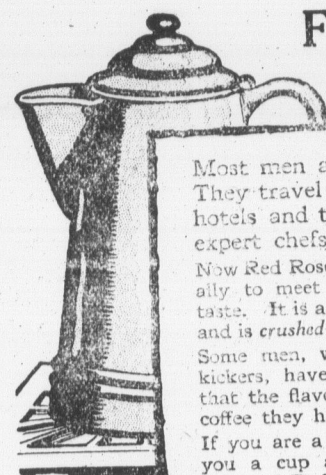
The minister's face glowed. Robert's cleared like a sky swept suddenly of clouds.

"My dear," said the minister, "you didn't go after all!"

"No," said Lucy, and her eyes were luminous with the light of deep content; "no, dear, we didn't go. I met Esther at the station, and we have come—home together."

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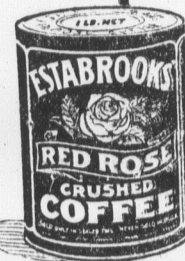
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