

* * The Story Page. * *

The Pratt Baby.

"What's to be done with the Pratt baby?" That was the question which was stirring the small village. Answers of various kinds were attempted.

"Mis' Peters says she'd be glad to—"

"But she couldn't with her poor health."

"Mis' Bates might."

"But she won't."

"Mis' Lane's got her hands full a'ready."

"Mis' Dr. Miller hasn't a thing to prevent her doing it."

"Not a chick nor a child—"

"And plenty of money."

But with all the cleverness displayed in fitting duties for other people, the Pratt baby remained homeless, although kindly looked upon as a sort of village protegee.

Its father had been run over and killed a month after its birth. The mother took it hard and wilted out of life, so that by the time the baby was eight months old, it looked out on a world in which it was absolutely without possession, yet with eyes as bright and blue, and cheeks as fair and rosy, as if it had been the child of an empress—perhaps more so.

For the present the baby was "staying on" in the family of Mrs. Garvey, in whose house Mrs. Pratt had rented a small room. Mrs. Garvey had six children of her own, but there was still room in it for another.

"A blessin' 'twould bring to anybody, the sweet cratur! wid its eyes laughin' and dancin' at ye the day long. An' it's meself would niver let it out of the house, but for havin' nobody to stay wid it when I'm out washin'."

During such absences Billy Garvey was detailed as nurse, an arrangement which suited the small boy well, for he hated school and loved the baby. It was his care day and night. Billy knew no joy greater than lay in the touch of its clinging little hand, and its merry laugh, as he performed for its amusement every antic known to boys.

When the first snow came Billy bundled up the baby, and took it out on his sled. The baby and Billy both enjoyed this, though it had its drawbacks. If Billy rounded a corner swiftly the baby rolled off; if he started up suddenly, the baby tipped over backwards. Consideration of these difficulties led to a bright thought on Billy's part. He nailed a soap box on the sled. This he filled with hay, and when he drew it out with his blue-eyed charge no child of the empress was ever lovelier or more tenderly smiled on, no charioteer prouder than Billy.

Up and down the two or three short streets he trotted one mild afternoon. It was market day, and a number of farmers were in from the country. Billy varied his sport by hitching his sled to the backs of the sleighs, thus securing a ride for himself, mounted on a narrow ledge in front of the soap box. Quickly he sprang from one vehicle to another as they came and went, during which capers only the tender Providence which guards the helpless saved the baby's innocent life from being trampled out.

The short winter afternoon was closing in—too soon, for neither Billy nor the baby were tired of the fun. Teams were scarcer, and after a ride behind a homeward-bound farmer, Billy quickly detached his sled and as quickly fastened it to one going the other way, with prospect of another spin. But disappointment waited, for just near the edge of the village the sleigh stopped.

Billy waited, for it was nearly at the foot of a long hill. His adroit scheme was to get himself hauled to the top of this and then take a run down, excited to a wild rate of speed by the delighted crows and shrieks of the baby.

The farmer stayed a long time, and Billy grew tired. Nothing but the prospect of this latest rush down the hill would have kept him. He saw some boys at play a little way back on the street, and went to see what they were doing.

And just in the unlucky moment when his attention was fully engaged, Farmer Crofts hurried out of the store and jumped into his box sleigh. His horses, with the sleigh, had been turned diagonally toward the store; the baby in the soap box was just beyond range of his sight as he came. And in the gathering twilight no one chanced to see the precious morsel of a craft sailing along after the big sleigh, as the horses, tired of standing, sped, not up the hill as Billy had anticipated, but down another road winding out of sight at once.

With one glance Billy had seen the baby safe, with the next his scared eyes saw only vacancy before the store door. With a wild cry he dashed toward where he had left his treasure.

"My baby! Where's my baby? Bring him back—bring him back!"

But sleigh, soap box, and baby, had melted completely into the shadows. Billy ran first up one road, then down the other, at last with a heart full of misery, carrying home his sorry tale.

He could not tell to whose sleigh he had tied the baby,

could not tell in which direction it had gone, did not know how far it might go.

Quickly through the village ran the tragic news.

"Billy Garvey's lost the Pratt baby."

Tears sprang to more than one pair of eyes.

"I—wisht I'd taken it."

"I might 'a,' just as well as not."

"I was just thinkin' of it."

"I would in a minute, if—"

But there were no conditions in the matter now, no prospect of a return of lost opportunity. The Pratt baby was lost, and the village mourned.

Farmer Crofts' horses stepped briskly along in the early evening. The increasing cold and steady motion made the baby drowsy, and like a sensible baby (he was one of the kind who always seemed to do the right thing, in the right time and place—perhaps that was his inheritance in lieu of any other,) he cuddled down into the straw and went to sleep. The farmer did not know of the unusual attachment to his sleigh, until he had put his horses in, and was unloading it of things he had bought. Then he stumbled over the soap box and nearly fell, scattering bundles of groceries about.

"What's this?" Mr. Crofts lifted a lantern he had lighted. The baby held up his head and gave a little gurgle of pleasure at sight of the light.

"Well, I am blessed!" Mr. Crofts holds the lantern closer, then jerked it away as two small balls of hands made a clutch for it. Then he put into another shape his exclamation, the truth contained in which he so little realized:

"Well—if I ain't blessed!"

A look of blank bewilderment came over his face.

"How did you git here?"

If baby and soap box had fallen from the skies, it could not have been a greater surprise. His surprise was none the less when he saw the string and realized how his unexpected visitor had come. What was he to do?

"Well, seein' you be here, I s'pose you can't be left out in the cold."

Not knowing what else to do, he picked up sled, soap box and baby, and carried them into the house.

"Here, Maria," he said, setting his burden on the kitchen floor, "look what somebody's sent you."

Mrs. Crofts gazed in amazement, then in displeasure.

"Jacob, what do you mean? You don't mean that you've let somebody put something on you—"

"No, indeed, I don't. You may get as mad as you like with somebody; but not with me. The sled was hitched onto the back of the sleigh, and come all the way from Bentley."

"Well, I declare! A little mite like that out in the cold. But you see how 'tis—a game of somebody's to put that child on us. They'll be fooled, though."

"Yes. I'll take it over to the poorhouse to-morrow. They can look for it there if they want it."

"They won't look for it. Well" as small grunts and sniffs arose from the box, "seein' it's here, I s'pose we can't let it starve."

"Anyhow, it's a purty little creatur."

The baby had by this time, after much winking and blinking, accustomed his eyes to the lighted room, and was now giving signs of being restless. As Mrs. Crofts approached him with much the look with which she would have regarded a stray kitten (she not liking cats), he, being accustomed to go to everybody, held out his hands with a look of gracious readiness to be pleased if well treated.

"Well, it is kind o' bright."

The baby took eagerly the warm milk brought for him, then settled back into Mrs. Crofts' arms with a look of perfect content with the existing state of things. Mrs. Crofts laughed.

"I can't set here holdin' a baby. You take him while I set things on."

She held him while the meal was eaten, then again passed him over to the farmer. Baby made a dash for the busy, half gray whiskers, burying his laughing, dimpled face among them with crows and coos, which plainly invited a game of romps of the baby order. This was, however, soon over.

"He's goin' to sleep."

There was something pathetic in the peaceful trust with which the lids closed over the blue eyes as the pressure of the small head became heavier on the arm. It went to the heart of the Pratt baby's new caretakers.

"It's a cold day, Jacob," said Mrs. Crofts the next morning. "I've got a conscience, if I am set agen' bein' put on, and I don't like the idee of that little creatur takin' a long ride such a day. Tomorrow 'll be milder, may be."

To-morrow was milder, but Mr. Crofts remarked:

"A day or two won't make no difference, now he's here."

On the third day a boy rushed into the house with a cry:

"O, my baby! I've found you—ain't I? How came

I ever to let you git away from me?"

And the Pratt baby pulled Billy's hair and poked into his eyes and rubbed his pink cheeks against the freckled ones with such little crows and squeals of delight as brought a distinct pang of jealousy to Mrs. Crofts' heart.

"Is he your'n?" she asked Billy.

"Yes. Leastways—I mean—he's the Pratt baby. He lives to my house. I've come for him. The sled's right here. I'll soon fix him up." Setting the baby on the floor, Billy made a rush to the shed and soon brought in the soap box.

"Stop," said Mrs. Crofts, as Billy spied the small hood hanging on a nail, "if that baby's got to ride into Bentley to-day he ain't goin' in a soap box, Jacob," she called into the back yard, "I want you to hitch up and drive into Bentley. This boy's come for the baby. Says it's his'n," with a slight quiver in her voice, "and if he's to go he's got to go comfortable."

"Who'd 'a' thought anybody'd ever be wantin' the poor little chap." The farmer's surprise was complete when his wife appeared wrapped for the ride with the baby in her arms.

"I'm goin' to see him safe with them that has the right to him," she said, firmly. Adding, with some severity: "And that won't let him go cavortin' over the country in a soap box on a winter day."

Billy wilted at this, but was sustained by his joy in the recovery of the baby, comforting himself by little pokes at the soft bundle covered up in Mrs. Crofts' arms, to make sure it was safe there.

Its warmth reached the innermost recesses of her heart—a pain with it at thought of the lonely house to which she would go back without it. It had been but a few hours in which the strange, unlooked-for, unwelcome visitor had been under her roof; and yet day and night the little presence had borne a growing sweetness. How its baby voice had filled the silent house to which she shrank from returning!

The return of the baby was heralded by triumphant shouts from Billy.

"He's back! He's back! I've found him! We've got him!"

Men came to the store doors to listen, and women ran out of small houses with shawls over their heads. A small crowd had gathered by the time Mrs. Garvey's door was reached.

It was Billy's intention to snatch the baby and rush in with a wild whoop. But Mrs. Crofts held on to it and walked with dignity into the house.

Mrs. Garvey seized the baby and wept over it a torrent of Irish fondling, while the other women waited their turn for a hug as a babel of tongues arose.

"I'm willin' to say I'm ready to take that blessed baby—"

"I'd decided to do that myself—"

"—I'm able to do well by him, and—"

"—I was with his mother to the last, and I've the best right—"

Mrs. Crofts looked about on the clamoring women.

"Which of you is the mother of this child?" she asked.

A blank silence for a moment, broken by Mrs. Garvey. "It's meself would have been glad enough to take the darlint when there was no one else to do it, but for—"

"I'm ready to do it now—"

"I can give him a good home."

"Well," Mrs. Crofts arose, and with an authoritative air took the baby from the hands of the woman who had just then chanced to be caressing it, this baby came to me, all unbeknown, ridin' by itself in the winter night. If the Lord didn't send him I'd like to know why. If anybody else wanted to care for him it's a pity they didn't find it out before. I'm goin' to take him home and keep him, and if the town authorities wants to interfere they'll know where to come for him."

She strode toward the door, but stopped at sound of loud sobs from Billy, her face softening into a beaming smile. "You come and see him whenever you want. He's to be your'n yet, all the same."

The town authorities never saw fit to find fault with the home which Billy had found for the Pratt baby.—N. Y. Advocate.

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Goethe's last words, when his sight was failing, are said to have been, "Open the shutters and let in more light." More light is what every son and daughter of Adam needs to-day, and we can have it by coming closer to Him who is the light of the world.

Happy are we who live in an age when "names and creeds and altars fall, and our Christ is all and all." For He and He alone brought to the world emancipating truth; He is the universal solvent; the search-light of the mind, and the dynamo of that love which is the only inexorable force of which we are aware.

All the really best things in human life are as accessible to the poor as to the rich.

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