

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

MRS. PERKINS' MINCE-MEAT.

By Elizabeth Price.

"They want you, Amandy, over at Brother Jacob's. The little baby's terrible low and it's mother's about give out." Mr. Perkins looked uneasily over his spectacles as he slowly folded the sheet of paper he held, adding, "It's a telegraph, Amandy. It must be pretty bad."

His wife laid down her lead-pencil and frowned. "If that ain't enough to try Job's patience threadbare!" she exclaimed. "I've just got done writing out my list for my mince-meat things. I was going to ask you to drive over and get them this afternoon, so I could make it early to-morrow. And here comes along another interruption." "Couldn't it wait a little longer, Amandy?"

"I suppose it could, seeing it's likely to have to. In all the years I've been housekeeping I've never failed before to make my mince-meat the first week in November, and here it is December already, and likely to be Christmas, if not New Year's, before this family gets a taste of mince-pie. You certainly have got sickly relations, Obed."

"I dunno as they can help it, Amandy. Maybe they oughtn't to be blamed." Mr. Perkins spoke apologetically. His wife picked up pencil and paper and laid them away as she said, "Well, it seems queer to me that as many of them as there is, nobody but me can nurse them. Just home from a siege with Maria's typhoid, and now out again to Jacob's baby. Oh, yes, I'll go, of course. 'Twouldn't be human to let the child die for lack of sensible nursing, which is likely half that ails it already. Put this list in your wallet, Obed. If so be the baby isn't much sicker we may get back in a day or two, and we can get the things on our way home."

"Did you count in an extra pound or two for Maggie's folks?" Mr. Perkins asked as she showed away the bit of paper. His wife replied sharply, "Indeed I didn't. If Maggie wants mince-meat let her get it the same way as I do. If she was capable, like she ought to be, she could do mine this time on shares. But do you suppose I'd trust her? Never. She'd be fussing over it for a week and likely spoil it in the end. No. I can do and do for others, but when I need help it ain't there."

"But, Mandy, she ain't strong, and there's all the children, and—"

"Obed, it's no use arguing. We could get rid of every penny we've got if we wanted to. Good mince-meat ain't to be made for nothing, and we positively can't afford to buy expensive materials and give them away. We'd be on the county if things were left for you to dispose of."

Mr. Perkins wisely changed the subject, and shortly left the room, announcing his intention to "hook up."

His wife stepped into the hall and called briskly, "Hattie, come down." A young girl answered the summons promptly, and Mrs. Perkins' snapping black eyes softened as they rested on her only daughter's sweet face. "What is it, mother?"

"Same old story. Your Uncle Jacob's sent for me to nurse the baby back to life. No telling when I'll be home again. It needn't make any difference with your visit, though. Your things are all ready. Stay with Nellie to-night, and don't miss your train to-morrow."

"But who'll take care of father?" asked Hattie, adding slowly, "I can

stay at home if it's necessary, though I would hate to miss all the good times Aunt Mary has planned."

"No need of it. Your father'll stay at Jacob's. His rheumatism is so bad he can't do much, and he needs a rest anyway. Your Uncle Josh can do the chores and take the milk home. The only thing that's rushing is the mince-meat, and you couldn't do that if it never got made."

"Why couldn't I, mother? I've helped you lots of times?"

"Because you haven't got judgment enough. There'd be chunks in it the size of a walnut and it wouldn't be fit to eat. To be sure I could have done it at your age, but girls ain't capable like they used to be—more's the pity. Just look up good and tight and leave the keys at your Aunt Maggie's."

"Oh, Hattie, put away my mince-meat rule. I've left it laying out, and I wouldn't lose it for ten dollars, though it does look like I'm fated not to get to use it this year."

Hattie watched her parents set out on their four-hour drive. "It's too bad," she murmured. "Mother's heart was just set on making her mince-meat to-morrow. As if all the pies in the world were equal to the dear little baby's life. But I hate to have her disappointed so often." She picked up the precious recipe and looked it over. "I don't see why I couldn't make it," she said aloud. "It never seems so difficult when mother does it. She'd be so surprised and pleased, too, after it's all done. I could go Thursday as well as Wednesday, and send a card to Aunt Mary not to meet me till then. What if I do have to miss a little of the good time? Mother's always giving up things she wants to do because somebody needs her help."

"I'll do it! I can make the list of things I'd need from this recipe, and get Nellie Gresham to drive me down to the store this afternoon. I'll make it to-morrow—Nellie'll help. I know."

Full of excitement, Hattie proceeded to carry out her plans. The Greshams were neighbors and intimate friends, and Nellie lent willing assistance to Hattie's undertaking. Mr. Gresham cashed the check which was to cover the expense of Hattie's little trip, "and there's enough to spare for the mince things," declared Hattie. "I'll pay for them myself, then if I should make a failure—which I shan't—nobody else will be the loser."

At dusk the two girls returned from the village store (the bed of the buggy well filled with a savory heap of "sugar and spice and all things nice," as Hattie sang, while they unloaded and stowed away their purchases).

They were at it bright and early the next morning, two youthful but earnest cooks, paring, chopping, measuring and weighing, with frequent references to the time-yellowed "rule," which they had pinned out of harm's way on the shelf-paper under the clock.

"I don't want one human being to know it," declared Hattie gleefully, as she stirred. "I wouldn't have mother's surprise spoiled for anything. She always puts it in one particular jar on one special shelf in the cellar. She brings up that jar before she begins her mince-meat, and suns it while she works. This time when she goes down for her jar she'll find it full, and won't she be pleased?"

"I'd love to be a fly on the wall and hear what she says," laughed Nellie. "I'll watch as close as I can, and write you all about it. Hattie, this is simply perfect. I never tasted better."

"It is good, isn't it, for a first attempt! Now it's ready to be put away,

and it's only six o'clock. I think we've done pretty well. Don't you?"

Brother Jacob's little baby proved to be a very sick child, and it was several days before his Aunt Amanda felt justified in leaving him to other care than her own. "Do exactly as the doctor tells you, Myra, and don't take any liberties," was her parting injunction. "I don't want to be sent for to undo anybody else's carelessness. Oh, you're welcome, as far as that's concerned. Only I'm going to make my mince-meat to-morrow, if the whole tribe gets sick." But Myra, who would never forget the gentleness of her baby's nurse, and Brother Jacob, who remembered that he owed his child's life to his sister-in-law, kissed her good-bye affectionately and thanked her from full hearts.

"Let's stop in Westminster and get that order filled," said Mrs. Perkins as they neared that village.

"It's pretty late, Amandy," her husband reminded her.

"I don't care if it's pitch dark, Obed. I'm going to have those things before I sleep to-night."

"Won't Cap Dennis think strange of us trading in Westminster, instead of at our own town store?"

"It don't make any difference what Cap Dennis thinks. His store's three miles the other side of our house, and I wouldn't get my order home before noon to-morrow, and by that time somebody'll probably have small-pox and want me to nurse 'em. It's now or never, Obed."

It was hardly dawn of the next morning when the work began. Mrs. Perkins frowned a little when she saw her "rule" still pinned to the clock-shelf. "If that's Hattie's idea of taking care of things, she didn't learn it from me," she remarked severely.

Her husband looked up from the apples he was paring. "She's young yet, Amandy, she's young," he reminded her. "Now the thing I'm thinking about is, how could I have been mistaken about the apples in that south bin? I was sure it was even full, but it ain't—not by considerable."

"Don't be a goose, Obed," Mrs. Perkins admonished him. "It's bound to be as full as you left it. There's been nobody around to meddle."

A little later she came up the cellar stairs with a big stone jar in her hands. "Some things do seem curious, Obed," she said. "I never kept that gray stone mince-meat jar only in one place when it's empty, and it ain't there. I'm certain sure I saw it the day we went away. No—it don't matter, only I hate to make changes after I get used to a thing. Out of apples? Here's another pan full."

"We ain't liable to interruptions to-day, thank goodness, because none of the neighbors know we're home, only Josh and Maggie. They won't be over before evening likely, and I'll get Josh to carry the mince-meat down cellar for me."

Josh and Maggie were a little late that night. The big kitchen was spotless and no sign of the day's occupation was visible except the big brown jar. "I left it for you to carry down for me, Josh," Mrs. Perkins explained. "Obed's shoulder is stiff yet from that spell of rheumatism he had. Put it on that three-cornered shelf in the northeast corner of the cellar—the one with the iron braces. There's the candle."

"Yes, I am tired, Maggie. Nursing's harder than housework, and it's played me out some. Then to-day I've made mince-meat."

"You have!" exclaimed her sister-in-law. "Why, I never supposed you'd get at it so soon. I—"

"When I have anything to do, Maggie, I don't loiter over it," said Mrs. Perkins, severely. "What's that, Josh?"