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THE RADISH GIRL.

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"A maiden never bold
Of spirit, so still and quiet, that her motion
Blush'd at itself. Her smoothness—
Her silence and her patience
Speak to the people and they pity her."

"Radishes—tea radishes?" An overstrained but sweet voice uttered this familiar cry in one of the upper streets of our city, and a little girl, who was toiling beneath the weight of an overflowing basket, drew back to the railing of a lofty mansion, that its mistress, a superb young woman, might pass from her carriage to the street door. The pavement was damp, and the lady hesitated for a moment before she left the carriage. The small, satin-clad foot lingered on the first step as she was about to descend, when the glad voice of a child broke from the drawing-room window above.

"Bobby, Bobby, I say, come, open the door this minute. Mamma is here, all in the rain!"

Mrs. Staples looked up. A beautiful young head covered all over with short brown curls was thrust out into the rain, and a hand, scarcely larger than a good-sized rose-leaf, was busy as a young humming-bird wafting kisses from one of the sweetest little mouths that ever answered the kiss of a mother.

"Come, mamma, I'm in such a hurry"—cried the dear little rogue, leaning eagerly over the eill and lavishing her kisses more profusely on the damp air—"Oh! I do wish you—there Bobby's opened the door—run up quick—papa is here!"

A fine boy had opened the door, and stood in the passage waiting his mother's approach. Mrs. Staples descended from her carriage with a careless but very graceful movement, and hurried across the wet stones, holding up the folds of her dress, but with her eyes raised to the cherub-face bending in its beauty above her. In the hurry of her movements a superb cashmere shawl had fallen loosely from her shoulders and swept along the muddy pavement as she passed.

"Lady, your shawl will be spoiled," said the soft, humble voice that had so feebly cried radishes a moment before.

The little girl had set down her basket, and stood half shrinking at her own boldness, holding up the rich and soiled drapery. There was something in the voice that appealed forcibly to the generous heart of the lady. She flung the shawl over her arm, and bent her eyes with a feeling of benevolent interest on the little maiden. She was very young, gentle and timid in her appearance, and altogether more delicate and lovely than those poor children usually are who follow her wearisome calling. Her dress might be described by the emphatic word poverty-stricken, yet it was tidy, and a natural grace dwelt about her person, which the frock of striped worsted and coarse woolen shawl rendered but the more remarkable. Two braids of rich black hair fell on either shoulder from beneath a little quilted hood which scarcely shadowed a face of such gentle and touching loveliness, that the heart ached while looking on it. There was privation and suffering in every sweet lineament. Mrs. Staples dwelt on the large sad eyes that sunk beneath her gaze, on the moist lashes and the tremulous spirit that lived around the small mouth, till her heart warmed toward the humble child.

"Poor thing," she said, drawing forth her purse, "take this, and go down into the basement; you seem half perished."

The girl looked wistfully on the piece of silver extended to her, but she did not take it.

"I—I would rather not take the money, lady, but if you will buy some radishes with it, I shall be so glad!"

She ran to her basket and held it eagerly up with both hands as she spoke. The radishes were uncommonly fine, and their slender scarlet spikes lay among the tufted leaves with a most tempting freshness, yet it was almost dark, and her basket teemed to the brim. Not one bunch had the poor child sold through that wet and dreary day.

Mrs. Staples smiled at the earnest way in which the little trafficker lifted her merchandise up the steps, but there was compassion in the smile.

"Go down to the basement," she said, kindly, "and the cook will take some of you. William," she added, turning to the footman, "conduct her down, and see that she is quite warm and comfortable before she goes away."

The man cast a supercilious glance toward the coachman, and turned with a shrug to obey his lady's orders.

"Mother let me take her basket down," cried the boy who had opened the door, his fine eyes kindling at the suppressed insolence of the menial, "I am not ashamed to lift her radishes."

He bounded down the steps as he spoke, and taking the basket from the girl he swung it round with a flourish to his own arm. There was manliness and grace in the action which might have befitted a much older person, and his air of protection was most amusing as he opened the gate and held it, that the humble radish-girl might pass down the area.

"Mamma, why don't you come?" cried the impatient little Sarah, letting herself down the stairs with both hands and feet, that she might hasten her mother's progress.

Mrs. Staples stood thoughtfully in the hall, for her heart yearned strangely toward the forlorn child whom she had just sent from her presence, but when the voice of her own darling aroused her, a beautiful smile lighted up her face, and she hastened toward the stairs with an impatient fondness, which nothing but a warm-hearted mother can appreciate. The lovely child scrambled up from her knees, and with the bound of a young fawn, leaped half way down the stairs into her mother's arms. Her musical laughter rang through the hall while she performed the exploit, broken into a richer sound by the kisses which she lavished over her mother's face, as she bore her to the drawing-room.

In the back basement of a gloomy wooden building, in the lower end of Cherry Street, sat an aged couple at night-fall, on the day when our humble heroine is presented to the reader. The room was damp, low and dark, with no other furniture than a couple of rude chairs, and a deal-table, on which were arranged a half-dozen unmatched cups and saucers, a broken plate or two, and a tea-pot with the spout broken off in the middle, all scrupulously washed and piled together beneath a clean crash towel, as if they had not been called in use for many a day. A brown platter which stood upon a shelf which ran above the table, contained the only appearance of food to be seen in the wretched dwelling, a bone of bacon thrice picked, and retained, probably, from the wretched desire to possess something in the shape of food, though that something were but a mockery. A straw bed was made up on one corner of the floor, and partook of the general neatness of the room. The sheets were of linen, and the covering, a patchwork quilt formed of rich, old-fashioned chintz, was nicely turned under the edges. One might have known how precious that quilt was in the eyes of the possessor, by the care taken to preserve it.

The old couple drew their chairs closer together on the hearthstone, and looked wistfully into each other's faces as the darkness gathered around about them, while the rain beat upon the walks without with increasing violence.

"Come, cheer up," said the woman, with a vain effort at cheerfulness, pressing her withered fingers on the hand of her partner, which had fallen with listless apathy on his knee. "Poor Lucy would have been home long before this if she had done any thing; she will be cold and wet; don't let us look so—so hungry when she comes in."

"Yes poor child, she will be wet and wretched enough," muttered the old man in a broken voice; and he passed his hand over his eyes and flung a handful of shavings and chips on the mouldering fire, from a pile which lay in the chimney corner. The blaze flashed up and revealed the pale, haggard faces which bent over it, with painful distinctness. They were sharp, wrinkled and meager with lack of sustenance. The lips of both were thin and blue, and there was a fixed expression about them, which told how firmly they had borne with suffering. The man looked anxiously into the face of his wife, and turned his head away again with a groan. There was a look of intense keenness about her sunken eye—of suffering and hunger that bowed the old man's fortitude to the earth. It was a picture of terrible famine, and yet patience and affection flung a thrilling beauty over it.

The man gave one more agonized glance at his wife, and rose to his feet.

"God of heaven!" he exclaimed, wringing his hands and looking wildly about the room, "you are starving to death, and I have nothing to give you!"

The poor woman lifted her head and tried to smile, but the effort was heart-rending.

"No, no, I am not very hungry; you remember the bread, yesterday. Let us try the bone again; if we could but get the least morsel, we might stand it till morning."

The husband went to the table and scraped the bone till it was white as ivory beneath his knife. With all his effort, but a few dried particles of meat were obtained; but he bore them to her with something of cheerfulness; there was more than he had expected.

"There is scarcely a mouthful, but it will keep you alive," he said.

She kept her eyes resolutely turned from the plate. "Take a part yourself, and give me what is left; I can wait."

The old man's bony fingers quivered for a moment over the scant morsel, and then he dashed his hand away and thrust the plate into his wife's lap.

"I don't need it. I am not hungry; eat, if you would not die."

The famished woman turned her eyes on the fragments and clutched them like a bird of prey. In one instant they were devoured; then, as if frightened at her voracity, she lifted her glowing eyes to her husband's face with a look of touching appeal.

"I could not help it. I meant to have left some, but there was so little!—If we had but one mouthful more!"

She looked enviously about the room, for the taste of food had made her almost ravenous. Suddenly she sunk back to her chair and laughed hysterically.

"The radishes, John; if she don't sell any we can eat them; there will be enough for all. I wish she would come."

"You forget that the kind woman in the next room lent us the money to buy them with; how can we pay her?" replied the man, looking sorrowfully upon the eager face of his wife. The poor woman buried her thin face in her hands, and tears stole silently through her fingers.

"You may sell the quilt to-morrow," she said, again lifting her face piteously to his, "I will not say a word against it again. It was my mother's, but we cannot starve to death—that poor child and all."

As she spoke, footsteps were heard in the passage. She started up with the eagerness of a famished hound and flung open the door. A tall man, marked by that most unfit badge of servitude for an American, a hatband of woven silver, pushed by her, and setting a basket down on the floor, stood gazing with a look of mingled arrogance and pity about the comfortless room. The little radish-girl, whose light footsteps had been lost in his heavier tread, stood just within the door, with the rain dripping from her hood down the heavy braids of her hair; her little hands were clasped, and her large, glad eyes wandered alternately from her grandparents to the basket, while her lips trembled with eagerness to speak the joy which she was yet too shy to express before a stranger. The man gave another look at the old couple, who stood with their keen eyes riveted on the basket, then turning carelessly on his heel he left the room, whistling an air and brushing the rain from the sleeve of his livery-coat. We inveigh against the arrogance of the rich levelled against the poor; but the insolence of the poor to the poorer is far more common and a thousand times less excusable; it is like quarrels in the same household, which even a community of interest cannot always prevent.

The moment Mrs. Staples' servant left the room, all the delight which had kindled up the little radish-girl's features broke from her tongue. She sprang forward and flung back the covering from the basket. Her eager little hands shook, her eyes grew beautifully bright, and no fairy telling down gold and rubies to a favorite, ever looked half so lovely as that happy child when she revealed the contents of her basket before her famished grandparents, who had fallen on their knees beside it. Her voice broke through the room like the melody of birds rejoicing together when the trees are in blossom.

"See, grandpapa, see!—a beef steak—a great large thick beef steak!—and pickles and bread. Oh, dear! that nice little gentleman has put back a bunch of radishes, the very best. Do look, grandma, here is some tea in this paper—real good green tea—and sugar and—why, grandpa, is that you crying so? Dear, dear grandpa, don't sob in that dreadful way. How can you?—I'm so happy. Why, as true as I live, if I an't crying myself all the time! Now an't it strange that we should all cry because we've got something to eat. I can't help it tho'—indeed I can't; can you, grandpa? I—I believe I shall die, I'm so happy!"

The excited little creature dropped the paper of tea from her trembling hands as she uttered the last words, and flinging herself on the old woman's bosom, lay bathed in tears and shaking like an aspen leaf, literally overcome with happiness. While her clinging arms were about the grandame's neck, the poor woman contrived to break a piece of bread from one of the loaves, and greedily devoured it, amid her caresses. Joy is as restless as grief; Lucy soon started to her feet again.

"But I have not shown you all. I have got money to pay Mrs. Miles, and a dollar besides. Don't eat much, because we will have such a supper in a few minutes. I'll get three cent's worth of charcoal, and borrow a gridiron, and—don't eat half enough before I come back, because of the supper."