

The Partlow's Christmas

(William Zachary Gladwin, in 'The Well-spring'.)

'I'm plumb sick of Billy Partlow and his doin's,' wrathfully declared old Mr. Moneypenny as he threw down the letter he had been reading. 'He's been married to my daughter Sarepty for fifteen year, and never has he done anything else but part low with every single thing he's had to sell; and Sarepty and her seven children—girls at that—can stub and grub along anyway, and be thankful there's a roof over 'em.'

Mrs. Moneypenny, a fat, little old woman, gave her husband a deprecating look. 'Billy's real kind hearted,' she said.

'What's that got to do with it?' blazed Mr. Moneypenny. 'What Billy Partlow needs is business sense, horse sense, common sense, any kind of sense. He'll lose his farm one of these days and serve him right. I'm glad he don't live in the same State with me. If my daughter and her children has got to get along with next to nothing, I'm glad they ain't where I have to look on at it.'

'If they was here,' ventured Mrs. Moneypenny timidly, 'mebbe you could do something for 'em.'

'Do something for 'em!' gasped Mr. Moneypenny. 'That's like a woman. Why, 't would take all I've got to stop Billy Partlow's leaks. 'Tain't often I speak out about him, but seein' I've got started, I'll say my say. Billy Partlow's shiftless, ma'am; plumb shiftless. You don't see nobody else sellin' his wheat when wheat's way down, and buyin' whatever he can get folks to let him have when the market's high. Sarepty writes a pitiful letter, but I ain't a-goin' to do nothing for her, not one thing. 'Tain't no use. I never did put water in a sieve, and I ain't a-goin' to begin. That's all. We won't say no more about it. But I just wish I had another daughter and some Billy Partlow was to come tryin' to marry her. I'd head him off. I'd head him off.'

'Times is hard,' again timidly ventured Mrs. Moneypenny.

'I know that,' was the quick rejoinder. 'And, now you've mentioned it, you can just give that two-dollar-and-a-half girl you've got in the kitchen warning. Goldie, the Scotchman, has a daughter thirteen years old that needs the place, and she'll come for a dollar and a half. I know how to save if Billy Partlow don't, and a dollar a week saved is something now, I tell you. 'Twould take more'n five hundred dollars out at ten percent to bring that in. You tell that two-dollar-and-a-half girl she can go next week.'

Then the short, sturdy old man went out to the barn, hitched up a team of young horses to the big waggon, took the reins in his strong, hard, old hands, and went clattering off out of town to inspect his farm.

Mrs. Moneypenny, left alone, sighed as she picked up her daughter's letter. It was the very first of September. 'I did hope if I showed him the letter in time I'd get him worked up to do something for 'em come Christmas,' she said sadly. 'But he's awful set, and Billy is tryin', when you've made the best of him. And father's kind of riled, too, that he's got seven granddaughters and ne'er a grandson. If one of them children had been a boy, father'd 'a' been lookin' after him pretty

close, if for nothin' else to see that he didn't turn out like Billy.'

She mused a while with the letter in her hands.

'I do hate to let Angeline go,' she said with a troubled look. 'She's an awful capable girl. I don't know what good a little thirteen-year-old girl is goin' to do me. She'll likely make as much work as she does, and I'm feelin' poorly, too, this fall. But father, he just looks at the dollars. He's got a pile of 'em, but they don't seem to give him no comfort.' And again she sighed as she went to put the letter away. 'I reckon I won't show father any more of poor Sarepty's letters. They just rile him,' she said.

Angeline started in surprise when she received her warning, but all she said was, 'Very well, ma'am. I'll get right about suitin' myself with a place.'

She did so, and in due time she was gone, and little Margery Goldie had come to the home of the Moneypennys.

How did she look, this cheery, little Scotch-American lassie? When her wraps were off, and she stood in her working clothes ready to begin, one saw rather short, light brown hair tied in the nape of her neck with a ribbon, a pair of clear, innocent eyes, rosy cheeks, and a strong, active figure. Her dress reached to her shoe tops, and over it she wore a long, low-necked, and sleeveless gingham apron. A pleasant sight she was to look upon, and Mrs. Moneypenny smiled.

The Moneypennys were not society people, and so little Margery did not take a servant's place in their house. She was there to work and to be respectful, but she sat with the two old people at the Moneypenny dining-table, and in the evening there was a small rocker for her in the Moneypenny sitting-room.

She had not been in the house a week till Mrs. Moneypenny was more than reconciled to the absence of Angeline. For, after all, Angeline had been, in her way, a sort of tyrant. It was a new experience to the patient old woman to be regarded with affectionate respect and obeyed implicitly. She began to realize how wearisome had been the tactics she had been obliged to resort to in order to get certain dishes cooked to suit Mr. Moneypenny when Angeline had one of her spells.

Margery's feet were tireless, and her merry laugh rang out over the small disasters of housekeeping in a way that more and more won Mrs. Moneypenny's heart.

It was eight o'clock one evening in the last of October, and Margery had gone up to bed.

Mr. Moneypenny laid down his paper. 'That little girl's a worker,' he said emphatically. 'I take it she's just about the age of Sarepty's oldest girl.'

Mrs. Moneypenny looked surprised.

'If Sarepty's oldest ain't all Partlow, I reckon she's just about such a girl as Marg'ry.'

Mrs. Moneypenny looked astonished.

'That oldest girl of Sarepty's had ought to be encouraged,' he went on; 'I don't mind sayin' to you that I shall get her a Christmas present.'

And then Mrs. Moneypenny was amazed.

That night Mrs. Moneypenny lay long awake. She was full of joyful excitement. She thought of this and she thought of that, that would be suitable for a present to Sarepty's oldest, and it fairly made her head ache at last to try to fit a present and

Mr. Moneypenny's close calculations together. 'To think of father a-settin' his foot right down no longer'n a month ago that he wouldn't do a thing for 'em!' she said to herself. 'I just believe he'll soften to the rest of 'em yet.' And she fell asleep.

Another week went by, and Margery was gaining steadily on the affections of the old man. He had been wont to declare that all young people were good for was to work. But as this little girl went merrily and blithely on her way, getting downright enjoyment out of her homely tasks, he began to have a new idea of the rights of childhood, and a second time he electrified his wife.

'Let me see all them letters of Sarepty's,' he said one evening.

Mrs. Moneypenny looked disturbed.

'You act as if you was afraid to show 'em to me,' he continued with a sharp glance. 'I just want to see the one where Sarepty tells about the sizes of her children and all about 'em. I've got an idee.'

Then Mrs. Moneypenny smiled, and her hands trembled with eagerness as she sorted out the desired letter from its fellows.

'Just as I thought! Just as I thought!' exclaimed Mr. Moneypenny after a slow and careful perusal. 'It is her next oldest that's just such a laughin', chipper little gal as Marg'ry. This dull business ain't no good nohow. Children had ought to laugh and chirk folks up. I'm goin' to get Sarepty's next oldest a present, too. I'm glad Sarepty's got two children that's some account.'

Gayer and blither grew Margery's spirits as the short, wintry days grew gloomier. She began to do small, unasked kindnesses for Mr. Moneypenny; and the old man enjoyed them so much that he shortly asked for his daughter's letter again.

Eagerly Mrs. Moneypenny handed it out.

'Yes, sir,' said the old man in triumph after re-reading it. 'I was thinkin' 'bout the next oldest when I read it before. But here it tells 'bout the third child bein' so full of love to everybody that she can't help doin' things for 'em. I expect she runs and gets her pa's mittens for him,'—Mr. Moneypenny stopped to scowl as he remembered that his granddaughter's father was the reprehensible Partlow,—'and hunts up his glasses for him,' he went on, 'that is, if Partlow wears glasses. And I don't care what anybody says, that child shall have a present too.'

Happy Mrs. Moneypenny! No human being knew how she had longed to do something for her grandchildren. She rejoiced, and blessed the day that Angeline went and Margery came, while she waited to have the precious letter handed back.

'Three good children's a blessin', said the old man. And then he reopened the letter and began to read it again. Presently he looked up. 'I never noticed before, wife, that the fourth child was named for you. Sarepty says she favors you in looks, and is like you in disposition. If that's so, she's peaceable and easy to get along with, and a master hand at mindin' her own business. Four out of seven good. I'm glad of it, and that fourth child gets a present too.'

That night Mrs. Moneypenny's pillow was wet with happy tears. She had lived forty-five years with Mr. Moneypenny, and had just found out that he thought her peaceable and easy to get along with!