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The Daily Short Story

HER GREAT MISTAKE.

By Selina Elizabeth Higgins.

"I can't take them, Mrs. Smith—please do not ask me. I know you are just the finest cook in the world, and I know your good, kind heart, too, but they so remind me—"

and the speaker burst into tears, and bowed her head upon the plain but snowy clean kitchen table, as if her heart would break.

Her neighbor reluctantly took up the round, pyramidal package she had just brought over. Where its pinned newspaper cover was half open, the white, tempting crust of a pumpkin pie showed, crowned with a dozen or more rich, brown, flaky doughnuts.

"Don't misunderstand me, Mrs. Smith," said Sarah Ritchie, drying her tears. "If you only knew—"

"I know all about it, dear," answered the kind Samaritan, tenderly. Don't speak of it again. I do wish, though, that you would come over again this evening. We are going to have a little company. It is just the season for cheering up you know."

"I have some very important business tonight," said Sarah. "It is about the property, and I have to see Lawyer Jones."

"Well, dear, don't fret too much," urged Mrs. Smith, in a sisterly way. "I know your cross is a hard one, but you must always count on us as true willing friends."

Sarah Ritchie, left to herself, sat looking mournfully out of the window at the snowy landscape. "Pumpkin pies and doughnuts" were prosaic themes. All the same, they opened fresh old-time wounds. There had been a time when Sarah, queen of a home, had been famous for thriftiness and excellency in her domestic life. Then there had come a jarring break and the golden cord of mutual love had snapped in twain.

Briefly told, this was the tragedy of her life. She had married Alfred

Ritchie, the bookkeeper in the small hardware business her father conducted. There was a happy year. Then, one day, her husband disappeared. It was known that he went away with the young lady clerk to a distant city. A deficit of five hundred dollars was found. Sarah's father was ill at the time. He died without knowing that his business was on the verge of ruin. All that was left was the home in which Sarah now lived, and that mortgaged.

Before the funeral an express package came containing five hundred dollars, no name, no explanation. The following week Alfred Ritchie reappeared in the village. Sarah refused to see him. He wrote her a letter begging an interview. Sarah wrote back to him forbidding him to ever cross her path again.

What could she think but the worst! She learned later that Alfred had taken charge of a grazing farm one hundred miles distant; like herself, leading a lonely, loveless life.

Sarah tidied up the place as was her wont, and the little place was hospitable and neat looking when Lawyer Jones arrived.

She had not seen him since her husband had so strangely gone away.

"I sent for you, Mr. Jones," she said, "because the mortgage on the house here is due. I cannot possibly pay it, but I can keep up the interest if you will renew the loan."

"I have a surprise for you," replied the lawyer. "I hardly know how you will take it, but—the mortgage has been paid in full."

"By whom?" exclaimed Sarah, in startled wonder.

"By your husband, Alfred Ritchie," "He is not my—" flashed out Sarah and then controlled the rising tide of resentment. "You tell this!" she added, her lips compressed. "Under no circumstances will I receive help, pity or interest from the man who has wrecked my life's happiness."



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There was a spell of silence. Sarah sat with heaving bosom, a suspicion of angry tears in her eyes. The attorney seemed thinking how he had best say what he had to disclose.

"Will you listen to a story I am at last authorized to tell?" he asked.

Sarah nodded, but with her emotion choked, her face not at all responsive.

"The girl who left the town the day that your husband did, as you know, was a distant relative of your father. Your husband had learned that she had married a wretch who would not only not support her, but influenced her to steal money from her employer and send it to him. Briefly Alfred went with her to hunt up the wretch. He compelled him to care for his wife. He borrowed five hundred dollars from a relative to replace the stolen money. He could not publicly explain all this without getting the girl in trouble, and you refused to listen to his explanations. The girl died a month ago, and now he has just written me he is free to have the truth known. By patient labor, always loving you, he saved up the money to pay off the mortgage on your home."

"Oh, how cruel, how wicked I have been!" cried the overwhelmed wife. "How shall I make amends? Oh, tell me, I implore you."

And Robert Jones, good lawyer and true friend, told her, and almost at daybreak next morning Sarah was on her way to the herding farm where her husband had been leading his hermitlike life.

Sarah found the bleak place with its cottage in charge of a boy. He told her that Mr. Ritchie had gone away for a few days on important business. At once, with a joy that thrilled her tired heart to mighty devotion and love, she started in "to make things comfortable."

"I will stay here, oh, I must say—if Alfred will only let me!" she told herself, as she scrubbed and cleaned and dusted. Then she set to thinking of the favorite dishes her husband used to like. She smiled as she recalled his ardent praises for her pumpkin pies and doughnuts.

Trailing through the snow, Alfred Ritchie approached his lonely home two nights later. He noticed that there was a light in the window. Then a sniff of unusual cooking crossed his nostrils. He pushed open the door.

Some one screamed—the startled Sarah—but not until the astonished husband had seen a kitchen table loaded with pumpkin pies and doughnuts, a famous steak frying on the comfortable looking stove, and the burnished tea kettle singing a merry song of welcome and comfort.

"Sarah," he cried, and his big, loyal heart spoke its earnest delight as he sheltered her in his strong, cherishing arms.

Oh, Alfred, it is like heaven, all this!" sobbed the penitent Sarah a little later, as they sat in the soft, soothing glow of the burning logs in the great fireplace. "I wish never to leave this. A glad, true wife, I will only ask to care for you, and please you, and love you."

"And pumpkin pies and doughnuts, all the year round," rallied Alfred gaily.

"Yes, all the time, dear, if you wish it," replied Sarah, humbly and gratefully.

"Only in a little better home," said Alfred. "I have been away on account of a legacy left me by a relative. It means less toil and finer surroundings. We won't be too grand, though. There must always be your famous pumpkin pies and doughnuts on the bill of fare!"

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