

LISBETH'S MISSIONARY.

"The butcher's bill, papa!"

Outside, the locusts were piping shrilly among the blue cups of the morning glory vines; the bland September sunshine steeped everything in yellow brightness. Within, the country parson sat at his desk with divers and sundry sheets of sermon paper scattered before him, half a dozen reference books open at his elbow, and his head clasped tightly between his two hands, after a fashion which involved considerable rumpling of his iron gray hair.

"Oh?" said the parson, letting his head, as it were, out of custody, and coming slowly down from the world of polemics, as he stared at the pretty, slender girl in faded calico and washed-out ribbons, who stood beside him with an ominous looking piece of paper in her hand.

"The butcher's bill, papa," said Polly Fenn; "and he's waiting, please."

"But, my dear—the parson laid down his pen, and took the bill into his hand with a puzzled air—"We've had no butcher's meat this month. We have striven to be in the last degree economical."

"Yes I know, papa," said Polly, knitting her pretty brows; "but we ordered three pounds of beefsteak the day the district missionaries dined here, and there was the joint for that Sabatarians Society day, and the evening the bishop was here—don't you remember?"

"I remember, my child—I remember," said the country parson, with a sigh. "Hospitality is an agreeable duty, and one that the Good Book enjoins upon us, but it costs money. Polly—it costs money. Put down the bill, child, and tell Neighbor Brisket that I will attend to it."

Still blue-eyed Polly hesitated. "And the grocer was here this morning, papa, and the account has really mounted up beyond everything. And he says that he hopes you will please to settle up at once, and that hereafter he has determined to do business only on a strictly cash basis."

The Reverend Mr. Fenn smiled a sickly smile.

"Then I am afraid, Polly," said he, "that he won't do much business with me. For so long as the vestry are so dilatory with their payments—"

"Yes, papa, that's just what I told him," said Polly; "but he says that business is business."

"He is right, my dear," said the parson, "and I am wrong; but it is through no fault of mine. Now run away, and leave me to my books."

Polly Fenn silently withdrew, with her pretty brows still knitted, as if she were utterly hopeless of comprehending the problem of the world's ways. The butcher, white-aproned and burly, stood at the door, a little upsurge of the fate which I day old neither ignore nor avert.

"Well, miss?" said the butcher.

"Papa will attend to it at his earliest convenience, Mr. Brisket," faltered Polly. "But his earliest convenience has been such a mortal long time a comin', miss," grumbled Mr. Brisket. "And times is dull and I've got notes to meet."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Brisket, but—"

"Tain't no good standin' here," said the butcher, irritably scratching his head. "I might ha' knowed what answer I should ha' got afore I crossed the threshold. But it's hard on a poor man, that's what it is, and them as call themselves gentry hadn't ought to eat if they can't pay. I'll call again this day week, miss, and then—"

And with this the butcher whisked himself away under the arch of morning-glory vines, where the locusts were singing and the pink and purple cups swung to and fro in the morning wind.

And Polly, with crimsoned cheeks and heart beating with vague resentment, turned back into the great sunshiny kitchen, where Lisbeth was awaying nervously to and fro in the splint-bottomed rocker, with a week-old newspaper in her hand, her yellow hair catching the sunbeams like a coronal of gold as she rocked.

"Lisbeth," said the eldest sister, austere, "are the wild grapes ready for preserving?"

"Wild grapes?" repeated Lisbeth, finging the newspaper into the window seat; "I haven't thought of them since you went away. Oh, Polly, how I wish we were rich!"

Polly advanced soberly to a flat wicker tray of clustered grapes, full of subtle perfume, and dusted over with pale purple bloom, and began to separate them from their stems with deft, quick fingers.

"Why?" said she.

"I would go to New York and see this new play," said Lisbeth, still awaying back and forth in the splint-bottomed rocker. "Oliva was a country parson's daughter, and so are we. I should like to see my own counterfeit presented on the stage."

"Nonsense," said Polly. "You had a deal better come here and help with these grapes."

"It's such wretched business to be poor!" said Lisbeth. She was a sparkling little creature, after the humming bird type of damsel, with yellow hair

curling low over her forehead, intense hazel brown eyes, and a small red mouth with dimples hovering shyly in its neighborhood. "Just look at us, Polly, you and me, two girls of nineteen and seventeen, that ought to be enjoying ourselves and having a good time, and here we are, washing and scrubbing, and turning wretched rags of dyed silk, and cleaning faded ribbons, and counting every pound of rice and every potato! Even these wild grapes, Polly, that you and I gathered down by the edges of the swamp, we shouldn't venture on the extravagance of preserving them, if Mrs. Deacon Blodgett hadn't offered to supply the sugar on halves. Oh, I do so hate this life! Even Brisket, the butcher, thinks he can insult us with impunity."

"Yes," said Polly, thoughtfully, "we mustn't order any more meat at present."

"But we must live," flashed out Lisbeth.

"There is salt mackerel," said Polly, "and eggs, and vegetable soups, and Mrs. Pullett always sends us a nice cut of pork and some fresh sausages when they kill their pig. Oh, we shall get along somehow, Lisbeth; anything is better than debt."

Lisbeth looked up with sparkling eyes. "Polly," cried she, "why don't they increase papa's salary? Six hundred dollars a year is a shameful pittance for such a man as he is."

Polly shook her head over the grapes. "Papa isn't a young man any longer, Lisbeth," said she, "and he isn't as modern in his ideas as Mr. Crocus."

"But he is such a learned man, cried out Lisbeth, shaking the yellow mane out of her eyes. "And his sermons—oh Polly, they make me cry, they are so deep and so solemn, and go down into one's heart so! Six hundred dollars a year, Polly, for such work and study as that!"

"There is no doubt," said Polly, soberly, "but that clergymen are, as a general rule, very much underpaid in this country."

"I shall never marry a clergyman," cried Lisbeth, with energy. "No, Polly, never! I'd marry a dust-man first! For dust-men get their pay, and clergymen don't."

Lisbeth stopped short, scarlet and confused, in this rhapsody of hers, for, chancing to glance up, she beheld in the doorway a tall and solemn-faced young man, with an umbrella in one hand and a travelling satchel in the other.

"We don't want anything, please," said she, jumping at once to the conclusion that she beheld a book agent, or a vendor of patent polish, or some such itinerant tradesman.

"I beg your pardon," said the gentleman, apparently as much embarrassed as was she herself; "I must have mistaken the house. I was looking for the Reverend Francis Fenn!"

"My good gracious! another missionary," murmured Lisbeth, sotto voce, as Polly stepped gracefully forward saying:

"You are not mistaken, sir; this is the house. Please to walk into the parlor, and I will speak to papa."

The best room of the parsonage was a cool dark, with green paper shades drawn down, a jar of fragrant dried rose leaves in the fire-place, and a home braided rug of party-colored cloth laid carefully down before the sofa to hide the darned spot in the carpet.

"Not that chair, please," said Polly, coloring up to the roots of her hair, as the unwary stranger advanced toward a certain corner; "the leg is broken, and we've glued it, and I'm afraid it's not quite safe. This one is better."

While Lisbeth, hiding her face in her apron, murmurs to herself, "Is there no end to our humiliations? Is our world always to be full of glue and patches, and mends and make shifts?"

"Lisbeth," said Polly, returning, "go and call papa."

"It's another missionary, I'm sure," said Lisbeth, unwittingly pulling down the sleeves of her brown calico dress. "And I know he'll stay to dinner, and he's got a hungry glare in his eyes, and there's nothing for dinner but barley soup and a cabbage. Oh dear!" with a grimace which made Polly laugh in spite of herself, "I wish the race of missionaries was extinct."

The country parson looked mildly up from the second paragraph of his "Thirdly" as Lisbeth came in, smelling of wild grapes, with an aureole of yellow hair about her face.

"Papa," said she, "there's a gentleman in the parlor to see you, with a carpet-bag and a white neck-tie!"

"An!" said the clergyman. "A visitor, I suppose. He is most welcome. But I am just at present deep in the thread of a complicated polemic theory. Make my compliments to the gentleman, Lisbeth, and beg his indulgence for a quarter of an hour or so." And the parson dipped his pen resolutely into the time-stained wooden standish, as if he was determined to settle the subject at once.

"But, papa!" Lisbeth had caught at his coat cuff to reclaim him temporarily from the abysses of theological argument.

"Yes, my dear," looking absently at her.

"Do you think he'll stay to dinner?"

"I shall invite him, my dear, must assuredly."

Lisbeth's countenance fell. "But, papa," faltered she, "there's nothing but barley soup."

"We will serve it with the good old-fashioned sauce of welcome, my dear," said the Rev. Mr. Fenn, with a grave, sweet smile. "And I doubt not it will suffice."

Lisbeth flounced out of the room with heightened color and quick impatient breath. "Papa's an angel," said she to herself, "but angels never were adapted to get along in this work-a-day world."

She put her golden head into the parlor door for an instant. "Papa is very busy with his 'Thirdly,'" said she, with a roguish twinkle in the deep hazel eyes, "and he begs you'll be good enough to wait until he's through."

The stranger bowed and looked more embarrassed than ever, as he answered—"Oh, certainly, certainly. I am in no haste what ever."

And Lisbeth went back to her sister. "Polly," said she, "what shall we do? Company to dinner, and nothing to give them."

"But we must have something," said Polly. "Put on your things, Lisbeth. Go out and buy a fowl, and a quart of potatoes, and a loaf of bread. And stop at Mr. Dakin's for an ounce of his best tea and a quarter of a pound of butter."

Lisbeth opened her eyes very wide at this extravagant order.

"Oh, you reckless Polly!" said she; "and where are all the funds to come from?"

Polly sighed softly. "I shall have to take the dried-cherry money," said she, "that I was saving up for my fall hat and gloves. But it isn't much matter. I dare say I can manage very well with the old ones for a little while longer."

"It's a shame!" cried Lisbeth, vehemently. "And to think how you toiled all those hot summer days to pick and dry those black ox-hearts!"

"There's no help for it, dear," said Polly, gently. "Get your hat on quick—there's no time to lose."

"But it isn't fair," protested Lisbeth. "Why should all the travelling preachers, and book agents, and mission collectors come here and eat us out of house and home?" Why don't they go to Mr. Crocus?"

Polly smiled. "Because Mr. Crocus doesn't make them welcome, and papa does," said she.

"Do wonder," cried Lisbeth, impatiently, "if there is any other race of men imposed upon as country ministers are?" Mark my words, Polly, I never, never, will marry a—"

But by this time Polly had tied on her sister's straw hat, and twisted a muslin scarf across her shoulders.

"Do make haste, dear," said she, in accents of gentle entreaty, as she pointed upward to the clock.

Scarcely fifteen minutes had elapsed when Lisbeth came flying back, with yellow tresses streaming behind, and market basket in her hand.

"There, Polly," cried she, in the clear, light voice of girlhood, as she deposited a plump chicken on the table, "there's your new hat; and there, as she laid down a pocket of groceries, 'are your gloves; and here,' rattling out the potatoes, 'is my last chance for a new blue neck-tie! And I do hope, Polly, that they'll give the missionary the worst kind of a dyspepsia."

"Lisbeth!"

"Well, but I do," saucily retorted the girl, as she turned to put away her hat. "And—Oh, Polly!"

Polly turned around with a start, at the changed tenor of her sister's voice.

"What is it, Lisbeth? You're not ill?"

Lisbeth, with a glowing face, pointed to the little wooden cupboard in the wall, which, extending through from parlor to kitchen, in butler's pantry fashion, was used as a general repository for books and papers. And then, for the first time, Polly perceived that both doors were slightly ajar.

"Polly," muttered the girl, hoarsely, "he has heard every word! He couldn't 'help it'! And flinging her hat in one direction and her scarf in another, Lisbeth fled up the narrow wooden stairs to her own room and threw herself, sobbing hysterically, upon the bed.

"It's my tongue," sobbed Lisbeth, "my wretched, chattering tongue. Papa always warned me against giving loose to it; Polly always told me it would get me into trouble. Oh, dear, dear, what must he think how can I ever look him in the face?" And with this doleful passage, Lisbeth buried her hot face in the pillows and cried harder than ever.

"Never!" cried Lisbeth, with a fresh burst of tears; never!"

But the country parson himself presently came to the rescue, with mild eyes and a firm, gentle voice.

"No member of my family must be lacking in courtesy to a guest," said he, taking Lisbeth gently by the hand; and the poor child was led shamefacedly into the kitchen, where the table was spread, and Polly stood smiling at its head.

"Mr. Vincent," said the parson to the tall stranger, "this is my youngest child."

"I am the black sheep of the family," said Lisbeth, hanging her head, "and I'm very sorry, sir, and I beg your pardon."

"Pray don't mention it," said Mr. Vincent, in genuine distress at the sight of the mortification of this yellow-haired lassie with the deep hazel eyes, and the red, sensitive mouth.

And when dinner was over—and here let us mention that Mr. Vincent ate and drank with an excellent appetite, as if no lurking shadow of the threatened dyspepsia disturbed his digestion—and the country parson had taken his guest into the study, Polly put her arm round Lisbeth's waist, and drew her out under the morning-glory vines, where, by this time, the blue and rose-tinted cups had all folded themselves into tight little parasollets, and hidden behind the leaves.

"Lisbeth," said she, "I've got good news for you."

"Nothing can be good news any more," said Lisbeth, with a fresh burst of tears.

"Oh, but listen," soothed Polly. "Do you know who this Mr. Vincent is?"

"A—missionary, I suppose." And poor Lisbeth spoke the word as if it was a dose of quinine.

"No, dear, he's the Bishop's secretary. And he has heard of papa's learning and zeal and talent, and he has come to offer him a parish near New York, with twelve hundred dollars—only think of it, Lisbeth—twelve hundred dollars a year, and an assistant. We shall be rich, darling, and dear, dear papa will have a little rest and ease in his old age."

"It can't be true," said Lisbeth, vaguely.

"But it is," cried Polly; and then the two sisters began to cry and sob, with happy incoherence, in each other's arms.

"Is it possible," cried Polly Fenn, "that it is a whole year since we came to Meridian Rectory?"

It was a year. Once more the wild grapes were scenting all the woods, once more the golden-rod held up its torches of flame along the course of babbling brooks, and Polly shaded her eyes with one hand, as she stood in the doorway and watched Lisbeth come lightly along the garden path, with the yellow sunshine tangled in her hair, and an unwonted moisture in her deep eyes.

"What have you done with Mr. Vincent?" asked Polly, demurely.

"He is walking down by the falls with papa," said Lisbeth, coming up to her sister's side, and slipping one arm through Polly's. "And, Polly—"

"Well, dearest?"

"I—I have something to tell you."

"Couldn't I guess it?" said Polly, laughing. "No, Lisbeth, don't turn your face away—I know it all, darling. He loves you, and you have promised to be his wife."

"Polly," said Lisbeth, "I think you must be a fortune-teller. But, oh, I am so happy! And I can hardly believe that it isn't all a dream."

"But, Lisbeth—"

"Well?"

"I thought you were never, never, going to marry a—"

But Lisbeth's soft little hand pressed over her sister's mouth, and her pleadingly uttered, "Please, Polly, don't," stopped the sentence ere it was finished. And Polly was merciful, and didn't.

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