

## The Fireside.

### THE HEAT OF BATTLE.

The minister's kitchen, because it undertook to serve too many purposes, was only a qualified success. As a dining-room it brought tears to the eyes of the mistress of the manse. Because it lacked a sink and several other conveniences, its career as a kitchen was in no wise brilliant. Sometimes the minister's wife mumbled strange things as she skilfully dodged between the dining table and the stove.

She possessed a temper—a weird, skittish temper that on occasions flashed up in a manner calculated to inspire terror in the uniformly peaceful soul of her husband. It caused him to wonder uneasily concerning her spiritual condition. Its skittishness, however, was confined mainly to the perplexities of the combination room where cooking well and dining comfortably seemed to clash. The congregation, the staid elders and deacons, remained in happy ignorance of the righteous indignation which sometimes flashed and flamed in the region of culinary mysteries.

For nearly two years the minister's wife had conducted an unsuccessful campaign under a banner bearing this device, "A new kitchen with a really and truly sink."

Repeatedly this banner had gone down in humiliation and defeat. The perversity of the three trustees who stood guard over the church treasury compelled the minister and his family to partake of their daily bread in the confines of the heated kitchen. There amid clouds of steam from the kettle's spout and various odors that lay heavy upon the air, the pastor of the Millville Presbyterian church munched his portion, while little rills of perspiration coursed hither and yon over his rotund, ministerial anatomy.

The trustees stubbornly insisted that a manse with three rooms on the first floor and four on the second, furnished ample accommodations for a modern defender of the orthodox faith. The prophet Elijah, they said, had only one little room upon the wall. In vain the little woman with the banner endeavored to convince them that when the parlor had to serve as the reception hall, and the kitchen as a dining room, there was perplexity and discomfort beyond a reasonable measure of Christian resignation. She reminded them also that Elijah was not burdened with the cares of a family in his limited quarters on the wall. With the aid of a stumpy pencil, chewed into ragged utility, she exhibited a plan of the dear little home she could fashion, if they would build her another apartment to serve as a kitchen. But the trustees were set in their ways. They listened to her good-naturedly, smiled a little, but refused even to seriously consider the proposition. Young Mr. Cummings, the junior member of the official body, finally undertook to champion her cause, but mainly because he was young, his minority report received scant attention. Then the mistress of the manse retired to the kitchen and sputtered. She told the tea kettle and frying pan just what she thought of those wooden trustees.

A month had passed since her last defeat. She was considering the question of serving a wedding anniversary

dinner. The proposition made her heart sink. "Oh, I just can't do it," she whispered under her breath. "This terrible kitchen makes mother nervous, and his people always look at me as if I was to blame for it. I'll just let the day go by like any other day until I can have things half-way decent."

She squeezed the dishcloth and hung it on a line stretched across the corner of the room. Then she dipped her hands into a basin of warm water to remove all trace of the soapy fluid in which the dishes had been washed. The fire in the stove was dying out, but the place was still uncomfortably warm. "They never could stand it," she exclaimed. Then she paused, her dripping fingers suspended over the basin.

"I wonder—"

There was a query in her voice and a bit of a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. Perhaps it was five minutes later when she entered her husband's study.

"Percy, our wedding anniversary is on the seventeenth."

"Is it?" he asked in a tone that indicated surprise at the recurrence.

"Yes, and I thought of having mother and some of our other relatives to dinner."

"An excellent plan," he commenced.

"But couldn't we do something different this year? We had them last year, you remember. Do you think Mr. Cummings and the other trustees would care to come? We have been at their homes so often, and perhaps it would help to keep up the good feeling in the church if we did a little special entertaining. I can prepare a good dinner when I try."

"Yes, yes, certainly," the good man agreed. "Certainly, have the trustees this year and the elders next time. Have we chairs enough, Maggie?"

"Oh, yes, if you drive a nail in that one that wiggles. And will you attend to inviting the men? Be sure to have Mr. Crowles come. I know he has been mean about our kitchen, as mean as ever he could be, but we won't slight him on that account."

"No, no, we must show a Christian spirit."

Then the good man delved again into the mysterious black books on the table which told of creeds and other things found in sermons. When her husband turned to his books, the little woman knew that the interview was at an end. Always it was the same. Next to the abominable kitchen she dreaded the black books. But somehow this time she hardly gave them a thought, so intent was she on the entertainment she had suggested. During the succeeding days her busy intellect fairly teemed with clever plans for the diversion of her prospective guests, the trustees of the Millville Presbyterian Church.

The members of that body were vastly pleased to be invited to dinner at the manse. They believed that such cordiality indicated that the minister's wife bore no ill-will toward them on account of their refusal to entertain her proposition. Mr. Crowles, the leader of the opposition, was so intensely gratified that he arrived fifteen minutes in advance of the other guests. He and the minister at once entered into an earnest discussion of the condition of the church

leaving the mistress to her own devices in the kitchen.

In that region things were reeking hot. The table, which of necessity stood near the stove that was doing its level best to raise the temperature still higher, was spread with a snowy cloth, each crease of which told of feminine energy on ironing day. The silver glistened in the lamplight, duly reflecting the vivid red of a spreading center piece.

For once in her life the minister's wife was happy indeed. Her face was flushed with excitement and with the fierce external heat. A tasteful white apron protected the front of her gown and she smiled to herself—a grim, contented smile—as she glanced at the windows now reeking with the condensed humidity of the room.

"There now, everything is ready," she murmured, giving a last deft touch to the appointments. Then lifting the coal hod she dumped into the stove a liberal supply of fuel, carefully distributing it with the poker. Her entrance to the parlor carried with it the smell of savory dishes, and the men, recognizing it as a goodly favored odor, arose with alacrity, prepared to do full justice to the bountiful spread.

"You will please take this place, Mr. Crowles," she said sweetly, when they had followed her into the seven-fold heated furnace. The chair she indicated was scarcely two feet away from the roaring stove. Mr. Sawyer was deposited hard by, while young Mr. Cummings was conducted to a place on the opposite side of the table. The minister and his wife occupied either end of the board.

"We thought of serving dinner in the sitting room," explained the little woman, "but that blessed husband of mine was late getting home this afternoon, and really I couldn't drag this heavy table alone. It is a heavy task for two. We always have our meals here, and I hope you don't mind—do you? It is our only dining room, you know."

"No, mom, we don't mind," responded Mr. Crowles, hitching his chair nearer the table.

"It is snug and homelike here," explained the minister, beaming upon his guests.

"Right pleasant place," commented Mr. Sawyer, behind whom the kettle hummed and sang as it gave off a steady cloud of hot steam.

Young Mr. Cummings began to tell of a new soprano who had recently come to town and who promised to be of value to the choir, but Crowles and Sawyer found it difficult to maintain a show of interest.

The minister poked at the platter of fried chicken.

"Will you have light or dark meat, Mr. Crowles," he asked.

"Oh, anything, anything," Mr. Crowles settled in his chair and threw open his coat, thereby freeing the garment from its clinging proximity to his back.

"She can sing clear up where there aren't any more notes," continued Mr. Cummings, "and if we get her the Methodists won't be anywhere near it."

"My dear, isn't it just a trifle?" began the minister, but the inquiry died away in the sprightly voice of his wife.

"And what is her name, Mr. Cummings? Of course we must secure her, if such a thing is possible. Don't you think so, Mr. Crowles? Good singers are so difficult to find and so necessary to the church. We must call on her soon, Percy."

"Yes, yes," returned Percy. "What

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do you think of it, Mr. Crowles; shall we ask her to sing in our church?"

"Eh?" asked Mr. Crowles, whose face was now moist and very red. The lamp-light shone upon dozens of tiny glistening drops on his forehead.

"Eh?" he asked again.

"I was speaking of the new soprano," the reverend host explained.

"Oh, yes—well, yes, better get her if possible. I may be wrong about it, but seems to me the room is very warm."

"Why, is it?" inquired the sweet little woman in surprise. "Perhaps you had better open a window, Percy. Are you uncomfortable, Mr. Cummings?" As she said this, the conspirator looked straight into the eyes of a junior trustee. He thought he detected a ghost of a wink in her gaze, and immediately arose to the occasion.

"No," he answered; "on the contrary, I was sure I felt a draught from that window and I was somewhat concerned. I take cold so easily."

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