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Chrissy's Christmas.

BY HARRIET PRESCOTT STOFFORD.

Sometimes it seems as if the simplest people get along the easiest, perhaps because they attack life in a simple manner. If Mrs. Penn's hens laid two eggs a day, if her little bean-patch flourished, if no drought came to dry up the berries, she asked for little more.

"Pray? Of course I pray! Pray for everythin' I want," she said. "You don't expect to get a thing without askin' for it? If it's wuth havin', it's wuth askin' for. Ask and it shall be given. I always ask, and I usually get it. If I don't, I know either I don't pray right or else the Lord thinks best not."

"I believe in direct answer to prayer myself, Mrs. Penn," said the minister. "But I have thought of it more in relation to spiritual blessing than to material things."

"You lost your berries, you said. Did you pray for rain?"

"I guess I did! But I suppose there's only just so much moisture, and it was needed somewhere else—in Indy or Ireland, or some of them fannin' places."

"But I had always felt," said the minister, who was young, "that one asked of Heaven the things of the spirit chiefly."

"So I do—Sundays. Mondays I ask for what I need, and Tuesdays for what my friends need. Fourth of July I ask for what the country needs. Come Thanksgiving day I don't ask for anything. I just give thanks and thanks with all my heart. But Christmas eve I always ask for just one especial gift."

"One especial gift?"

"I ask for a Christmas present of a competency."

"Of a what?"

"Of a competency. You needn't laugh; I'd like to have it—oh, wouldn't I! No more tramping through pastures in the raggin' sun an' tearin' myself to tatters after berries, an' no matter then whether the hens lay or not. No, oh, no, of course you see I ain't got it yet! I expect I ain't asked just right, or I asked too much. Anyway, the Lord can't give me everything, and if my house don't catch fire, and my hens lay, and I pick berries enough to keep me, perhaps that's all I ought to have."

"Oh, say!" Mrs. Penn fairly interrupted herself with her abrupt change of subject. "If any of your sick folks wants some rose-water, I made a lot of it last summer out of the wild roses by the roadsides. There was a beautiful blow. You take a bottle now—it's real refreshin'."

"Yes, I believe in answer to prayer—in this life or another. You won't think it's presumin' in me—if you be a minister,—but if there's anythin' you're desirin' in particular, just ask for it this Christmas, and—and see what happens!"

There was a twinkle in her eye at that moment which gave the minister a shudder. He had dropped in, partly in the performance of his duty, and partly to admire the blossoming of her crab cactus with the brilliant carmine of its alert and winged petals; and he

went out with the somewhat scared feeling of one who finds his inmost treasured thought an open secret.

Later that day the minister was standing by the window counting out some money for Mrs. Sloane, with whom he boarded. As he glanced up there was a flutter outside, a swirl of something pink, a laugh, a bright, quick glance, a slight form flitting by, and the minister had a sudden sense of vacancy afterward.

"Yes, she's pretty—the little flibbertigibbet! I shouldn't like my Sally—However, that's neither here nor there, and she's pleasant; yes, she's pleasant," said Mrs. Sloane, seeing his changing color and the direction of his glance as the young girl, delicate, slight, swift of an exquisite bloom, flitted by, the sun shining in the soft curls about her white forehead and the sky no bluer than her eyes.

"And she's got a pretty property, too," continued Mrs. Sloane. "She's just come into it. I guess she'll know how to keep it, if it's true that's said. I've heard Aunt Price say the Longleats screwed every penny that went through their hands. And in these small, intermarrying towns traits cling; they cling, and she's a Longleat. She's dressed well, but there's some that never spare on themselves, to be sure. There never was a Longleat born, I've heard Aunt Price say, that cared for any one but themselves. But there she may have been prejudiced."

"There ought to be some imperfection," thought the minister, "to keep the balance even." But he did not say it aloud; it seemed like a profanity. And he was not yet old enough in his profession to know that in less than five years he would have a better acquaintance with these people in their most inner and intimate relations than Aunt Price could have acquired in a lifetime.

The minister had had a distinct pleasure that was not at all in the line of his duty when Mrs. Darrell sent for him in her illness. She was Miss Christine Longleat's housekeeper, upper servant and companion. His visit, to his great happiness, had resulted in an acquaintance that gave him corresponding unhappiness.

For never was there anything sweeter, fairer, gayer than this sprite of a girl, of a type unknown to him before, a creature who seemed to him as light and fine and airy as a sweet-brier rose blowing in the wind, a girl with something of the child about her and something of the angel. And yet—a minister's wife—she should never be too fine and good for human nature's daily food! There was his mother, the servant of all the parish, the head of all the committees and all the societies, living every one's life but her own, making jellies for this sick person, sitting up all night with that one, sent for wherever there was distress, and giving herself to every one! She had been the ideal wife for a minister.

And why, why, why had his whole soul gone out to this butterfly of a girl, whom he never met in his rounds among the sick and poor, who perhaps had no tender feeling of any sort, and who could have inherited no generous and sympathetic quality. What kind of a helpmeet would she make? Would

it not be a hideous selfishness for him to hamper all his ministry by gratifying his own inclination?

And if he were in doubt as to Chrissy's fitness for the position he might offer, he was also in doubt if she would smile upon such a suit as he could prefer. There might be something entirely uncongenial to her in the life of a small parsonage and the duties of a minister's wife.

If the minister had not come to the place so recently, he would have known—what perhaps Mrs. Sloane did not know—that a strain of the prodigal Perverts had come into the Longleat blood with Chrissy's grandmother, and that but for that fact Chrissy would have been a good deal better off than she was. Still Chrissy had a pretty property, as Mrs. Sloane said. It had been accumulating during her long minority, while she had been away at school, and if she had not learned to give freely, it was because her guardians never allowed her more than enough money to buy her own and the other girl's caramels. For the rest she was just out of childhood, and hated the thought of sickness and suffering.

But when she found that the minister had a doubt concerning her, she would have gone into a convent before enlightening him. When a girl is only twenty-one, and a young man, tall and superior, has dark eyes that follow her pathetically, and when the young man is the minister, whom every one is admiring and reverencing, what he thinks of her becomes a matter of moment.

"Sally Sloane," she cried one day, when she and her friend were together, "if you breathe it to a soul that I gave you that hat, I'll never give you another thread!"

"O Chrissy, I won't," Sally answered, appalled at the prospect. "I'm sure I don't know how I could have got along at all if you hadn't given it to me, and this gown, too! I couldn't have had a tailor-made suit like this if I had put by my pennies till the longest day I live. You don't know how good you are!"

"Don't you ever speak that way again till the longest day you live! Good! It's you that are good, Sally dear, taking the things! Why I've got a great deal more than I know what to do with, and if you help me out, I think it's sweet of you. Oh, by the way, don't you want those mink furs? There just as good as new. I never wore them here, and they're exactly the color of your hair. Oh, no," in reply to Sally's exclamation, "that isn't being generous. It's being generous to give something you want yourself. And I don't seem to want anything—well—except—However!"

"Except what, Chrissy?"

"Oh, I don't know. Never mind. Except nothing. Do you know," with a quick effort to divert attention, "I've an idea that I think it would be simply lovely to carry out, if you'll help me. It'll take two of us. It's nearly Christmas, you know, and now—don't you—wouldn't it be fine to discover what all the people down in Deep Cove would like to have,—something they would like particularly and couldn't get for themselves, you know,—and have it at their doors on Christmas morning?"

"All the people in Deep Cove?"

"Well, most of them."

"Why, Chrissy, it would take half your fortune!"

"Oh, no. Not half my income, maybe. And if it pinched me a little I wouldn't mind. I never get quite used to the feeling the money's mine. Now if we could have a new dory drawn up before Joe Long's door just as the Christmas bells ring for early morning service; and if we could get the measure for a new reefer for old Captain Davy,—his blue one's patched with gray,—and have it left inside his door on Christmas eve; and if we could have a Jersey cow waiting to be milked, in the morning, inside the shed of poor old Mrs. Gallivan who lost her cow the other day; and one of those little invalid tables for that bedridden girl who makes toys out of fish-scales and shells, and—"

"But, Chrissy! Have you lost your head? You forget what lots, what loads of money it will take!" cried Sally, in alarm.

"Oh, not a great deal. And it will be fun. Only promise! Promise on your soul, as I do now, that you won't breathe a word of it to a single being! Now you think of some things. I don't mean turkeys and sleds and dolls, but things you know they wouldn't be having, and that come as if from Providence."

Then the two young girls had a delightful afternoon, getting ready to play Providence. It was down in Deep Cove that Mrs. Penn

lived, and in the course of Chrissy's and Sally's peregrinations they often made brief calls on her, gaining in a quiet way much needed information.

The present for Mrs. Penn was to be a warm cloak lined with fur, that Mrs. Darrell had laid by in moth-balls when it went out of fashion. It had been blowing in the wind every day for a week, in order that it might be possible to live in the same house with it. The two girls had gone down after dusk to leave it inside of Mrs. Penn's door,—no one in Deep Cove locked a door,—but first they paused to glance through her window.

"Come here, Sally, quick!" whispered Chrissy, and tiptoeing, they looked in.

Mrs. Penn was saying her evening prayer on her knees beside her little wooden rocking chair, and in the fever of her petition she was so oblivious of the rest of the world that her voice rose audibly.

"O Lord," she was saying, "I pray Thee as I have prayed—oh, many's the Christmas eve before,—that Thou wilt give me a competency. And, O Lord, if I do not make my desire plain, I mean by a competency two hundred dollars a year, paid twice a year, or oftener. And, O Lord, if it is not Thy will—"

At that point Chrissy drew back, and grasping Sally's hand, hurried off without a word. At Sally's gate she kissed her.

Continued on opposite page.

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