

QUESTION OF INCOME

By BELLE MANIATES

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On "butter day" little Susie Bradley always wiped the breakfast dishes. She was making but little progress with that occupation now, however, by reason of running to look out the window every few minutes. Although she took a handful of silver, a platter or a pile of plates with her on each trip, wiping as she went, she was not keeping pace with Rosie, the help, who was washing the dishes.

"I vow, Susie, this is the tenth time you have gone to that window!"

"Oh, I can't wait to see her!" sighed Susie. "I am so afraid the train is late."

The coming of the city cousin, Kathryn Randall, was always an event. The visit generally occurred in strawberry or harvest time, but what could have induced her to come to the farm in November was beyond the combined conjectures of the Randall family. She had written a short note saying she would be there that morning for a long visit.

"Can hardly wait for what, Susie?" asked a manly voice.

Susie looked up into the handsome face of Neil Milnes, one of the men from the city who were camping down on the river for the shooting season. It was Neil's turn to come for the milk and butter with which Mrs. Bradley supplied them.

"My cousin. She is coming to visit us, and, oh, she is so lovely and wears such beautiful clothes!"

Milnes laughed and walked out through the woodshed and across fields of stubble to join his companions.

"I can just imagine the city cousin," he thought, "clad in a bargain shirt waist suit and a picture hat from the bazaar at \$1.39, overwhelming the country folk about here with her 'style.'"

He heard the round of running feet behind and turned, expecting to see a young colt, but it was Susie.

"Mother said I could go down to the river road and meet them and ride home with them."

"Your cousin will think she has fallen in clover when she hears there are four young men on the premises," he suggested.

"Oh, she has lots of beaux," replied Susie loftily.

"Then she'll be sure to want more. Tell her we are all married, will you?"

Susie, however, had caught the sound of distant wheels and sped quickly away. Milnes met them riding in the light wagon, Mr. Bradley and the baggage on the first seat, and Susie perched proudly on the back seat beside the most stunning looking girl that he had ever seen. Mr. Bradley reined up and presented Milnes to his niece, Miss Randall, who acknowledged the introduction cordially. Then they drove on, and Milnes, recalling her tailored traveling coat with the big bunch of violets fastened at the belt, the chic hat and correct appointments of veil, gloves and purse, also foreign labeled steamer trunk, was amused at his preconception of the "city cousin."

He went on to the camp racking his brains for a plausible errand to the farmhouse, but his wits, usually fertile, refused to suggest. Finally he resolved to go away and await an inspiration. When he reached the farmhouse, Miss Randall, charmingly gowned, was in the kitchen with her aunt. She hardly vouchsafed the young man a glance.

"Oh, Mr. Milnes, what can I do for you?" asked Mrs. Bradley.

"Why—er—oh, we want some more butter," he said desperately.

"What have you done with all that you got this morning?" she exclaimed.

"Well, you see, it's Johnson's turn to cook, and he uses so much butter!"

Mrs. Bradley's eyes twinkled as she got a roll of butter, while Susie giggled outright, and he could see that Miss Randall was amused, though she was quite ignoring his presence. Suddenly it came to him in a flash that Susie had repeated his remarks. He turned to go, and Mrs. Bradley said good naturedly:

"Susie, go as far as the barn with Mr. Milnes and show him where to get some cider."

On the way out he asked Susie anxiously if she had told what he said.

"Oh, yes," she replied cheerfully. He groaned.

"What did your cousin say?"

"She said you didn't look like such a cad."

He winced and was silent for a moment. Then he said suddenly:

"Say, Susie, is her father's name Wellman Randall?"

"Yes. Uncle Wellman is her father. He is awfully rich."

Of course he was. Every one knew of Wellman Randall, the successful speculator.

"I am sorry," he said half to himself.

"Why?" asked Susie indignantly.

"Uncle Wellman is lovely."

"I know he is, but I wish he were poor."

Such a wish was beyond Susie's understanding, and she thought he was joking. All day he loafed and smoked by himself and thought of the vision at the Bradleys. At twilight he insisted that the milk was sour and went up to the house for a fresh supply. By good fortune Miss Randall was alone in the orchard.

"Miss Randall," he said, coming up to her, "we are all prone at times to say utterly idle words that we don't mean. I couldn't know that you were—" "That I was what?" she asked as he hesitated.

"That you were the hundredth woman. Until I saw you I had no reason to suppose that you were not one of the ninety-nine. I don't wonder you think me a cad, though."

She blushed a little.

"I am afraid Susie is leaky," she said.

Further conversation was prevented by Mr. Bradley's appearance upon the scene.

"Come, Kathryn, if you want to go with me to see the committee. We must be starting."

"Yes, uncle. Good night, Mr. Milnes." And she walked away, leaving Neil discomfited.

The next day, Sunday, the men were away from camp fishing save Neil, whose turn it was to cook dinner. While in the tent he heard steps approaching and then a fall. Going out, he saw Susie sprawled on the ground by the side of a pumpkin pie. Both were quite disturbed on the surface.

"Oh, dear," sobbed Susie, "mother took such pains, and I walked so slow and careful all the way!"

Milnes always had a tender sympathy with the woes of children. He picked Susie up in his arms and sat down in the hammock with her, kissed her gently and wiped away the rain of tears.

"See here, dear," he said soothingly. "The pie is all right. We can smooth it down, and if we can't we'll call it pudding. You needn't tell any one at the house, and the fellows won't know the difference. They'll think it's the proper style for a pie. You stay and watch me get dinner and help eat it, and then we'll have a boat ride."

Susie was quickly comforted. She was not used to being petted except by Cousin Kathryn, and her heart went straight into Neil's service henceforth.

"Cousin Kathryn is going to stay here and teach the school. Our teacher is ill and has gone away. Isn't that lovely?"

"What in the world is she going to do that for?" he asked in amazement.

"I mustn't tell. Cousin Kathryn told me it wasn't nice to repeat things."

Neil questioned no further. "It's some whim," he thought, "or a wager. She won't keep that up very long."

When Kathryn went to Susie's bedside that night for a little visit with her cousin she casually mentioned Neil's name.

The child sat up in bed, her eyes shining.

"I love him!" she cried.

"Why, Susie?"

Thereupon Susie confided the fate of the pie and told how he had kissed and comforted her. The next morning when Neil chanced to be strolling in the lane near the little schoolhouse he met Kathryn. To his surprise she stopped and spoke to him, smiling graciously.

"Susie told me how good you were to her," she said.

"Susie's a darling!" he exclaimed. "And say, Miss Randall, if I can help you in the school or anyway—"

She laughed.

"Oh, I can manage the school all right. I understand children."

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"I shall come and see now you get on," he declared.

He appeared in the schoolroom the very next day and announced that he had come to "visit." She was provoked, but she could not turn him out. She had written some words on the blackboard for the pupils to use in sentences. She now pointed to the first one, "Income."

"Who can make a sentence and use that word correctly?" she asked.

"Do call on that little fat boy for a sentence or he'll wring his hand off," whispered Neil.

She gave the youngster the floor, and he jumped to his feet in triumph, yelling:

"In come a rat!"

That was too much for Neil's composure, and he gave way to an infectious fit of laughter, in which teacher and scholars joined.

"You had better go now," she said to her visitor.

"If I'll promise not to come in again may I come every afternoon and row you and Susie home by the river way?"

She consented to this arrangement and thenceforth came hitheron days—to Neil and Susie at least.

November vanished, and so did the hunters, save Neil, who lingered and upon Mrs. Bradley's invitation took up his quarters at the farmhouse. He was very happy except when he remembered how paltry his income would appear in comparison with Miss Randall's millions. Susie used to watch him closely when he was in one of

these reveries, and her warm little heart, enlightened by her affection for Neil, divined the cause. She reached a decision. Her opportunity came that evening. She went to the barn to hold the lantern for Neil while he got some cider.

"I am going to tell you why Cousin Kathryn teaches school," she said bluntly.

"Oh, but you shouldn't, Susie! Didn't she tell you not to?"

"No. She didn't say not to tell that especially. Besides, every one knows but you. You know you wished Uncle Wellman was poor?"

"Yes," he said, his heart beating with hope.

"He is now. He lost everything he had in a minute, and he sent Cousin Kathryn here to stay while he went west to make some more money, and she would teach so as to help him."

"Susie, Susie, you are my good angel," he cried in delight.

The light of love and hope so transfigured his countenance that Kathryn turned pale when she saw him. When the Bradley family had considerably gone to bed at an earlier hour than usual Neil told Kathryn all that was in his heart.

"Dear," he said reproachfully, "why didn't you tell me of your father's loss?"

"I was afraid you'd think I was imagining myself 'in clover.' Besides, it shouldn't be a question of income—"

"A rat!" he finished, laughing.

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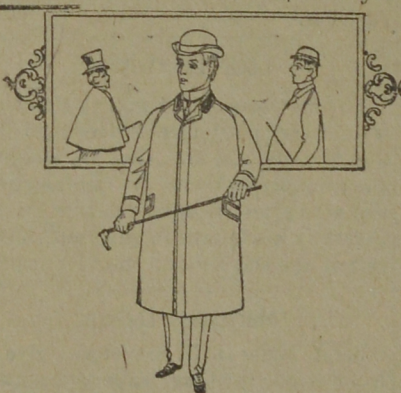
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