

When Peggy Came Back

By...
JANE
MEREDITH

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Richardson

"Yes'm, I saw it with my own eyes."

"Do tell!"

"Who'd 'a' thought it?"

"Are you sure he kissed her? P'raps he was just picking a leaf or something out of her hair."

"Well, Mrs. Demming, you needn't think that just because I ain't been married no man ever kissed me. I've had as many beaus in my day as ever you had!"

"Dear me, Miss Laviny, I didn't mean anything personal! Only it's quite a step from your porch to Mrs. Burkett's, and I thought"—

"I wasn't on my porch!" answered Miss Laviny shortly. "I was right close to the hedge, picking wine currants."

The last phrase was spoken apologetically, as if prompted by latent shame at thus spying on a neighbor.

"Oh, I don't know but it's your duty, Laviny, to keep your eye open when there's such doings in the heart of a respectable community like ours," was the unctuous reply of Mrs. Smithers.

"Well, that ain't all I've seen, either," announced Miss Laviny, rising to this skillfully baited hook. "You know Cousin Sallie left her theater glasses behind, and they're a heap of help. I can stand in my second story front with them and see straight into her parlor."

A girlish figure bending over a strip of renaissance lace in the rear of the shop straightened up suddenly, and an exclamation escaped her lips. But the women clustered round the front door gossiped on excitedly.

"Didn't he take the train for town yesterday morning?" queried Mrs. Smithers.

"Yes, but he came back at early dusk, with his arms full of white paper bundles, and when he got on the porch he tossed them helter skelter on the settee and—and—hugged her!"

"Oh!"

"Ain't that dreadful?"

"If anybody but you, Laviny Hart, had told that, I wouldn't believed it!" murmured Mrs. Smithers.

"It may look out of place for a single woman to say, but it does seem to me like a judgment on Doc Burkett for going off to marry a frivolous, do nothing Boston widow instead of some decent, thrifty girl in his own town. He ain't been dead three months, and here is another man hanging round his widow. Perhaps he's an old sweetheart. Everybody knows Doc was well fixed."

"Yes, and they do say," interposed Mrs. Demming, "them as was round when he was brought home that day, that she stood round like a statue, never shedding a tear and just doing what old Dr. Green ordered, like some machine."

"Perhaps she knew it wasn't no use to do anything anyhow," suggested Mrs. Marsden, who had a retreating chin and weak, fishy eyes.

"What's that, Becky Marsden?" snorted Miss Laviny, turning severely on her insignificant neighbor. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing," hurriedly replied Mrs. Marsden. "Only I was reading a novel yesterday where a woman got tired of her husband and put something in his coffee that didn't smell nor taste nor anything—and he"—

"Lawzee Becky, I always knew you was light headed," snapped Miss Laviny. Nevertheless the group of gossips turned suddenly silent and gazed at each other, wide eyed.

"My, wouldn't it be awful if we had a poison case here?"

The girlish figure in the rear rose now, and a clear voice rang across the stuffy little shop.

"You've no right to say such things. You don't know Mrs. Burkett and never wanted to treat her right, and you're wicked, wicked women to talk about her that way!"

Astonished silence fell upon the women. Then Mrs. Smithers' voice, no longer oily and complacent, rose cuttlingly.

"That's a nice way for you to speak to your elders, Peggy Smithers, and I'm ashamed of you. D'you mean to call Laviny Hart a liar?"

The girl fingered her bolt of braid nervously.

"No, aunt; but I can't sit here and listen to such dreadful things about Mrs. Burkett. I've worked for her, and I know she's a lady through and through, and she's not doing anything wrong. There's a reason!"

"Well, Miss Peggy, seeing as you're the only one in this party that has a visiting acquaintance with Mrs. Burkett, you might just walk up there and see who that man is."

"Oh, aunt, I can't! I couldn't ask such a question!"

"You don't need to ask. Worm it out while you're there. You can take up that new set of points you've made. Perhaps Mrs. Burkett might like to

wear them with her widow's black."

The last words came spitefully.

The girl stood in a pleading attitude. "This is a nice way to treat your old aunt that's given you bed and board for ten years now. Now you stop sniveling and trot along."

Poor Peggy! Before those words "bed and board" she never hesitated. They formed the spiritual lash which her aunt swung with unmerciful hand. The girl never stopped to reckon the mittens she knit for the shop, the lace she made or the interminable days of

fine sewing as a recompense for the obnoxious "bed and board."

Dreadfully she lifted her simple sailor hat from the shelf beneath the counter and started on her hateful errand.

The great trees arched protectively over her head, the wild strawberries bloomed at her feet, and from the woodlands came the calls of her favorite birds. But her eyes were heavy with unshed tears. Was it not bad enough to listen day after day to the gossip that emanated from her aunt's shop without being forced into a partnership with the gossipers?

Languidly and tremblingly she mounted the broad steps leading to Widow Burkett's porch. That much discussed lady met her at the door. Her quick glance detected the misery in Peggy's face.

"Come in, child. You look utterly worn out," she remarked, ushering Peggy into the dim, cool parlor. "What have you there? Oh, such lovely lace collars! I must have one of them. But I'm afraid this sort of work is pulling you down. You're looking badly, Peggy."

The girl flushed guiltily, and her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Mrs. Burkett studied her curiously.

"It is a long walk from the village, and as soon as Ned comes in we'll have some lemonade. He makes famous lemonade."

Ned! That must be the awful man. And she called him by his first name with such a proud light in her eyes. A brisk step sounded in the entry, the knob rattled, and Peggy turned dizzy and faint.

"Ned, dear, this is little Peggy Smithers, who made that lovely lace for me. Peggy, this is"—

Peggy had risen mechanically, and as she caught the next words she raised her eyes, swimming with tears, to Mrs. Burkett's astonished gaze. Delicious little chills were chasing up and down her hot spine. Oh, if only she might rush from the house, down the shady street to the shop. But no; that man stood between her and the door.

Peggy had never seen just such a man before. He stood so very tall and straight, laughed in such friendly fashion with his eyes and helped her to tiny cakes and a drink, all cool, sweet and sour, with the air of Prince Charming of fairy book fame. From somewhere—far, far away—came the trill of a riotously happy bird. Peggy raised her eyes once more to Mrs. Burkett's face, and this time there were no tears.

"Why, you're looking better already, Peggy. And now, if you won't have any more cake or lemonade, I shall carry you off to my room. I want you to see the beautiful silks and embroideries Mr. Lameroux has brought me from Japan and China."

The gossips at Mrs. Smithers' shop were becoming restless when Peggy came back. The girl fairly shivered with suppressed excitement, and her hand trembled as she stuck the hatpin through her sailor.

"Well, ain't you never going to speak?" snapped her aunt. "Didn't you hear anything?"

"Yes, I heard lots, aunt," answered the girl, trying hard to keep the exultation from ringing in her voice. The women leaned forward eagerly.

"His name is Mr. Edward Lameroux!"

"Hoity-toity," sniffed Miss Laviny. "Just like a novel," murmured Mrs. Marsden.

"And he's just home from China and Japan, and he's going to stay a year this time, and he's brought her the most beautiful silks you ever saw, and I'm going there to sew on 'em for a whole week, and she gave me the queerest candy. It came from China, too, and it burns your mouth, but it's good—and"—

"Lawzee, Peggy, why don't you get down to facts?" ejaculated Miss Laviny. "Is he going to marry her?"

"No!" exclaimed Peggy in a final burst of triumph. "He can't. He's her twin brother, and he's in the navy, and he's been gone five years—and"—

Mrs. Demming rose abruptly, saying: "I declare I forgot that batch of bread. Like as not it's all over my clean floor."

Miss Laviny, as usual, was last.

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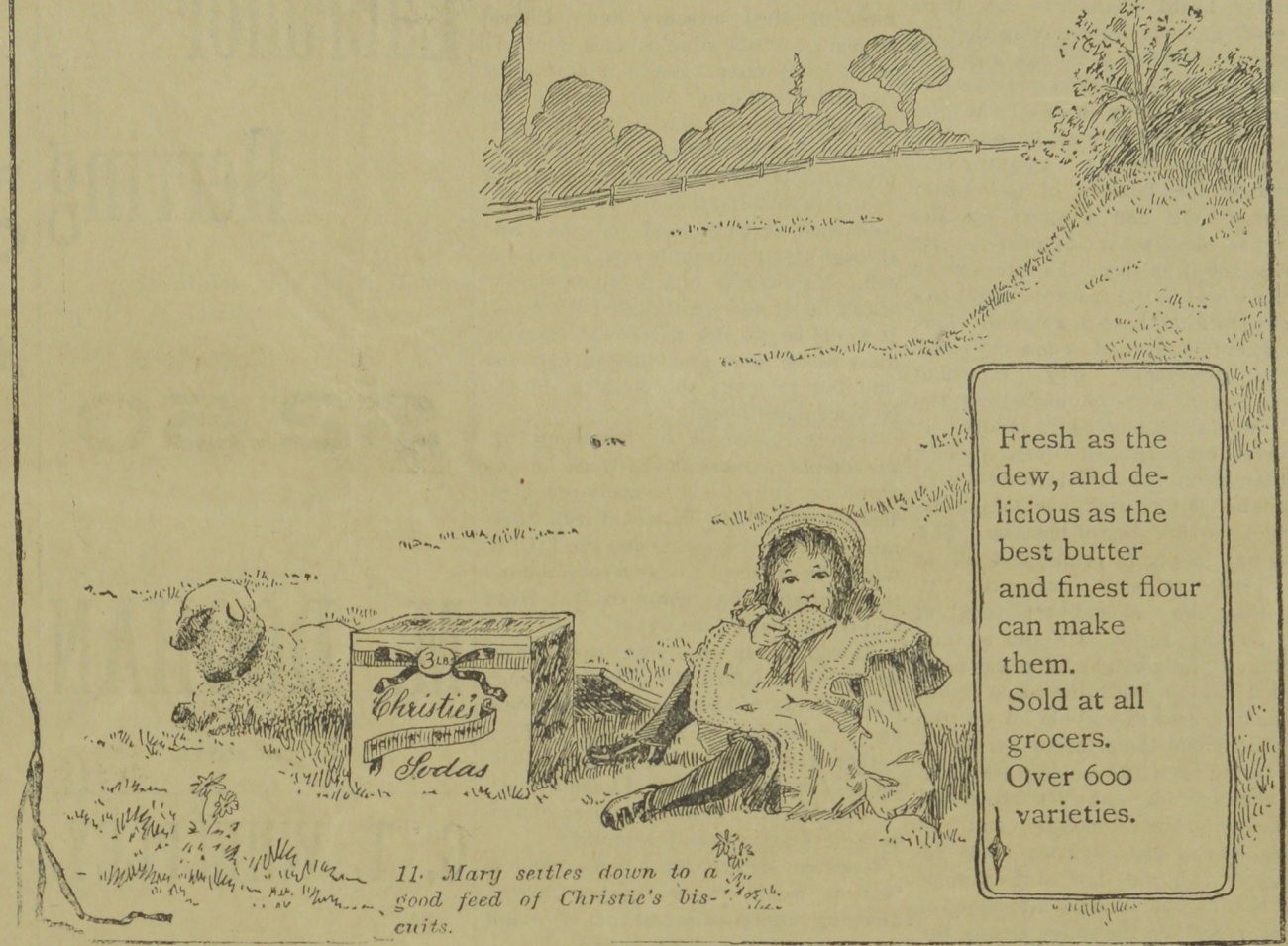
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grieved, departed in silence. One by one her visitors left, and Mrs. Smithers stood alone absently dusting and redusting her tiny showcase.

And in Mrs. Burkett's cool parlor the widow was saying:

"I do feel so sorry for Peggy, Ned, dear, that I believe I'll ask her aunt to let me take her to Boston when we go back. She is so handy with her needle. I know I could get her lots of work."

"Well, if she's so handy, why don't you have her for your maid?"

The widow laughed softly.

"She'd simply ruin me, Ned. The child adores me."

"I don't believe you could be ruined, and think what it would mean for that child to be taken away from those village harpies. The life must be torture to her sensitive nature."

"It may cost something to get rid of the aunt; but, then, I believe Peggy's worth saving."

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