Melissa's Better—Best Baby

BY AGNES LIDDELL

"What tomfoolery will those women be up to next?" Grandfather Tompkins, slumped in the big red rocker, was reading the local paper.

Melissa, mending a pile of grain bags by the door where she could watch Danny outside, longed dumbly to be one of those despised women who dared to "be up" to things besides hard, gruelling labor. But she kept discreetly silent. Grandmother Tompkins didn't care what the women did. It was sure to be something silly, always something to coax the dollars out of your pocket but never anything to put a penny in. She sniffed contemptuously and went on looking over beans.

"They better stay at home and take care of their own young ones," Grandfather Tompkins looked up from his laborious spelling down the column to say. "Not but what some folks could learn something on baby tending if they had a mind to," he glanced meaningly through the door to where Danny played contentedly on the porch. "But they better learn from their folks at home that's brought up four to healthy manhood and buried three."

"Oh! Something about young ones now, is it?" Grandmother Tompkins was interested at last. "I wondered what they'd do when they couldn't come around showing us how to make bread and can tomatoes. They're going to try their hands at raising babies now are they?"

"'The Baby Special,'" Grandfather Tompkins read it over. "That's a special car the car company let those women take to kite 'round the country weighing and measuring babies. What on earth do they want to run around weighing up a lot of young ones for?"

"Well, I never!" Grandmother Tompkins sat and stared. "A body'd think it was your hogs. Who cares how much baby weighs? You ain't going to get any money for them."

"They're actually giving them the use of that car!" Grandfather Tompkins exploded. "Lighting it and heating it and furnishing two men to run it, to say nothing of the electricity it will waste. Giving all that just to weigh up a bunch of kids and then trying to raise the fares on us. What's the government thinking of? Taxing us at every turn and then letting the Provincial Board of Health waste all that money on a pack of ornery young ones."

"But the babies are going to be men and women," Melissa ventured. "Ain't a pure-bred man worth as much as a pure-bred cow?"

"Could you sell that baby for five hundred dollars like I got for that heifer last week?" Grandfather Tompkins demanded witheringly. "Who'd pay you fifty cents for that spindle-shanks? Ain't even fat as he would be if you'd take Ma's advice and feed him pork grease and potatoes."

"Maybe 'twould be a good thing for some folks to have their baby weighed," Grandmother Tompkins put in. "They might see then that other folks knew something about baby-raising."

Melissa caught up her baby and hurried from the room. Get five hundred dollars for him? No amount of money could buy him from her! His cheery little smile, his sunny little gurgles which she chose to consider talk, his utter dependence upon her were all that made life worth living. Compare her baby to a Holstein calf! What wouldn't her boy be worth when he was a man if she could only do right by him?

And right she would do, if she could find out what was right. She never could fight for herself. They might slight her and overwork her and she hadn't the courage to complain. But Danny was different. He should have his rights if she had to fight the whole world. And to get those rights she had fought her own small world—her husband's family—ever since Danny came.

How she ever got the courage to do it was as much a mystery to Melissa as to everyone else, none of them having read "The Female of the Species." A quiet, dun little creature from babyhood, she had never before found courage to say Boo! to a wren. From her childhood, up, everyone had felt at liberty to snub her and ridicule her. She had grown into young womanhood accustomed to thinking of herself as "nobody but Old Jed Larkin's girl," and she took it as a matter of course that she should never have things as other girls had.

When Dan Tompkins, son of the wealthiest farmer thereabouts, first beaued Melissa home from church, the town considered it just one of Dan's side-splitting jokes and obligingly laughed about it all the week. Next Sunday Dan appeared again with Melissa. A twice-told tale loses its flavor and this time there was only a quiet smile. When the third Sunday Dan knocked Bill Smith down for sneering at Melissa and took her home in his new car—wherein never girl had ridden before—the town sensed that it was Melissa's turn to laugh. But Melissa didn't. She was too overcome by the grandeur of it to do more than sit and listen while Dan rattled on and on about himself, his car, his stock, and the money he was going to make. It was all so new and wonderful.

Dan married Melissa. She was too stunned to have said "No" had she wanted to. For weeks the country talked of nothing but "that dowdy Larkin girl's good luck," a view which humble Melissa piously shared. None of them thought for a moment that Dan was the lucky one. Melissa's patience, devotion and loyalty, her housewifely skill—there wasn't a better cook nor a neater housekeeper for miles around—were as nothing when tumbled into the scales against Dan's acres and pure-bred stock.

It must be said that Dan was not insensible to his good fortune, though he credited to his own shrewdness in picking out a wife. Melissa had cooked for him and his father during the one month his mother had ever permitted herself to be sick, and Dan had a lively recollection of the firm white loaves, the flaky, juicy pies, potatoes dry and mealy, and ham and eggs cooked just to the turn. He was a calculating, cool young chap, not to be tricked, when it came to picking out a wife, by emotions directly traceable to a saucy eye, a bobbing curl, or a trim, slim ankle. He had seen too many chaps pick them that way and eat soggy bread the rest of their lives. However, he never thought it worth while to mention any of Melissa's good points to her. Why spoil a faithful servant with praise? Melissa was a fine cook and a satisfactory wife. She knew her place as a Larkin born, a full octave down the scale from the Tompkinses, and she never tried to climb. No use starting her to thinking she was giving as much as she got.

All went well until Danny's arrival. Melissa accepted whatever treatment was accorded her in the same dumb way she had taken everything life dealt. She was so dazed at her own good fortune that she felt Mother Tompkins slights were her just due. Any mother would feel bad to have a son like Dan pick out a Larkin when he might have gotten the best going. So she meekly did all the heavy work, ate the chicken wings and was very thankful.

Mutiny began when Danny was eight days old and Mother Tompkins wanted Melissa to get up and help with the washing. Melissa refused! The older woman could not believe her ears. That the timid creature she had driven about for two years should actually spunk up and say she wouldn't do anything she was told to do was beyond belief. Father Tompkins was hastily summoned and added his voice to the demand. It was unheard of that a healthy woman should keep to her bed more than a week in confinement. Melissa merely turned her back on the couple and held the quilts tightly under her chin.

Clamorous ringing of the bell summoned Dan from the field to put down the rebellion. He strode into Melissa's room determined to show her she couldn't play tricks with him. He'd already lost fifteen minutes of daylight by her foolishness.

Melissa for once was first to speak. "You needn't say one word, Dan Tompkins," she said. "I ain't going to get up and touch that washing. And what's more, I ain't going to get up for six days longer. The doctor says it will be better for the baby for me to stay in bed two weeks and I'm going to stay."

That was her last word. Dan stormed wordily but Melissa neither spoke nor moved. She had said her all and besides the doctor had told her that getting excited was bad for the baby. It turned her milk to poison, and what mother wanted to poison her own child? She finally turned her face to the wall and closed her eyes. Dan would tire of it after awhile and go back to work. She was making a blind fight for her Motherhood.

Dan's contemptuous certainty that he could quickly "bring Melissa to time," slowly turned to doubt. He considerd lifting her out of bed and forcibly dressing her, but remembering an experience he once had with a faithful horse he thought better of it. The horse and Melissa had some points in common. Each had drawn over-heavy loads for years without complaining and then suddenly balked. All attempts to make the horse move failed. When these quiet ones got set they were terribly so. He decided that perhaps Melissa was right about not getting up, and so he went back to the field.

Melissa kept to her bed the two weeks and then went about her usual work as though nothing had happened. Mother Tompkins gave her first orders tentatively but finding them obeyed she picked up her old dictating ways. To outsiders Melissa seemed still the same patient drudge, but Mother Tompkins knew when to order. She did not need to be told that young Danny came first, and that if his well-being would be disturbed by any of her commands they would be ignored. So she kept her semblance of authority by wisely choosing the right time to speak.

To do the right thing by Danny became Melissa's religion. It brought out the cold perspiration to think that some act of hers, no matter what love was behind it, might spoil his whole life if it wasn't right. The busy doctor, sensing that here was a mother who would do what she believed right, in spite of relations and neighbors, crowded all the advice he could into the few visits he made after her confinement. Proper feeding was his hobby, but usually his teachings fell on deaf ears. The average woman argued that mother and grandmother and great-grandmother had fed everything to their babies, and some of them lived or there wouldn't be anyone here now!

Melissa was among the few who listened. She absorbed all he told her and wore out with much reading the feeding bulletin he gave her. A stray copy of a mother's magazine fell into her hands and she begged Dan to sign for it for her. He only laughed. There were more papers coming into the house now than any two women could read—three live stock journals and a poultry paper. She didn't need a paper to tell her how to bring up a baby. Any woman who had one could tell her all she needed to know. Melissa would have signed for it herself, but she had not the dollar.

But now the Baby Special was coming and there would be nurses and maybe doctors from the city with the very latest knowledge about taking care of babies. Everybody would be there, babies from all over and Danny should be among them.

Her planning was suspended by the arrival of Dan's youngest brother Dick, with his wife and a baby about Danny's age. Dick was out of work and came home to visit until something turned up. There was nothing new in this, it was the fifth time it had happened since Melissa had been a Tompkins, but the older Tompkinses were as elated as though Dick had just returned from the trenches.

Dick's home-coming at this time proved a godsend to Melissa. Ruby Muriel, the baby, had been brought up in the good old way to eat whatever and whenever she chose, or more properly speaking, to eat whatever a doting elder chose to give her. Her bottle, sometimes filled with milk, sometimes with tea or coffee, and again with sweetened water, was seldom out of her mouth, even when she was asleep.

But in spite of everything, Ruby Muriel was fat, a flabby, soft sort of fat which passed with her grandparents for beauty. As they were allowed to feed her whatever they liked, she became at once the pet of both. It was on the second day after her arrival that Grandmother Tompkins remembered the Baby Special.

"When was it those women were coming along with that Special?" she asked Grandfather Tompkins at breakfast.

"Don't know," he lowered his saucer of coffee long enough to say. "Better ask Meliss'. She's planning on walking in with Danny.

"We've got something worth showing now; we might all drive in," Grandmother Tompkins said as she handed Ruby Muriel a generously sugared doughnut. "When's it going to be here, Meliss'?"

Melissa, eyeing the doughnut with horror, was slow with her answer. "Next week Tuesday," she finally replied. "Ain't you afraid those greasy things will make her sick, Carrie?"

"If they're good enough for me I guess they won't hurt her any," Carrie scoffed. "A little grease might fatten Danny."

"What is this Baby Special?" Carrie asked. "If it's just one of those clinics, there's no sense in going. Some woman that never had a baby just gets up and tells you a lot of silly stuff about feeding the baby too much, and not to give her candy. Or else she ought to have a quart of milk a day and no tea or coffee."

"This ain't a clinic, it's a Special," Grandmother Tompkins explained. Having set her heart on taking Ruby Muriel to bask in the admiration of the crowd, she would not give up. "There's room for all of us in the auto and Dan can drive."

So it was decided they should go. Melissa at once began writing a list of questions to ask the nurse, a list which grew so long that even she at last saw the need of trimming it.

The great day arrived and Danny, who had been tucked to bed with the chickens the evening before, awoke laughing and sunny. Fresh and rosy from his bath, over which Melissa spent an extra ten minutes, he took his warm milk and then kicked about on an old comfort on the sunny porch while Melissa hurried through her morning's work. She had been up nearly three hours before Carrie appeared, though shrill protests from Ruby Muriel had long disturbed the country peace. Tired and cross, Carrie slammed her small daughter into Danny's high chair, and querulously asked for coffee for both.

"I don't see what's the matter with her," she complained. "She squalled half the night. Seems as if I didn't get a wink of sleep. I'll look like a scarecrow to-day, when all Dick's old girls are out."

Melissa thought she might tell Carrie what was wrong with Ruby Muriel. That young lady's supper the day before had included bits of salt pork, a piece of hot biscuit dipped in maple syrup, a nibble of cabbage, and the frosting off Carrie's cake. Experience had taught Melissa, however, that it would be unwise to refer to this, so she said nothing.

Dan came in as Carrie was sipping her coffee to announce that the bus would be ready in a half hour.

"I can't be ready by then," Carrie wailed. "I ain't bathed the baby yet and I've got myself to dress."

"Can't help it." Dan was firm. "It takes a good hour to drive to Three Rivers and I've got to be back early. Why don't you try sleeping nights and getting up days like Meliss'? She'll be ready."

"She'll just have to go without her bath then," Carrie ignored Dan's reference to her late rising. "Unless you've got time to do her, Meliss'," she added hopefully. "Could you? I've got to curl my hair."

"I'm afraid not." Melissa was scrubbing the potatoes for supper. "I've got to get Danny's bottle ready yet and Mother Tompkins wants a good lunch put up, and I must slick up a little myself. The water's all hot, though. Seems as if you could do it if you hustled."

"Oh, I can hustle as well as the next," Carrie sniffed. Seizing the soiled kitchen towel she dipped one corner of it in the basin of water which Dan, fresh from grooming horses, had just used to wash his hands. Three swift swabs over Ruby Muriel's protesting face and a wipe at each hand completed the bath. Drying was even more quickly done. A single dab at her face and a pat at each hand with the dry end of the towel left a fine foundation for the cheap face powder with which Carrie sprinkled her offspring.

"There, who's going to know she hasn't had a bath?" she demanded. "Now sit still, darling, while mamma dresses, and here's a banana for you."

Melissa permitted herself the luxury of separating Ruby Muriel from the unripe banana as Carrie dashed upstairs.

Curled, powdered and adorned with cheap trinkets, Carrie descended on the dot. Ruby Muriel was thrust into clean garments and, gay in a lingerie bonnet trimmed with clusters of pink roses and streamers of blue ribbon, occupied the post of honor on the front seat with Grandfather Tompkins and Dan. Danny, wearing a bonnet which Melissa had fashioned out of a handkerchief, perched on the little camp stool which was used when there were extras and clung contentedly to his mother's thumb.

Arrived at the Special, Grandfather Tompkins pushed directly towards the nurse with Ruby Muriel, as became a man of his importance. Grandmother Tompkins and Carrie stuck closely to him for everybody would be anxious to see Dick's wife and baby, fresh from the city. The crowd opened to let them through, but when Melissa with Danny tried to follow she found the lane closed. She worked her way around the edge until she reached the nurse's side, where she stood drinking in every word.

"The future of the whole world rests upon to-day's babies," the nurse was saying. "War has taken the best of our manhood, so it is up to Canadians to bring up healthy men and women to take their places. Canada needs pure-bred children more than she does pure-bred stock.

"Here," she suddenly took Danny from Melissa, "is a baby who shows what intelligent care can do." Deftly removing Danny's clothing she placed him on the scales. "Twenty pounds exactly," she announced, "and" to Melissa, "he is how old?"

"Eleven months, two weeks, three days and five hours," Melissa recited.

The nurse had some trouble with her speech. "As near correct weight as we could ever hope to get," she finally ventured to say, "and," whipping out a tape measure, "I'll guess that he is just twenty-nine inches long. He looks perfectly proportioned. Exactly twenty-nine and one-fourth," she read off the measurement. "He has been kept pretty closely to milk and fruit juice, hasn't he?" And nodding approval to Melissa's reply she held the smiling Danny high so that all might see his good points.

"This baby is as near perfect physically as you can hope to get them," she said. "His skin is clear and pink, flesh firm, breath sweet, eyes bright and sparkling, stomach not bulging as it would be if he were over-fed. He has eight teeth, which is about right, and he seems to be a good-natured, happy little fellow. Keep on with plenty of milk, but add to it crackers, toast, cereal, egg, and perhaps some finely chopped spinach as well as fruit juice and you'll be all right." She handed Danny to Melissa and took Ruby Muriel from Grandfather Tompkins.

That gentleman was smiling broadly. If a baby like Danny could get all that praise, what wouldn't the nurse say when she inspected Ruby Muriel?

"Here is a baby that illustrates where so many mothers fail," the nurse began. Grandfather Tompkins slipped his hand behind his ear and leaned forward. Surely he did not hear right! His smile slowly faded. "This baby has been improperly fed for many months, I should say," went on the nurse. "Blotched skin, bad breath, eyes slightly glazed, tongue coated and distended stomach all indicate wrong feeding. What do you feed your baby?" she asked Carrie, who, flushed and furious, was considering snatching Ruby Muriel away.

"Everything that's good enough for me," Carrie snapped.

"Yes." The nurse, used to hostility, held her ground for the sake of the other mothers. "I should say your baby ate everything. And she cries half the night, doesn't she? And vomits a great deal, and has considerable bowel trouble? She has only one tooth. Needs more bone-making food. More milk and less sugar would make a new baby of her."

"I've had enough of this," Carrie stormed, as the nurse, having found Ruby Muriel's abnormal weight and measures, returned her to her mother and picked up another baby. "I told you it would just be some old maid that didn't know anything about babies!" And she elbowed her way out of the crowd.

"I don't believe you could stand any more either." Dan, grinning broadly, suddenly appeared at Melissa's elbow. "Your head will be so big I'll have to buy you a new hat. What do you say to getting it right now?"

Melissa was speechless. To have Danny singled out for all that praise—though she always knew he was perfect—and then to have Dan offer to buy her so much as a shoe lace! It was too much.

"Blamed if it wasn't worth the price of a suit, too, to see Carrie's face when the nurse said Ruby was pimply," Dan chuckled. "I never could see why the folks thought she was prettier than our Danny. You ain't had any clothes for some time, so you better stock up now."

A resplendent Melissa occupied the lowly camp stool on the return trip, with Danny in a new coat and bonnet, again clinging to her thumb. Ruby Muriel sucked a stick of striped candy, daubing it at intervals over Grandfather Tompkins' coat sleeve. The ride was made in deep silence. Melissa was too overcome by the happenings of the day to utter a sound even had she been given to much speech. Carrie sulked by Dick, whose indolence could not be disturbed by anything an impudent nurse might say, and Grandfather and Grandmother Tompkins glumly nibbled peppermints. Only Dan seemed jovial and indulged in sundry chuckles as he kept the car speeding along.

"Pure-bred babies!" he said, when at home he lifted Danny out and actually carried him into the house. "You've got a pure-bred grandson to brag about now, dad, along with your Holsteins."

"Pure-bred fiddlesticks," snorted Grandfather Tompkins. "The fools ain't all dead yet."

"No, the more's the pity," agreed Grandmother Tompkins, hurrying after a doughnut for Ruby Muriel.

Melissa only smiled.

"Old folks never can change," she reflected generously. "But I should think Carrie would wake up for Ruby's sake."

Every man is the architect of his own fortune.

The most precious jewel of all is brimming health.

Keep the eggs from hens for hatching purposes and if you can select the eggs from individual birds remember that the best looking hens are not generally the best layers.

If we could now standardize retail prices with a moderate spread above production prices our side of this mundane sphere would slide along surprisingly well.

If there are cracks in the floor you want to stain, soak very soft tissue paper in hot thin starch until pulpy and fill up the cracks with this, and level it off with a knife. Then stain in the usual way. The cracks will be quite hidden.

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

APRIL 9

The Lord Preserves Joash, 2 Kings 11: 1-4; 11-17. Golden Text—Ps. 145: 20.

Time—B.C. 841-836.

Place—Jerusalem.

Lesson Foreword—Jehoram, king of Judah, had married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, king and queen of northern Israel (see Kings 8: 16-18). At Jehoram's death, his son Ahaziah came to the throne, 2 Kings 8: 25-29. On the death of Ahaziah, Athaliah, the queen-mother, now deprived of her proud position, put to death all her own grandchildren who would be claimants to the throne, and ruled as regent for six years.

The Hiding of Joash, 1-4.

V. 1. **Athaliah**; had inherited from her mother Jezebel great force of character, but her influence was always for evil. **Her son was dead**; that is, Ahaziah, who reigned for only one year, ch. 8: 26. During his reign Athaliah, the queen-mother was apparently the strong power behind the throne. At his death she was afraid that her position of authority was at an end. **Destroy all the seed royal**; that is, her grandchildren. They would be the legitimate claimants to the throne.

V. **Jehosheba**; sister of the late king. She had married Jehoiada the priest (2 Chron. 22: 11) and had, therefore, been won over from the heathen court party to the priestly party who worshipped Jehovah. **Took Joash**; her infant nephew. One infant was all that was left of David's descendants. The promises of God seemed to depend for fulfillment on a little, feeble life.

V. 3. Joash, like Samuel, was brought up in the temple, where, although just a stone's throw from Athaliah's palace, his presence was kept a dead secret for six years. During that time he was surrounded with the purest and most powerful religious influences; his good reign showed the value of this training.

V. 4. Jehoiada cautiously wins the favor of the military party before raising the standard of revolution. **Rulers over hundreds.** The army was divided into units of thousands and hundreds, each unit having a regimental officer in charge. **The guard.** These were known as Carites and were "foreign mercenaries employed as body-guards by the kings of Judah, like the Krethi and Plethi in the time of Solomon," 1 Kings, 1: 38. "The same body of troops furnished the guard both for the palace and the temple" (Skinner). Athaliah, as regent, was their commander-in-chief, but Jehoiada succeeded in winning them from her allegiance. Without their help he could not have enthroned Joash.

The Coronation of Joash 11-12.

V. 11. "The meaning seems to be that the guards were drawn up in ranks right across the court from south to north, and facing the altar and the temple" (Skinner). The guards were so stationed that they could repulse any attempt upon the young king's life.

V. 12. **Brought forth**; probably from the priests' residential quarters in the temple where he had been kept in hiding. **Gave him the testimony.** In this instance the testimony would be the official book of the law. The reference to it here would suggest that it was presented to kings at their coronation. **Anointed him**; with oil on the head. Prophets, priests and kings were anointed at the beginning of their ministry to signify: (1) that they were set apart to God for a particular work and (2) that God's spirit was outpoured upon them to qualify them for that work.

The Death of Athaliah 13-17.

V. 13. **Athaliah heard the noise.** The royal palace stood close to the temple and the shouts of the guard in the temple would attract Athaliah's attention. She hurried from the palace to the temple to discover its meaning.

V. 14. **By a pillar, as the manner was.** The king was presented to the people in the place where usually the king stood at worship in the temple. This was by one of the pillars (ch. 23: 3) and probably upon a raised platform there. **Blew with trumpets.** The trumpets were made of rams' horns and were blown to sound the alarm in battle, to proclaim the new moon and the new year, and at the coronation of a king.

V. 15. **Have her forth.** Lead her out beyond the ranks of the soldiers, that is, beyond the temple area. It was considered sacrilege to shed blood within the secred area. **Him that followeth, etc.**; a precaution against any who would side with the queen.

V. 16. **The way the horses came.** There appear to have been two entrances from the temple to the palaces, the one known as the "horse-gate" (the royal stables adjoined the palace) and the other the "gate of the guard," v. 19. The usual entrance for persons of importance would be by the gate of the guard. Thus it was an indignity to lead Athaliah out by the horse-gate.

V. 17. The covenant formed at the suggestion of Jehoiada was both religious and political. On the one hand the people swore allegiance to their new king, Joash, and on the other both people and king renewed their allegiance to Jehovah. The worship of the heathen Baal ceased in Judah with the death of Athaliah.

Application.

In a large Ontario Sunday School, twenty years ago, there was a boy who gave his teacher, and the School generally, a good deal of troubie. He was unruly and on more than one occasion he had to be put out of the School. But patient work wrought wonders and that boy—or rather man—is now assistant superintendent of that same School, and one of the real pillars of the Church. Every boy may not be a Joash, but there are hidden values in every child.

Joash had known and loved the temple all his life, and the influence of that training soon manifested itself. Not long ago, when in one of our Canadian provinces there was a referendum on prohibition of the liquor traffic, at a temperance meeting some one noticed that of five speakers, every one made reference to his early experience in Sunday School. Their steadfast adherence to temperance principles and cheerful advocacy of Prohibition came as a result of their early religious training.

"What manner of child shall this be?" was the question asked concerning John the Baptist. The same question might be repeated over every cradle. As the oak sleeps in the acorn; as the mighty torrent sleeps in the tiny rill; as music sleeps in the plain eggs of the nightingale; as the statue sleeps in the block of marble—so unmeasured possibilities sleep in the soul of every little child.

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