

The Free Press Short Story

Why Bessie Barrett Was So Happy

KATE M. CLEARY

"A fair-haired lad, and his heart was right—Was it ten, yes ten, long years to-night, Shall I bless him again before I die?"

"Oh, come in, come in!" he cried. The tone held less of invitation than of resentment. Indeed, he was both angry and disgusted.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, what do you want now?" His brusque permission to enter had been accepted.

"To-morrow will be Thanksgiving—eve," she said; "I wished to know if I might prepare for the day after."

An originally handsome apartment, this in which the old man sat, and it had been handsomely furnished.

"To-morrow will be Thanksgiving—eve," she said; "I wished to know if I might prepare for the day after."

"Prepare what?" he growled. "Why, a turkey, sir; or a pie, or—or a bit of cranberry sauce, sir."

"Turkeys! And where do you suppose I can get the money to spend on turkey? And pie! To make us all sick, and bring doctor and doctors' bills down on me!

"But I thought perhaps on account of the child," she began.

"The child—the child!" he repeated, irascibly. "I'm sick of hearing about her. If it isn't one thing she needs it's another. I'm not a rich man! You know that, Mrs. Dotty."

"Mrs. Dotty knew nothing at all of the sort. She shut her lips tightly, and said nothing.

"The poor, I tell you," whined on Godfrey Kirke, "and I can't stand the expense of her. What is she to me, anyhow?"

"Where is she?" he asked Mrs. Dotty, when she popped in her mild old head.

"You ought to know. It's your business to know. But it doesn't matter—doesn't matter in the least."

"You—you, Miss Beattie!" She started, as she looked up, and saw Bessie Barrett standing so near her.

"Oh, don't—don't mind, dear," said Mrs. Dotty soothingly, putting a hand that looked like wrinkled terylene on the girl's arm.

"I do mind!" Bessie passionately cried. "Oh, I do! I shan't stay here! I shan't be an expense to him any longer. I will go away somewhere."

"Now, Miss Bessie, dear, you mustn't cry that way; you really mustn't. I loved your mother before you, and I love you."

But the poor, little old comforter was almost crying herself.

Years before the Kirkes were the people of wealth and position in that part of the country.

First, the wife of the master died. Maud, the daughter, married a man whose only crime was poverty.

followed him, leaving their child to its grandfather, Godfrey Kirke. To the latter had come the final blow when his only son, Robert, his hope and pride, had run away to sea.

"A horrid day," she said, with a shiver; "but it can't be worse out than in."

"She put on a short old Astrakhan jacket, a little felt hat and a pair of much-mended cloth gloves.

"In the desolate house the day wore wearily on. The old man, plodding in solitude over his accounts, anxiously striving to answer for every cent of expenditure, and refraining from lighting lamp or candle till his weak eyes were strained to the utmost, was a pathetic illustration of the economy that is more contemptuous than admirable.

"The dusk, the dreary November dusk, was filling the room when he laid down his pencil and rang the bell.

"The meek housekeeper withdrew. Ten minutes later she brought in a tray on which were tea, bread, butter, two cups, two saucers and two plates.

"So he munched his bread dry, with a sense of exaltation in his self-imposed penance. He would not open the poor-house-door for himself by using butter.

"Butter has gone up three cents in the last week," he said. "I can't afford to use butter."

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Down to Hannah in the kitchen went Mrs. Dotty.

"What do you see Miss Beattie?" "Yes'm, Passin' westward a couple of hours ago—yes'm."

"Oh!" Mrs. Dotty breathed a relieved sigh. Bessie had probably gone to Rose Dever's house.

"No, sir." "Do you know why she went out?" "I suspect, sir."

"Well, speak up." "She overheard our conversation today."

"What of it?" "Nothing of it," with a very angry flash from very faded eyes, "except that she vowed she would be an expense to you no longer."

"She did, eh?" "She did."

"Well," grimly, "I hope she won't!" The child had a sulky fit. She was probably at the house of some neighbor.

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would she have to be thankful for on the morrow—if, indeed, there was to be a morrow for her. For might not she be shuddered at the thought—the girl at the morgue? The others were gone, why not she? He was just a wretched and forlorn old man.

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