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SHORT STORY

"Hear the Pennies Dropping"

MISS WILKIE taught the Intermediate Class at our Sunday School. She'd taught it for 20 years, ever since the place was opened in 1906. There was a photo in the cloak-room; a bit brown and faded, but if you stood on a chair and looked closely, you could see it all plainly enough; the boxy little building with the date over the door, and a flax-bush in front, and Miss Wilkie

Written for "The Listener"
by MARY STEWART

standing on the step with five grinning kids. In those 20 years, she had changed rather less than the building had. The building had increased in size; Miss Wilkie not at all. Her figure was angular as a jumping-jack, and she still clad it in what seemed to be the same dark, serviceable skirt, long-sleeved white blouse. Even her coiffure—a remarkable achievement in itself—had remained immune to time. Her hair was a curious shade of brown, the colour of bullrushes (or was it brandy-snaps?) but dense and lifeless as the hair on a doll. It was done low in front, swarming down almost to the eyebrows, and bound with a black velvet fillet. At the back it sprang out in a giant chignon, shaped like a beehive, and jammed full of hairpins. Her face was small and creased, with pale eyes behind pince-nez, a bony nose, and shiny yellowish teeth, which she cleaned every day of her life with household soap.

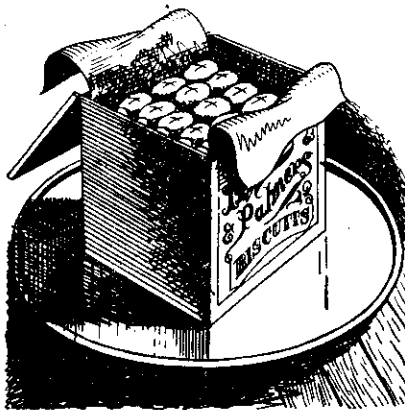
Our class was conducted in a dim corner by the stage: Miss Wilkie bolt upright in a kitchen chair, ourselves ranged round her in a restless semicircle. Our chairs were low and squatty, our backs got tired, and the little girls squirmed and fidgeted in their lace-trimmed drawers. The boys engaged in silent scuffles and made jumping rabbits on the sly out of their clean Sunday handkerchiefs. Meanwhile, we got up one by one and lounged by Miss Wilkie's chair while she heard our lesson for the day. If we knew it well enough—she was not exacting—we were rewarded with a small card. On this was printed a text, which we ignored, accompanied by an illustration, irrelevant but ravishingly coloured; robins in the snow; flights of butterflies; roses, artfully embellished with gold paint, and sentimental loops of ribbon. There were some fine collections of these cards, achieved partly through regular attendance and partly through judicious swapping. Conversation lollies were the usual medium, and "God is my Refuge" changed hands with "Kiss me, Sweetheart," in an innocent democracy of values.

MISS WILKIE'S missionary zeal was not confined to Sundays. Every Wednesday afternoon, she was at home to us from half-past three till four. A spiritual snack, as it were, to keep us going till the week-end. She lived in an old-fashioned white house near the church, covered in turrets and fancy iron-work, and set low among swooping lawns. In the flower beds were purple

and white asters, delphiniums and phlox. Also two crouching forms, carved out of box, and said to represent

a cat and a rabbit (which was which?). And, quite unmistakably, a vast umbrella. This time in privet. If Wednesday was fine, half-past three found Miss Wilkie seated in a basket chair on her verandah, a tin of Huntly and Palmer's biscuits on one side of her, a pile of tracts on the other. These she dispensed to us each in turn—one tract and one biscuit apiece. The biscuits were a special kind we never saw anywhere else; they had jam in the middle, and marsh-mallow on top, with a little cross picked out in pink sugar. Once out on the street, we licked our fingers, screwed the tracts into balls, and threw them over people's hedges. On wet days the ceremony took place in the dining-room, a dim and cave-like chamber which was entered reverently, like a mosque, in our stocking feet. Miss Wilkie was house-proud, and made us leave our shoes at the front door. In spite of this, I preferred Wednesday to be wet. I much admired the dining-room and thought our own a poor thing in comparison. It was full of mirrors, and moss-green plush edged with bobbles. There was a vast carved mantelpiece big enough for a palace; a horsehair sofa on which you slipped; velvet chairs on which you stuck; and towering vases stuffed with dried grasses. On the walls were portraits of Miss Wilkie's parents in large oval frames; she implacably cross-eyed beneath a black bonnet; he in check pants and whiskers, lolling with one elbow on an urn, before what appeared to be Balmoral Castle.

ONCE a year, Miss Wilkie gave her class a party. A big marquee appeared on the front lawn, and long tables covered with white paper were put up inside on trestles. There were wonderful things to eat; fruit salad with fresh pineapple, and enormous scoops of home-made ice cream; and so many different kinds of cakes bursting with cream and smothered in hundreds and thousands, it made you giddy to look at them. We always got a present each at those parties. We used to line up after tea, and everyone had a turn



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