

THE HOMELIEST GIRL

Carroll, Senior, also meditated that night through many a cigar, and his thoughts were not of such a nature as to contribute much to his peace of mind. The surprise of his niece upon finding that his wife and the family were not of her faith opened his mind to reflections to which he had been a stranger for many a year. Carroll in his young days had been as devout as the average Catholic youth, had served on the altar, and had even aspired at one time to the priesthood. Thrown upon the world, however, to make his own living, he had been obliged to sacrifice whatever ambitions he had entertained. He was a self-made man, and in that fact more than in his great wealth did he take unto himself glory. Money came fast, and with it admission into society. He had met the wealthy Miss Dyer and had fallen deeply in love with her. In the days of fervent Catholicity Carroll would have scrupled at marrying one outside the faith, but Henry Carroll had long since gone beyond the bounds of strict Catholicity. He had ceased to frequent the Sacraments, appeared at Mass rarely, and it was suggested by some who were not over friendly with him that the reason of his backsliding was his being mixed up in some dishonest deal. And so without any scruples of conscience Carroll had married the much besuited Miss Dyer. Stubborn in business was Carroll, stubborn in exacting what he believed to be his rights; but a strange commentary upon his stubbornness, which makes one suspect that in the matter he was not so tenacious of his rights, his children were brought up strangers to the faith which had once been so ardently professed by their father.

It was not to be expected, therefore, that the very non-Catholic Mrs. Carroll would accept into her house with much grace a relation tainted with practical Catholicity. It was that defect as much as the unprepossessing appearance of Mary Downey that raised in the majority of the household the spirit of rebellion against the orphan, intensified a hundred times on that Sunday when it was discovered that Mary had come to Mass with Nora the cook.

'It is intolerable, Henry,' said Mrs. Carroll at the breakfast table. 'The idea of your niece going to Mass, and that, too, with one of the servants. How can you allow it?'

'What, the going to Mass or the fact that she went with the cook?' asked Carroll sarcastically.

'Both,' she answered. 'None of us are Catholics. Your children are not allowed to go there. Why should you allow your niece?'

'Why? Because she believes it to be the right thing to do, no doubt. If my own children do not go there, it is not that I have not wished them to go there.'

'We will not discuss that matter,' said the woman. 'That was decided long ago.'

And the rest of the meal was passed in silence.

'Come, Mary,' said Carroll as the girl opened the door of her room to his knock, 'it is a glorious day for our trip. You have had your breakfast?'

'Yes, uncle, very early. Nora and I had it together when we came from Mass.'

'So you went to Mass,' he said as he tucked the robe about her in the seat at his side, and they went spinning along over the frozen land.

'Yes, sir. And what a lovely church! They didn't have any like it in our town, only just a plain brick one. Yours is all stone and has marble altars. It must be grand when it is all lighted up and when the big organ plays. My, but there must be thousands and thousands of pines in it. It must be grand when it plays, isn't it?'

'I'm sure it must be, Mary,' answered the man.

'And didn't you hear it?' she asked.

'Not that one. But, of course, I have heard pipe organs. You see, Mary,' he continued, as if in explanation of his defection, 'I am so tired on Sunday morning after working all the week, that it is pretty hard to get up and go to Mass.'

Big man as Carroll was, he chafed under the interrogation of the girl, but he could not find it in him to answer her other than kindly. There were too many in his household already giving her unkind words and looks. But unconsciously he reddened as he realised what a miserable excuse he had employed to cloak his irreligion.

'And your wife—I mean Aunt Carroll—doesn't like Catholics, does she?' said Mary when she perceived that the conversation was beginning to lag.

'You must not say that, Mary,' said the man.

'But she told Nora this morning never to take me to Mass again. But you see, uncle, I had to go to church with some one, for I didn't know the way alone. I can find it myself now. You see, it's just like this, uncle. It's a mortal sin to miss Mass, and anyway, mother made me promise when she was dying that I would never stay away from Mass unless I was too sick to stand up. She said my religion was dearer than—than all your money—and she told me not to be led astray when I came to live with you.'

'So your mother told you we were dangerous people, eh?' said the man, breaking out into laughter.

'Not exactly that,' said the girl. 'She said that you were just the loveliest man, and that she knew I would be safe with you. And we used to pray for you every night—for you to come back, mother used to say.'

'To come back?' repeated the man. 'Come back where?'

'To her, I guess, because we were so poor.'

'And you did come back, didn't you?'

'Yes,' he answered, but mechanically.

'And it was just because we said the prayers, wasn't it? Mother said that if you prayed long enough and hard enough you would get anything.'

'Do you believe that, dear?' asked the man suddenly, as if it were a new and strange doctrine.

'Why, everybody knows that,' said the girl. 'God said so.'

'Then keep right on praying for me—for all of us, won't you?'

'Yes, sir. I've got a lot of prayers to say now—you see, it's so near to Christmas—but I'll keep a place for you. You were so good when no one else wanted me.'

'Nora,' she said that night when she slipped into the kitchen, 'what do you suppose my uncle wants me to pray for? He kind of jumped in the automobile when I told him I could get anything I prayed for. I bet it's something for Christmas.'

'Sure, child, and what does the man want when he has barrels of money?' said Nora. 'If it's money can buy it, he can have what he wants without asking you to pray for it. He's the good man, and it's a shame that that wife of his made him lose the faith.'

'Do you suppose—'

But Mary suddenly stopped in the question that she was formulating. A new idea had flashed into her mind, and, as if she feared that Nora might be able to read it, she hurried from the kitchen and sought her room. Like a flash of light came to her mind the words of the priest at the morning Mass: 'If a man lose his faith, he is the poorest of the poor.' And Uncle Carroll, then, in spite of all his money, must be the poorest of the poor, since he had lost his faith. Her uncle had been kind to her, and now he was in need of help. He did not go to Mass; he had lost his faith. It was not money that could bring it back but only the grace of God. Now did she understand what her mother had ever meant when they had prayed for him to come back.

She was disliked by her aunt and by Evelyn and Henry because she was so homely. Was it not possible that God would answer her prayer and make her, if not as pretty as her cousin Evelyn, at least not so very dreadfully homely, as she knew herself to be? She was at Mass every morning, stealing out early lest she might be found out and forbidden to go. It was a secret, and not even Uncle Carroll must guess it.

But Uncle Carroll almost guessed the secret. Each morning he heard the little feet stealing by his door. On the second morning he looked out and saw her turning the corner in the direction of the church. It was but one of the trifles of life, but trifles many a time change the destiny of souls even as the destiny of the empires.

That Christmas morning, as the homeliest girl was feasting her soul upon the beautiful gifts left by some unknown hand on the table near her bed, the man entered the room.

'Merry Christmas, Mary,' he said. 'Has Santa Claus come this way?'

'Oh, uncle, it was you who gave me all these things. I can see it in your eyes. It must have cost you more than five dollars.'

Carroll laughed as he thought of the hundred dollars he had spent, extravagantly, his wife had said, for the one gift of furs for the girl.

'Pretty nearly as much as that,' he said. 'I'm glad your prayers were answered, anyway. I hope you did not pray for any more or I will be bankrupt. It's hard to keep up with one who prays like you.'

'And the funniest thing, uncle. I didn't pray for one of these things,' said the girl.

'My!' said the man, with a twinkle in his eye, 'and what did you pray for? Not a diamond necklace, I hope.' The girl hesitated and blushed.

'I prayed for two things,' she said, 'but I didn't get them—that is, I didn't get them yet. I prayed for you to be good instead of bad, and I prayed for me to be beautiful instead of homely.'

The man laughed, but it was a laugh accompanied by a tear.

'And I am good,' he said, 'at least I have come back, and am going to try to be good. And you,' he continued as he bent to kiss her, 'are as beautiful as your mother. And now it's time for us to go to Mass.'

The eyes of the girl opened wide.

'I knew it would come true,' she said.—*The Magnificent.*

What in the world's the use of fretting

O'er life's troubles every day?

All our blessings thus forgetting,

We've some blessings anyway.

One great blessing all may finger,

Woods' Great Peppermint Cure, to wit,

Drives off colds inclined to linger,

Makes us well and keeps us fit.