

A MYSTERY SOLVED.

AN EASTER STORY.



WHEN papa made you refuse young James Madder because he was only a poor artist, he never thought you'd have to decorate pinushions and hair brush boxes for a living yourself, did he, Stella?

'Good heavens, no!' ejaculated Stella, 'not if we had come to worse than this little room and a kerosene stove. I belong to myself, at least, and—but you were really a baby at the time, and have no idea what love means even yet.'

'Well, poor, dear papa probably knew that he was going to fail then,' said Jennie, 'and tried to do the best by you, and Mr Knatchball was very easily rebuffed. I guess he got an idea of it. Oh, Stella, when I was at school in Wellington we girls used to talk over our yet unknown "futures," and all of them declared that noblemen must be nicest, except Lizzie Post; for she wanted a highwayman, like one in a novel. As for me, I didn't want any one. I don't, I just hate the idea. Who would you have if you could?'

Poor Stella, she turned away to hide her tears from her little sister.

There was but one man in the world to her, and she was parted from him forever; he must think her false and cold, and mercenary.

She had never been able to explain her conduct to him. 'No matter about all that, Jennie,' she said, with a break in her voice. 'I try and suggest something about these pinushions and boxes. They are all returned on my hands, with the criticism "won't do." Now, why don't they do? Madame Touchup "finished" me in water colours, and Signor Dabble in oils. Can't I paint roses and Cupids for toilet-boxes after that, I wonder? There is something wrong with them, but what is it? Criticise them, dear, I must please Messrs Pinch and Penny, or we shall starve. They give me little enough for my work as it is.'

'Well,' said Jennie, placing her head on one side and regarding the squares of silk before her solemnly; 'some are fady and some are cloudy. The edges of the flowers look like tin. The Cupids are crooked and have bad complexions—and—'

'You needn't go on,' said Stella, 'I suspected as much myself. I must try something else. Let us go the bed—and extinguishing the gas she left the little room, on the door of which the word "Studio" appeared, and led the way to the upper floor, where a small half-bedroom afforded the daughters of the late millionaire a resting-place.'

Came to the colony with a shilling in his pocket, made a great fortune, failed and shot himself, was his record. No uncommon one—and his girls were left alone to support themselves on boarding-school accomplishments if they could.

Crying one's self to sleep at night is apt to lead to heavy morning slumbers. Therefore, Stella started awake in a desperate fright, to remember that the two Misses Plum came for their lessons at nine, and leaving her sister still in bed, hurried down to the studio after a hasty cup of coffee, to find them already there and examining the squares of decorated silk upon the table with admiration.

'I declare, Miss Price, they are too lovely for anything,' Miss Meta Plum cried; 'these cupids, now!'

'And these lilies,' echoed Fanny Plum, 'so soft—'

'Do you think so?' echoed Stella, doubtfully. 'Then she gave a little cry. The flowers, which last night certainly were hard, now lay soft as real lilies across the white silk. The arch little Cupids appeared ready to fly, the birds and butterflies were charming.'

In the night a transformation had occurred—her designs were unaltered, but they seemed to have finished themselves exquisitely. Bewildered, excited, she could think of nothing else throughout the whole of the Misses Plums' lesson, and when those excellent girls had, with their usual exasperating deliberation, folded their painting aprons, packed their boxes, set each other's hats straight, and uttered their adieux, she instantly summoned Jennie to her presence.

'Are you a genius—did you do this?' she asked. 'These things are finished up, and I never saw anything prettier.'

'Why, Stella, so they are!' Jennie cried. 'And I assure you that if I tried I could not do them as well as they were last night. You must have done them in your sleep. I've read of such things. You know there are no fairies now.'

'There are angels, and I fancy they must have done it. But Pinch and Penny's people shall see them in their altered form,' cried Stella, hastily packing the squares of silk in a box. 'They may take on their old, original ugliness if I delay. If I am a somnambulist, I may go on doing this in my sleep, but surely I never can in my waking moments.'

The critic at the office of Messrs Pinch and Penny was much pleased with the new work. 'If you can give us that sort of thing,' said he, graciously, 'we'll throw plenty into your hands, and we might advance the price, a little, too. We want some lovely designs for Easter cards and souvenirs. Now, if you will bring us a few by next week and they sell well, we shall be glad to give you regular employment on our staff.'

Stella returned home, full of a grand enthusiasm. She would do something in the way of an Easter card which should eclipse any previous effort of any artist. Visions of angels holding shattered crosses in their hands, of lilies of all shapes, instinct with life, of early dawn creeping over a sleeping city, flitted before her mind, all exquisitely worked out on satin for these beautiful Easter cards.

No Stella set to work in joy and hope on a large parcel of silk. But, alas! the old defects were still plainly to be seen, and she retired with a heavy heart, but again in the morning, her work, retouched and improved, lay upon the table.

This went on for a month or more, and the first astonishment being over, the sisters accepted the somnambulist's

theory as the only possible one, and thanked Heaven in their prayers that it had been vouchsafed to Stella to do better work in her sleep than she could in her waking moments.

In fact, they had come to expect the miracle to happen as certainly as they did that the sun would rise—when suddenly it did not. Stella's designs remained in the morning exactly what they were at night, and the firm of Pinch and Penny sent their critic to bring back the last installment of work.

'You see there is no use deceiving me,' he said, sternly. 'You've had a superior hand helping you. Get her back and we'll take you on again, not else.'

'He wouldn't have believed us if we had told him,' said Stella, as he left. 'What shall we do now, Jennie?'

At this moment there was a knock at the door. Both the girls started, and Stella hid the defective decorations under some blotting paper, while Jennie answered the rap. A gentleman stood without, a tall, bearded man, who bowed profoundly.

'Pardon my intrusion,' he began. 'My name is Madder. I occupy the adjoining studio and am a painter. I—' There he paused. For Jennie, always impulsive, uttered a cry.

'Madder—and an artist! Why, you must be the gentleman who came to see me long ago. I've grown so much larger that you'd never know me. But Stella—' There she paused. Her sister and their guest stood facing each other.

'The man advanced, their hands met. 'Is it possible?' the man cried. 'Mr Madder!' cried Stella. 'Your old sweetheart!' cried Jennie, delighted at the romance lying open before her. 'Oh! Mr Madder, it wasn't Jennie's fault; you must forgive her. It was all poor papa's doing. Then he failed and died—' Jennie paused a moment, and added dramatically, 'and here we are!'

'Thank Heaven, I have my explanation,' said the young man. 'Now for the art I came to offer, little guessing whom I should meet. My studio is in the room adjoining, though it opens on a different corridor and we use a different stairway. From my room I can often hear all that you say, and one evening I heard two girls—strangers as I supposed—talking over work that seemed to be defective. When they left the room for the night, I made use of a discovery of mine, namely, that there is in this partition a sort of sliding door. Long ago some one had hired both of these studios, perhaps, or friends who wished to speak to each other occupied them, but there it was. I had fastened this door, and now I pushed it back. The decorated silk lay upon a table under it, and I saw just what the work needed, only a few touches here and there, for the design was good. I spent an hour or so over them, and restored them to their place.'

'The next day the discussion amused me, and I continued my retouching, until one night I found the aperture closed, something was against it.'

'I pushed the old book-case there,' said Jennie. 'And so my work was stopped,' proceeded Mr Madder. 'But I could still hear what was said, and knowing that some young ladies were in trouble, I resolved to call, confess, and offer my slight services, little guessing whom I should meet, for I fancied you a rich woman, Stella, probably the wife of a rich man by this time, and that you had forgotten our old friendship. I was abroad, no doubt, when your troubles occurred, for I lived in Europe several years, and heard nothing of all that happened.'

'Strange that I did not recognize your voice. Your name I did not hear—Jennie always calls you "Sister,"'

'Ah, my voice is sadder than it used to be,' Stella said. 'But you will be happy again,' the young man whispered. 'Let it be my task to make you so.'

'I don't believe I am wanted just now,' Jennie said to herself as she slipped away. Really she was not; but that Easter she made a very pretty bridesmaid at Stella's wedding. Happy Stella! she now looks with particular favour on Easter cards, and has learnt to adapt the lovely autumn New Zealand flowers and berries to their decoration.'

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