

The Storyteller

REX CORDIUM

I.

'You're the only passenger, Miss,' said the station agent, as he handed me to the platform; 'just step in here.'

A kind of shed a few paces away, bearing overhead the notice, 'Linton,' told me my destination was indeed reached.

'Mr. Ellis, the school secretary, will be here in a few minutes, Miss. He had to fetch some letters and told me to get you warm. Mighty sharp weather, Miss,' and my obliging guide bowed and departed.

I, Agnes Morris, university undergraduate, had lately been appointed teacher of Linton district school. Papa's last illness had exhausted our slender capital, and, as my widowed mother had but Mabel, a girl of twelve, and myself, the hope of becoming the stay and support of my dear ones urged me to the sacrifice. Thus tremblingly, but hopefully, I accepted the position.

Mr. Ellis greeted me most kindly. He was an elderly man, with a pleasant though careworn face. I noticed that he hesitated a little over his words, as if he weighed everything he said. He made many inquiries as to my comfort as he showed me my place in the sleigh.

'I've settled the wee ones down at our feet, Miss Morris. I think they'll be more cozy there. The road's bad and we're having such a cold snap. Put the buffalo around you tight.'

The 'wee ones' were two little girls, at present undistinguishable bundles in mufflers and wraps. It was too cold for conversation, and I drew my furs around me and abandoned myself to the delight of a first sleigh ride in the country. The road was uneven for some distance, but was finally succeeded by a smooth, shining track, and we sped along to the music of the sleigh-bells.

Night was closing in as we stopped at the entrance to a long, low farm-house. Mr. Ellis opened the gate and, after bawling 'Johnny, come help with the trunk,' turned to me and smiled.

'Fraid you're cold, Miss Morris. Not used to the country, are you? Never mind. You'll soon like the air. Guess supper's ready by this time.'

The kitchen was neatness itself, with its polished stove, white-worn floor, immaculate cloth, and dainty tea service. It gave a pleasing sense of home comfort.

Mr. Ellis opened the door of an inner apartment and called:

'Jane, here's Miss Morris.'

A tall, middle-aged woman came forward, holding out a long, thin hand.

'Miss Morris, you're welcome. I hope you're not altogether froze.' Then, looking at her husband, 'My sakes! What kept you? Did you think I'd nothin' to do but sit here waitin', an' the supper spilin', an' the milk not staved yet, nor the young uns' clothes ready for the wash. Much you care, though. Keepin' this stranger out so long in the cold, too. It's a shame!'

I hastened to say that I had enjoyed the ride extremely. After a few minutes the irate lady grew calm and I turned to express my thanks to Mr. Ellis, but he had disappeared.

Muriel and Bessie, the little girls, had taken of their shoes and were warming their feet at the stove. Mrs. Ellis excusing herself to get some lights, I began to chat with the little ones.

'Aren't you afraid of getting chilblains?' I said to Muriel.

'Oh, no, Miss. I'll be warm just in a minute. Wasn't it grand, though! Did you like the cutter ride?' timidly.

'I guess you's 'omesick, Miss Mavis,' chimed in Bessie. 'You mustn't cwy, though. I allays cwy when I go away from papa.'

Bessie was two years younger than her sister, whom she greatly resembled. Both girls wore blue frocks and silver medals of the Immaculate Conception.

Mrs. Ellis' return cut short our talk, and soon we all sat down to supper. Mr. Ellis carved the ham while Mrs. Ellis poured out delicious cups of tea. Muriel and Bessie perched on high chairs near their papa. Opposite me sat Johnny, the farm boy. He had a shock of red hair and a freckled, good-natured face. Taking no part in the conversation, he every now and then would wink expressively at Mr. Ellis, and, whenever I spoke, would pause in the act of raising a morsel and gaze at me with open crumby mouth and twinkling eyes.

From Mr. Ellis I learned that ours was a new section and my duties comparatively light. Some little

time, he said, must elapse before things were in working order. In the meantime I must make myself thoroughly at home and get acquainted with the good people of the locality. 'These little ladies,' he added, 'will give you the entire history of the section in no time. They're very anxious to get to school, but I tell them when they've had a few whippin's from the teacher they'll be glad enough to run home and play with pussy.'

Muriel and Bessie in unison protested that pussy should come to school too, and Muriel went on very confidentially: 'She's good, Miss Morris. She's just as quiet as a mouse.'

Even Mrs. Ellis could not refrain from laughing, although the next moment she shrugged her shoulders and said: 'That's their papa's teaching for you! You young-uns ought to be seen and not heard.'

Strange to say, her every word to Mr. Ellis was a barb of bitterness. He took no further notice of her than merely to reply to her direct questions, and, supererogatory, withdrew at once, in company with Johnny, who whistled on his way to the barn, the keen air proving no obstacle to his enjoyment of a tune.

As I assisted Mrs. Ellis to clear the table, I was struck by the look of settled melancholy on her face. From time to time she wiped away a furtive tear and her manner grew quite gentle.

'We're few Catholics here,' she said. 'The church's ten miles away, an' we get Mass only every fourth Sunday. I generally drive the team myself. The babies can't go in winter an' Johnny's home Sundays.'

She did not mention Mr. Ellis by name, but went on after a little:

'It's a great pity we can't practice our religion better. Men are so careless, you know.'

I sympathised, saying, as I kissed my Promoter's cross:

'The Sacred Heart has done wonders for me, dear Mrs. Ellis. Who can tell what favors are in store for you!'

II.

The afternoon sun was adding its lustre to the already shining kitchen, and I was prepared to enjoy a pleasant hour with my Longfellow, when there was a light tapping at the door.

A slight girl of about fourteen years stood without. She wore a cloak of coarse but pretty plaid and a hood of the same material. Her eyes, dark and deeply expressive, told of a strong soul and a generous heart. In a glance I saw she was not an ordinary girl, but one of God's child heroines whom He decks with special graces which are at once a pledge of His love and a protection from the scorn of the worldly-minded.

The girl dropped me a courtesy and said: 'Please, are you Miss Morris? My father sent me over to make arrangements with the teacher about some lessons. I can't go to school.'

I invited her in, and soon we were chatting together with the ardor of old acquaintances. Her name was Lizzie Ford. A new St. Flawbeth, I thought, as I glanced from the toil-worn hands to the delicate face. Her father had been blind for some years, and Lizzie, his only child, remained his only solace. She looked after the house, did the marketing, kept the accounts, and was withal his careful nurse and affectionate companion. It was her father's wish that she should take lessons in history and grammar, and advance a little in arithmetic, for which she had a great fancy.

'You must study French and German, Lizzie. I know you'll like that,' I said, 'but, my dear, when can you begin?'

'Oh, Miss Morris, I love books and I can begin tomorrow, but I fear you'll find me stupid enough. I'll beg our Blessed Mother to help me that I may learn real fast and then I can do something for papa. I know if he could get good treatment he would not suffer so much. Oh, if you knew what it is to see your father always in pain.'

Her beautiful eyes filled in a moment, and I could hear her heart throbbing in nervous excitement.

'He's all I have,' she went on after a pause, 'and day by day I fear the suffering may affect his brain. Dear papa! I think the end must be very near.'

Just then the door of the inner room was thrown open and Muriel and Bessie came running in.

'Lizzie Ford, 'at you? It's so glad. Here's gum drops and cream candy!' and Bessie climbed into Lizzie's lap, while Muriel, after a hasty hug, darted away in search of Mrs. Ellis.

A few minutes later Mr. Ellis and Johnny came in for a hand-warmmer. Johnny's mouth opened in amaze at sight of our visitor, and the temporary lockjaw might have been prolonged indefinitely had not Lizzie obligingly come to his relief with a supply of the gum drops and cream candy.