



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Gospel According To Joan

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

"My!"

"Don't you think I've done pretty well?"

"Sarah Bannister, you know as well as I do, it is wonderful!"

The two women stood in the best parlor, a long room, furnished with aggressive plush and mahogany, and onyx tables, and a marble Clytie drooping her head impudently in her out-of-place state in a New England parlor. The room was chilly in spite of the radiators, glaring with gilt in the most conspicuous wall spaces. Every piece of furniture — old-fashioned square tables, chairs, and piano — was covered with dainty things, large and small, of all colors and fabrics.

"To think you made everything here with your own hands!" commented Miss Lottie Dodd. She was a distant relative of Mrs. Bannister's, who lived with her a month at a time.

"Yes, and the worst of it is, it isn't quite a week to Christmas, and I haven't got the things done yet."

"Land! I should think you had enough here for the whole town."

"I'm giving to about the whole town this year. Then, you know all our cousins out West, and the raft of relations we never see except at our funerals, that live in Watchboro, and Center Watchboro, and South and North and East."

"I didn't know you remembered them Christmas."

"I don't every year, but this time I was so forehanded I thought I'd put them in with the rest."

"You don't mean to say you are remembering all the Rice family?"

"Yes, I am."

"Not all those children?"

"Oh, I've got the children's presents all ready; it's the older folks' I haven't got done. I have planned a lot of drawnwork."

"You do that so beautifully," said Lottie. She was a tiny woman snuggled in a lavender wool shawl. The tip of her sharp nose was red. Her blue eyes were

tearful, from cold and enthusiasm. Lottie was prey to enthusiasms, even petty ones.

"I've got a lot more to do. I sha'n't try any different patterns from these here; the same with the knitted lace. That will make it easier."

Sarah Bannister clipped the last word short with a sneeze.

"Sarah, you are catching cold in this room."

"Don't know but I am. It never will heat when the wind's northwest. It's bitter outdoors today, too. The snow hasn't melted one mite. Look at those windows all frosted up."

"Well, Sarah, we better be going back to the sitting room, where it's warm."

"Guess we'd better. I was going to look a little longer. I don't seem to see some things I know I've got. I do feel some as if I were catching cold. Hope to goodness I don't — just before Christmas, too. I'll get Henry to bring in some wood for the sitting-room hearth fire."

"I sort of wonder sometimes why you and Henry don't keep a man to fetch and carry," said Lottie Dodd, as the two entered the sitting room, meeting a gust of warm air, scented with geranium and heliotrope from the window plants. "Henry is quite some older than you, and it's beginning to show."

"Oh, Henry's perfectly able to do what little chores we have. Men want some exercise."

They sat down. Sarah Bannister began to crochet, a neatly rolled-up ball of finished lace bobbing as her fingers moved. Lottie worked laboriously on a blue centerpiece.

"It certainly is lucky you are so well off, Sarah."

"Yes, I realize it is. Henry never saved much, but I have enough for both, thanks to poor father. I never spend a cent but I think of him. He used to talk so much to me about not being extravagant."

"Oh, Sarah, as if anybody could accuse you of that!"

Sarah started, but she continued talking. "Poor father used to say — I remember as if it were yesterday — 'Sarah, it's easy enough to get money, for those who have the right kind of heads, and work, but it takes more than heads to keep it. That's a gift.'"

Lottie Dodd, impecunious, who had never benefited much from Sarah's riches, except in the somewhat negative way of food and cast-off clothing, looked reflectively at the large, flat, rather handsome face.

Sarah stared sharply at Lottie, who did not speak. Silence and immobility make a fool inscrutable.

Sarah suspected. "Now, you wouldn't believe, Lottie Dodd, how little some of these things in there" — she shrugged her shoulders toward the parlor — "cost."

"You don't mean it." Lottie's voice was as blatantly innocent as a lamb's.

"Yes, I bought a lot at the five-and-ten-cent stores, and I had nice pieces of silk and satin and lace, and I mixed them in, and you'd never know. I thought of poor father every minute I was in these five-and-ten-cent stores."

"They would have just suited your dear pa."

Again the look of suspicion was in Sarah's eyes, to disappear before the other woman's innocent expression. Then the doorbell rang with a loud clang.

"Sakes alive! Whoever can that be, such a cold afternoon?" said Mrs. Bannister.

"Maybe it's a peddler."

"Well, if it is, he vamooses. I never will allow a peddler in my house." Sarah Bannister sneezed three times.

"Let me go to the door," said Lottie Dodd. "You have caught cold, sure as fate. Let me go, dear."

In Lottie's voice was the faint, very faint inflection in which she betrayed her consciousness that she was a year and a half younger than Sarah. To Lottie that meant, when she so desired, the feebleness of age for Sarah, juvenile agility for herself.

Sarah recognized that inflection. "I rather guess I'm as able to go to the door as you," she retorted. She thrust her face almost into the other's in a way she had when irritated.

"It was only on account of your cold, dear," protested Lottie, shrinking back.

"I haven't got any cold. If you're trying to wish one on me, you can just stop. Sneezing don't prove you've got a cold. Hm!"

"Why, Sarah!"

Sarah stepped majestically doorward as the bell rang again. She walked on her heels as she had a trick of doing when feeling unusually self-sufficient. Lottie peeked around the curtain over the pots of geraniums, but she could see nothing. She could hear voices, and the wind came in the cracks of the sitting-room door. The front door closed with a bang, and Lottie darted back to her chair. She expected to see Mrs. Bannister enter irate after turning away a peddler, but after Sarah entered a young girl, hardly more than a child.

"Go right to that hearth fire and sit down and get warm through," ordered Mrs. Bannister. She spoke in a stern voice, but her speech ended in a beautiful cadence. When the child was seated before the fire, which Sarah stirred to a higher blaze and piled with more wood, she gazed at the young face reflecting the red glow, and smiled in a way that made Lottie gaze wonderingly at her, and suddenly remember that years ago, so many years that she had forgotten, Sarah Bannister had lost a daughter about the age of this girl. Meantime Sarah Bannister was removing the girl's extraordinarily shabby hat, and pulling off gently her shabbier coat. The girl resisted the last a little, and her small timid voice murmured something about her dress.

"Never mind your dress," said Sarah. "You will get warmer with these off."

As she spoke she laid the coat and hat on a chair, rather gingerly. Such rags as the coat disclosed, such rags of a red silk lining, and such a sinfully dragged feather decked the old hat. Sarah turned to look at the girl. Lottie was looking. Lottie had her mouth slightly open. Sarah gasped. The girl sitting there, meekly, almost limply, was a darling of a girl (judging from her little face). It was very pale now, but with the velvety pallor of a white flower. Her hair lay in soft rings of gold shading into brown about her small head. She wore her hair short, and it made her seem more a child. Her dress was torn about the sleeves and gaped where hooks were missing, unless pinned with obvious pins. Her little hands were stiff and red, and one continued to clasp cautiously the handle of an unspeakably shabby old bag. Suddenly she looked up, first at one, then at the other of the faces regarding her. She looked with perfect composure, so perfect that it directly made her seem older. Her great blue eyes had a womanly wise cognizance of the two women.

"How old are you?" demanded Sarah Bannister, suddenly.

"Thirteen last May," replied the girl. Her voice was charming, with a curious appeal in it. She seemed to be begging pardon for the fact that she was thirteen last May.

Sarah Bannister, her face working as if she were about to weep, went to a little china closet, and presently came back with a glass of homemade wine, and a square of sponge cake on a pink plate.

"Here, drink this and eat this cake," said she. "It will do you good."

She set a small table beside the girl and placed the wine glass and the cake on it.

"Thank you, ma'am," said the girl. She began to eat and drink rather eagerly. She was evidently famished, but very gentle about it. She still retained her hold of the bag.

Lottie spoke for the first time. "What have you got in that bag?" said she, rather sharply. The girl flashed her blue eyes at her in a frightened but defiant way.

"Things to sell," she whispered.

Lottie looked at Sarah. So she was a peddler, after all. Sarah did not return Lottie's glance. She spoke to the girl.

"When you have finished your cake and wine, and get real warm, I will look at the things you have to sell," said she, softly.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Lottie began to be aggressive. "What is your name?" she asked, peremptorily.

"Don't speak so sharp, Lottie," said Sarah. "You will scare her half to death. She's nothing but a child. She was half frozen. She was standing there on the doorstep, shaking from head to foot, poor little thing, half dressed, too, on such a day as this." Sarah glanced at the heap of wool and red silk rags on the chair, and remembered a nice thick wool coat in the closet of a certain chamber.

Lottie asked again, but more gently, "What is your name, little girl?"

"Joan Brooks."

"Oh, I know her," said Lottie, with an accent of slight scorn. "Her father's that broken-down minister. He fills the pulpit sometimes when Mr. Whitman has bronchitis."

"He preaches very well, too," said Sarah, kindly.

"Father is not broken-down. He stands up as well as you do," said Joan, unexpectedly. Then she began to rise. "Where is my coat?" said she.

"You sit right down, child," said Sarah. "She didn't mean a thing. Of course your father isn't broken-down. We always speak that way of a minister who don't preach regularly."

"Father used to preach regularly," said the girl, eagerly, "but after we moved here the church he came to preach in burned down."

"That was the little Hyde's Corner church," interpolated Lottie. Sarah nodded.

"He preached regularly there," stated Joan, "until the fire."

"What does your father do now?" asked Lottie.

"He preaches for other ministers a great deal, and betweenwhiles he goes about taking orders for a beautiful book on the Holy Land."

Lottie looked at the geraniums, and her lips moved inaudibly: "Peddler."

"We don't have as much money as we did before the fire," stated the little girl, "and we don't have much of anything to give away. That is why —" She stopped.

Sarah caught up the bag, which Joan had placed on the floor beside her.

"Well, let us see what you have to sell," said she.

Sarah opened the bag and Lottie stood looking over her shoulder.

"My!" said Lottie, "what lovely drawnwork, and it's just the same pattern as that bureau scarf you made for your cousin Lizzie, too!"

"And I wanted one like it for her married sister, Jeannie. How much is this, Joan?"

Joan mentioned a price. Lottie paled, and her mouth dropped when Sarah Bannister, so careful of money, said she would take it. She also bought for a large sum a beautiful tablecloth with embroidered corners for the minister's wife.

"That's just like the one you made yourself for Mrs. Lester Sears," said Lottie. She thought Sarah Bannister must be losing her wits. "There's that same cornucopia in one corner, and cluster of daisies in another," she mentioned, feebly.

"I know it," said Sarah, defiantly. "Why shouldn't it be the same? It's a common pattern. I made that tablecloth for Mrs. Sears because she was so good when I was sick with the grippe, sending in things 'most every day. I wanted to make something for the minister's wife just as nice, because she and Annie Sears are so thick, and because we all know the minister isn't very popular, and I feel sort of sorry for her, but I didn't have the time or strength to make it. This is a real godsend."

"You'll have to tell her you didn't make it," remarked Lottie, maliciously.

"I am not in the habit of either telling or implying a lie," replied Mrs. Bannister. Then she turned suddenly to Joan. "My dear, who made these pretty things?"

Joan crimsoned, then paled, but she lifted clear eyes of truth to Mrs. Bannister: "A lady."

"What lady?"

"A lady."

"But what is the lady's name?"

"I would rather not tell her name."

Sarah looked at Lottie and spoke with lip motion:

"Her mother."

Even skeptical Lottie nodded. What so likely as that the broken-down minister's wife might do this exquisite work, and send her little daughter out to sell it?



Sarah was examining the tablecloth. "I am sure it is a little different from mine," she reflected. "The bunch of daisies is larger."

Lottie nodded. "Looks so to me."

Sarah laid down the tablecloth and took up some knitted lace. "This is almost exactly the pattern of mine, and I did want to knit some for Daisy Hapgood. I am so glad to get this."

The more Sarah Bannister bought, the more the little girl's face beamed. Her cheeks flushed; her blue eyes gleamed. Sarah kept gazing at her with loving admiration. As she bought everything in the bag, Joan seemed fairly quivering with delight. She held her pretty upper lip caught between her teeth, lest she break into sheer laughter.

"I will take this handkerchief with the embroidered G," said Sarah. "It is just what I wanted to tuck in a letter to Ella Giddings."

"I thought I saw one in the parlor just like that," said Lottie.

"So you did, similar. Mine has a queer little quirk at the top of the G, and that is for Emma Gleason. I wanted to make another for Ella. Lottie, do you mind going upstairs and bringing down my little black silk shopping bag? My purse is in it. I don't want to go through that cold hall. I have got the grippe; I almost know it," said Sarah, when the bag was empty.

While Lottie was gone, Mrs. Bannister and the girl added up items rapidly on the back of an old envelope. Sarah was economical with paper. Sarah added with zeal, and her hand was over the sum total, and she had time to shake her head with finger on lips when the door opened. The girl nodded. She was only a child, but she understood. The other lady was not to know what the things cost.

Lottie cast a sharp glance at the gleam of white paper in Sarah's cautious hand. "Whatever made you hang that bag up in the closet, when you always keep it in the top bureau drawer?" said she. "I had an awful hunt. Thought I never would

find it."

"I remember hanging it there when I hung up my coat when I came home yesterday," replied Sarah, calmly.

Sarah loosened the strings of the bag. Lottie watched like a cat. Sarah took out her nice black leather pocketbook. Lottie craned her neck. Sarah bent over the pocketbook, hiding her proceedings, counted out money, folded it in a nice little roll, and gave it to Joan.

"There," said she, kindly. "That is right. Now you had better run and give it to your mother."

"I shall not take this money to mother," said she. "She will not expect it. It is my money. Father and mother wish me to be independent. I have this money for Christmas presents and I shall have to see to them myself."

Joan rapidly slipped into her ragged coat. Sarah thought of the warm one upstairs, but did not somehow feel like mentioning it.

"You mean to say you don't tell your mother about this?" said Lottie.

"Mother does not wish me to tell her everything," said Joan. "Father does not, either. They say I should lose my individuality."

"No danger, seems to me," said Lottie. When the girl had gone and was disappearing down the road, a red rag from the silken lining of her coat blowing back stiffly in the icy wind like an anarchist flag, the women stood at the window, watching her.

"She is a darling little girl," remarked Sarah, with an absent air.

Lottie looked at her. Directly there came before her mental vision the freckled face, the long nose, the retreating chin, the weak eyes and stiff, sandy hair of Sarah's departed daughter, long in her little green grave.

"She thinks this beautiful girl looks like her," Lottie reflected.

Directly Sarah spoke in a breaking voice, and tears rolled down her cheeks. "She is the living image of my Ida."

Lottie lied for the sake of her own heart. "Yes, so she is," said she.

"Then you saw the likeness?"

"How could I help it?"

"Want me to take these things into the parlor and put them with the others?" offered Lottie. "You mustn't go in there with such a cold as you've got."

"I'll put them in the secretary, here," said Sarah. "There's one drawer without a

thing in it. I want to look them over again, and everything will have to be done up and addressed out here, anyway. Remind me to send to the store for some more Christmas ribbon tomorrow morning."

Sarah folded the dainty things she had bought and laid them carefully away in the secretary drawer, then she seated herself in her rocking-chair and took her pocketbook out of her black silk bag. She looked up and saw Lottie's sharp eyes turn away. She laughed and the laugh had a tang in it.

"Well, Lottie," said she, "if you want so much to know what I paid for the things, I am perfectly willing to tell you, although I cannot imagine why you want to know. I am not in the least curious, myself."

Lottie flushed suddenly. She tried to smile. "I ain't curious," she replied. "I never was. What makes you talk so Sarah? It sounds sort of hateful."

Sarah paid no attention. "The things cost just twenty-three dollars and seventy-nine cents," said she, coolly.

"My goodness!"

"Yes, just twenty-three dollars and seventy-nine cents."

Very swiftly Lottie sped her own little shaft.

"Why, Sarah Bannister, I never knew you spent as much on Christmas presents in your whole life. You have never had the name of being as free as all that."

"I didn't deserve it," said Sarah. "All those things made up in the parlor there didn't cost fifteen dollars. I told you they didn't cost so much, and they didn't."

"And you laid out all that money on these things?"

"I didn't have to do the work on these, and the work means a good deal when you are tired out and coming down with the grippe. And, besides" — Sarah hesitated; then she finished with defiant accent — "when I saw that darling little girl, the exact image of my dear lost Ida, I felt almost ready to mortgage the place to buy her out."

"Well, all I can say is, I am beat," remarked Lottie. "If anybody had told me that you would spend twenty-three dollars and seventy-nine cents buying Christmas presents from a peddler, I should say if you did you had gone plumb mad."

"She wasn't a peddler, Lottie. That girl is the daughter of a minister of the Gospel."

"Minister of the Gospel! He ain't preaching. He's peddling books."

Sarah began to speak, but the door bell cut her short.

"Who in the world is coming now?" she murmured, and smoothed her hair and straightened her apron strings.

"Another nice peddler, maybe," said Lottie. "Don't put your pocketbook away, Sarah."

Sarah looked at her reproachfully, and coughed. "Will you go to the door?"

Lottie went, her head erect. Directly the door was opened Sarah heard a loud, very sweet, very rapid voice, and knew the caller was Mrs. Lee Wilson. Mrs. Wilson danced in ahead of Lottie, who followed her sulkily. She did not like Mrs. Wilson, who was so much prettier than she ought to have been, considering her years, and so much gayer and livelier, that it seemed to give grounds for distrust. Mrs. Wilson slipped back her handsome fur neck piece, disclosing a deep V of handsome white neck, which Lottie glanced at, then openly sniffed. Then she spoke in a voice which seemed drawn out like thin wire. The voice had hissing sibilations.

"Don't you feel cold, Mrs. Wilson?" said Lottie.

Mrs. Wilson laughed. She understood. "Oh no," said she, sweetly. "I never catch cold with my neck exposed. Don't you think I am lucky to have a neck good enough to keep up with the styles? A woman does look so old-fashioned now, with a high collar."

Lottie flushed. "I care more about decency than I do about style," she snapped. Her animosity was no longer disguised.

Mrs. Wilson laughed again. "Well, it is nice to have a neck long and thin like yours in case the styles changed, and they are bound to, and I look like a freak with a high collar," she said, good-naturedly. "But, Sarah Bannister, and you, too, Lottie, I didn't come here to discuss low necks and high collars. I came here about that Brett family. You remember the talk when the father ran away and left those six children, after the mother died of quick consumption?"

"I thought an aunt came, or something," said Sarah.

"So she did, and stayed quite awhile, and then there was a report that she had gone away and taken the children. You know at first we thought the town would have to do something about it."

"Didn't the aunt take them away?" asked Lottie.

"Why, no, it seems she didn't. The minister's wife saw the oldest girl — she's a pretty little thing, you know — dragging a small one on a sled yesterday. She said both the children looked well dressed and well nourished, but the eldest girl wouldn't tell her who was looking after them."

"Guess the aunt came back," said Lottie, rather indifferently. Lottie was always indifferent when it came to large families of the poor. It had always vaguely seemed to her like something immoral.

Sarah looked interested. "Why, it seems as if the aunt must have come back," said she, "if they looked as well as you say. How old is the eldest girl?"

"Oh, they are all young. She can't be more than eight, a very pretty child with red-gold hair. They are all shy; won't talk. What I came about —" Mrs. Wilson hesitated a moment. She colored a little and laughed confusedly. "Well," she said, finally, "I suppose we have all been rather lax about those children. I had a letter from Mrs. S. Walsingham today, and how she had heard of the case I don't know, but she had, and — she reminded me very politely, but she reminded me all the same, that she was making an annual donation to the Ladies' Aid Society for just such cases. She said she presumed her letter was useless, for doubtless we had already looked into the case. She knew we hadn't. Somebody in this town has told her."

Lottie nodded her head in a sidewise direction. Mrs. Wilson laughed. "I dare say you are right," she agreed. "Emmeline Jay and her mother are always on the watch ever since they stopped going to church because they thought the minister before this one preached at them all. Well, anyway, Clara Walsingham wants to know, and, of course, she has a right."

"Just like Clara to write that sort of a letter," said Lottie. "Why can't folks come right out? I hate beating around the bush."

Mrs. Wilson giggled. "As for me, there never was a bush handy to beat around. I had to come right out and say my say. Well, the fact is not a woman of the society knows a thing about these Brett children, and who is going to begin? I would, but my little boy is sick and I suspect measles. I can't carry measles into a poor and deserving family. The minister's wife says she would right away, but her sister with her four children has come to spend Christmas with her, and she has her own three and no help. She says after Christmas she can do anything."

"I'd go tomorrow," said Sarah, reflectively, "but I think I have taken cold, and — it seems selfish, but I must get my presents off. I got rid of working on more, for I bought a lot, but I have a quantity to do up."

The two women looked at Lottie. She sat with her chin high, gazing out of the window.

"Christmas is right here, next week Thursday," remarked Mrs. Wilson, helplessly.

"If my cold is better I will go and see these children tomorrow, presents or no presents," said Sarah firmly.

Lottie looked over her shoulder at her. "'Twon't be any better. You've got fever now. Look at your cheeks."

As Sarah could not very well look at her own cheeks, and there was no mirror in the room, she gazed at Mrs. Wilson for confirmation.

She nodded. "Your cheeks do look pretty red," said she.

"I'll wait and see how I feel in the morning," she said as Mrs. Wilson rose to go.

In the morning Sarah was no worse and no better. The weather was severe. The wind was very high. Sarah decided to have Lottie bring the presents out from the icy parlor and see if she could not get them ready for mailing during the day.

"By doing that," said she, "I can have tomorrow to go and see those Brett children. Of course, something can be hung on the Sunday-school tree for them, anyway, and it can be seen to that they come, but I don't feel right to wait till after Christmas to do more than that. They may be suffering."

"Guess they're all right," said Lottie. "When there's such a tribe as they, somebody bobs up and looks after them."

Lottie deposited with care her first load of dainty things from the parlor. Sarah, muffled in a white wool shawl, sat out of the draught from the open door. Lottie went back and forth. She laid things on the table, the sofa, on chairs.

"Well, this is all," she said, finally.

"All?"

"Yes, I've brought out everything. You haven't things put away in other places?"

"No, only those I bought from the little girl yesterday. They are in the secretary drawer."

"Sarah Bannister, where is that beautiful embroidered tablecloth that we said was so much like the one you bought?" said Lottie, suddenly. "I don't remember bringing it out. No, don't you go to handling all these cold things. I'll look myself."

Lottie examined everything. Sarah watched. She was rather pale. Finally Lottie came forward and stood before Sarah with a determined air. "That tablecloth ain't here," said she.

"It must be."

"It ain't. When I look I look. It ain't."

Sarah stared at her.

"Some other things ain't here, too," said Lottie.

"What?"

"A lot of doilies, a lot of other things."

Sarah gasped. "Where do you think?"

"Sure you ain't put them away in other places?"

Sarah shook her head.

"Which drawer in the secretary did you put those things you bought from that girl?"

"Lottie!"

"Which drawer?"

"I don't see what you think that has to do with it."

"Which drawer?"

"Next to the top one," Sarah whispered, feebly.

Lottie crossed the room, her skirts swishing. She returned after two trips and laid the soft piles of dainty handiwork in two chairs before Sarah.

"These ain't cold," said she. "Now let's look over these things. Here's the tablecloth you bought."

"I don't see what you mean."

"Look at it; look real careful."

Sarah took the square of glistening linen, with its graceful embroidery, and examined it. She lingered long over one corner. Her lips tightened. She folded it carefully. "Lay it over on that other chair," said she.

Lottie obeyed. She looked a little frightened.

Sarah went on, examining one article after another. Lottie laid one after another on other chairs.

"There are still four more things missing," said Sarah.

"What?"

"That large centerpiece, really the best thing I had. I meant that for Clara Walsingham. She always sends me such beautiful presents. Then I don't see that blue sweater I knit for the Langham girl — Sally, you know — and I don't see the white Shetland shawl I crocheted for Grandma Langham. That was large and I couldn't fail to see it. And — I don't see the pink bedroom slippers I made for Cousin Emma's daughter Ruth."

Sarah's voice broke. She passed her handkerchief across her eyes.

"Don't you cry and get all worked up. It will make your fever higher."

"I haven't told you," moaned Sarah, weakly.

"What ain't you told me?"

"I haven't told you that the tablecloth I put in the secretary drawer, that I bought from that dear girl, who looks so much like my own daughter who passed away, is the tablecloth I made."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I found the place in the horn-of-plenty where I made a mistake and had to rip out something and work a leaf to hide it."

"Sarah Bannister!"

"I made all the other things I bought, too," said Sarah. "I had ways of telling."

"Are you sure?"

"I wish I wasn't."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know anything I can do."

Lottie, who had not received anything except a high-school education, but was usually rather punctilious about her English, forgot all caution. She sprang into a morass of bad grammar.

"She had ought to be took up!" she said, with decision.

"Lottie, that darling little girl!"

"Darling little limb of Satan!"

"She looked so —"

"If you say another word about her looking like your Ida I shall begin to wonder what your Ida really was. Likening your own flesh and blood to a thief and a liar!"

"Come to think of it, she didn't lie. She wouldn't tell the name of the lady who made the things."

"Oh, well, if she only stole, she ain't quite so bad. I shouldn't wonder," returned Lottie, sarcastically, "if there wan' goin' to be no question of brimstun' for jest plain stealin'."

"Why, Lottie, how you do talk! What has got into you?" Sarah said, weakly. Then she began to weep again.

The doorbell clanged. Lottie ran to the window and peeked.

"It's a man," she whispered. "Wipe your eyes, Sarah. It's the minister. I know him by his pants. He's the only man that don't go to the city to work that wears creased pants in the morning in this town. Wipe your eyes, Sarah. You don't want him to see you've been cryin'."

"I don't care," wept Sarah. "I'm going to tell him the whole story and ask for his advice. What's a minister for? He can offer up the question to the Lord in prayer."

"If he don't offer it up to his wife, it's all right," Lottie said in a loud whisper, on her way to the door. When she returned, the minister, Silas Whitman, followed her. He had removed his topcoat and appeared clad in clerical black, shabby, but tidy and beautifully kept. Silas Whitman's salary forced careful keeping and nearly prohibited expenditure. He was a very small man, fair, with high, light eye-brows, and light hair growing stiffly from his forehead. As a result, he had a gentle, surprised expression. He took a chair near Sarah Bannister, and she went on at once with her story. Silas listened, and his expression of surprise deepened to one of positive pain.

The minister was not exactly a success in this particular parish. He realized it forlornly, but saw no way out. He was a man whose genuine worth and attainments were dimmed by his personality. He was like a rather splendid piece of trained mechanism doomed to one track, which did not allow him to even use many of his abilities. He was overeducated for the little New England village; he was overinformed; mentally he towered among them like a giant among Lilliputians. There was not among them a man or a woman to whom he could betray his everyday thoughts of the great present of the world. Not one could have understood. During the war he had done his best to discharge his duty to his God and his country among a people whom the war, in spite of their Red Cross work and their contributions to the Expeditionary Forces, never reached. It came the nearest to reaching them when the profiteers hid the sugar and the scarcity began in the stores, when Mrs. A couldn't make currant "jell" and Mrs. B couldn't make peach preserve, and Mrs. C and all the rest of the alphabet could not bring sweet cake to the Ladies' Aid parties, when the men missed the sugar from their coffee; then it seemed to the minister as if through the fruit and pickle season his good New England people peered out and up, almost enough to smell powder and hear the roar of the cannon. At that time the minister preached two war sermons to full congregations, and had hopes. However, after the fruit season, the people settled back in their ruts of the centuries.

Silas, sitting there listening to Sarah's strange story, considered how she was shocked out of her tracks now, but how soon she would regain her step. It seemed a pity. Just now she was dramatic and interesting, and at the crucial

moment of the tale, when Sarah had missed the four treasures, the doorbell rang, and Lottie, peering out of the window, announced, "It's her."

"I am so glad you are here," Sarah said to the minister; then, in the next breath, she plucked at his sleeve as the door opened, and begged in a whisper: "Better let me speak to her first. She's only a child."

The minister nodded, and Lottie re-entered, leading Joan, or, rather, pulling her, for the little girl seemed to resist.

"Come here, dear," said Sarah. "Don't be afraid. Nobody is going to hurt you."

The little girl, carrying her bag, which did not seem so full as yesterday, allowed Sarah to put her arm around her.

"Now, dear little girl," said Sarah, and her voice trembled, "I must talk to you, and —"

The child interrupted. "What is the matter?" she inquired, with the sweetest air of pity.

"The matter?" murmured Sarah.

"Yes, ma'am, the matter with you. You have been crying and look worried."

"So I am," said Sarah, stepping into the open emotional door. "I am worrying about you."

The child regarded her with great, blue, troubled eyes. "I am very well, thank you," said Joan. "Please don't cry any more about me. I haven't any stomachache, or toothache, and I said my prayers this morning, and there's nothing ails me, truly."

Sarah gasped. "Do you feel that you have done just right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you a little girl who loves God?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The minister's face twitched. He coughed quickly and drew out his handkerchief and blew his nose. Lottie eyed him sharply. Sarah looked bewildered. The minister looked from her face to the perfectly open, ready-to-answer one of the child, and he coughed again.

"What have you got in your bag today?" Sarah inquired, rather hopelessly.

"The other things to sell."

"What other things? Open the bag!"

The girl obeyed at once. She drew forth, one by one, the missing articles of Sarah's collection. She eyed them admiringly. "Pretty," she commented.

Sarah stared.

"Why don't you speak right up to her?" said Lottie.

The little girl stared at her and smiled sweetly. "If you please, ma'am," she said to Sarah Bannister, "I am very busy this morning."

The minister swallowed a chuckle. Lottie looked at him.

"Joan," said Sarah.

"Yes, ma'am," said the child, looking up brightly.

"I have found out that you had sto— taken all those things you sold to me yesterday from me. You sold me my own things."

The little girl gazed. "I am real glad you found out so soon," said she.

"My goodness!" said Lottie.

Sarah gasped. "Why?"

"Because I was afraid you wouldn't."

Sarah stared at her, quite pale.

"I would have told you this morning if you hadn't found out," said the little girl, calmly. She took up the centerpiece which she had brought and looked fondly at it. "This is real handsome and I think you must have worked real hard embroidering it," said she. She added, "This is five dollars."

"You aren't going right on selling me my own things?" gasped Sarah.

"I must sell them to you. I couldn't afford to give them to you, and I mustn't sell them to anybody else."

The minister spoke for the first time. "Why not?" he asked.

She looked wonderingly at him. "It wouldn't be right. Are you the minister?"

Silas replied that he was.

"Then I am surprised you didn't know it wouldn't be right, and had to ask me," remarked Joan.

"Why wouldn't it be just as right to sell to anybody else?" asked Sarah.

Joan looked as though she doubted her hearing correctly.

"Why, they are your own things," she said simply.

Lottie came forward with a jerk of decision. "Now you look right at me, little girl," said Lottie. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know it was wrong for you to come here and sell Mrs. Bannister all this stuff?"

"It is hers," said Joan. She looked puzzled.

"Then, if it was hers, why didn't you let it alone?"

"I wanted to sell it. I wanted the money."

"What for?"

"All those poor little Brett children."

"The Brett children?"

"Yes, ma'am. Their mother died and their father thought he'd like to go and live with another lady, so he got married and the other lady didn't want six children so in a bunch, and so he didn't worry any more about them, and they were all starving to death and freezing, and there are two just little babies. And so I have them to take care of, and I can't earn money, for I am not old enough, and this is the only way, I decided, and I have just begun, and it works perfectly lovely."

"Goodness!" said Lottie.

Now the Rev. Silas Whitman realized that he must enter the field or be thought a quitter by two of his parishioners.

"Come here, little girl," he said, pleasantly.

Joan went smilingly and stood at his knee.

"Now, my child, listen to me," he said. "Didn't you know it was wrong for you to do such a thing? Don't you know you ought not to take anything whatever that belongs to other people and sell it to them?"

"They are all hers."

"Then why ask her to pay for them?"

"I wanted the money for the poor little Brett children and there wasn't any other way."

"But why should she have to pay for her own things?"

"Because she hadn't given any money to the Brett children, and I didn't begin to ask what they are worth."

"Don't you know it is wrong?"

"No, sir."

"Do you realize what you have done?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me what."

Joan looked up in his face and smiled a smile of innocent intelligence. "I opened one of the long windows in her best room," said she, "and I took those things I sold her yesterday and these I brought today, and I hid them in the Brett house. Then yesterday afternoon I packed them very nicely in the bag. I couldn't get all the things in, so I had these left over, and I came and sold them."

"Do you think she is going to pay you any more, you little —" began Lottie, but Sarah hushed her.

"I am not going to pay her, but I am going to give her some more money to buy things for the Brett children," said she.

"And you don't think you have done wrong?" persisted the minister.

Joan looked at him wearily. "They are her own things and she has them back, and she has paid me the money, and you heard her say she was going to give me some more, and it is for the Brett children. I haven't done wrong. The lady didn't give the money in the first place to the Brett children, so, of course, I had to see to it. And now she has her presents all back and everything. I think I must go now or I shall have no time to buy some meat and cook the children's dinner."

Sarah opened her black silk bag and handed a bill to the little girl. "Kiss me, dear," she whispered.

Joan threw both arms around her neck and kissed her, over and over.

"Will you come and see me?" whispered Sarah, fondly.

"Yes, ma'am; I'd love to."

They all stood at a window watching the child go down the path. Suddenly Silas Whitman began to speak. He seemed unconscious of the two women. He watched the little girl, the red silk rag from her coat lining streaming, march proudly away with a curious air, as if she led a platoon, not as if she marched alone.

"There she goes," said the minister. "There she goes, red flag flying! Our problem is her truth, and who shall judge? It may be, all of this, the celestial prototype of Bolshevism. She may be the little advance scout of the last army of the world, the child facing Pharisees, and righteous, and ancient evil, triumphant wisdom. There she goes, little anarchist, holy-hearted in holy cause, and if her way be not as mine, who am I to judge? It may be that breaking the stone letter

of the law in the name of love is the fulminate which shatters the last link of evil which holds the souls of the world from God.”

The minister caught up his coat, put it on, and went out. He did not look at the women.

They stared at each other.

“Lordamassey!” said Lottie.

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