

OPEN THE DOOR, POSY!



OSY and her mother lay side by side, quite still and white upon the bed. The air was hot and dry and still, and out of the window of their poor cabin the heat-haze could be seen overhanging the roofs of the town. But Posy and her mother never lifted a finger to disturb themselves as they lay, nor raised an eyelid to look out.

At the end of the bed sat Death, the Taxman, looking at them. Presently he said, "Where is my loaf of bread? How is it you have not got my loaf of bread for me?"

Posy's mother answered, "We were too poor. We were a week without food ourselves; and then came the fever; and then you came."

"That is a common story in these parts just now!" said Death. "But to make an end of this; if you cannot buy me a loaf you must go to the Poor-house to get it."

Then Posy got down off the bed, and went to the door. She felt quite light and thin in the sunshine; and as she walked through the town nothing moved out of her way, or recognised her at all. In the middle of the town she came to the sluggish market-place: there were the booths standing, but few people bought or sold. She wanted to cry, but her tears would no longer go out into the living world, but fell back upon her heart, burning it like fire.

"If I could get some one to give me a loaf here," she said to herself, "I need not go on to the Poor-house." She stopped at the first booth and asked. The woman went on crying her wares. She stopped at the second booth and asked; but the woman only cried her wares. "They cannot see me," she thought; and she stopped at the third booth, and put out her hand.

She reached up on tip-toe: she was very small. "I have asked," she said to herself, "and they have not said no." And she took a loaf.

When she got back she gave the loaf to Death the Taxman, and lay down by her mother again. As he was going, he called back through the doorway, "Mind you be ready for Death the Undertaker when he comes. And if he doesn't come soon you'd better call him."

Posy and her mother lay still on the bed for the rest of that day and all the night. In the morning the mother said, "Get up and look out, Posy; and if you see him, call him in." Posy got up, and looked, and came back again. "I don't see any one, mother, except a pedlar going along the road carrying his pack."

After a little time her mother said, "Look again!" And Posy looked, and came and lay down, saying, "I only saw a man going along carrying a Punch and Judy show on his back."

Then after a time her mother said, "Look again!" and Posy looked and said, "There is a man coming up to the door with a coffin on his back; and it is the same as the pedlar and the Punch and Judy man."

When Death the Undertaker unlatched the door and looked in, he saw the mother and daughter both lying still on the bed, all ready in their shrouds

shrouds. They were so thin he put them both into the same coffin, and seemed hardly to feel their weight as he carried them away. On the road he grumbled to himself because they were paupers and had left no money for him. Presently he threw the coffin down on the ground, and went away leaving it.

In a little while came Death the Sexton; and he, when he saw them, grumbled to his shovel because there was no money left on the coffin to pay him for digging the hole. He dug only a little way and then stopped, slipping the coffin in endways. Then he covered it over with earth which he trampled and beat down with a spud; and at last he too went away.

There was no fireplace, and no window, only a plain door; and the mother and her child lay for a long time side by side, just as they had lain on the bed in their little cabin by the town.

Presently there was a sound outside of a scraping in the earth, and the knock of a hand on the wood. "Get up, and open the door, Posy," said her mother. And Posy went and opened the door.

There was an old man, and with him two old women rubbing the mould from their eyes and looking in to see who was there. "So *you* are here, are you?" said the old man, "you who were always so proud!" "You kept yourself pretty stiff and highy-tighty, Missus; you did that," remarked one of the old women; "but you've committed felony, it seems, and were a pauper, which is worse." "Well, we're neighbours now," added the other woman; "you being in pauper's ground, which is next to the criminals. It isn't any of them proud folk who'll come and look in on you now."

Posy's mother began smoothing down the crinkles of her shroud, as her habit had been with her apron when she was a decent body in the world above. In a little while she would let them know something! Who were these disreputable old neighbours that dared come and speak to her now? She peered round the door to make out what they were like.

"I know you, Daddy Springfeather," she cried at last, "you that was hung for sheep-stealing, to be sure!"

"Not so bad as loaf-stealing!" answered the old man and the two old women.

"And you, and you," went on Posy's mother, pointing at them angrily; "you were the two old rag-pickers who never spent a penny but on drink, and died of that!"

"Better than dying a pauper," answered the two old women.

"Better it isn't: but I'm neither a pauper nor a loaf-stealer!" cried Posy's mother. "And you can get out of my doorway, for my coffin's paid for in the hem of the skirt that hangs up behind the door!"

"This coffin," said the old man feeling it with his thumb, "is no more paid for than it's mahogany: and if you didn't send your daughter to steal a loaf off Mealyman the baker at his booth in the market-place, you go round and ask him; for he's just come down, having been struck on the left cheek by Fever, while he was loving of Famine with his right."

“Posy,” said her mother, shutting the door against her assailants, so as to speak with her daughter alone, “what did you do when you went to fetch the bread?”

Then Posy told her mother all about it: and said her mother—“Where were our wits that we forgot to tell Death the Undertaker of the money in the hem of the skirt behind the door; which we never touched during the famine because it was to be for our funerals? Posy, my child, a pauper’s coffin is a thing I can’t sleep in! This has got to be set right.”

Before long she heard Death the Sexton digging near, for it was paupers’ ground, and the deaths were numerous. Then she began to cry—“Death the Sexton, come and take us out! Death the Sexton, come and take us out!”

When Death the Sexton heard that he laughed. “Oh, I daresay!” he said. “And why should that be?”

Said Posy’s mother, “Because you have buried us in a pauper’s coffin.” “And what have you to say against that?” “Only this,” said Posy’s mother; “the money for our funeral is in the hem of my skirt that is hanging behind the door; and unless I’m dug up, and buried again properly, how can you expect to get paid?”

Directly Death the Sexton heard that, about being paid, he came in a great hurry and dug up Posy and her mother and the coffin, and dumped them down outside the burial ground.

Presently Death the Undertaker came by, and Posy’s mother began to cry, “Death the Undertaker, come and carry us back to my house! Death the Undertaker, come and carry us back to my house!”

Death the Undertaker stopped, and began laughing. “Why that?” he asked at last. “Because,” said Posy’s mother, “you have put us into a pauper’s coffin, when all the time the money for the coffin is in the hem of my skirt hanging behind the door; and we want to go back and pay our way from the beginning properly.”

Directly Death the Undertaker heard her speak about paying her way, he stopped laughing quickly enough, and took up the coffin and carried it back to the little cabin, and laid Posy and her mother back on to the bed, and went away to get a better coffin.

Presently the mother heard Death the Taxman going by. “Death the Taxman, Death the Taxman!” she cried; “come and give us back the loaf we stole for you!”

Death the Taxman came in grumbling. “You may well say ‘stole’; I wasn’t able to eat it. I never found out till afterwards, or you shouldn’t have got buried. What I eat for my wage has to be come by honestly.”

“Well,” said Posy’s mother, “all you have got to do is to let us go, for there’s money in the hem of the skirt hanging there behind the door; and then we can buy you bread that you can eat.”

So Death the Taxman let Posy and her mother go. And when they came to life again they found themselves quite well and hearty after their long rest; and the fever was gone from the town, and the famine was

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over; and said Posy's mother, looking round, and beginning to tidy the house, "Since we *are* here again, we had better stop."

But in a short time came Death the Taxman, and Death the Undertaker, and Death the Sexton, all clamoring to be paid and have their victims.

"All in good time," said Posy's mother. "*You* send back Famine and Fever, and set them to catch us; and as soon as ever they've caught us again, depend upon it, we'll come! But until then—My word! what are you Silly Billies standing there for? Shut the door, Posy!"

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