

A Breach of Post-Office Discipline

A True Incident of the South African War

by Marie Corelli, 1855-1924

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„How is Grannie?”

„No worse—no better—just the same.”

The speakers were two plain, tired-looking women, who stood at their cottage doors, looking down the lane, and waiting for the postman.

„Oh! she believes God will be good to her. I don't! She's too good herself. It's always the way. When a person is good the Lord takes a pleasure in trying them, to see how their goodness wears. When they're born bad He just leaves them to the devil.”

„And the devil gives them all the good things in this world and keeps their bad times for the next, eh?” said the first speaker, with a weary smile. „Well, there’s a-many would be glad enough to get some luck in the world at the price!”

„But Grannie wouldn’t.”

„No. Grannie wouldn’t.”

Grannie herself, meanwhile, the unconscious subject of these remarks, was sitting within one of the cottages in her old arm-chair near the fire. She was a very aged woman, brown and wrinkled, and quite blind. Her grandson, the last remaining member of her family, had been called out as a reservist to South Africa, and since his departure she had been very dependent on her neighbours, not for money or food, oh no!—Grannie had both—but just for help to move about and get her little bit of cooking done. But her neighbours loved her so much, and respected her so highly, that they found it a pleasure more than a trouble to take turns in looking after her. Her Jack, the grandson whom the country had claimed, had commended her to the care of the entire village, and the village was not unworthy of its trust. Grannie was really no burden to it. The only difficulty just now was that she was ailing, and that there had been no news for some weeks from Jack at the front. Grannie had developed two serious forms of obstinacy; one was a loss of appetite, the other a feverish anxiety for visits from the postman. The postman himself was like a son to Grannie; he was very fond of her, and in his boyhood’s days had been Jack’s schoolfellow. On this particular cold winter’s morning, Grannie was unusually restless. She had passed a bad night, and woke up asking querulously if there were no letters. On being told no, that it was not time yet for the postman’s arrival, she shed a few slow tears, and begged that someone would read her a few words of comfort from her Bible. This was done; and then she said she would get on her clothes, and sit by the fire and wait for that tardy postman. Her two nearest neighbours, being a little anxious at the extreme pallor of her kind old face, helped her to dress, and made her some hot tea, and then went themselves to watch for that lingering messenger from the wonderful office that deals out joy, sorrow, life and death in stamped parcels with such unsentimental, yet valuable regularity. And Grannie, sitting by the fire, talked to herself, folding her withered hands one over the other nervously.

„Of course they wanted Jack,” she said; „such a fine, broad-shouldered fellow and strong as an oak!—of course they were obliged to have my Jack! Ah! and he’ll fight for the country—that he will! and they’ll give him a lot of medals, and make him an officer—oh, it is a fine chance for him! And it’s proud I shall be of him when he comes back.” Her voice broke and she gave a little cry—„What’s that? Who’s that?”

One of the women hurried to her. „Anything wrong, Grannie?”

Grannie turned her sightless eyes around.

„No, my dear, no! I—I can’t see—but I thought God Almighty had given me back my eyes again, and that I saw Jack coming in at the doorway!” She paused. „Is the postman come?”

„Not yet!”

Grannie sighed, and lay back in her chair with a wearied air of patience. Her neighbour stole out to join the other woman at the threshold.

„Grannie’s not herself to-day,” she said, softly. „Mebbe we’d better send for the doctor?”

„Mebbe,” returned the other in the same low tone.

Meantime, the postman, familiarly known in the village as Harry, was just turning into the lane where he was so eagerly expected, with a heavy heart.

In his bag lay a letter for Grannie from the War Office. Its colour was ominous; instinctively he guessed its news. By all the rules of his service he was bound to deliver that letter to the person for whom it was intended. His honest soul sickened; he thought of the lonely blind old woman sitting by her cottage fire—of her tears and prayers—of her longing for news of Jack—of her trust in God—of her simple ignorance of all the horrors of war.

Heavily and wearily his feet dragged along; and the thought came to him—„If I kept back the letter just a day or two?”

The shrill voices of the watching women reached him from the frosty air as he came along.

„Hi! Harry! make haste! Grannie’s wearying for you!”

He quickened his pace—it would depend, he thought—it would depend on how he found her.

„Grannie’s wearying?” he said, as he approached. „What! Isn’t she so well?”

„Scarcely—she’s just sickening for news. Have ye any letter from the front?”

„No!” he answered, and answered truthfully.

Then he stepped into the little cottage where Grannie sat, and looked at her. She heard him, and half rose from her chair.

„Is that you, Harry?” she murmured feebly; „I am sorely worried in my head—I can’t make out voices or footsteps as I used to do, but if it’s you, say so!”

„It’s me!” said Harry, slowly, his blue eyes fixed compassionately on the old woman’s drawn and ashen features. „You don’t make mistakes, Grannie! Don’t you think it! It’s me all right.”

„Have ye a letter?”

„No!”

The lie was spoken, and postman Harry shook under it as though some invisible devil had given him a blow.

Grannie sank back into her chair.

„It’s weary work waiting!” she muttered; „weary, weary work!”

Harry glanced enquiringly at the two women who had entered the house with him, and, answering their anxious looks, said in an undertone, „I’ll ask the doctor to come as I pass by his house.” Aloud he spoke—„Cheer up, Grannie! It is not the day for the South African mail.”

„Isn’t it?” and Grannie’s tired voice had a ring of hope in it.

„No! To-morrow or next day it comes in. You’ll hear from Jack for sure then!”

„You think so? Really? Truly?”

„Of course. He’s all right!”

„Yes—yes!”—said Grannie, with sudden vivacity, „He’s all right. God bless you, Harry! You’re a good lad—you wouldn’t lie to me! God bless you! He’s all right!”

Harry bent over the chair and kissed Grannie’s wrinkled brow, then resolutely turned away and went on his beat with the War Office letter still in his pocket.

The next morning, lo and behold, a very different kind of letter addressed to Grannie!—one from Jack himself! Harry could hardly believe his eyes, though he knew his old schoolfellow's writing well enough. It took him some time to realise the truth that poor Jack had been killed since that letter started on its way, and that the announcement from the War Office which had been held back was indeed the very latest of him. But having supported Grannie's hopes so far he was not going to dash them now. He hurried down the lane to her little cottage and almost tumbled over the threshold in his excitement.

„Grannie!” he called.

Grannie was in bed, but she heard him and called him to her side. She looked very weak and wan, but there was a feverish brightness in her sightless eyes as she felt him coming near to her.

„I am a bit ailing this morning, my dearie,” she said, „but never mind me!—you've got a letter?”

„Yes,” said Harry, and he gave her the long-awaited-for and precious epistle.

„Thank God!” sighed the old woman, as she felt it all over with her trembling fingers, and then handed it to Harry to open and to read.

And what a cheery, bright letter it was, to be sure! Full of hope and courage—teeming with expressions of love and remembrance to all at home — expecting to see everybody as well when he returned as when he left them, and concluding with a „*Cheer up, Grannie, I'll soon be home again. Your Jack,*” over which phrase poor postman Harry nearly choked and broke down.

But Grannie was content. She lay back upon her pillows with a peaceful smile and clasped hands.

„God is very good!” said she; „He will not suffer us to be afflicted beyond our strength to bear. Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning!”

She closed her blind eyes—and so Harry left her, with her Jack's letter within reach on the counterpane beside her, and her soul full of gratitude and prayer.

That night she died in her sleep; and postman Harry, devoured by the gnawings of conscience, as soon as he had delivered all his letters the next morning, went off to see the vicar, a kindly, broadminded old man, with a tender heart, always ready to sympathise with the griefs of others. To him Harry solemnly delivered the unopened War Office announcement, and made full and frank confession of its detention with a husky, tremulous voice and downcast eyes.

„If she had known he was killed,” he said, „it would ha' made her last hours bitter. She thought he was all right and well to the last; and she went to God happy! But I know I oughtn't to ha' kept it back—mebbe I'll lose my place now!”

The vicar heard him in silence, and himself opened the War Office envelope. It contained the fatal news they had expected—that Jack had been killed in action, and the good clergyman sighed as he laid it among his parish papers; then he turned to Harry.

„It was a breach of discipline,” he said, frowning to look stern, „but I will not report you! Don't do it again!”

„No, sir,” said Harry meekly, then after a long pause, during which he twirled his cap and looked foolish—„Thank you, sir!”

The vicar looked at him. There was a suspicious moisture in his eyes.

„Shake hands, Harry!” he said kindly.

Reddening with confusion Harry obeyed, taking the condescension as a sign of forgiveness, and then without daring to look round again, hurried off.

The following Sunday the vicar announced Jack's death from the pulpit with a few paternal words of tribute to the simple and manly life the young soldier had led among them before he was called to the front.

Many of the congregation wept for the loss of the bright gallant fellow who had grown up from childhood in their village, others spoke of „Grannie” just laid to rest under the green grass and silvery daisies.

„A mercy she died afore she knowed!” they all said.

And postman Harry, in his first and last „breach of office discipline,” thought so too.

