LAURA E. RICHARDS

HILDEGARDE'S HARVEST

MUSAICUM CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

Laura E. Richards

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CHAPTER I.

THE MORNING MAIL.

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Hildegarde was walking home from the village, whither she had gone to get the mail. She usually rode the three miles on her bicycle, but she had met a tack on the road the day before, and must now wait a day or two till the injured tire could be mended.

Save for missing the sensation of flying, which she found one of the most delightful things in the world, she was hardly sorry to have the walk. One could not see so much from the wheel, unless one rode slowly; and Hildegarde could not ride slowly,—the joy of flying was too great. It was good to look at everything as she went along, to recognise the knots on the trees, and stop for a friendly word with any young sapling that looked as if it needed encouragement. Also, the leaves had fallen, and what could be pleasanter than to walk through them, stirring them up, and hearing the crisp, clean crackle of them under her feet? Also,—and this was the most potent reason, after all,—she could read her letters as she walked, and she had good letters to-day.

The first that she opened was addressed in a round, childish hand to "Mis' Hilda," the "Grahame" being added in a different hand. The letter itself was written in pencil, and read as follows:

"My Deer,

"I hop you are well. I am well. Aunt Wealthy is well. Martha is well. Dokta jonSon is well; these are all the peple that is well. Germya has the roomatiks so bad he sase he thinks he is gon this time for sure. I don't think he is gon, he has had them wers before. Aunt Wealthy gave me a bantim cock and hens, his nam is Goliath of Gath, and there nams is Buty and Topknot. The children has gon away from Joyus Gard; they were all well and they went home to scool. I miss them; I go to scool, but I don't lik it, but I am gone to have tee with Mista Peny pakr tonite, Aunt Wealthy sade I mite. He has made a new hous and it is nise.

"So goodbi from
"Benny."

Hildegarde laughed a good deal over this letter, and then wiped away a tear or two that certainly had no business in her happy eyes.

"Dear little Benny!" she said. "Dear little boy! But when is the precious lamb going to learn to spell? This is really dreadful! I suppose 'Germya' is Jeremiah, though it looks more like some new kind of porridge. And Mr. Pennypacker with a new house! This is astonishing! I must see what Cousin Wealthy says about it."

The next letter, bearing the same postmark, of Bywood, and written in a delicate and tremulous hand, was from Miss Bond herself. It told Hildegarde in detail the news that Benny had outlined; described the happy departure of the children, who had spent their convalescence at the pleasant

summer home, all rosy-cheeked, and shouting over the joy they had had. Then she went on to dilate on the wonderful qualities of her adopted son Benny, who, it appeared, was making progress in every branch of education.

"I may be prejudiced, my dear," the good old lady wrote, "but I am bound to say that Martha agrees with me in thinking him a *most remarkable* child."

Miss Bond further told of the event of the neighbourhood, the building of Mr. Galusha Pennypacker's new house. The neighbourhood of so many little children, his friendship with Benny, "but more than all, his *remembrance of you*, my dear Hildegarde," had, it appeared, wrought a marvellous change in the old hermit. The kindly neighbours had met him half-way in his advances, and were full of good-will and helpfulness; and when, by good fortune, his miserable old shanty had burned down one summer night, the whole neighbourhood had turned out and built him a snug cottage which would keep him comfortable for the rest of his days.

> "Mr. Pennypacker came here yesterday to invite Benny to drink tea with him (I employ the current expression, my dear, though of course the child drinks nothing but milk at his tender age; I have always considered tea a beverage for the aged, or those who are not robust), and in the course of conversation, he begged me *most earnestly* to convey to you the assurance that, in his opinion, the comfort which surrounds his later days is owing entirely to you. His actual expression, though not refined, was forcible, and Martha thinks you would like to hear it:

"'I was a-livin' a hog's life, an' I should ha' died a hog's death if it hadn't been for that gal.'

"I trust your dear mother will not think it coarse to have repeated these words. There is something in the very mention of swine that is repugnant to ears polite, but Martha was of the opinion that you would prefer to have the message in his own words. And I am bound to say that Galusha Pennypacker, though undoubtedly *an eccentric*, is a thoroughly well-intentioned person."

"Dear Cousin Wealthy!" said Hildegarde, as she folded the delicate sheet and put it back into its pearl-gray envelope with the silver seal. "It must have cost her an effort to repeat Mr. Pennypacker's words. Poor old man! I am glad he is comfortable. I must send him a little box at Christmas,—some little things to trim up his new house and prettify it. Oh! and now, Bell, now for your letter! I have kept it for the last, my dear, as if it were raisins or chocolate, only it is better than either."

The fat square envelope that she now opened contained several sheets of paper, closely covered, every page filled from top to bottom with a small, firm handwriting, but no line of crossing. The Merryweathers were not allowed to cross their letters, under penalty of being condemned to write entirely on postal cards. Let us peep over Hildegarde's shoulder, and see what Bell has to say.

"Dearest Hildegarde:

"It is two full weeks since I have written, and I am ashamed; but it is simply because they *have* been full

weeks,—very full! There is so much to tell you, I hardly know where to begin. A week ago to-night our play came off,—'The Mouse Trap.' It went beautifully,—not a hitch anywhere, though we had only had five rehearsals. I was Willis, as I told you. I wore my ulster without the cape, and really looked quite masculine, I think. I had a curly, dark-brown wig (my hair tucked down my neck,—it didn't show at all!) and the prettiest little moustache! Marion Wilson was Amy, and she screamed most delightfully. In fact, they all screamed in such a natural and heartfelt way, that some of the ladies in the audience seemed to feel quite uncomfortable, and I am sure I saw Madame Mirabelle tuck her skirts close around her feet, and put her feet up on the bench in front of her. Well, we all did our best, though Clarice Hammond was the best; she is a born actress! and the audience was very cordial, and we were called before the curtain five times; and altogether it was a great success. I enclose a flower from a bouquet that was thrown at me. It was a beauty, and it struck me right on the head. I thought it was for Clarice, and was going to hand it to her, but somebody in the audience cried out, 'Why don't you speak for yourself, Willis?' and everybody laughed, and they said it was really for me, so I kept it, and was pleased and proud. I have pressed two or three flowers in my blue-print book, with the pictures of the play. I am going to send you some as soon as I can print some more. The girls snatched all the first batch, so that I have not a single one left.

"Let me see! What comes next? Oh, next you must hear about my surprise party. I was in my room one evening, grinding hard at my Greek (do you think your mother would object to 'grinding?' It is such old, respectable college slang, mamma allows it once in a while), when I heard whispering and giggling in the hall outside. I don't mind telling you, my dear, that my heart sank, for I had a good lot of Pindar to do, and there is no sense in shirking one's lessons. But I went to the door with as good a grace as I could, and there was our dear Gerty, and Clara Lyndon, and three or four other girls from Miss Russell's school. They said they had double permission, from Miss Russell at that end, and Mrs. Tower at this, to come and give me a surprise party; and here they were, and they were coming in whether I liked it or not. Of course I did like it after the first minute, for they were all so dear and jolly. They had borrowed chairs as they came along through the hall, and one had her pocket full of spoons, and another had a basket,—oh, but I am getting on too fast. Well, Gerty and I sat on the bed, and the others on the chairs, and we chattered away, and I heard all the school news. Then presently Mabel Norton opened a basket, and took out—oh, Hilda! the most beautiful, *beautiful* rose-bush, simply covered with blossoms. It was for me, with a card from Miss Russell and the whole school; and when I asked what it all meant, why, it seems that this was the anniversary of the day last year when I pulled a little girl out of the river, down near the mill-dam. It was the simplest thing in the world to do, for any one who was strong and knew

how to tread water; but these dear people had remembered the date, and had done this lovely thing to —well, Hilda, I didn't cry that evening, but somehow I want to now, when I come to tell you about it. You will understand! It is so lovely to have such dear, kind friends, that I cannot help it. Well, then out of another basket came a most wonderful cream tart, with my initials on it in caramel, and a whole lot, dozens and dozens, of the little sponge-cakes that I am so fond of. They cannot make them anywhere in the world, I think, except at Miss Russell's, and dear good Miss Cary, the housekeeper, remembered that I was fond of them. Oh, and a huge box of marshmallows; and we all knew what *that* meant. Marshmallows are the—what shall I say?—the unofficial emblem of Miss Russell's school; and soon two or three were toasting over the gas on hat-pins, and I was cutting the tart, and Gerty was handing round the sponge-cakes, and we were all as happy as possible. I ran and asked the girls along the hall to come in, and as many of them did come as could get in the door, and the rest sat in a semicircle on the floor in the hall, and we sang everything we could think of. All of a sudden we heard a knocking at the window. I ran and looked out, and there was something hanging and bobbing against the glass. I opened the window, and drew in a basket, full of all kinds of things, oranges and bananas and candy, with a card, 'Compliments of the Third Floor!' So of course I was running up to thank them, and say how sorry we were that there was not room for them, when I almost ran plump into Mrs. Tower, who was coming

along the entry, very stately and superb. She had heard all about it, and she came to say that, if we liked, we might dance for half an hour in the parlour. You can imagine—no, you cannot, for you never were at college! —the wild rush down those stairs. We called the third floor (they are mostly freshmen), and they came careering down like a herd of ponies; and the first floor came out of their studies when they heard the music, and we had the wildest, merriest, most enchanting dance for just half an hour. Then it was hurry-scurry off, for Miss Russell's girls were on the very edge of their time allowance, and had to run most of the way home (it is only a very little way, and one of the maids had come with them, and waited for them). And we all thanked Mrs. Tower as prettily as we knew how, and she said pleasant things, and then some of the girls helped me to take back the chairs and straighten things up generally. So the great frolic was over, and most delightful it was; but, my dear, I had to get up at five o'clock to finish my Greek next morning, and the ground floor was not much better off with its philosophy. And now there are no more gaieties, for the examinations are 'on,' and we must buckle to our work in good earnest. I don't expect to have much trouble, as I have kept up pretty well; but there is enough for any one to do, no matter how well up she is. So this is the last letter you will have, my dear, before the happy day that brings us all out to the beloved Pumpkin House. Oh, what a glorious time we shall have, all together once more! Roger is still out West, but hopes to get back for

the last part of the holidays, at least; and Phil's and Jerry's vacation begins two days before Gerty's and mine. Altogether, the prospect is enchanting, and one of the very best parts of it is the seeing you again, dear Hilda. Only three weeks more! Gerty paints a star on her screen for every day that is gone. Funny little Gerty! Give my love to your mother, please, and believe me always, dear Hilda,

"Your affectionate
"Isabel Merryweather."

Hildegarde gave a half-sigh, as she finished this letter, and walked on in silence, thinking many things. Bell's life seemed very free and full and joyous; it suited her exactly, the strong, sensible, merry girl; and oh, how much she was learning! This letter said little about studies, but Hildegarde knew from former ones how much faithful work was going on, and how firm a foundation of scholarship and thoroughness her friend was laying.

"Whereas I," she said aloud, "am as ignorant as a hedge-sparrow."

As she spoke, a sparrow hopped upon a twig close by her, and cocked his bright eye at her expressively.

"I beg your pardon!" said Hildegarde, humbly. "No doubt you are right, and I am a hundred times more ignorant. I could not even imagine how to build a nest; but neither can you crack a nut—ask Mr. Emerson!—or play the piano."

The sparrow chirped defiance, flirted his tail saucily, and was gone.

"And all girls cannot be students!" said Hildegarde, stopping to address a young maple that looked strong-minded. "Everybody cannot go to college; there must be some who are to be just girls,—plain girls,—and stay at home. As for a girl going to college when there is only herself to—to help make a home—why,—she might as well be Nero, and done with it."

She nodded at the maple-tree, as if she had settled it entirely, and walked on more quickly; the cloud—it was a slight one, but still a cloud—vanished from her brow, leaving it clear and sunny.

"The place one is in," she said, "is the place to be happy in. Of course I do miss them all; of—course—I do! but if ever any girl ought to be thankful on her knees all day long for blessings and happinesses, Hildegarde Grahame, why, you know who she is, and that she does not spell her name Tompkins."

CHAPTER II.

THE CHRISTMAS DRAWER.

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Christmas was coming. Christmas was only three weeks off. Oh, how the time was flying! "How shall I ever get ready?" cried Hildegarde, quickening her pace as she spoke, as if the holiday season were chasing her along the road.

"One is always busy, of course; but it does seem as if I were going to be about five times as busy as I ever was before. Naturally! there are so many more people that I want to make presents for. Last Christmas, there was Mammina, and Col. Ferrers and Hugh, and the box to send to Jack,—dear Jack!—and Auntie, and Mrs. Lankton and the children, and,—well, of course, Cousin Wealthy and Benny, and all the dear people at Bywood,—why, there were a good many, after all, weren't there? But now I have all my Merryweathers in addition, you see. Of course I needn't give anything to the boys,—or to any of them, for that matter,—but I do want to, so very much; if only there were a little more time! I will go up this minute, if Mammina does not want me, and look over my drawer. I really haven't looked at it—thoroughly, that is—for three days! Hilda Grahame, what a goose you are!"

By this time she had arrived at Braeside, the pretty house where she and her mother passed their happy, quiet life. Running lightly up the steps, and into the house, the girl

peeped into the sitting-room and parlour, and finding both empty, went on up the stairs. She paused to listen at her mother's door; there was no sound from within, and Hildegarde hoped that her mother was sleeping off the headache, which had made the morning heavy for her. Kissing her hand to the door, she went on to her own room, which always greeted her as a friend, no matter how many times a day she entered it. She looked round at books and pictures with a little sigh of contentment, and sank down for a moment in the low rocking-chair. "Just to breathe, you know!" she said. "One must breathe to live." Involuntarily her hand moved towards the low table close by, on which lay a tempting pile of books. Just one chapter of "The Fortunes of Nigel," while she was getting her breath?

"No," she said, replying to herself with severity, "nothing of the kind. You can rest just as well while you are looking over the drawer. I am surprised,—or rather, I wish I were surprised at you, Hilda Grahame. You are a hard case!"

Exchanging a glance of mutual sympathy and understanding with Sir Walter Scott, who looked down on her benignly from the wall, Hildegarde now drew her chair up beside a tall chest of drawers, and proceeded to open the lowest drawer, which was as deep and wide as the whole of some modern bureaus. It was half filled with small objects, which she now took out one by one, looking them over carefully before laying them back. First came a small table-cover of heavy buff linen, beautifully embroidered with nasturtiums in the brilliant natural colors. It was really a thing of beauty, and the girl looked at it first with natural

pride, then went over it carefully, examining the workmanship of each bud and blossom.

"It will pass muster!" she said, finally. "It is well done, if I do say it; the Beloved Perfecter will be satisfied, I think."

This was for her mother, of course; and she laid it back, rolled smoothly round a pasteboard tube, and covered with white tissue paper, before she went on to another article. Next came a shawl, like an elaborate collection of snowflakes that had flitted together, yet kept their exquisite shapes of star and wheel and triangle. Cousin Wealthy would be pleased with this! Hildegarde felt the same pleasant assurance of success. "There ought to be a bit of pearl-coloured satin ribbon somewhere! Oh, here it is! A bit of ribbon gives a finish that nothing else can. There! now that is ready, and that makes two. Now, Benny, my blessed lamb, where are you?"

She drew out a truly splendid scrap-book, bound in heavy cardboard, and marked "Benny's Book," with many flourishes and curlicues. Within were pictures of every imaginable kind, the coloured ones on white, the black and white on scarlet cardboard. Under every picture was a legend in Hildegarde's hand, in prose or verse. For example, under a fine portrait of an imposing black cat was written:

"Is this Benny's pillow-cat?
No! it is not half so fat!
No! it is not half so fair,
So it mews in sad despair,
Feeling that it has not any
Chance for to belong to Benny."

Hildegarde had spent many loving hours over this book; her verses were not remarkable, but Benny would like them none the less for that, she thought, and she laid the book back with a contented mind. Then there was a noble apron for Martha, with more pockets than any one else in the world could use; and a pincushion for Mrs. Brett, and a carved tobacco-stopper for Jeremiah. Beside the tobacco-stopper lay a pipe, also carved neatly, and Hildegarde took this up with a sigh. "I don't like to part with it!" she said. "Papa brought it from Berne, all those years ago, and I am so used to it; but after all, I am *not* likely to smoke a pipe, even if I have succumbed to the bicycle, and I do want to send some little thing to dear Mr. Hartley. Dear old soul! how I should like to see him and Marm Lucy! We really must make a pilgrimage to Hartley's Glen next summer, if it is a possible thing. Marm Lucy will like this little blue jug, I know. We have the same taste in blue jugs, and she will not care a bit about its only costing fifteen cents. Ah! if everything one wanted to buy cost fifteen cents, one would not be so distracted; but I *do* want to get 'Robin Hood' for Hugh, and where am I to get the three dollars, I ask you?"

She addressed William the Silent; the hero drew her attention, in his quiet way, to his own sober dress and simple ruff, and seemed to think that Hugh would be just as well off without the record of a ruffling knave who wore Lincoln green, and was not particular how he came by it.

"Ah! but that is all you know, dear sir!" said Hildegarde. "We all have our limitations, and if you had only known Robin, you would see how right I am."

And then Hildegarde fell a-dreaming, and imagined a tea-party that she might give, to which should come William of Orange and Robin Hood, Alan Breck Stuart and Jim Hawkins.

"And who else? let me see! Hugh, of course, and Jack, if he were here, and the boys and—and Captain Roger; only I am afraid he would think it nonsense. But Bell would love it, and I would invite Dundee, just to show her how wrong she is about him. And—oh, none of the King Arthur knights, because they had no sense of humour, and Alan would be at their throats in five minutes; but—why, I have left out David Balfour himself,—Roger would love David, anyhow,—and Robin might bring Little John and Will Scarlet and Allan-a-Dale. We would have tea out on the veranda, of course, and Auntie would make one of her wonderful chicken pies, and I would ask Robin whether it was not just as good as a venison pasty. Alan would have his hand at his sword, ready to leap up if it was denied; but jolly Robin would make me a courtly bow, and say with his own merry smile—Come in! oh! what is it?"

Rudely awakened from her pleasant dream by a knock at the door, Hildegarde looked up, half expecting to see one of her heroes standing cap in hand before her. Instead, there stood, ducking and sidling,—the Widow Lankton.

"How do you do, Mrs. Lankton?" said Hildegarde, with an effort. It was a sudden change, indeed, from Robin Hood and Alan Breck, to this forlorn little body, with her dingy black dress and crumpled bonnet; but Hildegarde tried to "look pleasant," and waited patiently for the outpouring that she knew she must expect.

"*Good*-mornin', dear!" said the widow, ducking a little further to one side, so that she looked like an apologetic crab in mourning for his claws. "I hope your health is good, Miss Grahame. There! you look pretty well, I must say!"

"I hope you are not sorry, Mrs. Lankton," smiling; for the tone was that of heartfelt sorrow.

"No, dear! why, no, certainly not! I'm pleased enough to have you look young and bloomin' while you can. Looks ain't allers what we'd oughter go by, but we must take 'em and be thankful for so much, as I allers say. Yes, dear. Your blessed mother's lyin' down, Mis' Auntie told me. *She* seems slim now, don't she? If I was in your place, I should be dretful anxious about her, alone in the world as you'd be if she was took. The Lord's ways is—"

"Did you want to see me about anything special, Mrs. Lankton?" said Hildegarde, interrupting. She felt that she was not called upon to bear this kind of thing.

The widow sniffed sadly and shook her head.

"Yes, dear! You're quick and light, ain't you, as young folks be! Like to brisk up and have done with a thing. Well, I come to see if I could borry a crape bunnit, to go to a funeral; there, Miss Grahame, I hope you won't think me forth-puttin', but I felt that anything your blessed ma had worn would be a privilege, I'm sure, and so regardin' it, I come."

"Oh!" said Hildegarde, with a little shudder. "We—we have no crape, Mrs. Lankton. My father—that is, my mother never wore it."

"Didn't!" said Mrs. Lankton. "Well, now, folks has their views. I was one that never liked to spare where feelin's was