



WHEN
SHE CAME
HOME FROM
COLLEGE



MARIAN RICHARD

NEW YORK WILSON

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Title: When She Came Home from College

Author: Marian Hurd McNeely and Jean Bingham Wilson

Release Date: January 20, 2017 [eBook #54033]

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WHEN SHE CAME HOME FROM COLLEGE

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When She Came Home From College



HEL-LO, LITTLE GIRL

When She Came Home From College

BY
MARIAN KENT HURD
AND
JEAN BINGHAM WILSON

*With Illustrations by
George Gibbs*



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1909

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Published October, 1909

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When She Came Home From College

CHAPTER I

ALMA MATER

“WELL, this is cheerful!” cried the Infant, as she stepped briskly into the room where the rest of the “Set” were dejectedly assembled. “What if this *is* the last night of college! What if our diplomas *are* all concealed in the tops of our top trays! Can’t this crowd be original enough to smile a little on our last evening, instead of looking like a country prayer-meeting?”

The Infant cast herself upon the cushionless frame of a Morris armchair, and grinned at the forms on the packing-boxes around her. Her eyes roved round the disorderly room, stripped of the pretty portières, cushions, mandolins, and posters, which are as inevitably a part of a college suite as the curriculum is a part of the college itself. Even the Infant suppressed a sigh as she caught sight of the trunks outside in the corridor.

“Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean;
Tears from the depths of some divine despair,
Rise from the heart and gather to the eyes,
On looking at the—excelsior—on the floor,
And thinking of the days that are no more,”

she chanted.

“It’s all very well to talk in that unfeeling way, Infant,” said Knowledge, separating herself with difficulty from the embrace of the Sphinx and sitting up on the packing-box to address her chums to better advantage. “It’s very well to talk, but the fact remains that to-morrow we are all to be scattered to the four corners of the United States. And who knows whether we shall ever all be together again in our whole lives?” Knowledge forgot the dignity of her new A. B. and gulped audibly; while the Sphinx patted her on the back, and said nothing, as usual.

“Well!” retorted the Infant, rising, “if I *am* the youngest, I have more sense than the rest of you. I’ve kept my chafing-dish out of my trunk, and I’ve saved some sugar and alcohol and chocolate, and ‘borrowed’ some milk and butter from the table downstairs; because I knew something would be needed to revive this set, and I hadn’t the money to buy enough smelling-salts.”

The Infant ran down the corridor, and came back with her battered dish; and the girls gathered together on the dusty floor around the box, which now served as a table. Their faces, worn from the strain of the week of graduation, relaxed noticeably as the familiar odor began to float upon the air.

“This *is* comfortable,” sighed Barbara, gratefully. “Let me take the spoon, Infant. Your four years of college life have not yet A. B.’d you in fudge.”

“Oh, you are not quite crushed by the pangs of the coming separation, after all, then,” grinned the youngest member. “Girls, did you hear an awful chuckle when our Barbara finished her Commencement speech yesterday? It was I, and I was dreadfully ashamed.”

“Mercy, no!” cried Atalanta, turning shocked eyes at the offender. “What on earth did you chuckle for, when it was so sad?”

“That’s just it!” said the Irreverent Infant. “When Babbie began to talk of Life and Love and the Discipline of Experience and the Opportunities for Uplifting One’s Environment,—wasn’t that it, Babbie?—I began to wonder how she knew it all. Babbie has never loved a man in her life” (the Infant glanced sharply at Barbara’s clear profile); “Babbie has never had any experiences to be disciplined about; Babbie’s environment, which is we, girls, hasn’t been especially uplifted by any titanic efforts on her part; and as for Life, why, Babbie’s had only twenty-one years of it, and some of them were unconscious. So when her oration ended with that grand triumphant climax, and every one was holding her breath and looking awed and tearful, I was chuckling to think how beautifully Barbara was selling all those people.”

A horrified clamor arose from the girls.

“Why, Evelyn Clinton! It was lovely!”

“Infant, you shameless creature!”

With a whirl of her white skirts, amid the confusion that followed, the House Plant rose to her feet and the rescue of her chum. “Just because you can’t appreciate what a splendid mind Babbie has, Evelyn Clinton, and how much the English professors think of her, and what a prodigy she is, anyway—”

“Hear, hear!” cried Barbara, laughing.

“—And how proud we are of her,” went on the impetuous House Plant “Just because you have no soul is no reason why you should deny its possession by others!”

“Well, I’ve stirred you all up, anyway,” said the Infant, comfortably. “And that is all I wanted.”

Barbara took the spoon out of the fudge dreamily. “You may be right,” she said to the Infant. “You know I didn’t get the Eastman Scholarship.”

“Don’t you ever mention that odious thing again!” cried Atalanta. “You know that the whole class thinks you should have had it.”

Barbara turned her face aside to hide a momentary shadow.

“Well, in any case,” she said, “there is work ahead for me. Every one who anticipates a literary career must work hard for recognition.”

“You won’t have to,” declared the House Plant, hugging her chum, and followed by a murmur of assent from the floor. “Why, Babbie, didn’t you get five dollars from that Sunday-School Journal, and don’t they want more stories at the same rate? I think that is splendid!”

“I shall not write insipid little stories when I go home,” Barbara answered, smiling kindly down at the enthusiastic little devotee who had subsided at her feet “I shall write something really worth while,—perhaps a story which will unveil characters in all their complexity and show how they are swayed by all the different elements which enter into environment—”

“Ouch!” exclaimed the Infant “You are letting the fudge burn, and unveiling your characteristic of absent-mindedness to the set, who know it already. This stuff is done, anyway, and I’ll pour it out Or, no,—let’s eat it hot with these spoons.”

The Infant dealt out spoons with the rapidity of a dexterous bridge-player, and the girls burned their tongues in one second, and blamed their youngest in the next.

“By the way, Babbie,” suggested the Infant with a view to hiding speedily her second enormity, “you never told us the advice that New York editor gave you last week.”

Barbara’s scorn rose. “He was horrid,” she said. “He told me that an entering wedge into literary life was *stenography* in a magazine office. Imagine! He said that sometimes stenographers earned as much as twenty dollars a week. I told him that perhaps he had not realized that I was of New England ancestry and Vassar College, and that I was not wearing my hair in a huge pompadour, nor was I chewing gum.”

The others looked impressed.

“What did he reply?” asked the Infant.

“He said, ‘Dear me, I had forgotten the need of a rarefied atmosphere for the college graduate. I am sorry that I am no longer at leisure.’ And I walked out.”

“You did just right,” declared the House Plant, warmly, confirmed in her opinion by a murmur of assent from the girls.

“Right!” echoed the Infant. “Babbie, you are the dearest old goose in the world. You will never succeed nor make any money if you take an attitude like that.”

“I shall not write for money,” declared Barbara, beginning to pace the floor. “What is money, compared to accomplishment? I shall go home, shut myself up, and write, write, write—until recognition comes to me. I am sure it will come if I work and wait!”

She flung her head back with her usual independent gesture, and the crimson color rose in her cheeks. And the girls eyed, a little awesomely, this splendid prodigy, in whose powers they believed with that absolute, unquestioning faith which is found only in youth and college. The short silence was broken almost immediately by the Infant.

“Are you going to have a chance to write at home, undisturbed?” she asked. “Our house is a perfect Bedlam all the time. Two young sisters and a raft of brothers keep me occupied every minute.”

“There are four children younger than I, too,” answered Barbara. “But do you suppose that I am going to allow them to come between me and my life-work? It would not be right; and my mother would never permit it.”

“Mine would,” said the Infant, gloomily. “She thinks it is the mission of an elder sister to help manage those who have the luck to be younger and less responsible. I wish your mother could have come to graduation, Babbie. She might have converted my mother to her standpoint.”

“I wish she had come,” said Barbara, wistfully. “It seems as if she might have managed some way.”

Her mind flew back to the quiet little Western town,—a thousand miles away; to the household full of children, presided over by that serene, sweet-faced mother. Why could not that mother have left the children with some one, and have come to see her eldest daughter graduate “with honor”?

“What a splendid thing it is to have a real gift to develop, like Babbie’s,” sighed the House Plant.

Barbara looked uncomfortable. “You all have them,” she said. “I think I talk about mine more than the rest of you.”

“You may give us all presentation copies of your magnum opus,” announced the Infant, mercenarily. “You will come forth from your lair—I mean workroom—a dozen years hence, and find us all living happy, commonplace lives. The House Plant here will be fulfilling her name by raising six Peter Thompson children and embroidering lingerie waists. Atalanta,—by the way, girls, mother asked me why we called that very slow-moving girl Atalanta, and I told her I was ashamed to think that she should ask such a question,—well, Atalanta will marry that Yale individual who never took his eyes off her at Class-Day march. And I think you are mean not to tell us, Atalanta, when we know you’re engaged.”

The Infant threw a spoon at her blushing friend, who unexpectedly justified her nickname by dodging it.

“As for the Sphinx,” went on the Infant, happy in the unusual feat of holding the attention of the girls, “the poor Sphinx can’t get married because she never says enough for a man to know whether it’s yes or no. She will just keep on loving her pyramids and cones, and teaching algebraic riddles, until she dies. Knowledge will always look so dignified that she will frighten men away. Father exclaimed to me, when he met her, ‘What a lovely, calm, classical face!’ I said, ‘Yes, that is our Knowledge all over.’ And you can imagine how I felt when she opened those dignified lips of hers and remarked conversationally, ‘Say! Isn’t it hot as hot?’”

The girls laughed at poor Knowledge, and the cruel Infant continued to read the future.

“Well, all of us will get presentation copies of Bab’s great work, even I, who will be making home happy ‘if no one comes to marry me’”—

“‘And I don’t see why they should,’” finished Barbara, cuttingly. She rapped the Inspired Soothsayer on her fluffy head with a curtain-rod.

“Your mind runs on matrimony to a disgusting extent, Infant,” she warned. “I shall never marry unless I can carry on my writing.”

“And be a second Mrs. Jellyby?” inquired her friend. “All right; I’ll come to live with you and keep the little Jellybys out of the gravy while you unveil the characters of some Horace and Viola to the admiring world. Oh, girls! The fudge is gone, and it’s twelve o’clock, and even *my* eyelids will not stay apart much longer.”

The girls rose slowly from their improvised chairs, and stood together, half-unconsciously taking note of the dear, familiar room in its dismantled, unfamiliar condition. Out in the corridor a few unseen classmates began to sing,

“Gaudeamus igitur, juvenes dum sumus—”

“What on earth are they gaudeamusing about to-night?” growled the Infant; but no one answered her.

They stood looking at each other in silence.

“Some of you I won’t see again,” said Barbara, in a wavering voice. “My train goes so early. Dear, dear Sphinxy,—and Atalanta—”

An odd, snuffling sound caused her to look around. “The Infant’s crying!” she exclaimed.

The Infant threw her arms about Barbara’s neck. “I guess I have feelings,” she sobbed, “if I did try to make things cheerful. Don’t forget me, Babbie dear, for I do love you astonishingly, and expect great things from you.”

Barbara hurried blindly down the corridor, with the faithful House Plant beside her. At the end she turned, and faintly saw the four white figures still watching her. They were looking their last at their beloved companion, the girl whose strength of character and instinctive leadership had first attracted, then held them together, through four eventful years at college.

Barbara waved her handkerchief at the silent figures, and her head dropped on her room-mate's shoulder as they neared their familiar door.

“Oh, Helen dear!” she sobbed. “How can we ever leave this college?”

CHAPTER II

HOME

THE Overland Passenger was clanking its way across the prairies of the middle West. Barbara, sitting on one of the stuffy red-plush seats, pressed her face against the window-pane, and looked out into the night. There was little to see,—the long, monotonous stretches of land, cloaked in shadows, with dim lights showing from a few farmhouses, and a wide expanse of sky, freckled with stars, above. But Barbara was nearing home, and the dull pain which had been with her since the last good-bys at college was forgotten, as her eyes drank in every familiar detail of the shadowy landscape. Above the purr and hiss of the engine sounded the jerky refrain of the rails, and the girl's heart echoed the words.

“Near-home, near-home,” it throbbed.

The noise of the train deepened as the piers of a bridge flashed by. A porter with a lighted lantern passed through the car, and a traveling agent in the seat ahead began to gather up his hand-baggage. But Barbara still gazed out of the window, over the great piles of pine that marked the boundary of the Auburn lumber-yard, towards a dim light that shone down from the hill.

“Auburn, Auburn! This way out,” called the brakeman.

A thin, gray man stood at the steps of the car almost before the wheels ceased to move. His voice and his hands went up simultaneously.

“Hel-lo, little girl,” he said to Barbara.

“Dear old Dad!” said Barbara to him.

“We'll have to trust to the livery,” said Dr. Grafton. “Maud S. has had a hard day, and I didn't have the heart to have her harnessed again to-night.”

“There's a rummage-sale hat,” laughed Barbara, as a driver in a shabby suit of livery and an ill-fitting top hat approached for her baggage checks.

Auburn knew naught of cabs. A “hack line,” including perhaps three dozen carriages which had passed beyond the wedding and funeral stage, attended passengers to and from the railway station. In a spirit of metropolitanism which seized the town at rare intervals, the proprietors of the “line” had decided to livery their drivers. So they had attended a rummage sale, given by the women members of an indigent church, and had purchased therefrom every top hat in sight, regardless of size, shape, or vintage. These they had distributed among their drivers in an equally reckless and care-free way. Auburn, as a whole, had not yet ceased to thrill with pride at her liveried service; but those of her inhabitants who happened to be blessed with a sense of humor experienced a sensation other than that of pride, upon beholding the pompous splendor of Banker Willowby's last season's hat held in place by the eyebrows of Peanuts Barker, or Piety Sanborn's decorous beaver perched upon the manly brow of Spike Hannegan.

The mutual enjoyment of this other sensation renewed the old feeling of fellowship between Barbara and her father.

“It’s good to have you back, Girl,” he said.

Barbara crept a bit closer. “It’s good to be here,” she answered.

The Grafton house stood at the top of the longest hill in Auburn, and it was ten minutes more before the carriage stopped at the maple tree in front of the doctor’s home. The electric lights of Auburn, for economical reasons, were put out upon the arrival of the moon, and it was still and dark when the two started up the walk together. The stars hung low near the horizon, a sleepy bird was talking to himself in the willow tree, and the air was full of the bitter-sweet of cherry blossoms. A little gray, shaggy dog came bounding over the terrace to meet them, and the doorway was full of children’s heads.

Barbara’s mother stood on the front porch. Her eyes were soft and full, and her face was the glad-sorry kind. She did not say a word, only opened her arms, and the girl went in.

The children’s greetings were characteristic. Eighteen-year-old Jack added a hearty smack to his “Hello, Barb”; David laid a pale little cheek against his sister’s glowing one; and the Kid thrust his school report into Barbara’s hand, and inquired in eager tones what gifts were forthcoming. Only one member of the family circle was absent.

“Gassy’s gone to bed,” exclaimed Jack. “She’s got a grouch.”

“I have not,” retorted an aggressive voice. “Hello, Barbara.” A thin little girl of eleven, in a nightgown, her head covered with bumps of red hair wrapped about kid-curlers, seized Barbara from behind. There was a vigorous hug, which sent a thrill of surprise to the big sister’s heart, and Gassy became her own undemonstrative self again.

“Gee, you ought to see how you look!” said Jack.

“*You* ought not, ’cause ’twould make you unhappy,” retorted Gassy.

“I should think you’d *feel* unhappy, sleeping on that tiara of bumps. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. You look just like a tomato-worm.”

“Careful, Jack,” cautioned his father.

But the warning came too late. The small girl rushed at her tormentor, leapt upon him, and thrust a cold little hand inside of his gray sweater.

“There, there, children, don’t squabble before Barbara; she’s forgotten that you are not always friends,” said Mrs. Grafton. “Run back to bed, Cecilia; you’ll take cold. The rest of us are going, too. It’s long past bedtime.”

Barbara had expected to find the first nights away from her college room lonely ones; but the big four-poster, ugly as it had always seemed to her, was an improvement upon the cot that was a divan by day and a bed by night. Blessed, too, was the silence that was almost noisy, out-of-doors, and the good-night pat of the mother, as she tucked her firstling in. It was good, after all, to be at home, and good, too, that she could be of use there. Her last thought was of the new green carpet in the sitting-room below.

“It’s an outrage on æsthetics, that shade,” she said to herself. “I wish mother hadn’t bought it until I got home. They do need me here.”

“It’s the same old place,” said Barbara, at four o’clock the next afternoon, “the same dear, old, sleepy place. Aside from the fact that I find some more tucks let down in gowns and some more inches added to trousers each year, I don’t think Auburn changes anything—even her mind—from going-away time to coming-home time. Procrastination is the spice of life, here.”

“The things that keep a town awake are usually sent away to college,” said her mother, slyly. “But Auburn is solid, as well as conservative.”

“It’s pitifully, painfully solid,” said Barbara. “If it only realized its own deficiencies, there would be hope for it. But it is always so complacent and contented with itself. The road that leads up the hill to Dyer’s Corner is characteristic of the whole town. Some man with plenty of time on his hands—or for his feet—ambled along up the hill in the beginning of things, and for fifty years the people have followed his long, devious path, rather than branch out and originate another easier. I believe that any sign of progress, civic or intellectual, would cut Auburn to the quick,—if there is any quick to cut, in the town.”

“Haven’t you noted the fine schedule on our electric-car line?” laughed her mother.

“That’s just what I was thinking of. I commented on the improved time that the cars make to Miss Bates, this morning. To my surprise she stiffened at once. ‘You ain’t the first to make complaint,’ she said. ‘There ain’t no need of running a street-car like a fire-engine; and they say that since this new schedule has been fixed, the conductors won’t deliver dinner-pails to the factory men, or hold the car for you while you go on a short errand. Auburn ain’t going to tolerate that.’ Doesn’t that sound just like Miss Bates, and like Auburn?”

“That’s right; run down Auburn,” said Jack, tossing his strap of school-books on a chair, and hanging his cap on the rubber-plant. “You’ll make yourself good and popular if you go about expressing opinions like that in public. Auburn was good enough for Airy Fairy Lilian in high-school days, but having received four years of ‘culchaw,’ and a starter on the alphabet to add to her name, the plebeian ways of the old home-place jar her nerves. I like your loyalty, Mistress Barbara!”

“That is totally uncalled for, Jack,” said Barbara. “I like Auburn as much as you do. But it’s not an intellectual affection. I can’t help seeing, in spite of my love for it, that the town is raw and Western,—and painfully crude.”

“An intellectual affection! That’s as bad as a hygienic plum-pudding,” groaned Jack. “If I didn’t have to go out to coach the football team in five minutes, I would sit down and express my sympathy at the stultifying life which you must lead for the next sixty years. Unless, of course, we marry you off. There is always that alternative.”

“I hope you *are* going to be contented, dear,” said Mrs. Grafton, as her tall son relieved the rubber-plant of its burden, and clattered noisily out of the room. “I realize that after four years of the jolly intercourse you have had with the girls, and the growing college life, we must seem slow and prosaic to you here; nothing much happens when you are away. Of course, I don’t miss things as much as you will. *I’m* used to the old slow way, and besides, *I’m* too busy to have time to think of what is lacking. But I don’t want you to be hungry for what is not. The happiest thing I’ve had to think about all these four years, has been your home-coming, but I’ve been a little worried about your coming, sometimes. Do you think you are going to be contented with us?”

Barbara’s answer was judicial. “Why, yes, I think so,” she said. “Of course I shall miss the college life, and the intellectual stimulus I had there, but *I’m* going to work hard, too. All the theories I learned at

Vassar are just ready to be put into practice, and I have so much to give the world that I can hardly wait to take my pen in hand. Oh, I am so glad, mother, that my life-work is laid out for me. I tell you frankly that I never could stand living in Auburn if I were not busy. The sordidness of the workers, and the pettiness of the idlers, would make me desperate. But I shall go to work at once, and write—write—all the things I have been longing to give utterance to for four years.”

“But you can’t write all the time,” said Mrs. Grafton.

“No, I don’t intend to. There are other things to do. There has never been any organized philanthropy in Auburn, and there is plenty of work for somebody in that line. I hope, too, that I may fall in with some congenial people who will care to do some regular, systematic study with me,—though I suppose they will be hard to find in a town of this size. Then, too, I thought that I might help Susan.”

Mrs. Grafton’s busy needle flew as she talked. “How, dear?”

“Oh, in her studies. Susan and I kept together in high-school days, and I think that it has always been a tragedy in her life that she couldn’t have a college education. She has a fine mind,—not original, you know, but clear-thinking,—and she loves study. Poor girl, I can help her so much. And of course it will be a mental stimulus to me, too.”

“I’m afraid Susan won’t have time.”

“Why, what is she doing?”

“Housework,” replied her mother. “She is cooking, and caring for her father and brothers, and she does it well, too.”

“What a shame!”

“What, to do it well?”

“You know what I mean, you wicked mother. A shame to let all that mental ability go to waste, while the pots and pans are being scoured. It doesn’t take brains to do housework.”

“Doesn’t it!” sighed Mrs. Grafton; “I find, all the time, that it takes much more than I possess. When it comes to the problems of how to let down Cecilia’s tucks without showing, how to vary the steak-chops diet that we grow so tired of, and how to decrease the gas-bills, I feel my mental inferiority. I’m glad that you have come home with new ideas; we need them, dear.”

A voice rose from the foot of the stairs below,—a shrill soprano voice, that skipped the scale from C to C, and back again to A.

“That’s Ellen,” said Mrs. Grafton, laying down her sewing with a sigh. “I can’t teach her to come to me when she wants me. She says that she doesn’t mind messages if she can ‘holler ’em,’ but she ‘won’t climb stairs fer Mrs. Roosevelt herself.’ I suppose I’ll have to go down.”

“What does she want?”

“That’s what makes it interesting: you never know. Perhaps an ironing-sheet, or the key to the fruit-closet. Maybe the plumber has come, or the milkman is to be paid, or the telephone is ringing. Or possibly a book-agent has made his appearance. She always keeps it a mystery until I get down.”

“I don’t see how on earth you live in that way. I never could get anything done.”

“I don’t accomplish much,” sighed her mother. “The days ought to be three times as long, to hold all the things they bring to be done. My life is like the mother’s bag in the ‘Swiss Family Robinson.’”

“I can’t work that way,” said Barbara. “It’s ruinous to any continuity of thought. I suppose that means that I’ll have to shut myself up in my room to write.”

Mrs. Grafton had gone downstairs.

“I don’t see how mother can stand it,” said the girl to herself. “Two telephone calls, an interview with the butcher, a stop to tie up David’s finger, a hunt for father’s lost letter, some money to be sent down to the vegetable man, and two calls to the front door,—that makes eight interruptions in the last hour. If she would only systematize things, so she wouldn’t be disturbed, she wouldn’t look so tired as she does. There ought not to be so much work in this house.”

She glanced around the big, homey-looking living-room, through the door into the narrow, old-fashioned hall, and beyond, into the sunny dining-room. The house was an old one; the furnishing, though comfortable, showed the signs of hard usage and disorder. An umbrella reposed on the couch, Jack’s football mask lay on the table, and her mother’s ravelings littered the floor. A heterogeneous collection of battered animals occupied the window-sill, and a pile of the doctor’s memoranda was thrust under the clock.

“I don’t wonder that things stray away here,” she added, “with no one to pick them up but mother. She ought to insist upon orderliness from each member of the family, and save herself. I’m afraid that her over-work is partly her own fault.”

“Another mishap,” said her mother, as she picked up her sewing on entering the room. “The gas-stove this time. Ellen can’t make it burn, and I’ve had to telephone the gas-man. Her baking is just under way, too, and I’ll have to send out for some bread for supper. I hate to ask you to do it, dear, this first day, but I’m afraid that Jack won’t be back in time to go.”

“Where shall I go? To Miss Pettibone’s?”

“Yes; my purse is on the table. Get a loaf of bread and some cookies, and anything else that would be good for supper. The meal is likely to be a slim one.”

Miss Pettibone’s tiny front room took the place of a delicatessen shop in Auburn. She was a little, brown, fat acorn of a woman, who had been wooed in her unsuspecting middle age by a graceless young vagabond, who had brightened her home for six weeks and then departed, carrying with him the little old maid’s heart, and the few thousand dollars which represented her capital. She was of the type of woman who would feel more grief than rage at such faithlessness, and she refused to allow her recreant lover to be traced. After the first shock was over, she turned to her one accomplishment as a means of livelihood, and produced for sale such delicious bread, such delectable tarts, such marvelous cakes and cookies, that all Auburn profited by the absence of the rogue. She did catering in a small way, and sometimes, as an especial favor, serving; and the sight of Miss Pettibone in a stiff white apron, with a shiny brass tray under her arm, going into a side entrance, was as sure a sign of a party within, as Japanese lanterns on the front porch, or an order for grapefruit at the grocer’s. The tragedy of her life had not embittered her, and all the grief that she had stirred into her cakes was as little noticeable in the light loaves as the evidences of sorrow in her intercourse with the world. Optimism was the yeast of her hard little life, and had raised

her to the soundness and sweetness of her own bread.

There was no one in the shop as Barbara swung the door open and set a-jingle the bell at the top. But there was encouragement in the sight of a spicy gingerbread, some small yellow patty-cakes, some sugary crullers, and a pot of brown baked beans, in the glass-covered counter. Miss Pettibone came bustling into the room at the sound of the bell.

“Why, Barbara Grafton,” she said delightedly; “you, of all people! When did you get back?”

“Last night,” answered Barbara.

“Well, I declare! If I’m not glad to see you! You haven’t changed a mite,—even to get taller. I guess you’ve got your growth now. You spindled a good deal while you was stretching, but you seem to be fleshing up now.”

“I’m always a vulgarly healthy person,” said Barbara. “But how about you? How is the rheumatism?”

“It’s in its place when the roll is called. I’ve had a lame shoulder all spring.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Well, you don’t need to be. That’s one of the things that make dying easy. Providence was pretty kind when she began to invent aches and pains. Just think how hard it would be to step off, if you had to go when you was perfect physically. But that ain’t the usual way, thank goodness! All of the rheumatic shoulders, and bad backs, and poor sights, and failing memories, are just stones that pave the road to dying. I guess that’s what St. Paul meant when he said, ‘We die daily.’ But you don’t look as though you had begun, yet.”

“College food seems to agree with me, Miss Pettibone, but it’s not like your baking. I’ve come for a loaf of bread, and to carry off that pot of beans.”

“You can have the bread, child, but not the beans; they was sold hours ago.”

“Too bad,” sighed Barbara. “Give me the gingerbread.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s sold, too.”

“Why do you keep them, then?”

“I always ask my customers to leave them, if they ain’t in any hurry for them. It keeps my shop full, and besides, it makes folks that come in late see what they’ve missed. I notice that the minute a sold sign goes on a thing, it raises its value with most people. Barbara, it does my heart good to see you back again.”

“I’m glad to be back, too. How much are the little cakes?”

“Are you, my dear? Well, I’m glad to hear you say so. Twenty cents a dozen. Do you want them right away? You see, going away from home spoils lots of young folks, these days. Sending ’em away is like teaching them to tell time when they’re children. Of course it’s a matter of education, but after that they’re always on the outlook to see if the clock is fast or slow. And most of the young people who go away to college find it pretty slow in Auburn. I’m glad that *you* ain’t going to be discontented.”

Barbara looked guilty. She did not want to accept undeserved praise, and yet it was hard to be frank without being impolite.

“Of course I expect to miss college life, Miss Pettibone,” she began.

“Dear me, yes. I know what that will mean to you. Why, after I came back from Maine, twenty years ago, I was as lonesome for sea-air as though it had been a person. To this day I long for the tang of that salt wind. That’s why I use whale-oil soap—because the smell of the suds reminds me of the sea. Of course you’re going to miss college, Barbara.”

“I shall try to keep so busy that I won’t have time to be lonely,” said Barbara.

“That’s the right spirit. It won’t be hard to do, either, in your house. Your family is a large one, and your mother is put to it to do everything. Gassy ain’t old enough yet to be of much help, and it’s easier to keep a secret than a girl, in Auburn. I guess she’ll be glad to have you here to pitch in. It’s a good thing that you like housework.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about it. Housekeeping is not my forte. Of course I shall help mother, but I don’t intend to do that kind of work to the exclusion of all other. I intend to save the best of myself for my writing.”

Miss Pettibone looked properly awed.

“Well, it’s a wonderful thing to be able to write. I always said that you’d be an authoress, when I used to see those school compositions of yours that the ‘Conservative’ used to print. Why, Barbara, you come in here once when you was in Kindergarten school, and you set down on my front window-sill, and you says, ‘Miss Pettibone,’ you says, ‘I’ve written a pome.’ And I says, ‘Good fer you, Barbara, let’s hear it.’ So you smoothed down your white apron, and recited it to me. ‘It’s about my mother,’ you says; ‘and this is it:—

‘Oh, Mrs. Grafton,’ said Miss Gray,
‘Oh, do your children run away?’
‘Oh, no,’ said she, ‘they never do;
Because I always use my shoe.’

Then when you was through you explained to me that your ma didn’t really whip you. You just had to put in that part about the shoe to make it rhyme, you said. You was an awful old-fashioned child, Barbara!”

“My poetry was of about the same quality then that it is now,” laughed Barbara. “I’ll take the bread and the cakes with me, Miss Pettibone. This is like old Auburn days. I haven’t carried a loaf of bread on the street since I left home.”

“Well, paper bundles with the steam rising from them ain’t very swell, but sometimes the insides makes it worth while,” said the little baker. “Come in and see me often, Barbara, when it ain’t an errand. And give my love to your mother. She hasn’t been looking well lately, seems to me.”

Barbara smiled her good-by, and the little bell jingled merrily as the door swung shut.

“It’s always good to see Miss Pettibone,” she said to herself as she started up the quiet street. “She belongs in a story-book,—a little felt one with cheery red covers. It is queer about her, too. She is as provincial as any one in Auburn, and yet she is never commonplace.”

At the corner she encountered another of the characters of Auburn. This was Mrs. Kotferschmidt, the old German woman, whose husband had been for years the proprietor of the one boat-livery of the town. He had died during the past winter, and Barbara, meeting the widow, stopped to offer her condolences.

The old boatman had taught her to swim and to row, and her expressions of sympathy were genuine.

“Mother wrote me about your loss,” she said. “I was so sorry to hear about Mr. Kotferschmidt.”

The old lady rustled in her crape, but the stolid face in the black bonnet showed no sign of emotion.

“Oh, you don’t need to mind that,” she said politely. “He was getting old, anyways. In the spring I hired me a stronger man to help me mit the boats.”

Mrs. Kotferschmidt was the only passer Barbara met on her way home. Chestnut Street was practically deserted. The school-children’s procession had passed, and the business-men’s brigade had not yet started to move. The shaded avenue, with its green arch of trees overhead, stretched its quiet, leisurely way from Miss Pettibone’s shop to the Grafton house. A shaft of red sun cut its way through the thick leaves, and covered with a glorified light the square, substantial houses that bordered the road. A few children played upon the street, a dog was taking an undisturbed siesta on the sidewalk, and three snowy pigeons were cooing softly as they strutted along the gutter. It was all pretty and peaceful, but quiet, desperately quiet. Barbara’s thoughts went back to the college campus, crowded with chattering students, leisurely professors, hurrying messenger-boys, and busy employees, and full of activity at this hour. What if the Sphinx could see her now, or the Infant, or the dear House Plant, with that plebeian loaf of bread under her arm, on that deserted Western road? She knew what they would say; she could almost feel their glances of pity. Oh, it was a misfortune to be born in a place like Auburn,—a stultifying, crude, middle-western town. She choked down a lump in her throat that threatened her.

“I must get to work,” she thought. “Soon,—soon! I shall never be able to exist in Auburn, if I give myself time to think about it.”

CHAPTER III

THE THEORY OF PHILOSOPHY

IT was eight o'clock on a warm morning in June, a few days after Barbara's return. She rose from the table, where she had been breakfasting in solitude, and sought her mother.

It was not easy to find her. The girl looked into the kitchen, passed through her father's office, and ran upstairs to Mrs. Grafton's chamber—all without result.

"Jack!" she called, stopping at the door of her brother's room, and severely regarding the recumbent figure in bed. "Jack! I'd be ashamed of lying in bed so late! Where's mother?"

A muffled groan, a tossing of the long swathed figure—and silence.

"Jack! Tell me at least, if you know where she is."

The swathed figure rose up in majesty, and a pair of half-open, sleepy eyes became visible in a yawning face.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said Jack. "If you didn't actually wake me up to ask where mother is. What do you think I am! A supernatural dreamer, with visions of everything mother does floating around my bed? Think I can see all over the house with my eyes shut?"

Jack flounced back, and recomposed his long limbs for slumber.

"You ought to be up, anyway, by this time," declared Barbara, eyeing him with cold disapproval. "There are plenty of things that you could do to help."

She walked down the stairs, puzzling over the strange lack of system that she saw everywhere about her. There was Jack, lying at his ease in his room, with a superb disregard of responsibilities. She caught a glimpse of Gassy sitting in the dusty, disorderly library, reading the story from which she had been forcibly separated the evening before at bedtime. And finally, as she reëntered the dining-room, she stumbled over the Kid, who was arranging plates, taken from the uncleared dining-table, in a neat line on the carpet.

"Don't upset my ships!" he roared, as Barbara unconsciously crunched a butter-plate under her erring tread.

She stared in horror at the débris; then, sweeping the plates up, to the accompaniment of shrieks from the youngest Grafton, she sat down on a chair and took her struggling little brother on her lap.

"Charles Grafton, listen to me!" she said firmly but not angrily, remembering the pedagogic articles on "Anger and the Child," and the extracts which had filled a large college note-book. "Charles! What do you mean by doing such a dreadful thing as this? Answer, immediately."

It was while she was trying to understand his stormy articulations that Mrs. Grafton appeared, and sank down wearily in a chair near the door. The Kid immediately wriggled from his sister and ran to his mother, weeping.

“Just see what this boy has done!” cried Barbara. “I picked up half these plates from the floor. I never saw such a child! This table ought to have been cleared long ago, anyway.”

“Ellen can’t clear the table until breakfast is over,” said Mrs. Grafton, soothing the little boy in her arms. “Your father, Cecilia, Charles, and I had our breakfast as usual at quarter after seven. I imagine that Ellen was waiting for you to finish. Moreover, the gas-man came to look at the meter in the cellar, and she and I both went down with him. I just came up from there.”

Mrs. Grafton’s face settled into weary lines, and she sighed heavily. But Barbara did not notice. She was looking at the new egg-stain on the Wilton rug.

“Mother,” she said, in her fresh, energetic voice, “I really do think things might be managed more systematically here than they actually are. You know that, if there is one thing that we learn at college, it is the need of system. Now see here!” Barbara rose, and began to pace back and forth over the egg-stain. “We rise at six-thirty, an absurdly early hour, though perhaps necessitated by the work of a large family —”

“Yes,” interposed her mother, smiling through her pallor. “We *all* rise at half-past six.”

Barbara flushed. “Now, mother!” she said. “I know I haven’t done it these few days since I came home, but that was accidental. It shall not happen again. And Jack is dreadful about getting up!”

“Well,” said Mrs. Grafton, “this ‘system’?”

“Oh, yes. We should rise and finish breakfast by quarter-past eight. Then let Ellen do the dishes, of course, and all the work in the kitchen. Then make Jack get up and do the outside work, the lawns, sweeping the porches, and so forth, to get it out of the way early. Cecilia,—how I hate that nickname Gassy!—Cecilia ought to do her share. She should be taught to keep her room in order, and the library too, I think.”

“I won’t!” shouted an excitable little voice from the next room.

“Don’t talk that way, Cecilia,” called Barbara. “You’ll never improve, if you don’t do something in this world.”

“Why don’t *you* do something, then?” retorted the voice, “instead of telling mother how to run the house?”

A smile flickered upon Mrs. Grafton’s pale face, and died in another sigh. Barbara rose and shut the dining-room door.

“Now I”—she resumed—“I will guarantee to keep the lower floor looking fresh and clean,—not doing the sweeping, of course; and I will take care of my own room and Jack’s also. That will probably occupy me until half-past nine, after which I must spend my time until twelve in writing every minute, undisturbed. In this way, you see, we shall each have our own individual work,—David and the Kid being allowed to play,—and your burden will be considerably lessened. And all through a little application of system.”

“System!” echoed her mother, mechanically allowing Charles to slip from her lap.

“Yes,” said Barbara. “That leaves your room and David’s and the ordering for you.”

“My room, and David’s, and the ordering,” repeated Mrs. Grafton.

“Why, yes,” Barbara responded, looking curiously at her mother. “What is the matter, dear? You look so queer and white. Aren’t you well?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Mrs. Grafton. “Here is Susan coming to see you. Keep her out on the porch, Barbara, there is so much to do in the house.”

Left alone, Mrs. Grafton’s eyes filled, and her lips began to twitch nervously. “So much to do!” she repeated. She put her handkerchief up to her shaking lips. “What am I crying for?” she asked herself sternly. “I never used to be so foolish.” But her eyes kept filling and her lips twitching. She had a feeling that she was allowing herself to be weak. Then a sense of hopelessness in a domestic universe seemed to rise up and overwhelm her, and she wept again.

Suddenly she rose and hurried from the room, as she caught the sound of Jack’s boots on the stairs.

“I’m so glad to see you!” cried Barbara, pushing forward the best porch-chair to receive her guest. “And I’m especially glad that you came so early, for I shall be inaccessible after ten o’clock. My literary hours begin then.”

Susan fanned herself. “I just stopped a minute on my way to get some sewing-silk,” she said, “but I couldn’t help trying to get a glimpse of you again. How fresh and at leisure you look, Babbie. All your work done so soon?”

“No-o,” answered Barbara, a slight blush making her confession charming. “The fact is, Sue, I got up later than usual this morning, for some reason, and mother and I have been taking our time in discussing a new system of housekeeping, by which I am to lighten mother’s labors considerably.”

Susan looked wistful as she rocked back and forth. “I suppose your college training makes you accommodate yourself to all circumstances,” she said. “It must be hard to have to come to every-day living like this, after all the advantages you have had. I believe you know enough theory to fit into any situation.”

“Oh, no,” interposed Barbara, “not every one.”

“And all these four years,” went on Susan, her sweet face sobering, “I have just been doing housework, and trying to take dear mother’s place. My life has been bounded by dishpans and darning-cotton, and my associates have been housemaids and dressmakers. I haven’t improved at all.”

“Now you are fishing!” rejoined Barbara. “I must say, Susan, that as for not being a college girl, you show it less than any other girl I ever saw.”

“You flatter me,” declared Susan. “And oh, Barbara, I want to say that it’s awfully sweet of you to be willing to read with me an hour every day. It will help me ever so much, to get your trained point of view about things. I am so immature in my mental judgments, I know.”

“I am only too glad to help you,” said Barbara, heartily. “And really, Sue, you are a godsend to me, for you are the only girl in town that is congenial to me at all.”

Susan looked pleased. “That’s kind of you,” she answered. “Well, I must not keep you from helping your mother. By the way, how is she to-day? Everybody is saying how tired and worn out she looks, and is glad that you have come to share her burdens.”

“Why, mother’s all right,” replied Barbara. “How people will talk and gossip about nothing! Good-by, Sue dear. Take some roses on the way out. And let’s begin reading to-morrow.”

She paused a moment on the porch, looking with appreciative eyes at the pretty lawn, with its wealth of gay-colored nasturtiums and roses. As she passed through the hall, her eyes fell upon Gassy, still curled up in the chair, and absorbed in her book.

“Cecilia!” called Barbara, with all the authority of an elder sister. “You have done nothing all morning. Take the duster and dust the living-room immediately.”

The little girl’s legs kicked convulsively in protest. “Oh-h, how I hate you, Barbara!” she cried abstractedly. “I’ve only eight pages more.”

“Nearly ten o’clock!” sighed the girl, as she mounted the stairs to her room. “I shan’t get much done to-day.”

She made her bed with resigned patience, pinned an “Engaged” sign on her door, and fell to work. But even through the closed door came the busy sounds of an active household. A thump, thump, thump of the furniture downstairs in the living-room proclaimed that a vigorous sweeping was going on; the maddening click-click-clash outside drew her to the window to behold Jack sulkily guiding the lawn-mower. Just below her came the measured hum of the sewing-machine, and Barbara remembered, with a guilty start, that she had promised to finish those sheets herself, the day before. Finally, the sound of a toy drum and the martial tramp of little feet in the hall outside her door nerved her to action.

“What *are* you doing, children?” she cried, putting her head out through the door in despair.

David and the Kid stopped marching simultaneously, and eyed their big sister. “I’m Teddy Roosevelt,” said David, mildly, “and the Kid is all my Rough Riders.”

“Well, you must not ride here,” declared Barbara. “You are disturbing me and I can’t write. Go downstairs and play,—right away. You must not annoy me again.”

She shut her door, cutting a yell from the Kid into two sections. The martial sounds died away, and she was free to resume her thoughts. Their continuity seemed broken, however. It was some time before she took up her work again.

About an hour afterwards, as Barbara, with pleased expression and a flying pen, was half way through an enthusiastically philosophic peroration, she was disturbed by a sudden jar, as if some heavy weight had fallen, shaking her chair considerably. In a minute, footsteps sounded outside again, and some one timidly opened her door. It was David.

“Mother—” he began.

“I *cannot* be disturbed!” cried Barbara, frantically, waving her pen. “Run away, David; I simply must not be talked to!”

The little fellow, with a scared look, obeyed, and Barbara was once more left alone. It was not the conglomeration of sounds which now annoyed her,—it was the utter absence of the noises to which she had grown accustomed. The hum of the sewing-machine had abruptly ceased, and a sudden cry of “Jack, come here, quick!” had stopped the teasing whir of the grass-cutter. To Barbara there was something ominous in the sudden cessation.

“Well, it’s nearly twelve, anyway,” she exclaimed, shutting up her desk. “I’ll give up for this morning.”

She opened her door and went downstairs. No one in the halls; no one in the living-room. She turned toward the kitchen, but was arrested by the sound of her father’s voice coming from the sewing-room,—his voice, but strange, low, unnatural.

“There, Jack! That’s enough water. Slowly, Ellen. Stop crying, Charles. Mother’s all right.”

Barbara reached the door in one bound. “What—” she began, and stopped, while her shocked eyes took in the scene before her.

In a frightened, huddled group near her stood Gassy, David, and the Kid, staring at their mother, who lay on the floor perfectly quiet. Jack and Ellen stood by, with water and cloths, and the doctor was gently sponging away the blood from a cut on Mrs. Grafton’s temple. No one spoke to Barbara or noticed her.

As she crossed over, brushing the children from her path, her father looked up and saw the alarmed look on her face. “Your mother fainted, that’s all,” he said reassuringly. “She fell from the sewing-machine and cut herself. But she will be all right soon!”

Mrs. Grafton opened her eyes and faintly smiled.

“O mother dear!” cried Barbara. “O mother! It is my fault! I said I would do those sheets yesterday.”

Mrs. Grafton began to cry. “I don’t want to hear about sheets,” she sobbed weakly.

“No, dear, no, dear, you needn’t,” soothed the doctor, motioning Barbara away.

It was a new sensation to Barbara to stand back, while the doctor carried Mrs. Grafton upstairs to her room, and, aided only slightly, put her to bed. Mechanically she did as ordered, and followed her father out of the room, when her mother had fallen asleep, with a feeling that the end of the world had come, and that “system” had deserted the universe.

“Yes, it is a nervous break-down,” said the doctor, throwing himself into an easy-chair in the living-room. “I might have known that it would come, with the crushing weight of this household on her delicate shoulders. But your mother is so brave and bright that I didn’t realize what she has been doing.”

“And of course I’ve been away,” sighed Barbara.

“Well, *she* must go away now,” said Dr. Grafton, with determination. “A complete rest and change she must have, as soon as possible. And Barbara, my girl, you’ll have to take the helm.”

“Oh, I will,” she cried confidently. “I can and will gladly. I won’t let it crush *me*. I’ll reduce it all to a science.”

“H’m,” said her father. “This science is not taught at Vassar. However, I don’t see what else we can do. And your mother must go at once.”

Barbara lost her sense of the logical continuity of events during the next few days. Packing, planning, consoling small brothers, encouraging her mother, who was inclined to rebellion,—the minutes and hours flew. Before she realized, she stood one morning on the front porch with her arms around the sobbing Kid, resolutely forcing a smile, while she waved a cheerful farewell to the departing phaeton, containing a very pale mother and a very determined-looking father.

“Good-by, mother dear!” called little David, winking away his tears. “Come back soon.”

“Come back *well!*” added Barbara, cheerfully.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRACTICE

MAUD S. lengthened her measured tread an infinitesimally small distance, in response to the doctor's impatient command. But she did it sorrowfully, and with the air of yielding to a child's whim. Maud S. had been born and brought up in Auburn, and she had been educated to a stern sense of the proprieties. It was right and proper to forego appearances, and even to abandon one's dignity, if necessary, upon a call of mercy; but a trip to the station, with a trunk aboard, and a feeble passenger inside, certainly ought to be made decently and in order. Moreover, it was the first outing that Mrs. Grafton had taken for eight years, and the occasion was one that required proper observance. To be told to "Chirk up, Maud," right in front of Banker Willowby's house, was certainly irritating, and her excessive good-breeding showed in the forbearance with which she received the admonition. Maud S. made up in refinement and courtesy what she lacked in speed, and she showed her delicacy, even in her resentment, by the ladylike way in which she flapped her ears forward, in order that she might not hear the domestic conversation that was going on in the carriage behind her.

"I feel like a deserter from the regiment," sighed Mrs. Grafton. "I ought not to be going away from home."

"Well, I'm sorry to say it," responded the doctor, "but you certainly ought to be getting away from home just as fast as the train will carry you,—and Maud S. will condescend to take you to it. I can't get you out of Auburn too soon."

"It is wicked of me to leave the house and the children."

"It would be wicked of me not to *make* you leave the house and the children! You have had an undisturbed diet of house and children four years too long. No wonder your heart rebels. A fine kind of doctor I am, not to have detected this long ago! If it had been any patient but my wife, I should have been quick to discover it. But it's partly your own fault, Elizabeth; you had no business to be so uncomplaining about yourself. Even that excuse, though, doesn't keep me from realizing how brutally thoughtless I have been."

The mother-mind went back to the forlorn little group on the porch. "Poor children," she sighed; "I don't know how they are going to get along; if they only had some one to rely upon for their three meals a day! But Ellen is woefully inefficient, and she has to be handled with sugar-tongs, besides. The spring sewing isn't finished yet; the porch ought to be screened; David—poor little pale face—ought to be sent away before his hay fever begins; and the fruit-canning season is just at hand."

"Oh, *we'll* get along," assured the doctor, in the old, illogical way that means nothing, and yet is so comforting to a woman; "Barbara's young and strong, and full of energy. She'll put her hand to the helm, if need be."

"But this is her vacation, and I want her to enjoy it. She's worked hard at her books for four years. Besides, she is so full of her writing now—"

Dr. Grafton laughed,—a merry, contagious laugh, that rivaled his medical skill in winning his patients.

“I thought as much,” he said. “Getting admission to her room nowadays is attended with all the formalities of the Masonic ritual, and she goes about with ink on her fingers and ink on her nose. I suppose she is fired by the ambition of the Banbury Cross lady in making ‘music wherever she goes.’ Poor little Barbara; she’s taking herself so very seriously, these days! She feels that she must gush forth a stream of living water for thirsty mankind, forgetting, dear little lass, that she is not a spring yet, but only a rain-barrel. Four years of college have filled her, but she doesn’t realize that now is the time to keep all the bung-holes shut. I suppose we must all pass through that think-we-are-artists disease, but Barbara seems to have an aggravated case.”

“She has been encouraged in it a good deal.”

“Yes, I know she has,—more’s the pity. A prodigy now and then must be encouraging to a college faculty, but it’s a bit hard on the prodigy herself, and harder still on the prodigy’s family. Intellectual lights ought to be hidden under a ton, instead of a bushel, so it wouldn’t be so easy to dig them out. I believe, myself, that Barbara *has* a fine mind, and unusual ability, but, dear heart, she’s only a child! She has to live before she can write.”

“I haven’t dared tell her that yet,” said her mother; “I don’t want even to seem to discourage her. And you know how confident Barbara is.”

“I wish she were a bit less *self*-confident; she’s bound to be disappointed, and I’m afraid that she sets her hopes so high that the fall, when it comes, will be a hard one. I wish, too, that she wasn’t quite so serious about it all. Her saving grace of humor seems to have utterly deserted her at this trying period of her existence.”

“That’s a way that humor sometimes has,” said Mrs. Grafton. “The very jolliest, drollest woman I ever knew confided to me once that her sense of humor had entirely deserted her, at one time. She had been out sailing with the man who afterward became her husband, and during the course of the evening he had done a little love-making. ‘He called me Sweetie,’ she said to me. ‘Think of it! Sweetie! Why, it’s as bad as Pettie, or Lambie!’ And the worst of it was that it didn’t even seem funny to me until after I thought it over at home. ‘When love comes in the door, humor flies out of the window,’ she said; and I suppose it may be the same way with genius.”

“If Barbara’s genius was armed with a broom instead of a pen, it would be better for her,” said her father. “And that is why I am glad, for her sake as well as yours, that you are going away. The girl isn’t all dreamer; she has a practical compartment in that brain of hers, and your absence will give her a chance to open the doors and windows of it, and sweep the cobwebs out. Oh, I’m not worried about *Barbara*,—she’ll rise to occasions. And *we’ll* get along beautifully. If *you’ll* only come back to us well and strong —”

Maud S. made an unnecessary clatter over the macadam road, in order not to hear the rest of the sentence. The anxious note in her master’s voice swallowed up the last trace of her resentment.

In the meantime the little group on the Grafton porch had turned back into the house. Jack had taken his fishing-tackle, and gone off down the dusty road without a word. David, with a plaintive expression on his thin little face, had turned to his beloved “Greek Heroes” for comfort. The Kid’s tears had been dried by Barbara’s handkerchief and two raisin cookies, and he had gone to the sand-pile to play. Gassy, alone, was unaccounted for. She had slipped away from the porch when her mother was assisted into the carriage, and was not in sight when the others turned back into the house.

“Picking up, first,” sighed Barbara, as she came back into the big living-room, which seemed unusually untidy and cheerless. “Then the bed-making and the chamber-work, planning the meals, and ordering the supplies. I think I shall write out all the menus for Ellen,—that will be the easiest way.” She was putting the room in order, and her hands flew with her thoughts. “I mean to do everything systematically. I want to prove to father that, college fits a girl for anything,—even practical life, and if I keep the house in order, discipline the children, and have some excellent meals, I think he’ll be convinced. It will take some time to get things started, but I believe that after I have them systematized, they will go smoothly, and I shall have plenty of time left for my writing. Mother always spent so much time on the unnecessary little things; no wonder she went to pieces—poor mother!”

Something dimmed Barbara’s tender eyes, but she steadied her lips and went on with her plans:—

“One thing I intend to change, and that is having dinner at noon. It’s horribly unhygienic, and old-fashioned, too. I’ll speak to Ellen about it.”

She pulled open the door of the hall-closet to find a dust-cloth. A huddled pile of pink gingham, with two long, black legs protruding, lay prone upon the floor. The head was hidden.

Barbara put an arm about the place which seemed to mark a waist in the gingham. “What’s the matter, dear?” she asked tenderly.

There was a long-drawn breath, and an unmistakable snuffle. Then Gassy’s voice answered coldly,—

“Nuthin’.”

“Well, don’t lie in here in the dark. Come out with me, little sister.”

Gassy came, slowly and reluctantly. She rose from the floor, back foremost, keeping her face assiduously turned away from her sister.

“I don’t like to see you cry—”

“Wasn’t crying,” stiffened Gassy, with a sob.

“I mean I don’t like to have you tucked away in here, when I need you outside. I want your help, little girl.”

“What for?” demanded Gassy, suspiciously.

“Oh, just to have you about, to talk to,” said Barbara. “Come on out with me, and help me plan the lunch.”

“Lunch? Are we goin’ to have a picnic?” asked Gassy, seating herself with her proud little face turned toward the window.

“No; but we’re going to have dinner at night while mother’s away. And Cecilia, how would you like to turn vegetarian?”

“Just eat vegetables?”

“Yes; it’s much more hygienic.”

“No meat at all?”

“No; we eat altogether too much flesh.”

“It would be cheaper to board at a livery stable,” said Gassy.

“And healthier, too, I think. I’ve gone without meat voluntarily for three whole years, and I have been in perfect physical condition. It’s a help mentally, too. And diet isn’t restricted if you substitute eggs and nuts and fruit for meat.”

Nuts and fruit sounded good to Gassy. “All right,” she said; “I’d like to try it. But we can’t do it yet awhile; we’re working out a bill at the butcher’s. His wife broke her collarbone last year, and he’s paying the doctor’s bill in meat. Besides, what will Ellen say?”

Barbara wondered, herself. But she was too proud to admit her foreboding.

“Ellen draws her salary” (college settlement lessons forbade her using the term “wages”) “for following our wishes—”

“Then she doesn’t earn it,” interrupted Gassy.

“And I’m sure she could find no objection to any decision of ours as to the best kind of food. Will you ask her to come here, Cecilia, as soon as she gets her dishes washed? I’ll have the menu ready for her by that time.”

Miss Parloa’s cook-book, which Barbara took down from the shelf to assist her in her task, was not a vegetarian; but memories of her self-imposed college meals still lingered. By the time Ellen’s lumbering step was heard in the back hall the menu was ready, neatly written upon the first page of a new little blank-book.

“I wuz down in the cellar,” stated Ellen, “and I can’t leave my work to come every time I’m wanted. Just holler the things down to me. Me and your ma has an understanding about that.”

“If you come in here after the dish-washing every morning, Ellen, you won’t have to make an extra trip upstairs,” said Barbara, in the approved college-settlement tone. “I have no desire to demand unnecessary service from you. I shall always have the menu for the day ready for you at this hour. This is for to-day: while mother is gone we shall have dinner at night, and luncheon at noon.”

Ellen’s expression was not wholly encouraging, as she took the little book. It read:—

Cantaloupes with ice.

Eggs in tomato cases.

Rice patés.

Thin bread and butter.

Parmesian balls on lettuce, with French dressing.

Olives.

Wafers.

Mint sherbet.

Nuts.

“Cantyloops! What’s them?” demanded Ellen.



CANTYLOOPS! WHAT'S THEM?

Barbara explained.

“Oh, mush-melons! Why didn't you say so? Mush-melons won't be ripe fer a month. What's that next thing?”

“That's a new way of serving eggs,” said Barbara; “the recipe's in the book. It's simple, and very pretty.”

“You can't serve 'em that way in this town,” grumbled Ellen. “Tomatoes don't come in cases,—they come in baskets. And as long as there's a dish in the house where I'm working, I won't never set a tomato-basket on the table. What's rice payts!”

“The recipes are all in the book: I've marked the pages,” said Barbara, with dignity. “Of course, Ellen, if cantaloupes are not in the market, we'll have to substitute something else. Or perhaps we could get along without that course.”

“We might have the ice, without the melons,” suggested Gassy.

Barbara glanced up suspiciously, but the sharp little face was innocent.

“That is all, then, Ellen. The recipes are given in full, and you will have no trouble in following them. I have ordered all the necessary materials. The rice and the cheese will be here in half an hour. Miss Cecilia will show you where the mint-bed is in the garden.”

Ellen's large freckled face took on an expression of astonishment. “*Who* will?” she asked.

“Miss Cecilia,” responded Barbara.

Ellen's eyes followed Barbara's glance. "Oh, *Gassy!*" she said. "Didn't know who you meant, before. Say, Barbara Grafton, I can't never get up a meal like this, with no meat, and on ironing-day, too. Your ma never has sherbet but Sundays, and then Jack turns the crank fer me. And nuts! Nuts won't be ripe till October."

"The nuts are already ordered," said Barbara, turning away. "That will do, Ellen. I'm going upstairs now to do the chamber-work, and after that I shall go to my writing. I don't want to be disturbed. If any one comes to see me, say that I'm not at home."

"I'll holler if I want you," said Ellen, grimly.

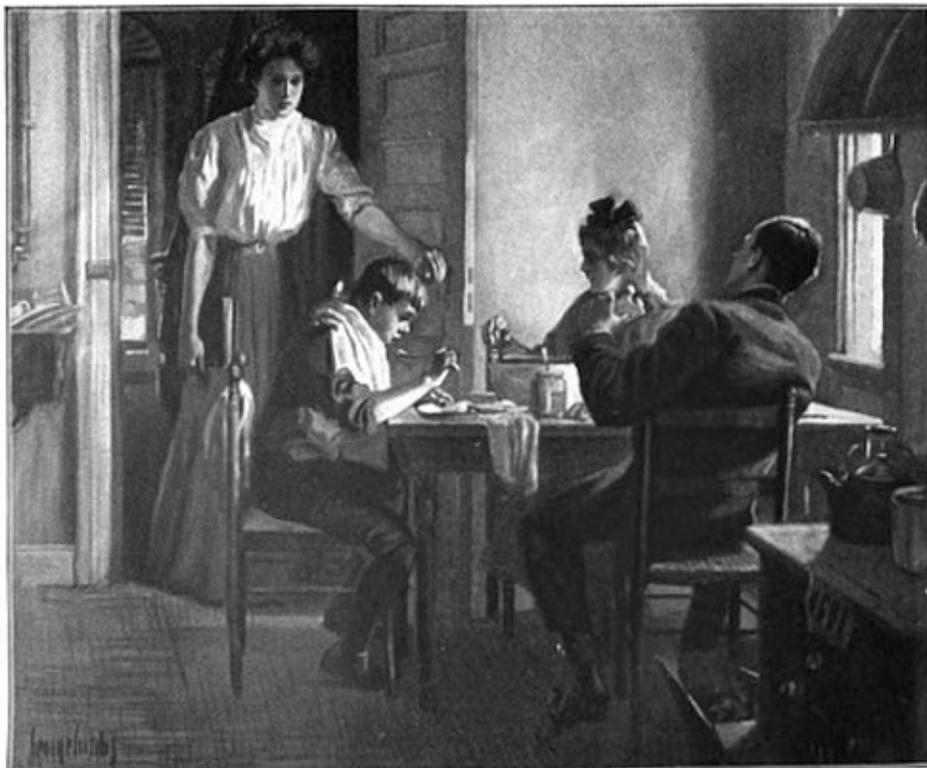
"No, don't do that, because it breaks into what I am doing. I shall be downstairs again before luncheon-time, and you can tell me then anything you need. Cecilia, I trust you to see that I am not disturbed for two hours. Don't call me before twelve o'clock, no matter what happens."

It was long past noon when the last sheet of "The Spirit of the Eternal Ego" slipped from Barbara's hand, and the pen was dropped. She glanced up at the little clock near the vine-wreathed window. "Ten minutes of one!" she exclaimed; "I must have missed the din—luncheon bell. But my essay is done—hurray!"

She hurried down the stairs. The living-room was empty and the porch deserted. The dining-room table had not been set. In the kitchen the sink was piled high with dirty dishes, dish-towels hung over every chair, and a trail of grease-spots ran from pantry to back door. The kitchen table was pulled up before a window, and about it were seated David, with some canned peaches, Gassy, with a saucer full of ground cinnamon and sugar, and Jack, with a massive sandwich of cold beefsteak and thick bread. On the table were a bowl of cold baked beans, a saucer of radishes, a dish of pickles, and a bottle of pink pop.

Barbara shuddered. "Where's Ellen?" she asked.

Jack looked up. "Ah, the authoress!" he exclaimed. "I judge from your appearance upon the scene of action that the fire of genius has ceased to rage in unabated fury."



“Why are you eating in here? Where’s Ellen?” Barbara repeated.

“In reply to your first question, to save carrying; in reply to your second, I canna say. I know not where she went; I only know where she deserves to go.”

“Has she gone away to stay?”

“In the language of the housewife, she has ‘left,’” said Jack. “I hurried home from the river, bringing two thirty-pound trout to grace the festal board, an hour ago. I found that if there was to be any festal board, I must supply both the festives and the boarding. The gas-stove had ceased to burn; the kitchen was still. Ellen had flown the coop. I was for calling you, but Gassy, here, was obdurate. She said that you had left orders with your private secretary that, come what might, you were not to be disturbed. Luckily, father telegraphed that he was not coming home until to-morrow. So, with the aid of my little family circle, I prepared the repast which you see before you. It was dead easy: each one took out of the ice-box his favorite article of food, and for a wonder, no two happened to want the same article. Fall to, yourself, fair lady; there is still some cold boiled cabbage in the refrigerator, and you have earned it after your valiant fight as bread-winner for the family this morning!”

“Stop your nonsense, Jack. Didn’t Ellen make any explanation of her going?”

“Like the girl in the ballad, ‘She left a note behind.’ It was written on the other side of a wonderful menu, which probably was the cause of her leaving. I don’t wonder it scared her off. The note lies there on the table.”

Barbara picked it up. The page had been torn from the blank-book, and on it was scrawled:—

“i am leving youse. my folks have been at me to come home, and i have desided not to stay where i cant holler, also i cant get no dinner like this, youse can pay my wages to the boy that comes for my close.”

Barbara sank hopelessly into a chair. There seemed nothing further to be said upon the subject of Ellen.

“Where’s Charles?” she inquired.

“Don’t *you* know?” said Jack. “I haven’t seen him since I came home. We thought you must have sent him on an errand, when he didn’t appear at noon. The Kid always turns up regularly at meal-time.”

“I haven’t seen him since mother left,” replied Barbara. “Then I sent him to the sand-pile. I haven’t an idea where he is.”

“You told him he couldn’t go to a picnic,” said David, dreamily.

“Why, no, I didn’t.”

“But you did, Barbara. He came and knocked on your door while you were writing, and told you he wanted to go. And you said no. Then he hollered that he thought you were”—David hesitated delicately over the epithet—“a mean old thing; that he hadn’t asked you to let him have a picnic before since mother had left. And you told him to run away,—that you were busy.”

“Did I?” asked Barbara, trying to remember. She had a faint recollection of such an interruption, but

she was never sure of what happened during the hours which she spent in the throes of authorship. "How long ago was it?"

"'Bout eleven o'clock."

Barbara looked worried. "I can't think where he could have gone," she said. "Have you looked everywhere in the house?"

"Everywhere we could think of," responded Jack. "Don't worry, Barb; he'll show up as soon as he gets hungry. Disappearance is his long suit."

"Does he often run away like this?"

"Every time the spirit moves him. Not even a letter-press could keep him down when the wanderlust seizes him. Sometimes he is gone for hours. Punishment doesn't seem to do him much good, either, though I must say he never gets enough of it to make any impression. If he were mine, I should test the magic power of a willow switch."

"How do you find him?"

"Oh, he comes wandering in, like the prodigal son, after he has fed upon husks for a while. Maybe he has been unable to face the ordeal of a separation from Ellen, and has gone with her."

"I wish he hadn't gone while father and mother are away. I feel, somehow, as though it were my fault."

"Now stop worrying, Barbara; he'll turn up. My only fear is that you'll receive him with open arms when he arrives. Just you plan to be a little severe on him, and we'll cure him of his habit before mother gets home."

But in spite of Jack's reassurance, Barbara was troubled, and as she cleared away the remains of the children's feast, she caught herself looking out of the window, and listening for the click of the gate. At two o'clock, when the last dish was put away, the Kid had not returned; at three he was not in sight; at four none of the neighbors had seen him; at five she left the anxious seat at the front window for the kitchen, with reluctance; and at six it was a worried-looking Barbara who greeted Jack's return from baseball practice.

"Hasn't the little rascal turned up yet?" asked the boy. "I think I'll go out and take a look at some of his favorite haunts. Now, Barbara, if he comes while I'm away, don't you play prodigal with him!"

The dinner was eaten, and cleared away. At seven there was no Kid. At eight the other children went to bed without him. At nine o'clock Jack returned with no news. Even he showed anxiety as Barbara met him at the door with expectant face.

"Nobody has seen a glimpse of him," he reported. "I've been the round of his intimates, and to all of his pet resorts, and I've scoured the town. I don't know what else to do."

There was a noise on the front porch. A slow, halting step came up the stairs. Barbara rushed toward the door.

"Careful, now," cautioned Jack. "That's the Kid, all right Don't you greet him with outstretched arms."

But the caution was not necessary. All of the pent-up anxiety turned into wrath as Barbara became sure

of the step. Her heart hardened toward the small offender as she hastily made her plans for his reception. In response to the second knock at the door, she answered the summons.

“Who’s there?” she asked, without opening the screen.

“It’s me,” said a still, small voice.

“What do you want?”

“Want to come in.”

“Well, you can’t come in. I don’t let strange men into my house at this time of night.”

There was a pause on the front step as the little lad wearily shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Then he knocked again.

“Want to get in.”

Jack looked at Barbara, warningly. “I can’t let you in,” she said; “I’m alone in the house; my father and mother are away from home, and I never let strangers in when I’m alone.”

“I’m not strangers; I’m Charles.”

“Charles wouldn’t be out at this time of night,” remarked Barbara, impersonally.

“I’m hungry,” said the Kid.

There was a wistfulness in the voice that touched all the mother in the girl. “Well, I never turn any tramp away hungry,” she said; “I’ll give you some bread and milk, but then you’ll have to go.”

She unlocked the door, and surveyed her small brother chillingly. The Kid had evidently made a day of it. His cap was gone, his shoestrings were untied, his face and hands were streaked with dirt, and one shirt-waist sleeve was torn away.

“Goodness, how dirty!” she said. “There is a place set at the table for our own little boy, but he’s a clean child, and I can’t let you have it as you are now. You’ll have to wash, first. Go up those stairs, and you’ll find a bathroom, the first room to the left. Wash your hands and face, and then come down. I’ll give you something to eat before you go.”

The Kid looked at Barbara steadily. Wonderment, doubt, and understanding were expressed in turn on his round face. He turned without a word, his small fat legs climbed the stairway, and his dirty little figure disappeared inside the bathroom door.

His sister for the first time ventured a look at Jack.

“Bravo, Bernhardt!” he said.

“I hated to do it,” said Barbara. “But I know that he deserved it, and I feel sure that it was the right thing. A psychological punishment is so much better than a scolding or a whipping. And Charles realized what it meant; did you see his dear puzzled little face take on contrition as he began to understand my meaning? Mother says that he is a hard child to manage, but I don’t see why. He responds so readily to an appeal to his reason.”

There was a sound in the upper hall. From the bathroom door floated down the voice of the Kid:—
“Missus,” he called; “hey, Missus! There ain’t no soap in here.”

CHAPTER V THE "IDGIT"

THERE were two newspapers in Auburn. The "Transcript" was one of the oldest newspapers in the middle West, and it well upheld the dignity of its years. It was Republican as to politics, conservative as to opinion, and inclined to Methodism as to religion. It prided itself upon the fact that in the fifty years of its existence it had never changed its politics or its make-up, and had never advanced its subscription price or a new theory. It represented Auburn in being slow, substantial, and self-satisfied.

The "Ledger" was a new arrival in Auburn, and had not yet proved its right to live. It had a flippant tone that barred its entrance to the best families, and Auburn had never given it the official sanction that would insure its permanent success. The difference in the spirit of the two papers might be seen by a glance down the personal columns of each. The "Transcript" was wont to state in dignified terms that "Joseph Slater departed yesterday for Jamestown." The "Ledger" would announce flippantly, "Joe Slater went to Jimtown yesterday. What's up, Joe?" This was spicy, all Auburn agreed, but it savored of vulgarity, and the old residents clung to their old paper, in spite of the fact that the new sheet was enterprising, clean, and up-to-date. The "Ledger" catered to advertisements; the "Transcript" paid special attention to the obituary column. And the citizens of Auburn subscribed to the "Transcript," and borrowed the "Ledger."

On the morning of the sixteenth of July the "Transcript" contained two items more than the "Ledger." The first of these was headed:

AUBURN AUTHORESS!

Miss Birdine Bates of this city contributes some lines upon the death of little Martha Johnson.

Dearest parents, from the Heavens
Comes this message unto thee,—
Do not weep for little Mattie,
Thou art not so glad as she.

There were six Johnson children
Living on the fruits of heaven.
But the winged angels asked for
Still another, which made seven,—

And they held out beckoning fingers,
Saying, "Little Mattie, come!"
In a dainty old-rose casket
Little Mattie was took home.

There is no hearth, however tended,
But one dead lamb is there;
And Martha will be greatly missed
For one who was so small and spare.

But in the crystal, opal heavens,
Clustering near the golden gate,
Her and all the other Johnsons
For her family sit and wait.

Cheer up, mother, sister, brothers,
And the pastor of her church,

For though Martha's joined the angels,
She leaves none in the lurch.

The other item was not poetic. It was in the advertisement column, and read:—

WANTED: immediately. A good cook. Must be neat, willing, honest, and experienced. No laundry work. References required. Only competent workers need apply. Address X. Y. Z., this office.

"I saw your advertisement in the paper this morning," said Miss Bates, stopping at the doctor's gate in the early evening.

Barbara sat on the porch step, her bright head drooped upon the vine-covered railing. It had been sweeping-day, and the unused muscles of her back were protesting against their unaccustomed exercise. Perhaps it was weariness that sent the querulous note into her voice.

"How did you know it was mine?"

"Why, I happened to meet David on the way to the 'Transcript' office this morning. I knew that Ellen left you several days ago, so I put two and two together. Besides, my dear, I would have known for other reasons. The advertisement showed that it was written by an inexperienced housekeeper."

"How?" asked Barbara.

"Nobody ever advertises for help in Auburn. Newspapers aren't much good for that. If you want a girl, all you have to do is to spread the news among your acquaintances."

"That isn't hard, with *you* to help," muttered Gassy, from the step above.

"What's that, Cecilia? Oh, I thought you spoke to me.—And they will be on the outlook for you. It is much cheaper than advertising. How are you getting along without Ellen?"

Barbara thought of the half-done potatoes, the broken water-pitcher, and the soda-less biscuits that had been incidents of the day. But she was in no humor for a confession to Miss Bates.

"Pretty well," she said.

"That's good. You know so little about housework, Barbara, that I wouldn't have been surprised if you were missing her. Not that you're to blame for that. Lots of people set a college education above home training, nowadays. Just about noon to-day I smelled something burning, and I said to myself, 'There goes Barbara Grafton's dinner.' But of course it might have come from some other kitchen. The wind came straight this way, though."

"Yes?" said Barbara, wearily.

"Is it true that you've turned vegetarian? I was at the butcher's this morning, and Jack came in and got a steak. I knew that your pa is away, but I thought that one steak wouldn't do for your family. I happened to mention it to the butcher, and he said that your meat orders were falling off lately. So I just wondered if you had given up eating meat."

A long, thin arm, extended from the step above, thrust Barbara vigorously in the side. In the dusk the action was hidden from the visitor, but Barbara knew well its purport. She was being enjoined to tell nothing to Miss Bates.

"Our appetites for meat seem to be falling off this hot weather," she returned guardedly.

“Of course it’s a lot cheaper to live that way,” said the visitor. “Saves cooking, too. And you won’t have time to do much cooking if all these reports I hear of your starting a benevolent society are true.”

There was no response from Barbara.

“If you’re thinking of going into club-work, you’d better join our lodge,—the Ancient Neighbors. Maybe you’d be elected to office. Mrs. Beebe, the old Royal Ranger, resigned three months ago, and Miss Homer, the new one, ain’t giving satisfaction. She don’t seem to be capable of learning the ritual. She got the meeting open last night, and forgot what came next, and had to send for Mrs. Beebe to get it shut. If you have any memory for rituals, Barbara, maybe I could get you in for office.”

Barbara murmured her thanks. “I haven’t much time for club-work, though, now,” she said.

“I have,” said a small voice. Gassy’s fist, inclosing an imaginary missile, shook in the direction of the unconscious visitor.

“I expect that your literary work takes up most of your time.”

Barbara caught her breath sharply. How much had that dreadful woman heard?

“Of course you may not *be* writing, but I have had my suspicions about it, since I met you with that fat envelope with the Century Company’s stamp, a week ago. I knew that you had done a bit of writing at school, and I put two and two together, and said to myself, ‘Barbara Grafton’s gone to writing.’ I couldn’t help wondering if the ‘Century’ had taken it, or sent it back. Of course, being an author myself, I’m always interested in budding genius. What is it, Barbara, poetry or fiction?”

Out of the shadow of the porch vines came Gassy’s sharp little voice. “Jack cut *your* poetry out of the paper this morning, Miss Bates,” she said.

“Did he?” said Miss Bates, delightedly. “I didn’t know Jack was so appreciative as that. I’m afraid the poetry wasn’t as good as some I have written. But I felt it—every word of it—when I wrote it. And I suppose Jack liked its tone of sincerity. That is my highest ambition: not to win fame or money, but to be cut out and carried in the vest-pocket.”

“He said,” giggled Gassy, from behind the vines, “that he couldn’t have the sanctity of the home invaded,”—the imitation of Jack’s inflection was perfect,—“an’ that he wouldn’t suffer our minds,—David’s and mine, he meant,—to be c’rrupted, so he cut it out; but I think he sent it to mother. We always save all the funny things for her, to cheer her up, now she’s sick.”

The darkness hid the terrible expression upon Miss Bates’s face, but it did not conceal the frigidity of her tones as she took her elbows from the doctor’s gate. “Your sister’s got a job in giving you some of her college culture, Gassy Grafton,” she said to the small fold of light gingham which showed alongside the vine-clad porch post. She looked back over her shoulder to fire her last volley of ammunition.

“I hope it will *amuse* your mother,” she said. “If you’d all been a little less selfish about using her like a hack-horse when she was at home, you wouldn’t have to be sending jokes to her at a sanitarium, now.”

“What on earth did you tell her that for?” asked Barbara, as Miss Bates swept around the corner.

“She deserved it. She needn’t pick on you!”

“But you can’t give people all they deserve, in this world, little sister.”

“No, not always,” said Gassy. “But I always do when I can.”

Miss Bates’s opinion about the value of newspaper advertising seemed to be well founded. A week passed without an applicant for the vacant position in the Grafton kitchen. Barbara grew tired and cross and discouraged. The weather turned hot, and the sunny kitchen on the east side of the house seemed to harbor all the humidity of the day. The nurse at the sanitarium wrote that Mrs. Grafton was not improving as rapidly as she could wish. David’s hay fever began, and he went wheezing around the house in a state of discomfort that wrung Barbara’s sympathetic heart. The writing and the precious study-hour had to be abandoned. So it was with a feeling of relief that the over-worked girl saw a strange woman come through the office gate one morning. The newcomer was not at all prepossessing. Hair, eyes, and skin were of the uncertain whity-yellow of a peeled banana. Her shirt-waist bloused in the back as well as the front, and she had yet to learn the æsthetic value of sufficient petticoats. She stared uncertainly at Barbara as the latter opened the side door.

“Did you wish to see any one?” asked Barbara, after a painful silence.

“Yes, mam,” said the girl.

“Whom do you want?”

There was another long pause, during which the girl shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Then she said, “The lady, mam.”

“Did you come to inquire about a position?”

The young woman evidently concentrated her energy upon the question. Her mind moved so slowly and jerkily that Barbara, watching the process, was reminded of the working of an ouija board. She would not have been surprised to hear the girl squeak. But the query was beyond the newcomer. It was plain that vernacular must be tried.

“Do you want a place?”

The girl brightened a shade. “Yes, mam.”

“Can you cook?”

“No, mam.”

“Wait upon the table?”

“No, mam.”

“Sweep and dust?”

“No, mam.”

“Can’t you bake at all?”

“No, mam.”

“Have you never cooked?”

“No, mam.”

“Well, what can you do?”

The whity-yellow girl brightened again. It was evident that this time she was to vary her reply.

“I kin milk, mam.”

Two hours later, Jack surveyed the new acquisition through the porch window. “I see we have an Angel of the House,” he said to Barbara, who had stretched her weary length in the hammock. “How came she here?”

“She just blew in.”

“In answer to your advertisement?”

“No, she had never seen it.”

Jack took another critical look through the window. “She doesn’t give the impression of being overweighted with intelligence. And she’s certainly not beautiful. Has her color run in the wash, or was she always of that gentle hue? But appearances must be deceitful; she’s a paragon of cleverness, if she fills the bill for you. I suppose she is a wonderful cook?”

Barbara shook her head.

“Neat?”

“She doesn’t look so.”

“Well, willing?”

“I haven’t discovered yet.”

“Honest, anyway?”

“I don’t know anything about her morals.”

Jack assumed a momentary air of distress. Then he drew a long sigh of relief as he remarked, “Well, I *know* she’s experienced. You said no others need apply!”

The hammock’s motion stopped, and Barbara lay ominously silent for a minute. Then the pent-up feeling of the past week burst forth in her reply:—

“John Grafton, I don’t know one earthly thing about that girl! She’s done farm-work all her life. She doesn’t know how to cook. She never heard of rice or celery. She never has seen a refrigerator! She’s afraid of the gas-stove. She wouldn’t know what I meant if I asked her about references. She can’t do anything but milk. She isn’t one single thing that I advertised for, or hoped for, or wanted! But maybe she can learn. And I’m so tired, and hot, and discouraged, and I’ve spoiled so many things!”

And for once in his life Jack understood, and forbore.

“I’ve seen a good many kinds of imbecility in my life,” said Jack, a week later. “But never one to equal hers.

She is willing, she is active,
She is sober, she is kind,
But she *never* looks attractive,
And she *hasn’t* any mind.

She was born stupid, achieved stupidity, and had stupidity thrust upon her,—all three. I found her pouring water on the gas-stove to put out the burner, the other day. She’ll have us all gas-fixiated, if we don’t watch out.”

“That was several days ago,” laughed Barbara. “She’s developed a stage beyond that, now. In fact, she’s devoted to the gas-stove. I can hardly prevail upon her to turn it off at all. She announced to me yesterday that it was the handiest thing she ever saw,—that you ‘only had to light it once a day, and fire all the time.’ Think what our gas-bill is likely to be under her tender ministrations!”

“Her awe of it is evidently great,” said Jack. “She asked Gassy this morning if she was named after the stove. ‘I don’t wonder they named you that,’ she said; ‘I ain’t never seen nothing like it. W’y, if I wuz to go home and tell ’em I turned on a spit, and there wuz the fire, they’d say I wuz a liar!’”

“She’s an idgit!” ejaculated Gassy; “a born idgit!”

Gassy’s epithet clung. It was used by the family with bated breath and apprehensive glance, but still it was used. No other title seemed appropriate after that was once heard, and her Christian name sank into oblivion from disuse. It was never employed except in her presence. And the Idgit certainly earned her title. She put onions in the rice-pudding; she melted the base off of the silver teapot by setting it on the stove; she cut up potatoes peeling and all, for creamed potatoes, explaining that “some liked ’em skinned, an’ some didn’t”; she left the receiver of the telephone hanging by its cord for hours, until the doctor’s patients were desperate, and so many complaints poured in at the central office that a man was sent to repair damages; she turned the hose on the walls and floor of the kitchen to facilitate scrubbing, until the whole room was deluged, and overflowed like the Johnstown flood; she answered the doorbell by calling through the dining-room and the front hall that “no one’s to home”; she put the bread sponge in the oven of the range, and then built a fire above it to “raise it quick” (the oven was full of burned paste before Barbara discovered the time-saving device); she ladled the gold-fish out of the aquarium to feed them, and left the four red, dead little corpses on the library mantel. “They’re too pretty to sling out,” she said.

Barbara wavered between exasperation and amusement during the twenty-four hours of the day. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with her,” she confided to her father one evening. “I thought that intelligence was a part of the make-up of every human being; but Addie either has no place for it in her identity, or else the place that is there is empty. I gave her a recipe yesterday,—how she ever learned to read is beyond my comprehension,—that called for ‘six eggs beaten separately.’ Addie emptied one from its shell, beat it, emptied another, beat that, and followed the same proceeding with the whole six.”

“I can tell something funnier than that,” said Dr. Grafton. “I telephoned over here from the livery stable this afternoon, and asked Addie to ‘hold the phone’ until I could read a message to her. Central rang off before I could read it, and then I couldn’t get connections again. So I came over home to give it to her, twenty minutes later, and found her obediently still holding the receiver.”

“The last teller of tales has the best chance,” chuckled Jack. “What message did you give the Idgit to give Miss Bates when she called here yesterday?”

Barbara considered. "That I was in, but that I was engaged, I think," she said finally.

"She gave it, all right! She told Miss Bates that you *were* at home, but that you were going to be married. Thanks to Miss Bates's activity and interest, the report is widely circulated throughout Auburn."

Barbara groaned.

"Don't worry over it," said her father. "The fact that Miss Bates is standing sponsor for the story will destroy its danger."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about that," responded Barbara. "What is the report of my betrothal to an unknown, and therefore harmless, man, as compared with the problem of the Idgit? I don't *want* her, I can't *keep* her, and yet how am I to get rid of her?"

"Maybe she'll leave; she told me her family wanted her back," said Gassy, hopefully.

"I can't see what for," said Barbara, "unless it is to kill chickens. That is the one thing she has done without blunder or assistance, since she stepped over our threshold. And unless Addie's family are given over wholly to a diet of fowl, I fail to see how she could be of any use to them."

But relief from the Idgit came sooner than was expected. In the middle of an afternoon of canning raspberries, Mrs. Willowby came to inquire about Mrs. Grafton's health. Barbara slipped off her berry-stained apron, sighed over the fruit-stained nails that no amount of manicuring would whiten, and dabbed some powder on her shiny face. Then she went into the living-room to greet her guest.

Mrs. Willowby was one of the few residents who reconciled Barbara to Auburn. Refinement was her birthright, and in her gentle voice, simple manner, and fine breeding were combined all the aristocracy of old Auburn, and none of its pettiness; all the progress of new Auburn, and none of its crudeness. The miseries of kitchen-work were forgotten, as the two dropped into the dear familiar talk of the college world, that partook of neither servants nor weather, recipes nor house-cleaning.

"It's a hundred years since I have talked Matthew Arnold with any one," sighed Barbara. "No, perhaps two months would be nearer the truth. But it *seems* like a hundred years."

"Why *don't* you?" asked Mrs. Willowby.

"Just now, I haven't time," said Barbara; "but if I had all the time in the world, there wouldn't be any one to talk to."

"Why not your father and mother?"

"Father and mother! Why, father doesn't know poetry,—except Riley and Bret Harte; and mother doesn't care for it."

Mrs. Willowby's sweet brown eyes twinkled. "You're joking with me, Barbara."

"No, I'm in earnest."

"You dear little girl! Are you such a stranger to your own home people? I don't believe that Matthew Arnold ever wrote anything that your mother doesn't know. Where she gets time, with all her multitudinous duties, to love Shelley, and live Browning, and keep abreast of Stephen Phillips and Yeats, I don't see; but she does it, somehow. She is one of the few true poetry-lovers I know. As for your father, I

have heard him quote Riley and Harte to you children, because, I always supposed, he thought you could understand them. But he himself doesn't stop there. He isn't so widely read as your mother, but the old poets he has made his own. He knows his yellow Shakespeare from cover to cover. How have you ever lived in the same house with them and yet been such a stranger? Your father and mother, dear, are the cultivated people of Auburn."

Surprise was written strongly on every feature of Barbara's face.

"That's the trouble with college life. You young people never get the opportunity to know your own families, nowadays. At the time when you are just beginning to be old enough to appreciate your parents, you are sent away. Then you go to work, or marry, and leave home without knowing the real wealth that often lies at your own doors. Did you ever read Emerson's 'Days'?"

Barbara shook her head. Mrs. Willowby turned to the open book-shelves, and took down a shabby green volume. "It has your mother's own marks," she said, as she turned to the page, where a lead pencil had traced a delicate line about the words,—

"Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdom, stars, and sky that holds them all
I, in my pleachèd garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn."

There was a moment's pause after the stately lines were finished.

"I understand," said Barbara, finding her voice. "But I never knew,—before. It is true, Mrs. Willowby, about losing some things by college life. I'm beginning to think that there are lots of things to be learned at home."

The gentle brown eyes smiled at the new tone of humility. "My dear little girl," began Mrs. Willowby, "if you have discovered that, you have learned the very thing for which you were sent to college. The most important lessons in the world are not learned from textbooks, and all—Goodness, Barbara, what on earth was that?"

Somewhere from the back regions of the house had come the sound of a mighty explosion. It was followed by the sound of breaking glass, and a shrill shriek.



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLOOR SAT THE IDGIT

“The Idgit!” breathed Barbara. The Emerson slid to the floor, and the hostess and guest rushed to the kitchen.

In the middle of the floor sat the Idgit, a whity-yellow island in a sea of raspberry juice and broken glass. From the oven of the gas-stove came a volume of flame and smoke. The stove-lids lay on the floor, and the kitchen was full of flying flecks of soot. Barbara rushed to the stove, and turned off the burners, one by one. Then she lifted the huddled heap from the floor.

“What is the matter, Addie?” she asked.

The ouija board in the Idgit’s brain was unusually stubborn and unmanageable. It was fully three minutes before anything intelligible came from her lips. Then the inarticulate sounds resolved themselves into the words, “Oh, gol, mam!”

“What happened?”

“I dunno, mam.”

“What did you do to the stove?”

“I dunno, mam.”

“Did you light it? How did the burners come to be turned on?”

“I was cleaning the stove, mam. I must ’a’ turned ’em on when I washed the knobs.”

“Then did you light it?”

“No, mam. I left it to carry the fruit down cellar; an’ I lit a match to see by.”

“Oh!” said Barbara.

For the first and last time in her career the Idgit uttered a voluntary sentence. “I’m going to quit to-night. Gol! that gas-stove!”

CHAPTER VI

THE DUCHESS

IT was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Barbara threw herself into the hammock on the porch, every nerve in her body tingling with fatigue. In a chair near by sat the Kid, driving imaginary horses along Main Street, and politely removing his hat to every one he met on the way. He inquired whether Barbara desired to ride on the front seat with him, but she was so tired that she scarcely answered the little boy, and wearily closed her eyes to avoid seeing David's book and Jack's racket lying on the piazza floor. She felt that to rise from the hammock and pick up that racket was a task requiring the strength and energy of a Titan.

She was gradually succumbing to the influence of the swaying hammock, and the tension of her nerves was relaxing, so that the sudden stampede of the horses on the porch was dimly associated in her mind with thunder, when she felt a sudden touch on her shoulder, and opened her eyes to see the Kid standing near.

"There's a lady at the gate, Barb'ra," he said.

Barbara peered over the edge of the hammock. Coming up the path, with a stately stride and a majestic swing that allowed her skirts to sweep first one edge of the path and then the other, advanced a Being whose presence immediately inspired Barbara with a sense of approaching royalty. It was not that the visitor was fashionably attired, for her faded black garments and dejected-looking bonnet, even in their palmyest days, could not have been called stylish. Yet, resting in serenity upon the thin, tall form of their wearer, they seemed calmly self-satisfied and distinguished. As the visitor approached, she shed kindly critical and affable glances about her, and rewarded Barbara's inquiring gaze with a cheerful smile.

"You're Barbara Grafton, I s'pose," she said in a brisk voice. "I'm Mrs. 'Arris, an' I've come to 'elp you hout."



I'M MRS. 'ARRIS, AN' I'VE COME TO 'ELP YOU HOUT

Barbara sat up quickly. "Oh!" she said. "Do you wish a position as cook here?"

Mrs. Harris's eyes rested upon her with amiable condescension. "I come to 'elp you hout," she repeated. "I'm Mrs. Brown's widdier sister, and when she told me as 'ow you was left alone and the 'ouse agoin' to rack and ruin—"

Barbara suddenly stiffened in the hammock.

"Why, she says to me, she says, 'Ilda, I'm awful fond of Dr. Grafton, an' I can't let 'im starve without proper care while 'is wife's gone. Now you jest put on your things an' go up there an' 'elp hout.' So I come," concluded Mrs. Harris, composedly; and she sat down.

The Kid drew nearer, and stared at her from under his mass of tawny hair. "You goin' to stay here?" he inquired.

"Yes, of course," answered Mrs. Harris, with a sweeping glance at the little fellow, that took in the holes in the knees of his stockings.

"Then please get out o' that chair," said the Kid, promptly. "It's my black Arabian horse."

"Charles!" cried Barbara.

"You take another chair, or play somewheres else," said Mrs. Harris, calmly. "Runnin' wild sence 'is mother left, I s'pose," she remarked, turning to Barbara.

Barbara choked back her astonished resentment at this speech, and returned to the subject at hand.

"It may be that you will not suit," she said coldly, rising. "Can you cook well, and do you understand

gas-ranges?”

Mrs. Harris laughed complacently, eyeing the slender girl before her with amused condescension. “I ’ave cooked for the finest families o’ Hengland,” she announced. “I’ll settle with your father about wages. Now you jest show me the kitchen, an’ then I’ll let you go, as I see this porch ain’t tidy, an’ that there child needs to be attended to, an’ probably the rest o’ the ’ouse wants cleanin’.”

The Kid slunk off the porch as the words “needs to be attended to” pierced his small cranium. He thought it meant chastisement for his last speech, poor child, and saw, with joy, Barbara following this new and surprising person into the house. In Barbara’s mind a sense of resentment and defeat was conflicting with a feeling of relief at the prospect of help. She rejoiced to herself as they passed through the hall, for she had just swept it with her own hands.

“Dreadful dusty mopboards,” said Mrs. Harris, nonchalantly. Barbara’s spirits sank.

As they entered the kitchen, she suddenly remembered that she had left some dishes piled in the sink, to be washed with the dinner things. In her absence, moreover, some hungry boy had been rummaging in the cake-box, and had left crumbs and morsels of food scattered over the table. Mrs. Harris paused on the threshold, and untied her bonnet, while her roving black eyes quickly took in the scene before her. Clean enough it had seemed to Barbara an hour before, but now many things, hitherto unnoticed, suddenly sprang into prominence. She saw that the white sash-curtain at the window was disreputably dirty; that the stove was actually rusty on top; that cobwebs lurked in the corners; and she remembered, with a pang, that the ice-box had not been cleaned since her mother left.

“My!” ejaculated Mrs. Harris. “Well, I’ll get dinner first, then I’ll tackle this lookin’ room. You set the table, Barbara,—ain’t that your name?—an’ I’ll do the cookin’. What meat ’ave you ordered?”

“None,” answered Barbara; “I don’t approve of eating meat, and have not allowed the children to have any for some time. Father has been taking his dinners down-town lately.”

“Land alive!” ejaculated Mrs. Harris, turning shocked eyes upon Barbara. “The poor children! An’ your paw,—druv from ’is ’ome! Well! You jest go to the telephone, an’ horder a good piece of steak before it’s too late.”

“I prefer not to have meat,” said Barbara, stiffly.

Mrs. Harris’s face settled into stubborn lines. “I’ve never ’eard of anything so foolish,” she declared. “Growin’ children need meat, an’ you run right along an’ horder that steak.”

It was at this point that Barbara’s sense of diplomacy came to her aid. This woman had indeed forced herself into the kitchen, but she was very welcome, nevertheless. She must not prejudice her at the outset, but must gradually accustom Mrs. Harris to her views. Barbara turned away to the telephone. Immediately Mrs. Harris’s manner changed, and she became affable again as she bustled capably about the kitchen, and assigned small jobs to her young mistress.

“Hello!” cried Jack, joyfully, as he took his seat in his father’s place, and viewed the well-cooked steak. “Is the embargo off? Is this a carving-knife that I see before me? Why, Barbara! Didst do this thyself, lass?”

“Jack,” said Barbara, nervously, “I have engaged a new maid and—”

A decided voice from the kitchen interrupted her.

“Barbara, you come an’ git the bread. I’m busy.”

The children seated around the table stared at one another.

“Whew!” whispered Jack to Gassy; “now, by my halidame, there goes Barbara. Is Petruchio in the kitchen?”

Barbara reëntered with scarlet cheeks. There was something in her manner which warned even the Kid not to comment. The meal began in absolute silence, another cause of which may have been the perfectly cooked dinner, which descended like manna into the loyal but empty stomachs of the Grafton offspring. The Kid ate his steak voraciously, and eagerly extended his plate for more.

“See ’ow ’e’s ben pinin’,” remarked a voice from the open doorway.

The children started, and looking up, for the first time saw the dignified figure of Mrs. Harris surveying them with a condescendingly satisfied gaze. “These are all the children, I s’pose, Barbara. Well, now, there’s a nice rice puddin’ for dessert, an’ then you an’ that little girl can ’elp me clear away to-day, ’cause there’s so much to do to clean up this ’ouse.”

“I don’t want any pudding,” declared Jack, in haste, longing to get away to some nook where he could laugh unseen.

“Set right where you are,” said Mrs. Harris, calmly. “You don’t get no more to eat till supper, so you’d better fill up now.”

Jack gasped and obeyed.

Even when dinner was over, and the dishes washed with the surprised help of a subdued Gassy, there was no diminution of Mrs. Harris’s energy. She cleaned the kitchen thoroughly; she scrubbed the bathroom; she charged upon the children’s rooms, and the dust and dirt retreated in confusion before her vigorous onslaught. She accompanied the performances with a running fire of ejaculatory comment. Barbara, with set lips, kept just behind her, and followed directions with an injured determination to die in her tracks before giving up.

“I am glad to have such capable help,” she said, observing Jack in the next room.

“‘Eh?’” returned Mrs. Harris, looking up from her dustpan. “Wish I could say the same! But never mind, you’ll learn in time, I dare say. O’ course you’ve ben in school an’ can’t be expected to know much yet.”

Barbara heard a chuckle and subdued applause from the next room.

“Who’s that?” inquired Mrs. Harris, abruptly. “Oh, it’s your brother. I was lookin’ for ’im. What’s ’is name? Jack? Well, Jack, you jest take these rugs out to the back yard an’ beat ’em a little. They need it.”

Jack advanced, hesitating. “I don’t know how to beat rugs,” he muttered.

“Well, I’ll show you,” said Mrs. Harris, serenely. “Lend a hand with this big one.”

Barbara surveyed with joy the sullen droop of Jack’s back, as he followed his instructor down the hall.

“Let well enough alone,” she called impersonally.

“Don’t you do it!” exclaimed Mrs. Harris. “You beat ’em thorough.”

“I think we won’t do any more,” declared Barbara to Mrs. Harris, as the clock struck four. “We have been at this all the afternoon, and I’ll let you leave Jack’s room until to-morrow. We have done enough for to-day.”

Mrs. Harris put her hands on her hips and surveyed Barbara quizzically. “Well, you ain’t used to work, be you?” she said. “Tired, I s’pose.”

Barbara’s face flushed. She was so weary that she lost the dignity to which she had been clinging desperately all day.

“Yes, I am tired!” she burst out. “I worked all the morning before you came. Besides, it’s absurd to fly around like this, trying to do everything at once. My time is too valuable to waste so much of it upon such things as these.”

A queer expression settled upon the features of Mrs. Harris. She looked amused, indulgent, and vastly superior.

“Your time too valuable?” she said slowly and calmly; “your time too valuable? Well, young lady, I don’t know jest what things you’ve got to do besides taking care of your brothers and your sister, but I reckon there ain’t nothing better.”

Barbara drew a long breath of anger and walked away.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” she said ruefully to her father, a few days later, “if only she didn’t assume all the powers and prerogatives of a sovereign. But she has actually reduced the children to the most subdued state you can imagine. Jack never ravages the pantry now, since Mrs. Harris caught him that first afternoon, and asked him kindly if he would mind leaving enough for the rest of us. Even Gassy never answers her saucily, and David goes about the house like a crushed piece of nothing. And yet she isn’t a bit cross or unkind. It’s something in her manner that admits of no disputation. Jack has named her the Duchess, and it just suits her.”

The Doctor laughed. “You mustn’t allow yourself to be so easily impressed, my dear,” he said. “I notice, however, that she takes a great deal of responsibility off your hands, and that ought to reconcile you to any drawbacks. I have just sent word to Mrs. Harris to have dinner at one instead of twelve, as I shall be busy at the office, and can’t get away so soon.”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when they saw David returning down the hall in haste, followed by a tall figure advancing with majestic tread. The doctor coughed uneasily.

“Dr. Grafton!” proclaimed the Duchess; “David says as ’ow you wants the dinner put off till one!”

There was an accent of such injury in her voice that the Doctor found himself saying hastily:—

“Why, yes, Mrs. Harris, I did send that message, but—”

“I thought it best to tell you as ’ow it can’t be done,” replied the Duchess, with finality, turning to depart.

Dr. Grafton caught the smile on Barbara's face.

"What's that?" he said peremptorily; "can't be done? Why not?"

The Duchess turned back with surprise written in her large, serene countenance. "Why not? Why not?" she repeated. "Why, because it ain't convenient to change, sir."

Dr. Grafton found himself following her down the hall. "I'm going to be very busy and can't get away," he said apologetically. "Perhaps half-past twelve—"

The Duchess turned again, and contemplated him calmly. "Any reason why the rest must wait for you?" she inquired with uplifted eyebrows.

"Why, no," said the Doctor.

"Well, then," answered the Duchess, "come any time you want. You'll find your dinner kep' nice an' warm on a plate in the oven."

Dr. Grafton meekly returned to the living-room, to find his daughter considerably averting her face from him. His hearty laugh brought her back to his side. He threw himself on the couch by the window.

"Well, I give up!" he announced. "Was there ever such a martinet!"

Barbara laughed with him, but her face quickly sobered. "I really don't think I shall stand it much longer," she said. "She has absolutely no regard for my ideas, and pays no attention to any orders or requests. She even tells me what she 'desires' for meals."

"They are very good meals," put in the Doctor, hastily. His mind reviewed the gastronomic comforts of the last few days, and the uncertainty and scantiness of those meals before the arrival of the Duchess.

"Don't give Mrs. Harris up, my dear," he said, as he rose to depart. "You are forgetting the state of things before she came, just as it is hard to remember the tooth-ache when it has finally succumbed to treatment."

A drawling voice from the library broke the ensuing silence.

"'It feels so nice when it stops aching,'" quoted Jack. "Remember those green-apple pies, Miss Babbie?"

"Remember those rugs that you beat so happily?" retorted Barbara.

"Well, I am going to try to accustom the Duchess gradually to those regulations which are necessary; and if she won't fall into line, she can—"

"Fall out!" said Jack, promptly. "Only in that case, my dear, you will not find the poet truthful in those charming lines,—

The falling out of faithful friends
Renewing is of love.

You will find it a renewal of—Idgits, I'm thinking."

But it was another week before the clash came. A few preliminary skirmishes marked the passage of time, but Barbara might have overthrown theories and plans, however "necessary," if matters had not

been precipitated by a morning visitor.

“I just thought I’d drop in,” said Miss Bates, coming up to the porch where Barbara was sitting shelling peas and Gassy was reading. “I wanted to see how you were getting on. Where you goin’, Gassy?”

“To read where people aren’t talking,” answered the little girl as she left the porch.

Miss Bates shook her head sorrowfully. “It’s awful to see how those children act without their mama,” she said. “I don’t like to complain, Barbara, but Cecilia’s conduct to me is almost beyond parallel! An’ Charles called me a real naughty name yesterday, when I took his toy reins off of my gate-posts.”

“I’m sorry,” said Barbara, mechanically, putting some peas in with the pods. “I’ll speak to Charles—”

She was interrupted by the voice of one who called with authority, “Barbara, ain’t them peas done? It’s time to put them on.”

Barbara excused herself, and carried in the dish. When she returned, with flaming cheeks, Miss Bates was watching for her with open curiosity.

“I heard you quarreling about the potatoes,” she said. “They say you’re completely changed now, an’ that you haven’t the say about anything any more, since that Englishwoman came; but I didn’t believe it until I heard you give up about havin’ the potatoes mashed.”

They had forgotten the presence of David, who had been reading in a corner of the porch all morning.

“You always have your say about everything, don’t you?” he inquired dreamily. “I wonder how you know so many things people say. Barbara never does.”

“I must go,” said Miss Bates, rising abruptly. “Barbara, since things *are* all took off your hands, why don’t you spend some time teaching them children manners?”

Barbara ate her appetizing dinner in almost complete silence. The comfort of sitting down to a well-set table and of staying there throughout the meal, without rising half a hundred times for forgotten articles, had no power to soothe her injured feelings. So all Auburn was talking about her, and calling her incompetent, and imposed upon by a woman who was only a kitchen “help”! It was intolerable, and she would endure it no longer. She would take the initiative, and once for all convince Mrs. Harris of the necessity of subordination.

After dinner, Barbara wiped the dishes, a task which Mrs. Harris exacted on ironing-day. Her resentful silence was lost entirely on the Duchess, whose good-humor was almost startlingly displayed in conversation.

“I’ve ben hironin’ like a fiend to-day,” she said in a self-satisfied tone, “an’ there’ll be plenty o’ time this afternoon to finish, an’ to put up them tomatoes as ’as ben waiting to be put up. You’ll ’ave to ’elp, Barbara, if we’re to get them done in time.”

“That will be impossible, I’m afraid,” said Barbara, endeavoring to keep her voice calm. “Susan Hunt is coming over this afternoon for a lesson.”

“Oh, well, put ’er off,” replied the Duchess.

Barbara moved uneasily. "No," she answered steadily. "I don't wish to put her off. The tomatoes can be put up to-morrow."

"Them tomatoes is just right now, an' it's so warm, lots O' them will spoil afore mornin'," the Duchess answered, the smile dying out of her face. "Go to the telephone, Barbara, an' tell that 'Unt girl she can't come. She's ben runnin' 'ere enough lately, an' I can't get through them tomatoes alone."

For a moment Barbara wavered. Insufferable as she felt this dictation to be, she thought of the comfort and order of the house, and her heart sank at the thought of losing them. Then Miss Bates's words suddenly came back to her: "You haven't the say about anything any more; they say you're completely changed."

She turned on the unsuspecting Duchess. "Mrs. Harris," she said determinedly, "you ordered those tomatoes yesterday, when I had decided that it was best not to have them until later, because of the ironing. Now you want to put them up when it is inconvenient to me to do so, because you have them on your hands, and they may spoil. I cannot help you this afternoon. If you cannot attend to them alone, let them go until to-morrow, when I shall be at leisure. We shall simply have to throw away those tomatoes which are not good."

Auburn should have seen the expression of the Duchess. Good-humor gave way to surprise, which was succeeded by disapproval, in turn to be routed by annoyance. It was not until the last sentence that a Jove-like rage sat upon her reddening countenance.

"You *won't* do them tomatoes?" she inquired in a queer voice.

"No," said Barbara.

"You'll let 'em spoil?" incredulously.

"Yes, if necessary."

Mrs. Harris stopped ironing. She reached out a strong brown hand, and turned out the gas under the irons. She unrolled the sleeves of her brown calico dress. Then she turned slowly toward her resolute mistress.

"Barbara Grafton," she said with an awful calmness of manner, "you're an ungrateful, 'ard-'eaded girl, an' I'm sorry for your family. I come 'ere to 'elp you hout in your trouble,—I ain't no common 'elp,—an' you flies in my face whenever you can, an' goes agin me every chanct you get. What does I do about that? Nothin'. You try to make me spend my time in frills, an' fussin' over things as the finest families in Hengland never 'as. What does I do? Nothin'. I goes on my way an' swallers insults from a chit of a girl. I seen lots o' things sence I come which 'urt my sensitive disposition, but I passes 'em by. Now it comes to tomatoes, an' I guess we'll part. You're an ungrateful girl, an' I washes my hands of you."

Mrs. Harris crossed over to the sink, and solemnly washed and wiped her hands. Then she put on her faded black bonnet, which always hung by its rusty strings from a hook behind the door. She stood a minute, on the threshold, and looked at Barbara in Olympic sorrow.

"Onct more," she said almost entreatingly, "will you 'elp with them tomatoes?"

"No," said Barbara.

The screen-door banged loudly. Barbara was alone again.

CHAPTER VII

“THE FALLING OUT OF FAITHFUL FRIENDS”

THE Kid stamped loudly up the piazza steps, and trotted through the house to find Barbara. His infant intellect, assisted by the pangs of his stomach, assured him that it was past the dinner-hour. And yet no loud-tongued bell, energetically operated upon by the Duchess, had summoned him from his play in the dusty street. On such a dire occasion the Kid always reported to headquarters; and passing through the empty dining-room, he came upon Barbara alone in the kitchen, desperately struggling with a can of salmon. The Kid stopped on the threshold and stared.

Barbara, with the can in one hand and the opener in the other, was hotly endeavoring to effect a combination of the two, with a notable lack of success. At first she held the can in the air, and attempted to punch a hole in it with the can-opener; but as this seemed an entirely futile course, she gave it up, and adopted a new method of attack. When Charles arrived upon the scene of action, she placed the can firmly on the table, and gave it a vicious stab with her knife. The tin yielded; Barbara smiled, and all was proceeding merrily, when a sudden, inexplicable twist jerked can and can-opener out of her hand and landed them both on the floor. Barbara forgot herself, and stamped her foot forcibly.

“Where’s Mrs. Harris?” inquired the Kid, with a look of fearful anticipation gathering in his eyes.

No reply. His sister picked up the can, and succeeded in boring a small hole in its top.

“Say, where’s Mrs. Harris?” repeated the little boy, anxiously.

“Charles,” said Barbara, looking at the child for the first time,—“mercy, how dirty you are!—Charles, dinner will be ready soon. Mrs. Harris has left us—”

She stopped short in astonishment. The Kid had thrown himself prone upon the floor, and had broken into loud wails.

“What is it? What is it?” she cried, running to him and trying to pull him up from the floor.

The Kid held his tough little body down, and wept copiously.

Barbara tried sternness. “Charles, get up this minute,” she commanded, “and tell me what is the matter.”

The Kid lifted a woe-begone face to his sister.

“She’s gone,” he said, “and we can’t ever have any more beefsteak, or lamb with gravy.”

“Was that what you were crying for?” asked Barbara, coldly. “Charles, I am disgusted with you. Now you get up and wash your hands, and dinner will soon be ready.”

She sighed as she carried in the salmon, extracted from the hole in the can in minute sections, so that it resembled a pile of sawdust rather than the body of a fish. She found herself wishing that it had been possible to reconcile her desires and Mrs. Harris’s commands.

It was a melancholy family that partook of the pulverized fish, fried potatoes, bread, butter, and

bananas, which constituted Barbara's effort.

"Oh dear!" sighed Jack, as he took his seat. "Variety is the spice of life; we certainly have that, so I suppose you think we don't care for the other spices, having left the pepper-cellar in the pantry. I always did like pepper on fried potatoes."

David lifted his large blue eyes and let them rest on his elder sister.

"You must be like Cinderella's sisters," he said reflectively. "Had such an awful temper,—couldn't anybody live with 'em."

Barbara looked angrily at the little boy, but his face was so innocent that her heart softened. She did not answer him, but began to explain matters to her father, who looked grave and rather preoccupied. Her story did not seem to impress him, for some reason, and Barbara found herself faltering over her account, and justifying herself in every other sentence.

"Yes—yes," said the Doctor, abstractedly, as she finished. "Of course you ought not to have to put up tomatoes if you don't want to. Mrs. Harris was a very capable woman, though, and you are in for another siege, I'm afraid. It's too bad. You will have to try to get some one else." And, looking at his watch, he left the table.

Gassy had been quiet during the whole meal, her elfish locks, bright eyes, and silence making her more conspicuous than if she had shouted. After dinner, she soberly enveloped herself in her large apron, and took her place at Barbara's side, ready to help her sister.

"I hate dishes," she remarked conversationally, as she took the first plate in hand. "They are never over, and they never change. I must have wiped this Robinson Crusoe plate of the Kid's at least a million times since mama went—There! Oh my, Barbara, I've broken it!"

"Cecilia! Why don't you hold on to the things you take in your hands?" cried Barbara. "I never saw such a child! You break everything you touch!"

The child's face flushed. She stood quietly a moment, and wiped two plates with deftness and precision. The next moment, Barbara at the sink suddenly felt as if a whirlwind had struck the room. A dishcloth went whizzing upwards until it clung to the clock on the shelf, a wriggling figure freed itself from a blue-checked apron, which was flung tumultuously on the floor, and an agitated, retreating voice exclaimed, "I'll never—*never*—NEVER wipe for you again! There!"

Barbara finished the work alone, and went to the porch, with a struggle going on in her mind. She felt that she was failing, in spite of her best efforts,—failing with the children, failing to do the "simple" household tasks, and to manage the household machinery that had never been so startlingly in evidence before. What was the cause of it all?

"Of course I am not very experienced," Barbara said to herself, "but still, with a moderately good servant, I am sure I could manage very well. The trouble has been with the frightful maids we have had. And the children are demoralized by the frequent changes, and are hard to control. Oh, for one good cook, so that I could show myself to be the capable girl that a college girl ought to be!"

She felt so cheered by her soliloquy, which she did not realize to be unconscious self-justification, that she sat down almost happily to write the daily report that went to brighten her mother's exile. In spite of all domestic accidents and crises, this letter was always written; and the more lugubrious Barbara's state

of mind, the harder she strove for a merry report. She had nearly finished the last sheet, with flying fingers, when a chuckle caused her to look up, and discover that Jack had been reading page after page, as she had discarded it.

“Bab,” he said, “you certainly do write the funniest letters I ever read. If you should try to write a story instead of ‘The Absolute In-ness of the Internal Entity,’ you would make your fortune immediately. I don’t see how you can write one way and feel another, as you do.”

Barbara’s reply was checked by the appearance of Susan, and Jack disappeared, carrying the letter with him.

“I’m so glad to see you!” said Barbara, cordially. “Did you bring your Browning with you?”

“Yes,” answered Susan, sitting down in the big cane rocker. “Yes, I brought him, and a basket of mending besides. I am awfully behind in it, and I can talk and darn at the same time.”

The glad light faded out of Barbara’s eyes. “Why, Sue dear!” she said, “that’s impossible. No one could possibly study Browning and do anything else at the same time. He absorbs all the energy and attention that one has.”

“Oh dear!” sighed Susan. “I did want to begin our lessons to-day, but we’ll have to put it off till to-morrow, then. Bob leaves for New York to-night, you know, and he must have all the socks that I can muster.”

“Are you really going to mend those things now, instead of reading the ‘Ring’ with me?”

Susan looked up quickly. “Why, what else can I do?” she said. “Bob must have decent clothes, and we can begin the ‘Ring’ to-morrow.”

“Very well,” responded Barbara, icily. “Of course Browning doesn’t mean so much to you as he does to me. But I considered our engagement to read this afternoon so binding that I have just lost Mrs. Harris in consequence.”

“Lost Mrs. Harris in consequence?” repeated Susan. “Why, Barbara, how?”

“She insisted upon putting up tomatoes this afternoon when I couldn’t help her, because of our engagement, and—well, she wouldn’t stay when I was firm,” replied Barbara, wishing that the subject of disagreement had been a little more dignified. “Really, Susan, that woman was insufferable.”

“And you let her go for that?” cried Susan, in a surprised voice.

“Yes,” answered Barbara.

Susan jabbed her big needle into a large sock, with energy. Her friend watched her with uninterested gaze. Suddenly Susan stopped, and looked at Barbara with an expression of determination.

“Babbie,” she said with an air of having summoned up her courage,—“Babbie, I hope you won’t think me officious, but I feel that I must tell you some things. Even if I am not a college girl, I have learned a good deal about common things in these four quiet years at home. You are having a hard time, my dear, as everybody knows. Of course every one talks about it. But I don’t know *what* people will say when they find out why Mrs. Harris left,—for of course they will find out.”

Susan stopped her incoherent outburst, and eyed Barbara doubtfully. Then she went on.

“It was dreadful of you to let Mrs. Harris go, when she had been so kind. What if she *did* go contrary to your ideas! Some of them are queer, you know, and why did you care, anyway, so long as your poor family were taken care of comfortably? You can’t get along without a maid, Barbara,—it’s all too much for you. But I’m afraid you’ll find it hard to get any one to come, now.”

Susan stopped uncertainly.

“Do finish,” said a cold voice from the hammock.

Susan looked at the motionless figure lying in an attitude of superior attentiveness, and her color rose.

“Barbara, I can’t let it go on,” she broke out. “If no one suffered but yourself, it would be different. But the children are affected, too. David never looked so really ill as he does now; and if you are not careful, you will find him sick on your hands. Your father is worn and worried all the time, and you yourself are as thin as a rail. It’s because you don’t accommodate yourself to circumstances. You insist upon carrying out some absurd theoretical ideas in the face of practical difficulties. And I hate to have people talk about you as they do.”

As these last words fell upon her ears, Barbara sprang up from the hammock. Her eyes were flashing, and her dignity had utterly disappeared.

“Don’t ever say that to me again!” she cried excitedly. “I don’t care a continental what people say about me! Just because I have been away all these years and have had superior advantages, all the people of Auburn discuss me and criticise me, and are—well, jealous!”

“Do you mean that I am jealous?” asked Susan, an unusual light in her soft blue eyes.

“That makes no difference,” retorted Barbara. “The truth of the matter is, that you have stayed here, and have had some experience in housekeeping, and you have grown to think that it is so important that nothing else is of value to you—none of the higher things. If that is what you and Auburn mean,—that I care more for,—yes, Browning, and literature, and the real issues of life, than for housekeeping,—then you are quite right I do. And I always shall. And I must say that I resent any interference whatever.”

There was a long silence. Then Susan rose, biting her lips, to hide their trembling. “I must go,” she said.

“Can’t you stay longer?” asked Barbara, politely.

“No, I’m afraid not,” replied Susan.

To both girls, the very air was full of constraint. Barbara accompanied her visitor to the gate, where they parted with scarcely a word. Then she turned back swiftly to the porch, and sat down in the chair just vacated by Susan. She pressed her hand to her temples.

“I must think this out,” she said aloud. “Could I have been wrong?”

Some time later, the Kid cantered up to the porch. He went straight to a bowed figure in the big chair, and pulled down the hands from the hidden face.

“I’m hungry, Barb’ra,” he said. “Isn’t supper ready?”

Barbara put her arms around him, and hugged him tightly.

“*You* like me, little brother, don’t you?” she said.

“Of course,” answered the Kid, nonchalantly; “and I’m hungry.”

Barbara took him by the hand, and led him gently into the house.

“I think I can find something for hungry little boys,” she said.

CHAPTER VIII

APPLIED PHILANTHROPY

“DADDY, please fasten me up,” said Barbara.

The doctor thrust two large hands inside of her gown, in the man’s way, using them as fulcrums over which to pull the fragile fabric with all the force of two strong thumbs. “Pretty snug, isn’t it?” he said. “Where are you going in your Sunday best?—mill or meeting?”

Barbara shook out the folds of her violet gown. “Meeting,” she responded. “The Woman’s Club has asked me to give them a paper to-day.”

“The Woman’s Club! What has become of the A. L. L. A.?”

“The Auburn Ladies’ Literary Association is still in existence, unfortunately. But it isn’t going to be long.”

“Why not?” asked her father.

“It’s going to have its name changed, if I have any influence with its members,” said Barbara. “Isn’t it absurd for it to go on calling itself ‘*Ladies’ Literary Association,*’ just because it has been used to the title for thirty years, when every other women’s organization in the country is ‘Woman’s Club’? And ‘*Literary*’! Did you ever hear of anything so pretentious! Nobody is literary nowadays, but Tolstoi and Maeterlinck. Besides, the name debars the members from philanthropic and civic work, which are the moving factors in all club life. I shall certainly make an effort to have the other members change the name, this very day.”

“You’d better keep your hands off,” laughed the doctor. “The A. L. L. A. is Auburn’s Holy of Holies. What are you going to ‘stand and deliver’ before it?”

“One of my college papers. I haven’t had time to write anything new since the Duchess left. It’s on the ‘Psychology of the Child in Relation to Club Work.’ I had to piece on half the title to make it appropriate.”

The suspicion of a twinkle lurked about the doctor’s eyes. “Well, good luck to you,” he said; “the Literary Association may not approve of your paper, but it can’t find fault with your dress.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Jack. “That garb is like all the rest of Barbara,—it’s too irritatingly new to pass unscathed in Auburn. Is that churn effect the Umpire Style, Barb?”

“It can’t rouse any more criticism than it has already had,” said his sister. “I shan’t care what they say about the gown, if they only hear my message.”



With subdued swish of black silk skirts, and a decorous silencing of whispers, the Auburn Ladies’ Literary Association came to order. Barbara, with veiled amusement, looked about the familiar “parlors” of the Presbyterian church. The standard and banner, with the legend “Honor Class,” had been moved into a corner, the melodeon, stripped of its green cover, stood in walnut nakedness on the platform, and a sprawling bunch of carnations and a gavel ornamented the superintendent’s desk. The map of Palestine,

done in colored chalk, had been partially erased from the blackboard at the head of the room, and beneath it was written the following

PROGRAM

Roll Call. Answered by quotations from Shakespeare.

Instrumental Solo. "Murmuring Zephyrs."

MISS MARTHA CRARY.

Recitation. "Queen of the Flowers."

MISS HYPATIA HARRISON.

Paper. "Geo. Eliot's Life, Character, and Position as a Novelist."

MRS. ABBIE PENFOLD.

Vocal Solo. "Night Sinks on the Wave."

MISS LIBBIE DARWIN.

Address. "The Literary Atmosphere of Our Club."

MRS. ANGIE BANKSON.

Readings.

- a. Macbeth.
- b. Daisy's Daisies.

MISS COLEMAN.

Paper. "Psychology of the Child in Relation to Club Work."

MISS BARBARA PRENTICE GRAFTON.

"It's to be hoped that Abbie's and Angie's are not so long as mine," thought Barbara, irreverently, "or there'll be no one to put the Grafton mackerel to soak to-night; to say nothing of all the winds and waves that must be passed through before they come to me."

It was the "wind and wave" part of the program that appealed to the audience. The papers were accorded polite attention, as befitted Auburn manners, but the musical numbers and readings were followed by the subdued hum that is an expression of club delight. For Barbara, the entire entertainment of the day was not furnished by the program. Between the swaying fans she caught glimpses of Mrs. Enderby's placid face, relaxed in sleep; from the church kitchen came the rattle of paper napkins and the clink of Miss Pettibone's tray, and from the rear of the room sounded, at intervals, the cough of Mrs. Crampton, a genteel warning to speakers that their voices did not "carry."

"Was there ever a human being more frightfully out of her element than I am here!" thought Barbara. "If the House-Plant could only see Mrs. Enderby! But she's no more asleep than all the rest of them. What *am* I going to do to wake them up!"

This thought was uppermost in her mind as the afternoon was tinkled and applauded away. It was more than ever prominent as the precise, ladylike voice of Mrs. Bankson was raised a half-tone higher in her closing paragraph:—

“But, however, after all is said and done, it is the *literary* atmosphere that makes our club what it is. The dearly-loved paths that we have followed for many years have led us to lofty summits and ever-widening vistas, but never away from our original goal. The Ever-Womanly has always been our aim, and, while less substantial ambitions have fluttered by on airy wing, and the thunder of the new woman has rolled even upon our peaceful horizon, we have never faltered in our footsteps.

“On, on we go in our devotion to literature. And, as one of the most notable of our lady poets has so aptly expressed it,—

Still forever yawns before our eyes
An Utmost, that is veiled.”

A ladylike patter of applause, and a more active flutter of fans, greeted the end of the speech. The back door creaked violently, and Miss Pettibone’s round face appeared in the opening to see if time for refreshment had come. It disappeared suddenly as Miss Coleman mounted the platform to impersonate, first a bloody Macbeth, and then a swaying field daisy. And, finally, Barbara Prentice Grafton and the Empire gown faced the Literary Association.

Later, when she recalled the afternoon, Barbara was surprised to remember how little of her original paper she had used. The triviality of the program had supplied her with text enough, and the “Psychology of the Child” was partially diverted into a sermon upon the aimlessness of a purely literary club. In her earnestness she was carried beyond caution.

“I call you to new things,” rang out her resolute voice, in conclusion. “Literary effort in club life is outworn. You *can* read your Homer alone, but it takes concentrated, combined interest to accomplish the *vital* things of living. You have read too long. It is philanthropy we need in Auburn,—civic improvement, educational effort that shall be for the masses rather than our selfish selves. I call you to this. I ask you to work with me for the good of our town and our people.”

The effect of Barbara’s personal magnetism was never more strongly evidenced than by the genuine applause that greeted her effort. The Literary Association might disapprove her theories and her violet gown, but her sincerity was inspiring. The Auburn mothers caught the contagion in her voice, and were interested, if not convinced.

There was a momentary pause as the applause subsided. Then Barbara said earnestly: “I’m afraid I may have been too abstract in my statements. But I have very definite ideas of what might be done in Auburn that would be most beneficial to our children and ourselves. The crêche that I spoke of is one of them. If any of you care to ask any questions, I shall be glad to answer them. If I can,” she added more modestly.

Mrs. Enderby, who had been aroused from her nap just in time to hear Barbara’s ringing close, rose to the occasion. To her a question was a question. “Miss Barbara,” she inquired, an interested expression on her rested face, “do you believe in children going barefoot this hot weather?”

Barbara looked surprised. “W-why, n-no,” she said.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Enderby, conversationally, “I was wondering.”

There was another pause. Then Mrs. Bellows rose in her place. "Did I understand you to say *Kreysh*?"

"Yes," said Barbara. "A day-nursery would be the first form of philanthropy I should advise for Auburn."

"What need, if I may ask," inquired Mrs. Bellows, impressively, "has Auburn for a day-nursery?"

Barbara explained the relief to the mother and the good to the child.

"It seems to me," remarked Mrs. Bellows, "that a Kretch is about as necessary here as two tails to a cat. If there's a death or sickness in the family, I send the children over to Lib's. Otherwise, I'd rather have them at home. They gad enough as it is."

"Do you mean that the mothers are to take turns in taking care of all the children in town?" asked Mrs. Penfold.

"My goodness!" murmured Mrs. Enderby.

"It saves the children from the moving-picture shows and the cheap theatres that are among the most pernicious of evil influences," said Barbara. "It keeps them off the street and out of bad company"—

"Not if she lets that Charles attend," whispered Mrs. Bellows to the woman in the next chair. "I've forbidden Sydney to play with him."

"And gives the mothers a vacation. Instead of the care of their little ones every day, they have charge of them possibly two afternoons a summer."

"I'd hate to trust my boys to Bertha Enderby," whispered Mrs. Bellows again.

In the discussion that followed, Barbara offered her most convincing inducement. "I'm not a mother," she said, "but I am willing to do my part toward furthering the work. If I can have coöperation in the establishment of the nursery, I'll give my time, in turn, to it. And I think—I'm not certain about it, but I think I may be able to furnish the room for the purpose."

The novelty of the idea carried the day with the younger members of the club, and when Barbara took her place again, the seed of the enterprise had been planted. But her second mission to the Association met with less favorable result. The suggestion for the change of name met with decided opposition.

"It doesn't seem ladylike to call it *Woman's Club*," objected Mrs. Angie Bankson.

"The name has been good enough for us for thirty years," said Mrs. Bellows, with acerbity.

"A. L. L. A. makes such a good monogram," sighed Miss Lillie Beckett, who designed the programs for the club on state occasions.

Mrs. Enderby's sleep had filled her with good-will toward the world, and she amiably proposed a compromise. "Why not keep our old initials," she said, "and take another name, each word beginning with the same letter as the old one?"

"What, for instance?" demanded Mrs. Bellows. "Do you happen to think of any?"

The sarcasm of the speech was lost on Mrs. Enderby.

“Well, Auburn for the first word,” she suggested mildly.

But when put to vote, the motion was lost. The Auburn Ladies’ Literary Association triumphed, and the “Woman’s Club” died before it was born.

“That snip of a Barbara Grafton!” said Mrs. Bellows to her neighbor, as the pink sherbet and the paper napkins went around. “The idea of her being invited to address us, and then giving that fool advice to women that knew her when she should have been spanked! I’d never send a child of mine to college, if I had all the money in the world. Normal school can do enough harm. I didn’t know she could be such a fool! *Kretch!*”

Susan leaned over from the next chair. “Barbara isn’t a fool, Mrs. Bellows,” she said warmly; “she’s the cleverest girl I ever knew.”

“In books, maybe,” sniffed Mrs. Bellows.

“No, in everything,” said Susan. “It is in books that she’s had the most training, but she is just as clever in other things. She’s had an awful time this summer with sickness, and poor help, and housework, and no experience in any of them. Any one else would have been discouraged long ago. But she has stuck it out, and been big and brave and cheerful about it, to give her mother a chance to get well. I can’t let any one say anything against Barbara.”

The two women looked their surprise at the warm defense from quiet Susan.

“It’s her theories I object to, not her,” said Mrs. Bellows.

“She won’t keep them all,” said Susan. “She’ll always be loyal to her own convictions, just as she is now; but she’ll find out later that some of them are not so worth while as she is herself. Then she’ll sift them out.”

“I wish she’d hurry up with her sifting, then,” said Mrs. Bellows.

Barbara, in the meantime, had not waited for her sherbet but had hurried home to prepare the meal. In the evening she laid the matter of the nursery before her father, and was surprised to be met with some of the same objections that had been advanced at the woman’s club.

“But mayn’t I *try*?” she pleaded finally.

“I see your heart is set on it,” said the doctor. “I’m not going to refuse you the carriage-house for the use of your children, though I do think you won’t need it more than once. Auburn has no real *poor*, you know. Only, Barbara, *don’t* take any more upon yourself this hot weather! The Kid is a whole day-nursery, himself.”

It took all Barbara’s leisure time from Monday until Thursday, which was the appointed day for the opening, to get the deserted, dusty carriage-house in order; to coax sulky Sam, the stable-boy, to move the accumulation of broken-down sleighs and phaetons into a corner; to hire two women to sweep, scrub, and dust floors, windows, and walls, in order to make the carriage-house fit for an afternoon’s habitation by the many clean, starched children whom she hoped to see. But it was worth it,—oh, yes, it was worth it!—and Barbara’s heart glowed with enthusiasm at the idea of driving the entering wedge of civic improvement into the flinty heart of staid Auburn.

Meanwhile the house suffered. Dr. Grafton was called away at meal-times with conspicuous

frequency. Gassy, David, and the Kid did not object greatly, for their imaginations were fired by the elaborate preparations for the "party," which the Kid firmly believed to be held in honor of his birthday, three months past. But Jack protested bitterly.

"Another 'walk-around'!" he ejaculated, coming in at six o'clock Wednesday evening, and gazing blankly at the bare dining-room. "Say, Barb, a fellow that's been canoeing all afternoon has an appetite that reaches from Dan to Beersheba. I don't want to make you mad, but I feel mighty like Mother Hubbard's dog."

Barbara looked up nervously. "Now, Jack, what difference does it make to you whether you sit at table with the others and use up hundreds of dishes, or eat in the kitchen and save my time? The bread is in the pantry with butter and raspberries, and there is some cold meat in the ice-box. Cut all you want. Besides, I have sent Charles over to Miss Pettibone's for a blueberry pie."

Jack looked unwontedly cross. "Sometimes I think you are the camel that edged himself into the tent and crowded out his master," he said. "These walk-arounds on Sunday nights were pleasant enough at first with everything piled on the kitchen table, so that we walked around with a sandwich in each hand; but it comes so often now that it seems as if 'every day'll be Sunday by and by.'"

Barbara's reply was checked by the sudden appearance of the Kid, bearing a disk in both hands. The paper covering was torn and spotted with blue patches, and a broad stain extended the full length of his blouse. He put his burden carefully on the table, and turned apologetically to Barbara.

"I may have dropped that pie; I don't remember," he said.

"N. P., no pie for me!" declared Jack. "Au revoir, Miss Grafton. Peter asked me over to supper, and there's still time to overtake him."

Away went Jack, lustily chanting "The Roast Beef of Old England." Barbara fed the Kid to the brim, feeling somewhat guilty when she met his clear young eyes full of affectionate trust in his big sister. It was too bad to offer up the family on the altar of philanthropy. The Infant's cruel prediction as to a Jellyby future came back to her, but the ends justified the means in this case.

The next morning was so clear, warm, and bright, that Barbara's spirits rose to fever heat. This was the day of her opportunity to loosen the bondage of Auburn mothers, and to take the first step toward raising them to higher standards of ease and culture. Her face beamed as she sped downstairs to do the daily tasks which awaited her. Breakfast was ready long before any one appeared to partake of it; dishes were washed in haste, beds made in a trice,—just this once!—and dusting passed over entirely.

All Barbara's morning was spent in planning games, in decorating the carriage-house with flags, in going to Miss Pettibone's for the dozens of cookies which she had ordered, and in finding cool space in the refrigerator for twelve bottles of milk. The children were to come at two; and at half-past one Barbara sat on the porch, dressed in a simple white gown, waiting for the first arrival and for her assistant, Mrs. Enderby.

At five minutes after two, there were no children. At ten minutes past, still no children. At fifteen minutes after two, Mrs. Enderby's fat, placid self waddled up to the doctor's gate.

"My children are coming along," she said. "It's awful warm. I've brought a palm-leaf fan. I can fan the children, if you want me to. Any come yet?"

“No, not yet,” replied Barbara. She had been awaiting the arrival of Mrs. Enderby with that desire for moral support which a new undertaking always brings upon its authors. Mrs. Enderby, as the mother of six children, might well be expected to furnish any amount of support derived from experience; but somehow, as Barbara looked at her, she felt that she had made a great mistake. A cushion cannot serve as a propelling-board; and poor Mrs. Enderby looked very cushiony.

She sat rocking slowly and evenly on the porch. “If no one comes by three o’clock,” she said, “I think I’ll leave and go over to Main Street to see the new moving pictures. I forgot about them when I promised to help.”

“Oh, I am sure some children will come,” Barbara replied hastily. “It is such a fine chance for the mothers to rest.”

At quarter of three, it seemed to the confused girl that all Auburn was invading her lawn in a body. Streams of small children, dragged along by elder brothers, sisters, nurses, and mothers, descended upon the house like a flood. The air resounded with the shrieks of suddenly deserted youngsters, with the threats and warnings of their departing guardians, with the consolations of Barbara, Mrs. Enderby, and Gassy herself. Just as suddenly as they had come, all the natural protectors left, with singular unanimity, Barbara thought. It was not at all as she had planned. There had been no grateful approach of a mother at a time to meet the white-robed, calm hostess; no pleasant chat, no graceful reassurance of a child’s safety. But an enormous wave had broken upon the Grafton house and as quickly retreated, leaving thirty-nine pebbles of assorted sizes on the shore. Thirty-nine! Barbara gasped.

Her first step was to sweep the children to the carriage-house in a body. Mrs. Enderby led the procession, waddling along like a very fat hen, with innumerable little chickens running after. Barbara brought up the rear, anxiously counting thirty-nine over and over to herself. Loyal little Gassy kept her eyes upon the children as if she had been transformed into a faithful watch-dog. And the Kid himself seemed to exercise a remarkable amount of oversight; he was waiting for the presents which were, of course, the object of a birthday party.

Barbara’s whole subsequent recollection of the afternoon lay in a picture,—the one which greeted her as she stepped into the carriage-house, gently pushing the last of the flock before her. The large room seemed to her bewildered eyes fairly decorated with children. Every broken-down buggy and sleigh was filled with more than its quota, and prancing steeds were tugging at the ancient shafts in vain. In a corner of the room, ten boys were fighting for possession of a dilapidated harness. Shrieks of delight were rising from the hay-mow above her head, and thin little legs were running up and down the upright ladder with spider-like agility.

Barbara gasped. “Mrs. Enderby!” she exclaimed. “How shall we ever get them together again!”

Mrs. Enderby did not answer. She stood in the middle of the room with her fan idle in her hand and her head turned backward as far as it would go. Involuntarily following her gaze, Barbara looked up and saw a sight which haunted her in dreams forever after.

Fifteen feet above the floor, a long, narrow beam extended horizontally from one edge of the hay-mow to the opposite wall. Sitting on the beam, with legs dangling down, sat seventeen children, one behind another, so tightly wedged that there would not have been space for even half a child more. Wriggling, twisting, turning upon one another,—and at any instant the slender beam might break!

It was little Gassy who saw the look of frozen horror on Barbara’s face, and took action first. Without

a word she sprang up the ladder and out to the edge of the hay-mow. There she called out:—

“Each kid that comes back *now*, slowly and carefully, gets a cookie!”

No one moved. Mrs. Enderby down below dropped her fan and began walking up and down beneath the beam, with her ample skirts outspread to catch any child overcome by dizziness.

“A raisin cookie!” cried Gassy.

No one stirred.

“With nuts in it!”

The child nearest the hay-loft began to wriggle backwards. “I get first choice!” she said.

“Second!”

“Third!”

The line took up the slow wriggle, and Barbara below watched, with her skirts also extended. She could think of nothing else to do.

“Slowly!” shouted Gassy militantly. “Keep below there, Mrs. Enderby. Each kid has to go down the ladder to Barbara for the cookie, an’ *stay* down. Then we’ll play down there.”

Children respond quickly to an appeal to the stomach. In less than five minutes, seventeen children were munching seventeen cookies, and a rousing game of “Drop the Handkerchief” had been started by a now thoroughly alert Barbara. Most of the children joined in with gusto. Mrs. Enderby picked up her palm-leaf, and tapped Gassy with it approvingly.

“Now you can just keep on helping by counting thirty-nine over and over again,” she said.

Game succeeded game. London Bridge fell down in weary repetition for Barbara. The players assured themselves unto seventy times seven times that “King Willyum was King George’s Son.” A trousers button had to be pressed into each child’s hand as a hiding-place. Six children at different times were hurt, and cried. Mrs. Enderby, now that the danger was over, took her chair into a corner and went to sleep behind her fan. But faithful Gassy remained at the front, singing with rare abandon and helping to lead each game.

Barbara herself was so engrossed in wiping away youthful tears, and in singing, that she did not notice the gradual diminution of her forces until Gassy suddenly took her aside.

“Barbara,” she said anxiously, “there are only twenty-seven kids in this room; where are the others?”

Barbara counted hastily; looked up in the hay-mow; gave a wild glance into the abandoned vehicles. It was true; the Kid himself was missing. Then she crossed over to Mrs. Enderby and touched her shoulder.

“Mrs. Enderby,” she said, “I am afraid you will have to take ‘King William’ with Gassy, while I look for twelve children who seem to be missing.”

She flung open the door, and looked around. No children. Some odd instinct led her towards her own house. As she approached, the dining-room door facing the carriage-house suddenly opened, and a swarm of little boys issued forth. Little boys they were, but little goblins they looked to be, so impish were their faces, so bedraggled their appearance. Each boy held in one hand a milk-bottle, which he was applying to

his lips in infant fashion; each blouse was bulging with rapidly disappearing cookies. Barbara's refreshments were almost a thing of the past.

As she rushed over to the group, it disintegrated, and in the centre, deserted by all his fellows in crime, stood the guilty Kid.

There were no words suitable for the occasion, and therefore Barbara said nothing. Under her stern gaze, the Kid visibly shrunk. His milk-bottle dropped from his hand and splashed them both. He began to weep most violently.

"Oh, I don't like birthday parties," he sobbed. "They didn't bring any presents this time; I asked 'em. An' we got tired o' games, so we went wading in the creek an' got all wet. An' nen we were hungry an' I thought you did forget the supper—"

Wading! Barbara glanced around at the little boys, and at the rest of the troop which had filtered from the carriage-house. Were these the children that had come to her house several hours before—these unrecognizable *gamins*? The boys were the most torn; but even the girls seemed lost in dirt and disorder.

Mrs. Enderby made her leisurely way up to Barbara, and began to fan her placidly. "They're all here," she said; "I've just counted the thirty-nine of 'em. And here comes the mothers again, so our labors are over."

Again the strange influx of parents and guardians, which had so puzzled Barbara before. Again the receding wave, carrying the pebbles back this time.

Barbara was vaguely conscious of choruses of remarks singularly alike in character. "James Greenleaf, *where* is your hat?"—"Robbie, you dirty boy, come here"—"Martha, how did you tear your apron so?" She realized that she was not being thanked as much as was her proper due. But all she wished to do on earth was to get to her own room to rest—not to think.

It was not until next morning, however, that the final blow fell. A very relaxed Barbara sat at the head of the breakfast-table, and around its corner Jack was looking at her quizzically.

"What beats me," he said, "is why you should have been willing to do all that work in order that the mothers of the enlightened A. L. L. A. should be enabled to go almost in a body to see the opening of the new moving-picture theatre. Do you believe so heartily in the 'culchah' of those things?"

"Jack!" cried Barbara, starting from her seat. "Jack, they *didn't* do that, did they?"

"They sure did," responded her cruel brother. "Nineteen maternal parents of the thirty-nine were visible to me from my seat in the back row. They had the time of their lives."

Barbara's eyes filled with tears at this disappointment of her hopes. As she struggled hard to keep them back, she caught the glance of her father,—so apprehensive, so tender, and yet so amused, that, although the tears came from her eyes, laughter also sounded from her lips.

"Here endeth the first lesson," she said.

CHAPTER IX

“WITHOUT”

THE alarm-clock under Barbara's pillow sent forth a muffled rattle, like a querulous old woman with tooth-ache, complaining from beneath her bandages. The girl turned over in bed and sighed. A moment later the town-clock struck six, with insistent note, and after a sympathetic delay of a minute more, the living-room clock below sounded its admonition. Sleepily and reluctantly Barbara drew forth the alarm-clock to make sure of the worst.

“It's *always* six o'clock,” she said crossly. Then she slammed the offender down upon the bed, and set her bare feet upon the floor with a thud that betokened no happy morning spirit. Oh, for those luxurious days at college when a closed transom and an “engaged” sign upon the door insured sufficient slumber after a night of school-girl dissipation! Not since the nightmare of housekeeping had attacked her rest, two months before, had “Babbie the Nap-kin,” as she was jocularly known at college, had enough sleep. This starting the day with heavy eyes, and body that sighed for rest, was a new thing. How had her mother done it, all these years? Probably as she, Barbara, was doing it now;—there was no one else to share it with her.

The same old routine,—Barbara wearily went over it: Unlock the doors, open the windows; light the fire, put the kettle on, take the food out of the ice-box, skim the milk, grind the coffee, make the toast, set the table, rouse the sleepers. Every one of the mornings in the year her mother had done it, or superintended the doing of it. Three hundred and sixty-five mornings, for twenty-three years. 8395 times! Barbara shuddered.

It was hot and stuffy downstairs. The chairs were set about at untidy angles, and the sun blazed in fiercely at the window. The kitchen door-knob was sticky to the touch, and a bold cockroach ran across the back porch as she opened the door. Was this summer hotter and more disagreeable than usual, or was it possible that Mrs. Grafton had been responsible for the cool, shaded rooms and the fresh morning air that had always greeted Barbara when she arrived upon the scene of action? For the third time in her experience the girl considered herself with misgiving. Was it possible that housekeeping was a science, instead of merely an occupation,—to be learned by study, and experiment, and experience, just like philosophy? Was it even possible that she, Barbara Grafton, called “The Shark” at college, was, for the first time in her life, to fail miserably in a “course”?

Dr. Grafton and David were the only members of the family who responded to the breakfast-bell. The doctor drank his under-done coffee and ate his over-done toast without comment; the small boy bent contentedly over a bowl of bread and milk. Barbara herself ate nothing.

“What's the matter, girl?” asked her father. “Aren't you well?”

“I'm all right, only not hungry.”

“I'm afraid you're working too hard. I can't have you losing your appetite and looking like a ghost. Don't you hear of a cook?”

Barbara shook her head.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to make other sort of arrangement, then. Perhaps Mrs. Clemens will take us all to board until we hear of some help. I’ll try to see her to-day. I don’t mind the meals,—my stomach is proof against anything!—but I can’t have you sick.”

Her father laid a tender hand on her shoulder, and gave her a playful little pat as he left the room. But Barbara felt anything but playful. Her eyes flashed, and her lips set in a hard, bitter line. “My stomach is proof against anything!” Such a stupid joke,—such a cruel bit of pleasantry! There were unshed tears in her voice, as well as her eyes, as she went to the stairway and called up, crossly: “Jack, Cecil—ia!”

There was no answer. Repeated calls brought forth an angry response from Gassy, and a lazy one from Jack.

“Breakfast is all over. If you’re not down in five minutes, there’ll be nothing for you; I’m not going to let my dishes stand all morning!”

Gassy deigned no answer. Dangerously near the time-limit, Jack appeared.

“The wind seems to be from the east this morning,” he remarked casually.

Barbara did not answer.

“Was there anything special requiring my attendance at this witching hour of the morn?”

“The lawn-mower,” said his sister, sharply.

“Ah, I thought it must be a telegram or a fire,—judging from your agonized voice.”

“If it *had* been a fire, you would have had to be roused! When you haven’t an earthly thing to do about the house, Jack, I do think that you might get up in time for breakfast.”

“You have some new theories since you began housekeeping. I have some faint recollections about your being the last man in the house to rise, a few weeks ago. I’m sorry, though, I overslept, Barb. I got up the minute you called.

I roused me from my slumbers,
I hied me from my bed.
If I had known what breakfast was,
I would have slept, instead.

Excuse me for turning up my trousers. The coffee seems to be somewhat muddy.”

The storm that had been threatening all the morning came at last. College dignity was forgotten, and Barbara became a cross, over-worked, over-heated child, with a strong sense of grievance.

“Jack Grafton, you are a lazy, selfish, inconsiderate *beast!* If you had to do anything but *eat* the meals, you wouldn’t criticise them so sharply. You *know* I’m doing the best I can,—you know it!—and it’s so hot, and there’s so much work—”

David’s serious brown eyes looked reproach at his older brother.

“I’m sorry, Barb,” said Jack, penitently. “I exaggerated about the coffee,—it’s not muddy, only riley. You mustn’t get so fussed up about things that are said in fun. You always *used* to be able to take a joke. As for the grass, I’ll hie me hence at once. It needs a cutting as badly as Gassy’s hair.”

In spite of herself, Barbara smiled at the comparison. "Poor Cecilia," she sighed. "I don't know what on earth to do with that hair of hers. It is so stiff and rebellious that it won't lie smooth, and yet so thin and straight that it won't fluff out, like other children's. I want her to have it cut, but she objects, and pins her faith to that row of curl-papers that makes her look like a Circassian Lady. It is such an ugly shade of red, too. If the child only knew how she looked—"

"She'd never have another happy moment," interrupted Jack, pushing back his coffee-cup. "Well, to work, to work! My, it looks hot out there in the sunshine!"

An hour later, Barbara raised a flushed face from the ironing-board to greet the Vegetable Man. The Vegetable Man was fat and red, and wheezed as he walked. He was an old patient of the doctor's, and his bi-weekly trips to the Grafton house were partially of a social nature. His face wore the blank expression of a sheet of sticky fly-paper, and he was equally hard to get rid of. He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and fanned himself with his hat.

"This is a scorcher!" he remarked.

No one appreciated the truth of this statement more strongly than Barbara. But she feared the result of an enthusiastic response to the Vegetable Man. "Yes," she assented. "It is."

"Ninety-three, accordin' to the official thermometer on the weather bureau's porch. My thermometer's three degrees higher, an' when I'm out in the sun, I believe mine's right. Even the guv'ment's likely to make mistakes on a day like this."

Barbara nodded.

"Want any vegetables this morning?"

"No, I have already ordered my meals to-day."

"Got some nice corn out there in my wagon. An' some prime cauliflower."

"I don't want either, to-day."

"All right; only you know you save money by buyin' from me instead of the grocery-store. Your ma would tell you that, if she wuz here. How is your ma?"

"Getting better, slowly."

"That's good; give her my respects when you write. Leander Hopkins's respects, an' hopes you will soon be in your accustomed health again. How are you gettin' on while she's gone? Are you just helpin' in the kitchen, or are you without?"

"Without?"

"Yes, without."

"I don't understand what you mean, Mr. Hopkins."

"Why, without a gurr!—a kitchen gurr!."

"We have no cook at present. Do you know where I can get one?"

“No, I can’t say as I do. Gurrles are pretty scarce in kitchens, nowadays, though there seems to be plenty of them in parlors. Maybe my Libbie would come in and help you out, though she ain’t never worked out, regular.”

“Oh, would she?” exclaimed Barbara.

“Can’t say fer sure. I’ll ast her when I go home. She’s got steady company, now,—he’s a brakeman on the Southern Limited,—an’ he always gits back fer Sunday night. I dunno as she’d like to engage herself fer Sunday nights. But I’ll ast her. You ain’t got that waist sprinkled enough; it’s too dry to iron well.”

Barbara only thumped her iron a little harder.

“Don’t like to be told, do ye? Guess you must be a little like my wife,—set in your ways. I know a good deal about ironin’; seen the women-folks do it fer thirty years.”

“You must have had a good deal of time to sit and watch.”

“Wal, no, not so much as you might think; they’s a good deal of work on my place. I’ve been sickly, though, a good bit of my life, an’ had to sit by an’ let others do it. I know, Miss Barb’ry, that I’ve got the reputation of bein’ lazy, but it ain’t true: I ain’t lazy; I don’t mind workin’, but I don’t like to *have* to work. That’s what I like about vegetablin’: I can rest a little as I go along.”

“You are fortunate!”

There was a pause as the stubborn iron squeaked its way over the half-dry linen.

“Wal, I guess I must be goin’. You wouldn’t like no egg-plant, would ye?”

“No, I think not.”

“Shell I bring in a little pie-plant before I go? Ye might change your mind if you was to see it.”

“No, I won’t trouble you.”

“No trouble at all, even if it is a hot day. You’re sure you don’t want it?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Wal, good-day, then. Don’t fergit my respects to your ma.”

Out of the kitchen door waddled Mr. Hopkins. In at the same door he waddled a few seconds later. “Hate to int’rupt ye, Miss Barb’ry,” he said mysteriously, “but jest look a’ here.”

“What is it?” inquired Barbara, suspiciously, fearing she was being enticed to the vegetable wagon.

“That’s what I don’t know,” said Mr. Hopkins.

The Vegetable Man led the way around the walk at the side of the house. He stopped at the turn, where the syringa and the lilac mingled their branches in a leafy roof. The sun and the leaves made a checkerboard of light and shade below, and here in the dancing flecks of sunshine lay a grotesque little figure, asleep. It was Gassy, but such a sadly changed Gassy! Reckless hands and a pair of scissors had worked havoc with the hair that had been “too stiff to lie smooth, and too thin to fluff.” Except for the crown of the head, where a few locks stood erect, like faithful sentinels on a battle-swept field, the scalp

was almost as bare as a billiard ball. Not content with devastating her enemy, Gassy had concealed the last sign of the hated color by covering the remains with a coating of black. Perspiration and tears had aided its extension, and two streaks of the dark fluid had found their way down her cheeks. There were traces of recent crying about the closed eyes, and a damp handkerchief was tightly clutched in one of the thin little hands.



SUCH A SADLY CHANGED GASSY

Barbara dismissed the Vegetable Man with a few whispered words of explanation, walking with him to the gate to insure his departure. Then she returned to the syringa-bush, and took the shorn little head in her lap. Gassy started, and sat erect. For a moment she looked bewildered; then she remembered, and her proud little voice said defiantly:—

“I guess I won’t look like a Circassian Lady, now!”

Barbara hesitated; words seemed so futile, and any explanation was impossible. Then she did the very best thing, under the circumstances,—caught the small sister in her arms, and held her close. Gassy struggled for a second, then her thin little body relaxed, and the hot tears drenched Barbara’s shoulder.

“You needn’t think I didn’t know about my hair, before!” she said fiercely, between sobs. “I’ve always hated it, long before I heard what you and Jack said. But I’ve got it fixed now. It ain’t stiff, or thin, or red, any more!”

Barbara waited until the first shower was over. “How did you do it, dear?” she asked, at last.

“Manicure scissors and liquid blacking,” said Gassy, with a fresh storm of sobs. “I don’t care if I *do* look awful! I looked just as bad before. Jack said I’d never have another happy moment if I knew how I looked. And I do. I’m the ugliest girl in Auburn,—the very homeliest!”

Barbara's quick thoughts flew to the sanitarium at Chariton. Was it possible that tragedies like this were of common occurrence in her mother's life? It was only a child's tragedy, but it was a very real one; and the tenderest wisdom and the wisest tenderness were needed to dispel it. Her mind went back to the sweet lips and the loving arms that had soothed so many of her own baby griefs. Housekeeping had been such a small part of her mother's life; was she, Barbara, capable of being a substitute in a case like this?

"I'm sorry you heard what we said," she replied, tenderly stroking the sticky head. "Of course you know that we always exaggerate when we joke,—Jack and I,—and we said what we did in fun. Your hair isn't as pretty now as it will be when you get a little older; then it will turn dark,—red hair always does,—and you may have real auburn, which is the prettiest shade in the world."

"It isn't just my hair,—it's all of me," sobbed Gassy. "I'm so dang homely!"

Barbara laughed, a merry, hearty laugh, that carried more comfort than a million words to the aching little heart. "You blessed chicken! You're not so homely."

"But I want to be pretty like you; not skinny, and awkward, and tight little pig-tails of hair! I'd just love to shake curls out of my neck, the way the other girls do."

"Well, not *everybody* can have curly hair; I'm not that lucky, either. But I was thinner than you when I was your age, and far more awkward. You'll grow fatter in a year or two. And in the meantime, dear, be glad of the pretty things about yourself,—your clear, wide-open eyes, your dainty little ears, your high-arched instep. You have a very sweet mouth, too, when you are happy."

Gassy snuggled a shade closer to her sister. "I like you, Barbara," she said, her proud little voice strangely softened.

"I know you do, dear. And I love *you*, so much that I want you to like yourself. Don't think about how you look; you're always pretty when you're merry. Let's go in and shampoo that head of yours. You won't mind it short during this hot weather, and it will probably grow in thicker and darker because of this cutting."

The half-ironed waist had dried when they returned to the house, and Barbara, as she re-sprinkled the garment and laid it back in the ironing basket, was reminded of her frequent admonitions to her mother about "systematizing the housework." "A mother is a composite of cook, laundress, seamstress, waitress, nurse, and kindergartner," she said to herself. "And yet that isn't what keeps her busiest; it's the unforeseen happenings, and the interruptions, that eat up the time. I don't wonder she never finished her work. What next, I'd like to know?"

Her wish was soon gratified by the appearance of Jack at the door. "Gee whiz! but this day is a scorcher," said the boy, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief, as he threw himself upon the lounge in the next room. "It is ninety in the shade in the yard,—that is, it would be if there was any shade to get under. If I ever said anything derogatory unto the snow-shovel, I take it all back. Here's a letter, Barb; mail-man left it."

Barbara, reaching for the envelope, stumbled over the prostrate form of David, who lay on his stomach on the floor, reading his well-worn copy of the "Greek Heroes."

"Goodness, David, do get out of the way! There isn't room to step in this house when you lie on the floor. And please don't read aloud until I finish this letter." She tore open the envelope, and her eyes eagerly ran over the words, as her mind hungrily took them up:—

MY DEAR MISS GRAFTON,—It gives us much pleasure to notify you that the Eastman Scholarship will fall into your hands this year. Miss Culver, who ranked slightly above you in the competitive examination, writes us that circumstances make it impossible for her to enjoy its advantages. You, as second in rank of scholarship, fall heir to her place and her honors.

We heartily congratulate you upon the attainment of what you so richly deserve, and beg that you will notify us of your acceptance this week. It is so late in the season now that an immediate decision is necessary.

Cordially yours,
Eastman Scholarship Committee,
E. C. BEDFORD, *Chairman*.

Jack, glancing up from the lounge, caught a glimpse of Barbara's face, "What's the matter? Is mother worse?" he demanded, sitting bolt upright on the sofa.

"No,—oh, no. It's just a letter from college," said Barbara. She got up from her chair suddenly, and made her way back to the kitchen.

"If you're through with it, may I read aloud now?" called David; but his sister did not hear him. She stepped inside the pantry and sat down on a tin cracker-box to think it over.

The Eastman Scholarship! The highest honor which Vassar had to offer, and which carried with it a year of post-graduate study, had been the ambition of Barbara's life. Nobody but herself could dream what that letter meant to her. Nobody but herself ever suspected how bitter the disappointment had been the spring before, when Miss Culver, who was less brilliant, but more of a student than Barbara, had taken the scholarship almost out of her hands. Every one in college had expected her to win it, and though she had been outwardly dubious about her prospects, she had been inwardly self-confident. It had taken courage to offer congratulations to Miss Culver, on that dreadful day when the decision had been announced. *Everybody*—that is, everybody but the faculty—knew that it belonged, by right, to her. She had made light of her defeat at home,—she had never dared think much about it, herself,—and nobody had suspected how deep a tragedy it was.

And now the chance had come, *now*, when everything in the world was upside down; when a sick mother and a forlorn household needed her; when an empty kitchen called her; and when a pair of hands, awkward though they were, meant as much to her family as a brilliant brain meant to her college. Barbara closed her eyes, and tried to think.

David, in the next room, had taken up his reading again, at the *Isle of the Sirens*:—

"And all things stayed around and listened; the gulls sat in white lines along the rocks; on the beach great seals lay basking and kept time with lazy heads; while silver shoals of fish came up to hearken, and whispered as they broke the shining calm. The wind overhead hushed his whistling as he shepherded his clouds toward the west; and the clouds stood in mid-blue, and listened dreaming, like a flock of golden sheep.

"And as the heroes listened, the oars fell from their hands and their heads drooped on their breasts, and they closed their heavy eyes; and they dreamed of bright, still gardens, and of slumbers under murmuring pines, till all of their toil seemed foolishness, and they thought of their renown no more."



BARBARA SANK DOWN WEARILY

“I’ve been asleep,” thought Barbara, bitterly, “asleep and dreaming.”

“Then Medea clapped her hands together, and cried, ‘Sing louder, Orpheus; sing a bolder strain; wake up these hapless sluggards, or none of them will see the land of Hellas more.’”

“Then Orpheus lifted his harp, and crashed his cunning hand across the strings, and his music and his voice rang like a trumpet through the still evening air: into the air it rushed like thunder, till the rocks rang, and the sea, and into their souls it rushed like wine, till all hearts beat fast within their breasts.”

“Every dream I had at college—every hope, every aspiration—has gone,” interrupted Barbara’s thoughts. “Surely I left school with plenty of ambition. But here I am, a drudge of a housekeeper, and a poor one at that! I can’t even cook a meal or iron a waist. And I haven’t the chance to do anything else, with mother sick. Oh, I would like to! I would, I would! Because this is my last opportunity. If I don’t take this, *I shall never, never, see the land of Hellas more.*”

David lost his place in the story. But the new page he turned was just as sweet to him, and he went on reading in his child’s voice, made hoarse by hay fever, and yet sweet with love of the words:—

“And a dream came to Æetes, and filled his heart with fear. He thought he saw a shining star which fell into his daughter’s lap; and that Medea his daughter took it gladly, and carried it to the river-side and cast it in, and there the whirling river bore it down, and out into the Euxine Sea.”

It was nine o’clock that evening before the last dish was washed, David’s throat-wash prepared, Gassy’s head anointed, and a letter written. After these things were done, Barbara went out to the mailbox. She posted her letter, and came back through the moonlight that seemed to heat the breathless night. Mosquitoes hummed about the porch, a cricket creaked in the grass, and the voices of innumerable locusts nicked the silence of the evening. The house was dark and lonely, and still. Barbara sank down on the porch, wearily, and laid her head against the railing.

“I’ve cast in my star,” she said to herself.

The homely words of the Vegetable Man came back to her with new meaning.

“Yes, it’s true, I *am* without,” she added; “that’s just the word for it!”

She put both hands before her eyes, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER X

THE VEGETABLE MAN'S DAUGHTER

CHARITON SANITARIUM, August 23, 1907.

DEAR LITTLE DAUGHTER,—You don't know how nice it is to be able to write a letter all by one's self. Dictating a letter to your home people is like eating by proxy.

I am getting better every day. Am sleeping without opiates, and am actually hungry for my meals. Those trying periods of faintness appear far less often, and my temperature is so normal that I am losing prestige with the nurses. It won't be long now until I shall be home again.

I feel guilty every minute I stay away. Those cheery letters of yours tell only the funny side of housekeeping, but I know that there is another side, too, and that inexperience and hot weather and hard work are a serious combination. It is too big a load for one pair of shoulders. I was sorry to hear that the Duchess had gone; she promised so well that I felt relieved about my motherless children and my wifeless husband. I hope you will be able to get Mr. Hopkins's daughter. If not, you had better go to the boarding-house for dinner and supper during the hot weather.

How is David? I think of him so often these torrid days. If his hay fever is bad, he ought to be sent nearer the lake. Watch him carefully, dear, won't you?

There is little for me to write you. No news is sanitarium news, and I see no one but my doctor and nurse and a few people whose illness is the most interesting thing about them. I live on your letters,—the dear, funny letters that you must steal time from recreation to write. I read scraps of them to the doctor and a few friends I have made here, and they never fail to ask me daily if I have "heard from the clever daughter." The cleverness I knew all about, long ago, but I am finding out new things every day about the sweetness and usefulness of that same daughter. Try to save yourself all you can, dearie. Why, oh, why, when you were choosing, didn't you select a mother that didn't "prostrate"?

Kiss the babes for me, and tell your father that I can't and won't stay away much longer. Much love from

MOTHER.

Barbara read the letter aloud to Gassy on one of the hottest of the August days. Then she drew the little sister into her arms and kissed her,—a long-drawn kiss in which was expressed relief and joy and gratitude. Gassy understood, and nestled close with a happy little croon.

"Won't it be nice to have her back, Barbara?" she whispered. "It's been awful lonesome without her! If it hadn't been for you, I couldn't have stood it." Then, ashamed of her unwonted show of affection, she drew herself out of her sister's lap, saying in her stiff little voice, which had been heard less frequently of late, "It's too hot to kiss!"

"There's another letter, too," said Barbara; "I don't know whether I'd better open it or not. It's addressed to mother, but I think it is from Aunt Sarah."

Gassy made a grimace. "Better open it, then. It won't hold any good news."

"I'm afraid I must; Aunt Sarah doesn't know that mother is away from home. I hope it isn't descriptive of any more family broils. If it is, I shan't forward it."

"Prob'ly she's going to make us a visit," said Gassy.

A horrible foreboding of what Gassy's prediction would mean swept over Barbara. It was succeeded by a still more horrible sensation as she read the letter:—

MY DEAR NIECE,—I am about to start for the shore on my annual trip, and intend to stop and see you on the way. I leave here Thursday, and expect to arrive in Auburn some time Friday. I intended to let you know before, but I have been very busy attending to my wardrobe, and have neglected less important things. You never make much fuss over me when I come, so I knew I could break the monotony of the long trip east without inconveniencing you.

Your last letter said you were not very well. Of course I regret to hear that, but you cannot expect me to express sympathy for what is obviously your own fault. New Thought stands ready to help you, and until you are willing to accept its teachings, you cannot hope to have peace of either mind or body. I shall do my best to convince you of this when I come.

I understand that Barbara is with you. I am anxious to see that college life, of which I never approved, has improved her. I shall telegraph you later when to meet me.

Your affectionate aunt,
SARAH T. BOSSALL.

P.S.—I neglected to say that I shall bring Edward's boys with me.

Barbara laid down the sheet of paper, and sat looking at it with troubled eyes.

“What's the matter?” asked Gassy.

“She's coming, *to-morrow!*” groaned Barbara; “and she's going to bring those awful grandchildren of hers. That means that one of us will have to give up a room, and sleep in the attic. And to-morrow is sweeping-day, and not a thing baked in the house, and father away, and David half-sick, and only me to do the cooking for nine people! And Mrs. Clemens can't take us to board; father asked her before he left.”

Gassy looked equally disconsolate. “I just hate those Bossall boys,” she said; “they fight all the time, and grab the best pieces, and call you red-head, and brag about living in the city. Archie's the biggest cry-baby I ever saw, and Nelson's an awful liar, and that Freddy hasn't even sense enough to keep his stockings up; they're always in rolls about his ankles.”

Barbara listened unhearingly. “Aunt Sarah always expects to be ‘entertained.’ And she's so particular that I just dread to have her come inside the house. During this hot weather I've been letting things go a little, and I know she'll comment on the way they look. It doesn't seem as though I *could* do any more work than I have been doing! What *shall* I do, Gassy?”

“We might go out and see the Vegetable Man's daughter,” suggested Gassy, flattered at being taken into consultation.

“I think that's the only thing left,” agreed Barbara; “ask Sam to harness Maud S., and I'll put on my hat while you're gone. You may go with me, if you want to.”

Grassy looked wistful. “I s'pose if I stayed, I could pare the potatoes for you,” she said hesitatingly.

“You dear little chicken, you,” said Barbara. “Never mind the potatoes; we can fix them together when we come back. I'd rather have you with me, now.”

Maud S. jogged slowly along the road that led to the Vegetable Man's. It was a winding road that twisted its way uphill like a yellow shaving curl. Midsummer lay heavy on the farm-lands stretching away on either side. The corn-fields gleamed yellow in the sunshine, the locusts filled the air with their incessant drone, and goldenrod and wild asters, covered with a veil of dust, flaunted in every corner of the rail-fences. Barbara loved those rail-fences, built in the days when time was the farmer's chief asset, and now rapidly giving way to the ugly, prosaic barbed-wire that is so symbolic of the present age of commercialism. Something of this thought she expressed to Gassy.

“It keeps the cows out of the corn, though,” was the small sister’s response.

Barbara mused over the words as she urged on Maud S. They, too, were characteristic of this Western country, the new world that was so busy at money-making that it had no time to think of beauty; the world that lived alone to keep the cows out of the corn. She loved the long, rich stretches of rolling prairie lands; she was proud of the miles of waving yellow corn-fields; at college she had felt a tender sort of thrill every time she claimed ownership with the middle West. But planted in that same prairie land, like a stalk of corn, herself, her beauty-loving soul revolted at its materialism, and pride in its productiveness seemed a sort of vulgar greed. The beautiful middle West was peopled by men with souls so dead, that to keep the cows out of the corn was their ambition in life. Live-stock and grain bounded their existence on four sides. Was it possible that people could grow so deaf to the voice of loveliness that a midsummer day could fail to speak of beauty to them? The strident clatter of a harvesting-machine seemed to assent to the question.

At the top of the hill, Maud S. stopped for a rest. And looking down from the summit, Barbara was answered. Into the hazy, blue distance stretched the corn-fields, so far away that the tasseled tops became but an indistinct, waving sea. Eyes could not see where the sea ended and the hills began; the two met, blended, melted into each other; every sign of industry was a part of the wonderful landscape, and utilitarianism became beauty itself.

At the third curl of the shaving stood the Vegetable Man’s large red barn. Back of it, and hidden from the road, stood his small white house.

“I should think his wife would rather live in the stable,” said Gassy, as the two girls went up the narrow walk with the grass growing untidily through the broken planks.

Leander Hopkins himself answered their knock at the door, and to him Barbara explained her errand.

“Wal, I dunno. She’s got steady company now, and her mind seems to be set on him. She’d like to do it fer yer ma, though, I’m sure. Ye’d best ast her.”

He led the way through an uncarpeted hall into the kitchen, where a tired-faced woman and a slatternly girl were at work. Barbara cast a quick look at the latter, and her heart sank. The Vegetable Man’s daughter was thirty-odd years old. She was thin and sallow and stupid-looking. Her eyes were crossed, and a pair of large glasses, apparently worn to hide the defect, succeeded only in making it more prominent. She listened to Barbara’s recital with little show of interest.

“I dunno,” she said finally, “as there’s any need I should work out.”

Again Barbara offered inducements.

“Do you let your girls have company?” asked the Vegetable Man’s daughter, with a simper.

“Oh, yes, certainly,” answered Barbara.

“Steady company, I mean,” said the girl.

“If they prefer that kind,” said Barbara, smiling in spite of herself.

“And all their evenings?”

“Yes,” replied Barbara.

“And Sunday afternoons to supper?”

Barbara hesitated. “Yes,” she agreed, finally.

“Well, I dunno,” said the girl. The tired-faced woman put in a word:—

“You might go and help her out a bit, Libbie. Then you could buy those white shoes you’ve been wanting.”

“Well, maybe,” assented the girl. “When do you want me?”

“Right now,” said Barbara.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Hopkins accompanied the three girls to the gate, lending his presence while Barbara untied the horse and cramped the buggy. “Good-by, Libbie,” he said; “write us frequent, and don’t work too hard. Give my regards to yer pa, Miss Barb’ry. I ain’t never forgot the time he pulled me out of noomonia. There ain’t nothing too big fer me to do fer him; tell him to come out some time, and pick gooseberries.”



Great-Aunt Sarah reached Auburn the next day. No telegram had heralded the hour of her coming, and consequently there was no one at the station to meet her on arrival. At noon on Friday, while Barbara was convincing the Vegetable Man’s daughter that steak should be broiled instead of fried, a carriage rolled up to the door. Peanuts Barker, still in Banker Willowby’s top hat, deposited a trunk on the front walk, and a stout lady, with two methodical puffs of shiny black hair in under her bonnet, and three small boys dismounted.

At the sound of the wheels there was a general scattering of the clan. Gassy, whose hatred for Aunt Sarah was general, and for the boys specific, retired to the coal-cellar, David hurried to put his dear books out of reach of marauding hands, and Jack meanly abandoned the scene of action for an upstairs window. Barbara and the Kid were the only members of the family to greet the guests.

“How do you do, my dears?” said Aunt Sarah, majestically. “I was surprised to find no one at the station when I arrived. I am not accustomed to the care of my own baggage. Barbara, how sallow you are! Don’t set my trunk down there, sir; my fee to you includes payment for carrying it upstairs. Archie, let the dressing-case alone; I don’t want to have to speak to you about it again! I suppose I am to have the east room, as usual. I hope the morning light won’t wake me up at day-break.”

“The same old Great Sahara!” whispered Jack, appearing in the hall to shoulder the luggage. “Age cannot wither, or custom stale her infinite arrive-ity. If I should hear that voice in the heart of the Hartz Mountains, I should say, ’Tis she! ’Tis she!”

It was true that the three years that had passed since aunt and niece had met had done little to change Aunt Sarah. At the table that noon, Barbara, who had sacrificed her vegetarian theories to the comfort of her visitors, hospitably inquired about the result:—

“How is your steak, Aunt Sarah?”

Mrs. Bossall plied her knife vigorously for a moment, then replied to her niece’s question with a single word:—

“Tough!”

Barbara’s housekeeping, Jack’s idleness, Gassy’s disposition, David’s dreaminess, and the Kid’s table-manners were all criticised with impartiality. Even the Vegetable Man’s daughter was not spared.

“If that girl were working for *me*, she wouldn’t sit up with her young man until half-past ten o’clock,” she announced, on the second morning after her arrival.

She commented on the hardness of her bed, the crack in her window, the quality of her food; Barbara’s theories, the doctor’s weakness for charity cases, the lack of economy in the household, and the extravagance of sanitarium life, all came in for her condemnation. Barbara’s temper was held by a single airy thread, that threatened daily to snap, and was kept in place only by exertion of much will-power, and the comforting thought that Aunt Sarah’s visit could not last forever.

“Edward’s children” had inherited some of the most striking of their grandmother’s characteristics. Moreover, added to her aggressiveness and her domineering qualities, they possessed a fertility of resource and an ingenuity for mischief that filled the Kid with envy, Barbara with horror, and Jack with amusement.

“They have imbibed some of their beloved grandmother’s theories,” said Jack to Barbara, on the third day of the visit. “Talk about the ‘New Thought’! Those kids have more new and original thoughts in ten seconds than her whole sect has in ten years. What idea do you suppose they conceived this morning? I came up the back walk in time to see a bundle of white linen dangling in the air at the barn window. Those little fiends were up in the loft working the hay pulley, and hanging from the rope below was the youngest Wemott baby, the hook of the rope caught through the band of its little apron. There was only a button between that infant and eternity when I rescued it.”

“They are the worst children I ever saw,” said Barbara. “Cecilia is hard to manage, but she is as nothing compared with the Bossall boys. You can’t appeal to their better natures, for there is nothing there to appeal to. And as for punishing them, I don’t believe that they are afraid of anything in this whole world.”

“Except Gassy,” suggested Jack.

“Yes, they seem to hold her in wholesome respect I can’t understand the cause of their consideration for her, unless it is fear. Cecilia isn’t mighty in the flesh, but her tongue is a power.”

The reason for this respect came to light the next day. It was fear: but fear of something besides Gassy’s tongue. Before daylight, Aunt Sarah creaked her way up the attic stairs to the little, hot room in which Barbara had slept since the arrival of the guests. Aunt Sarah was addicted to black silk nightgowns, and the long, dark robe, a lighted candle, and curling-pins, rolled so tightly that they lifted her eyebrows, gave her a decidedly Lady Macbethian appearance.

“Are you awake, Barbara?” she inquired, in an angry stage whisper.

By that time Barbara could truthfully answer that she was. “What is it?” she asked.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” said Aunt Sarah, in a voice that betokened anything but regret. “But I am in such a state of mind that even New Thought fails to calm me. I was never so insulted in my life as by the treatment that has been accorded me and mine while in my own niece’s home.”

“What do you mean, Aunt Sarah?” cried Barbara, now thoroughly aroused.

“I mean just this: Cecilia has been according Edward’s children a system of torture that has nearly robbed them of their sanity.”

Even in her worry and bewilderment, a wicked thought, reflecting upon the *present* mental condition of Edward’s children flashed through Barbara’s mind. But she checked the desire to give utterance to it.

Aunt Sarah set down the candle, and faced Barbara severely. “I was aroused from sleep a few moments ago by a noise in the next room,” she said. “It sounded like a scream from Archie, and I sat up in bed and listened. I heard a deep voice in the children’s room, saying, ‘I am the Holy Ghost,’ and other irreverent things which I cannot, at this moment, recall. I knew that no burglar would stop for that announcement, so I quietly opened the door and looked in. A figure in a sheet was standing between the two beds, with arms outstretched over the two boys.”

“What!” exclaimed Barbara.

“It was Cecilia, of course,” continued Aunt Sarah. “The dear little lads were speechless with fright and horror, and that bad child was claiming to be the Holy Ghost, and threatening all sorts of terrible things to them if they tore David’s books again. I sent her back to bed at once, and tried to reassure the boys, but they were in a sad state of terror. They tell me that this has gone on from night to night. They know, of course, that it *is* Cecilia, but they are timid by nature, and they have been in a pitiable frame of mind. I have noticed, ever since our arrival, that they have been slightly unmanageable, and this explains it all; New Thought cannot work against a supernatural fear. Now, the question is, what are you going to do with Gassy?”

Wicked Barbara suppressed a chuckle as she debated. “Well, I think I’ll let her sleep till morning, Aunt Sarah,” she said aloud, soberly. “Then I’ll see what I can do with her. It was very wrong of her, of course, and I’m sorry that you and the boys have been put to so much distress. It isn’t like Cecilia to be cruel.”

“It is exactly what I should expect of her,” was the sharp reply. “Cecilia I like the least of any of my niece’s children. She is *naturally* an inhuman sort of child, without the slightest trace of affection for any one; and then she has always been allowed to have her own way, until she is most unmanageable. Elizabeth and your father have spoiled all of their children, but the result is most obvious in Cecilia. She ought to be severely dealt with for a trick of this kind. Reverence, if not simple humanity, should have deterred her. But none of you children seem to have any reverence for anything. I think I shall speak to Cecilia, myself, this morning.”

“Oh, please don’t, Aunt Sarah,” exclaimed Barbara, impulsively. “You know how sensitive Cecilia is, and how hard to handle! I think that if I talk to her first, I can make her sorry for frightening the boys. But she doesn’t li—”

Aunt Sarah took up her candle with as much dignity as it is possible to assume in curling-pins. “I understand that Cecilia doesn’t like me,” she said stiffly, “and I assure you that the feeling is mutual. I shall not speak to her, of course, if you prefer that I shall hold no communication with her. But I shall write your mother a full account of the whole affair as soon as I leave, which will be this morning, if possible. I must say, Barbara, that I never expected that you would condone wrongdoing, even in your own household. I shall telephone for an expressman to take my trunk to the station at ten this morning. If there was ever a home and a family where New Thought is needed, this is the one!”

Aunt Sarah was as good as her word. During the entire breakfast hour, she deigned not so much as a glance at her guilty great-niece. Upon her departure, she ostentatiously kissed every other member of the family, including Jack, who presented a cheek gingerly for the salute. Barbara accompanied her to the station, but she was not to be mollified, and the farewell was enlivened only by Edward's boys, whose parting act was to open a coop of chickens in the Auburn baggage-room, and give the fowls their freedom. Barbara, as well as the station-master, heaved a sigh of relief as her relatives boarded the train.

Upon her return to the disorderly home, the big sister sought out the little one. It was hard to find fault with the punishment that had been meted out to Edward's boys, but it must be done. Barbara took the small girl on her lap. "Why did you do it, Chicken?" she asked.

Gassy's lips set in a decided line. "Because they deserved it," she said. "I ain't one bit sorry, Barbara Grafton, not one single bit! Those are the meanest, sneakiest boys that ever lived! They didn't dare torment Jack,—he was too big; they were afraid of me because I could beat them running. So they took it all out on David and the Kid, 'specially David. He ain't strong enough to fight, and, besides, he's too gentle; and they knew it, and took advantage of it all the time. First they used to hit him, and tease him, but he'd never answer back,—just look at them kind of sad and slow, like Mary, Queen of Scots, on the scaffold. And that spoiled all their fun; the scratch-back kind are the only ones who are ever really teased, you know."

Barbara put this bit of philosophy away for future reference.

"But after awhile," the child continued, "they found out that it hurt him lots worse to meddle with his books, so they did that, just to worry him. You *know* how he loves that King Arthur book of his! Yesterday they cut out every single picture in it with their jackknives,—just hacked it all up! You can't *hurt* those boys,—they're too tough; but they're awful 'fraid-cats, and you can scare 'em easy. So I just put on a sheet, and went in and warned 'em that they dasn't touch David's books again. He cries every time they do, and that makes his hay fever worse."

"But, dear," Barbara said quietly, "it wasn't nice to do it. They were in your own house, you know—"

"We didn't invite them," interrupted Gassy.

"And, besides, you must never scare people. It's a very dangerous thing to do. If they had been frightened into brain fever, you would never forgive yourself. And one thing more, dear, I don't like your calling yourself the Holy Ghost."

"That was because my sheet was torn. The hole-y ghost, you know."

"I know, but it isn't a reverent thing to say."

"But, Barbara, it doesn't seem wicked to me to say that. I never could even imagine the Holy Ghost. It just seems like words, and nothing else. Every time I go to church they talk about the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit, and the Life Infinite, and I can't understand 'em. Even Jehovah sounds awful big and far off. But when they say Jesus,—Baby Jesus, I mean, or Little Boy Jesus, or Man Jesus,—that is easy and sweet. I always like best to think of Him that way; not like a God, so far off, and with so many things to manage, that it's hard to believe that He cares, but like a man, that made mistakes, and had to try over again."

"Yes," said Barbara, understandingly.

“I like to think,” went on Gassy, “that He did just the same things that we do, and loved the same things, and wanted the same things. It wouldn’t help me any to have Him be *glad* to die and go up in a chariot of fire, with people hollering, like Elijah did. But it does help me to know that He *wanted* to live, just like I do, and cried about leaving everything, at first, and then was big and brave enough to stand it. You know I wouldn’t be irreverent about *Him*, Barbara!”

“No, and it would hurt you to have any one else irreverent about Him. And that is why I don’t like to have you say what you did about the Holy Ghost; you may hurt some one else.”

“Well, I won’t do it again; that is, I won’t be irreverent,” promised Gassy. “But about scaring them, Barbara Grafton, you mustn’t try to make me be sorry about that, for I’d be telling a lie if I said I was. They deserved it, and there wasn’t any other way of making them let David alone. I’m glad I frightened some of the bad out of them.”

And with this Barbara was forced to be satisfied.

The path was straightened for Barbara after the departure of her guests. The Vegetable Man’s daughter was incompetent, but she was good-natured and cheerful. Her shrill soprano voice rose at all hours of the day in the request to be waltzed around again, Willie, around, and around, and around. Her “Steady Company” made regular calls at the kitchen every evening that he was off his run, and sat on the back porch, with his feet on the railing and his pipe in his mouth, scarcely uttering a word during the call. The Vegetable Man’s daughter proved to be a fluent conversationalist, and judging from the scraps of sound that floated around to the front porch, now and then, the evening visits seemed to consist of monologue, sandwiched in between a kiss of greeting and one of parting. Promptly at half-past ten the Steady Company would withdraw, and the Vegetable Man’s daughter would renew her request to be waltzed around again, Willie, all the way up the back stairs.

Perhaps it was the thought of her absent lover that prevented her success as a cook, for it was certain that the day after one of his calls the bread was apt to be unsalted, the napkins forgotten, and the milk left to sour. But she was strong and willing, patient with Barbara’s theories, and fond of the children. Something of the old-time comfort returned to the house, and Barbara found time to mingle with the young people of Auburn, and to enjoy the first youthful companionship she had had since her return from college. On some of these occasions she met Susan, who greeted her with a stiff smile, in which wistfulness was scarcely hidden. There was nothing of regret in Barbara’s cool nod. Susan was not as necessary to her as she was to Susan, and in the popularity which came to her as readily with the young people at home as at school, she easily forgot the quiet girl on the outskirts of the jolly crowd.

Gayeties began to thicken upon the approach of school-days, and Barbara took active part in all of them. In the relief about her mother’s condition, all serious thoughts took wing, and Barbara played the butterfly with light heart. “The Infinite of the Ego” lay untouched in a pigeon-hole of her desk, and she felt no inclination to write anything heavier than the semi-weekly letters that merrily told the life at home to her mother. The taste of play-time was very sweet after the hard summer; and tennis and boating and driving filled the days of early autumn to the brim.

But the recess was of short duration. Barbara, coming in from an afternoon tea, was met in the hall by the Vegetable Man’s daughter. “I’ve something to tell you, Miss Barbara,” she said.

“What is it, Libbie? Are we out of eggs? I remembered, after I had gone, that I had forgotten to order

more.”

“No’m, it ain’t eggs; it’s me. We eloped this afternoon.”

“What!”

“Yes’m; me and my Steady Company. He got off his run this afternoon, and we thought we might as well do it now and be done with it.”

“So you’re married?”

“Yes’m; we went to the justice’s office. They said it was the prettiest wedding that had been there in a month. I wore my white shoes, and I flush up so when I get excited.”

“But how did you *elope*? Didn’t your family ever know that you were going to be married?”

“Oh, yes, they knew that for two months already, but we didn’t say nothing to them about this. We wanted a piece in the paper about it, and they always write it up when a couple elope. So we told the justice we was running away, and we wanted it wrote up, and he said he’d see to it. Besides, we didn’t have time to let ’em know, out home; we just decided it ourselves this afternoon.”

“Well, I hope you’ll be happy, Libbie,” Barbara recovered herself enough to say. “I suppose this means that I shall lose you?”

“Yes’m. I’m just back for my clothes. We’re going out to his mother’s to-night. She’s got the harvesters at her house this week, and will want me to come out and help her cook for them. After that, we’re going to housekeeping in town.”

“Aren’t you going to have any wedding-trip?”

“We had it already. We took the trolley-car out to the cemetery after the wedding, and set there two good hours, till it was time to come in and get supper. I knew you wouldn’t get home in time. I’m sorry to leave you this way, without warning, Miss Barbara, but it can’t be helped. That’s what an elopement is.”

Barbara’s pretty reception gown was laid aside for a shirt-waist and skirt and a kitchen apron. And as she and Gassy “cleared up” the dishes, the Vegetable Man’s daughter and her Steady Company passed away in a cloud of romance and tobacco smoke.

CHAPTER XI

REAL TROUBLE

“THE lion is the beast to fight,
He leaps along the plain:
And if you run with all your might,
He runs with all his mane.
I’m glad I’m not a Hottentot,
But if I were, with outward cal-lum
I’d either faint upon the spot,
Or hie me up a leafy pal-lum,”

sang Jack, in a clear baritone that made up in volume what it lacked in quality. “I don’t know but I’ll *have* to take to the tall timber, if I don’t find my school-books. Barberry, have you seen anything of my Greek since the twenty-sixth of last June?”

“All the school-books are piled on the rubber-box in the vestibule,” said Barbara. “I suppose your Greek is among them. Hurry, David; you’ll have to put on a clean blouse before you start, and it’s after eight, now.”

David’s voice came from the pillows of the couch, where he had curled himself into a disconsolate little ball,—“I’m not going to school to-day, Barbara.”

“Why not?” asked his sister.

“I’ve got a headache, and my shoulders are tired.”

“First symptoms of the nine o’clock disease,” commented Jack; “David has it every year.”

“I don’t think you feel so very bad,” said Barbara. “You’ve been so much better lately. And you’ll have to make up all the lessons that you miss, you know.”

“Wish I didn’t have to go to school,” said David, in a petulant voice that was most unusual with him; “I hate it.”

“I can’t understand why you don’t like to study when you so love to read,” remarked Barbara. “You ought to do much better work in school; you’re not a bit stupid at home.”

“I have ideas in my head,” said David, plaintively. “But when I get them out, they aren’t ideas.”

“You do too much dreaming and too little studying. I can’t pull you away from books at home, but you don’t seem to be able to concentrate your mind on your school work.”

“Lessons are so unint’resting,” said David. “If I was in history or mythology, now, I’d like those; but I only have reading and ’rithmetic and language and g’ography. I’ve read everything in my reader a million times, and every time we come to a beauteous sentence in our language lesson we have to chop it up into old parts of speech. I can’t do numbers at all, and I just hate g’ography!”

“You like to read it at home.”

“Yes, but that’s diff’runt. I always read about the people, and the animals, and what’s in the country,

and what the inhabitants do, and how they live. But at school they make you tell all the mountain ranges from the northeast to the southwest of Asia, and the names are awful hard to learn. They're just like eight times seven, and seven times nine: there doesn't seem to be anything to make you remember them, but there's a whole lot of things to make you forget them!"

"Wait until you get into fractions," said Gassy. "*Then* you'll see! 'Rithmetic is just planned to keep you guessing. When I was beginning addition, I thought that was all there was to learn, but afterwards I found that I'd only learned it so I could do subtraction. Everything you find out about just makes more things for you to study. I wish I'd stayed with my mind a blank,—like the Everett baby."

"Don't worry about that," said Jack, consolingly. "You haven't strayed so far from that condition that you can't find your way back."

There was a crackle of stiff white apron, a flash of thin, black legs, and Whiting's Language Lessons went sailing through the air, its pages falling as it struck Jack's head.

"Now see what you've done, Spitfire!" said Jack.

Two months before, this exhibition of temper would have been made the subject of a moral lecture from Barbara. Now she only looked sober as she bent to help Gassy pick up the leaves. "Poor book," she said; "you've given it what Jack deserved. That's hardly fair, is it? Come, Boy, help repair the damage that you caused. No, David, you needn't help; I want you to go and get ready for school."

"Must I?" pleaded David.

"I think you had better."

The little boy raised himself from the couch with a long-drawn sigh that Barbara remembered days afterward. "All right, if you say so," he said: "I'll change my waist now."

The house seemed very still after the children had trooped out to swell the procession of young people headed toward the school. Barbara reflected with relief that their departure would lighten her labors. With the Kid at kindergarten, and the others away from home, she could count on a tidy house and an unbroken opportunity for work.

"It doesn't seem very affectionate to be glad that they are gone," she said to herself. "Mother always seemed to be sorry when our vacation was over. But it *is* a relief to have a quiet house, and a chance to work without a dozen interruptions an hour. Perhaps, after I get things into running order, I shall have time to do a little writing every morning while they are out of the way. Then—"

The thought of the pile of rejected manuscripts lying upstairs in the corner of her desk stopped her dreams. "I can't even write any more," she thought bitterly. "This kitchen drudgery takes the life out of my brain as well as my body. I *must* find time to put the early morning freshness into something besides dishes."

It was with this idea that she carried a writing-pad and her fountain pen out to the side porch an hour later. An orderly house and an undistracted mind seemed to make conditions favorable for writing, and the scanty bits of philosophy that had sifted their way into the gayeties of the past fortnight began to find utterance in best college rhetoric. The lust of writing stole over the girl, and for two hours she wrote steadily, utterly oblivious to everything.

The sound of the opening of the gate roused her. It was Jack, coming up the gravel walk with David in his arms,—an inert little David, whose arm hung heavily over his brother's, and whose hand swung limply at the end. The fountain pen rolled unheeded off the porch.

“What is it?” breathed Barbara.

“Where's father?” asked Jack.

“Gone to see the Wemott baby. What's the matter with David?”

“I wish I knew,” said Jack, hoarsely. “He's sick, though. Call father by 'phone, and then help me to get him to bed. I'll tell you about it when you come upstairs.”

Barbara's heart stood still, but her feet flew. “Wemott's residence,” she said at the telephone. “Oh, I don't *know* the number, Central; hurry, please, do hurry!”

It seemed hours before the answer came. “Is Dr. Grafton still there? . . . No, don't call him. . . . Tell him to come home at once.” Even in her excitement she found thought to add the words that should save him ten minutes of worry,—“There has been a hurry call.”

The limp little body lay stretched out on David's bed. “I can't find his night-shirt,” said Jack, in the same hoarse voice. “Where do you keep it, Barbara? He was taken sick at school. Bob Needham came running over to the High School to tell me to come at once,—that David was acting strangely. By the time I got there, he was lying just like this across one of the recitation benches, and his teacher was trying to make him swallow a little brandy. She told me that she had noticed that he was not himself during a recitation; he began to talk loudly and rather wildly, and to insist that his head *did* ache; that”—Jack seemed to force out the words—“that it *wasn't* the nine o'clock disease. She tried to quiet him, and had just succeeded in getting him to agree to go home, when he toppled over on the floor. Don't wait to unfasten that shoe-string, Barbara; cut it. Of course I brought him right home. Willowby's driver was just passing the school, and I hailed him. When will father be here?”

Between the disjointed sentences brother and sister put the sick child to bed. Then Jack hurried to call Dr. Curtis by telephone, while Barbara hovered over the still form until her father's step was heard on the stair. In the ten minutes' interval the girl learned what four years of college had failed to teach,—the hardest lesson that Time brings to Youth,—how to wait.

The two physicians arrived almost simultaneously. Then Barbara and Jack were sent downstairs on errands that both felt were manufactured for the occasion. When they came back, the bedroom door was shut and they sat down in the hall outside, silent and aloof, and yet drawn together by the same fear which struggled at each heart. After what seemed to be hours, the door opened, and Dr. Curtis came out. Two white faces questioned his.

“Probably brain fever,” said the doctor. “We hope that it won't be very serious,—if we've caught it in time. Jack, you come along to the drug-store with me. Miss Barbara, you might go in and see your father now.”

But the girl had not waited for his instructions, to push past him into the bedroom. Dr. Grafton stood looking down at the little figure outlined by the bed-clothes. He turned as Barbara came in, and the girl received no encouragement from his face. When he spoke, however, it was reassuringly. “Come in, Barbara; you can't disturb him now. He's had some medicine, and he won't rouse for some time. I want to talk with you.”

“Is he dangerously sick?”

“We can’t tell just how sick he is, but we won’t think about danger yet. His fever is pretty high. Has he complained about not feeling well lately?”

“Not until this morning, and then not much. David never does really complain. He wanted to stay away from school, though.”

“He ought never to have gone,” said her father.

Barbara winced as though she had been struck. “That was my fault, father; I told him that I thought he had better go.”

Dr. Grafton did not seem to hear. “I’ve been trying to think what is the best thing for us to do. I don’t dare to let your mother know yet. I’ve sent for a nurse for the boy, but it’s going to make extra care for you to have sickness in the house. I don’t know just what we’ll do with the children; we must try to find some haven for Cecilia and the Kid. You and Jack and I must hold the fort. Do you think we can manage it? It may be a long siege.”

Barbara’s eyes overflowed, but her voice was steady as she answered her father with a slang phrase that seemed, somehow, to carry more assurance with it than college English would have done,—“Sure thing!”

“That’s all, then. The nurse will be here in twenty minutes. Try to keep the children still when they get home from school. I know that I can depend on you to keep things running, downstairs.”

“Yes, father.”

News traveled fast in Auburn, and before the children had returned from school, two visitors had cleared some of the difficulties from Barbara’s path. The first was Mrs. Willowby, who stopped at the door to tell Barbara that Gassy and the Kid were to be provided with a temporary home. “I am on my way to school now,” she said; “and I’ll explain it to them, and will take them home with me this noon. If you can get together what clothing they will need, I’ll send Michael over for it this afternoon. You know what a happiness it will be to me to do anything for your mother’s children, and I’ll try to mother them enough to keep them contented. In the mean time, dear, we are all at your service.”

As Mrs. Willowby’s carriage left the door, Susan came hurrying up the walk, a covered plate in her hand, and her face alive with sympathy. She caught Barbara’s face and drew it down to her own, using the childish name for her which had been dropped since college days. “Dear old Bobby,” she said. “I’ve just heard about.”

Barbara’s face relaxed and the tears began to gather.

“I’ve come to stay,” said Susan, in a practical voice, which brought more relief than pity would have done. “That is, to stay as long as you need me. David may be all right in a day or two, and then I’ll only be in the way. But in the mean time, I’m going to be Bridget.”

“Oh, no,” protested Barbara.

“Oh, yes,” mocked Susan. “You’ll have enough on your hands with all the extra cares, let alone the cooking. You must save a part of yourself for David, if he needs you. I don’t expect to do as well as you have been doing, if Auburn gossip is to be trusted, but I shan’t poison your family during your absence

from the kitchen.”

“I can’t let you do it,” said Barbara. “You ought not to take so much time away from home. What would your family do without you?”

“I have them trained so that they could get along without me for a year,” answered Susan. “Brother Frank is as handy about the kitchen as a woman, and he is not at work, now. Besides, I shan’t be away all the time; I shall run back and forth, enough to have my fingers in both pies. And speaking of pie, Barbara, here is a cherry one that I had standing idle in my pantry; I felt sure that you hadn’t made any dessert, yet.”

Barbara took the plate unsteadily. The two girls seemed to have changed natures, and something of Susan’s former stiffness had fallen upon Barbara. Of the two, Susan was far more at ease. “But I can’t take favors from you,—now,” said Barbara, awkwardly, “after what—”

“Look here, Barbara Grafton,” answered Susan. “You’ve always been doing favors for me,—all your life,—favors that I couldn’t return. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, but that I didn’t know how. You could always *do* things,—write, and draw, and sing, and entertain, and teach,—and I’ve reaped the benefit. Don’t you suppose I’ve ever wished that I could return the favors? Now there’s only one thing in all this world that I can do for you, and that is cook. Do you mean to say that you’re not going to let me do it?”

Over the little brown pie the two girls clasped hands. “Where do you keep your potatoes?” said Susan. “It’s so late that I’ll have to boil them.”



Somehow the long hours of the day dragged by, and ten o’clock at night found Barbara in her room.

“Go to bed, now,” her father had said. “David’s stupor will last all night, and I want you to be ready for to-morrow, when we shall need you. Miss Graves can take care of him better than either of us, just now. Our turn will come later.”

It was hard to stay in the sick-room, where the deathly silence was broken only by the little invalid’s heavy breathing and the swish of Miss Graves’s stiffly starched petticoats; harder still to go away, beyond these sounds. Barbara went reluctantly, dreading the long night when hands must lie idle, and feet still. Jack, too, had decided to “turn in early,” and the house seemed very silent without the usual uproar of the children’s bedtime. She had just fallen into an uneasy sleep, when she was roused by a step upon the stair. In a moment she was wide awake. Was it her father with bad news, or Miss Graves in search of something? By the familiar squeak Barbara knew that the top stair had been reached. The step sounded in the hallway, and the girl sat up in bed as her door was pushed open and a shadowy little figure entered the room.

“Cecilia Grafton!” exclaimed Barbara.

Gassy tiptoed toward the bed. “How’s David?” she demanded, in a whisper.

“How on earth did you get here?”

“Walked. How’s David?”

“Just about the same. Father says he is not suffering any pain. Did you come alone at this time of night?”

“Yes,” said Gassy, defiantly, “I did. Mrs. Willowby thought we ought to go to bed early. So we did. She let me sleep in the rose room, only I couldn’t. Mr. Willowby went to bed early, too, in the room just across the hall, and he snored awful. I stayed awake about two hours. I knew I couldn’t get to sleep unless I knew, myself, how David was, so I dressed and came. Is he going to be awful sick, Barbara? Tell me the truth; please don’t fool me!” A pair of cold little hands found their way to Barbara’s shoulders.

“We hope not, dear.”

“I wish I could sleep here to-night. I hate to be sent away.”

“But Mrs. Willowby will worry, if she finds that you have gone.”

“Can’t you telephone her that I’m here? I’ll go back to-morrow, Barbara, and I’ll be awful good if you’ll just let me sleep with you to-night. I always thought heaven was like that rose room, but I can’t sleep in it. Please let me stay here.”

Barbara slipped on her bath-robe and tiptoed down to the telephone. All was quiet in the sick-room as she passed. When she reached her own chamber, Gassy was cuddled down between the sheets. She snuggled close to her older sister with a little sob. “Even rose rooms can’t keep you from worrying, can they?” she said.

In the three weeks that followed, Barbara discovered that nothing can “keep you from worrying” when the dark shadow that men call Dread of Death stands on the threshold. She marveled constantly that one frail little body could withstand such desperate onslaughts of fever and pain. David’s illness was quick of development: the drowsiness was followed by days of high fever, and these were succeeded by nights of unconsciousness which plainly showed the strain to which the little frame was being subjected. He wasted greatly under the suffering, and although her father and Dr. Curtis said, “About the same,” each day, it seemed to Barbara’s eyes that the little brother grew less human and more shadowy with every succeeding twenty-four hours. Mrs. Grafton had not been told, both physicians deciding that the shock might cause a relapse, and Barbara’s hardest duty was to keep the news from her mother. In the cheery letters that continued to go to the sanitarium at regular intervals, there was not a word of the tragedy at home, but the writing was more of a strain than the watching in the sick-room.

As Dr. Grafton had predicted to Barbara, her turn came later. David took a most unaccountable dislike to Miss Graves, whose devotion to starch was the only thing in her disfavor, and he objected to her presence in the sick-room with the unreasoning vehemence of the delirious. It was impossible to dismiss Miss Graves without some valid excuse, and equally impossible to secure another nurse in Auburn. So most of the care devolved upon Barbara, much to David’s satisfaction, for he called constantly for his sister, and seemed most contented when her hands smoothed the hot pillow or gave the sleeping-draught.

To the management of the housework, Barbara gave little thought. Meals were scarcely an incident in those days of waiting. Little by little, as conditions grew graver in the invalid’s room, Barbara gave up more and more of her household duties, yet she was vaguely aware that things went on like clockwork downstairs. The meals that appeared upon the table were delicious, and yet Susan’s part in them was not obvious. She slipped in and out of the house at all hours, always bringing comfort with her, and yet bestowing it so quietly that it seemed the gift of a beneficent fairy.

Every critical thing that Barbara had ever said of the provincialism and officiousness of Auburn folk came back to her during these days of trouble. When Mrs. Willowby came with advice or encouragement,

when the Enderby children brought home David's school-books, when Miss Pettibone came running "across lots" with beef tea or a plate of doughnuts, when Mr. Ritter pressed his telephone into service, and agreed to carry all messages, that the sick child might not be disturbed, when even Miss Bates stopped at the door to inquire affectionately about the invalid, and when all the town combined to keep the news from Mrs. Grafton, Barbara's conscience was stricken. Her heart warmed with gratitude, and the meaning of the word neighborliness was, for the first time, made clear to her.

And yet, with all the kindness and helpfulness that Auburn could bestow, there was plenty left for the girl to do. It was Barbara who answered the door, who took the messages, who encouraged the children, who cheered Jack, who comforted her father, who assisted the nurse, who was brave when conditions were most discouraging, and sunny when the clouds hung lowest. And it was Barbara, too, who sat beside the bed, ready to rub the aching side or smooth the feverish brow, and who met, with a sinking heart, the discouragement that each day brought.

It was the middle of October before the crisis came. An early frost had stripped the flower beds, withered the vines, and left the yard bare. Barbara, looking out of the window through a blur of rain, on the day when David's fever was highest, was vaguely relieved by the desolation outside. Sunshine out of doors would have been a mockery. She stood with her back toward the bed and her face toward the street, but her eyes saw nothing but the wasted little form that tossed restlessly to and fro, and her ears heard only the heavy breathing, broken, now and then, by a moan. Miss Graves had gone to get a few hours' sleep to fortify herself for the vigil of the night, and Dr. Grafton, in the next room, was consulting with Dr. Curtis. The house was so still that their low voices were plainly audible. The words were not distinct, but the discouraged note in her father's speech fell heavily upon the girl's heart. "*They are afraid,*" she said to herself.

She turned from the desolate window to the bed, and with pale lips and dry eyes gazed down at the little brother. David tossed restlessly upon his pillow, and called aloud for Barbara.

"I'm here, dear," said the girl, taking the small, hot hand in hers; but the boy flung it away with a strange strength.

"I want *Barbara,*" he cried.

At the sound of the hoarse voice, Dr. Grafton hurried back into the room, followed by Dr. Curtis. And then began a fight with death that Barbara never forgot. Pushed aside as merely an onlooker, the girl watched, with a sort of curiosity, the man that she saw for the first time in her life. The father she had always known had vanished; in his place was the skilled physician, who seemed to have thought for the patient rather than the son. The two doctors worked like one machine,—fighting the fever back step by step, beating it, choking it, quenching it; pitting against it strength and science and skill. And when it finally succumbed, and David was snatched from the burning, a poor little wasted wraith of life, Barbara understood the worship that Dr. Grafton's patients gave him.

"We've won out," he said. "The fever's left the boy. Now if we can only keep him alive to-night—"

The shadows of evening were heavy in the room as Miss Graves's starchiness sounded along the hall. She went at once to the bedside, and laid her hand on the boy's forehead. Then she looked quickly up at the doctor. In that glance Barbara read the whole story,—it was a question, now, of vitality.

Susan herself brought up the tray of supper to Barbara, who tried to eat it in order to seem appreciative. But the rolls and the creamed chicken were sent back untasted, and she could not even find words to reply to the unworded sympathy in Susan's good-night. The old habit of gesture comes back in times of deepest emotion, and both girls understood, without need of words, Susan's reassuring pat of the shoulder, and Barbara's tight grasp of the hand.

"Go to bed, children," said Dr. Grafton, as he came out of the sick-room to the hall where Barbara and Jack stood together. "We need absolute quiet and plenty of air for the boy. There'll be no change for several hours, and you want all the sleep you can get."

"I can't sleep," protested Jack.

"But you can *rest*, and you must do it," answered his father. "We may need you both—later."

"You'll call us," said Jack, "if—"

"Yes," said his father, "I will."

Jack turned, without a word, to his own room, and Barbara heard him throw himself on the bed with a half-stifled moan. She herself opened her bedroom door and went in. Sleep was out of the question. She fell upon her knees beside her couch and prayed,—an inarticulate, broken cry for the help that is beyond human power. Then she lighted her little night lamp, and sat down before her desk with a volume of Emerson in her hand. She turned to the essay on Compensation, and read, her eyes seeking and finding the detached sentences that seemed written for her:—

We cannot part with our friends. We cannot let our angels go. We do not see that they only go out that archangels may come in. . . . We cannot again find aught so dear, so sweet, so graceful. But we sit and weep in vain. . . . The death of a dear . . . brother . . . breaks up a wonted occupation, or a household. . . . But . . . the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden flower with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made the banian of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men.

Barbara dropped the book hastily. "There's no compensation in that!" she said bitterly. Then she picked up a bit of paper, and put the cry of her heart into a few crude words.

Her father, coming into the room two hours later, found her there at her desk, her tear-stained face bowed on her arms. The pencil was still in her hand. Dr. Grafton touched her shoulder gently, but the girl did not waken. He hesitated for a moment, hoping for the right words to tell her, and as he did so his eyes fell upon the crumpled paper before him. It read:—

THE BANIAN TREE

The flower grows beside the wall,—
A little, sheltered thing,
And over it the sunbeams fall
And merry linnets sing.
No usefulness it has in life
So weak it is, and small,
And yet how happily it grows
Beside the shielding wall.

The banian tree grows tall and straight,
It sends its branches wide;
Beneath its shade the pilgrims wait,
The travelers abide.
They praise it, lying on the sward;
But what is that to me?

Forgive me, Lord; but it is hard
To be a banian tree!

The doctor's eyes filled. "Thank God," he said, "she won't have to be, this time!"

CHAPTER XII

THE END OF THE INTERREGNUM

THE Grafton children stood in a row, watching their father and Barbara establish David in the big Morris chair, on the occasion of his first trip downstairs. Joy and awe were struggling for supremacy in their hearts, but were carefully concealed after the fashion of young America.

“Well, David,” said Jack, jocularly, “you look just exactly like a collapsed balloon. Remember how nice and round you used to be? Now, hurry up and get there again. It was becoming.”

“He reminds me of the pictures of the famine-sufferers in India,” remarked Gassy. “How their ribs did stick out, and how funny their hands were,—like claws.”

“David looks to me like the sweetest small boy ever made,” said Barbara, quietly, as she bent down to kiss the pale lips of the little fellow, and tucked the afghan around him more closely.

“Puzzle,—find David!” called Jack. And indeed, the child seemed lost in the huge chair, his wasted little face wearing a faint smile of contentment at being the centre of so much attention.

“If you children continue to talk so loudly, you will have to leave,” said Dr. Grafton, as he prepared to depart. “Barbara, you will see that David has all the quiet he needs, of course.”

The Kid raised himself from the floor, where he had been wriggling in the imaginary likeness of a boa constrictor.

“Everybody talks about David,” he said jealously. “Aren’t I the baby any more?”

“You’ll always be a baby,” consoled Jack; “a great big baby, even when you are as old as I am. So don’t worry.”

Gassy laughed, and the Kid looked puzzled. “Babies always cry,” he said reflectively.

“Yes?” said Jack.

“Then you must be a baby too,” added the Kid, with triumph, “’cause I saw you cry when we first saw David. I didn’t cry at all.”

“No, you young sinner,” returned his elder brother. “You’ve made a picnic of the whole thing. I’ll bet a cookie you’ve had a good half of every bit of food that has been sent to David. Hasn’t he, Barbara?”

“People have been very kind,” said his sister, disregarding his question. “But really, if Miss Bates brings another installment of preserved plums, I don’t know what I shall do. David can’t eat them, and I’ve explained it to her; but she insists that they are the best things possible for him, and brings them every other day, with unvarying regularity.”

“Let them come,” said Jack, “and Charles and I will advance to the onslaught, and deliver David from the attacks of the enemy. Plums, chicken-broth—even quail—let them continue to flow in abundantly, and fail to mention to Auburn that David is not an ostrich.”

"I guess Mrs. Willowby understands," observed Gassy, impersonally. "She asked me if David enjoyed the wine jelly she sent yesterday, and I said I didn't know, but that Jack said it was the best he had ever tasted."

"Thunder!" exclaimed Jack, turning very red. "Gassy, you do bear away the palm for unpalatable honesty. Why is it, I wonder, that every really honest person is disagreeable, too?"

"Letters!" said Dr. Grafton, reappearing opportunely. "Two for you, Barbara, one from your mother, marked 'Personal,' and the other postmarked New York. David, how would you like to see your mother again?"

The little boy looked up and smiled at his father. "I wish she'd come," he said. "She's never seen me since I was a sufferer from India. I was a balloon when she left."

"Well, you will soon have a chance to show her how fast you are getting well," replied the doctor, smiling. "I wrote her the whole story of last month, the other day, since she is so much stronger, and here is her answer. She will be at home at six o'clock this very afternoon."

The children all exclaimed at once, even Gassy, who threw her arms around Jack's neck and hugged him, quite forgetting her usual self-repression, and his recent thrust at her honesty.

"Hurray!" cried Jack, joyfully, escaping from Gassy and twirling a small chair in air. "It seems too good to be true."

Barbara said nothing. She glanced at her father, who returned her look with one of understanding. They were both thinking of the home-coming as it might have been.

"I forget about mother, some," remarked the Kid. "Was she as nice as Barbara?"

David answered him. "They're both the same kind," he said quaintly, "but mother's mother. That's all the difference."

"We must have a house clean and pretty enough for mother to come back to," said Barbara, smiling at the invalid. "Gassy, you will have to help a little; there will be so much to do. Jack, take care of David for a little while, please."

"I don't mind helping," said Gassy, as they left the room together. "I'd sweep the whole house, if it would bring mother back. I wonder how she'll think I look, with my hair bobbity. Mercy, Barbara; you dropped one of your letters. Here it is."

"I'll open it now," said Barbara, sitting down on the stairs. "Why, it's from the Infant."

The Infant's letter was short and to the point.

"You haven't written me or the other girls for three months," it began; "and I shall punish you. I shan't tell you that Atalanta is engaged, and that the Sphinx is too, though how it happened, I don't see. The man must have been able to answer some of her mathematical riddles, or he never could have reached her heart. And I won't tell you about my summer abroad,—not a word,—nor how Knowledge is going to be a post-grad. at Columbia, and visit me at the end of every week. You don't deserve a line, Barbara Grafton! But I am writing to tell you that I just heard—no matter how—that you refused the Eastman Scholarship, and to ask you mildly whether you are insane. With all your talent and ability, Babbie, how could you refuse it? Every one always knew that you should have had it in the first place. Now you surely are not

going to stay in that little town of yours that you have so often ridiculed. There is only one reason by which I can account for it, and I don't think you can be in love."

Barbara laughed aloud, and folded up the letter. "To think that I wanted it so much," she said aloud, unconsciously. "What if I had not been here this autumn!"

"Hadn't been here?" repeated Gassy. "Why, Barbara! Did you ever think of leaving us?"

Barbara threw an arm around her sister's shoulders. "I wouldn't leave you for anything," she said.

They had reached the kitchen, and had fallen to work together. "It's too bad we haven't a servant," said Gassy, "though you do cook very well now, Barbara. Only I'd like mother to come home and find a girl in the kitchen."

"It's too bad, indeed," returned Barbara, cheerfully. "But remember how we were helped when David was ill; and think how Mrs. Willowby gave up her own maid to us for so long, and of all that Susan did. I'm so happy over David that I don't mind cooking nowadays. And you are a nice little assistant, Gassy."

The nice little assistant glowed with pleasure. "Know why?" she inquired.

"No; why?"

"Hair!" replied Gassy, laconically. "Hair and clothes. You were pretty good to me that dreadful day when the hair went, and you make me look so much nicer. I like you very much, Barbara,"—Gassy never used the word "love,"—"and I don't think college has hurt you one bit, no matter what Miss Bates says. It's just as Jack says,—your A. B. stands for A Brick, instead of A Bachelor."

"Did he say that?" said Barbara, laughing at the unexpected conclusion, as she leaned over and patted the stiff little shoulder near her.

"You're a dear little sister," she said. "Who's that?"

A loud knock had sounded at the door.

"Come in!" called Barbara.

The door opened slowly; a puffing man, carrying a small trunk, entered, and dropped it heavily on the floor. It was the Vegetable Man.

"Why—what—" began Barbara.

The Vegetable Man smiled at her serenely. "She's comin'," he said, and disappeared, leaving Barbara and Gassy staring at each other in astonishment.

Suddenly the door reopened, and there appeared the Vegetable Man's daughter, as untidy and breezy as ever.

"I've come back," she said. "I heerd you was wantin' help, so I come over. Guess I'll *stay*, *this* time. Shall I hang my hat here?"

"But—your husband—" began Barbara.

"*Him? Why*, don't you know?" returned the Vegetable Man's daughter, serenely. "I didn't like 'im after

we was married. He drank. So I come home.”

“Drank!” cried Gassy, in horror.

The Vegetable Man’s daughter nodded. “Like a fish!” she added. “’Twan’t a day before he began. Stood it two months, I did, an’ then I lit out. Come home, an’ it wasn’t excitin’ enough for me, so when I heerd you was still without, I come over ag’in. Miss Barbara, if you don’t tell me what to git for dinner, there won’t be no time for gittin’.”

Barbara started. “You took me so by surprise, Libbie,” she said, “that I can scarcely think. I’m delighted to have you back, especially since mother is coming home to-day.”

“Want to know!” ejaculated the girl. “Landed right in the middle of excitement, didn’t I?”

“Yes; and we’re going to celebrate with a grand supper,” put in Gassy, thinking it best to break the news at once.

“You bet!” cried the Vegetable Man’s daughter, cheerfully. “Nothing’s too good for your ma. Now, Miss Barbara, what meat? Or do you still go without?”

Barbara hesitated. In that moment’s hesitation there was involved more than the ordering of a dinner. Theory had its last battle with Practicality, and came out with drooping colors. But Dr. Grafton would have been relieved in regard to the stability of Barbara’s sense of humor, if he could have heard the laugh with which she admitted her own defeat. “I will order some steak,” she said.

“It’s too good to be true,” she said joyfully to Gassy, as they left the kitchen. “I declare, I scarcely know where I am, I am so glad. Isn’t it beautiful when things unexpectedly work out right?”

“Glad the Vegetable Man’s daughter’s husband drank?” inquired Gassy.

Barbara laughed again, and did not answer.

The morning flew by as if Father Time had suddenly borrowed the wings of Mercury. Barbara dusted and straightened the rooms, putting everything in immaculate order. Many little duties, which had been disregarded during David’s illness, suddenly came to her recollection, and the girl essayed to finish them all. She resolved that her reign should end in a blaze of glory, and that her mother should see that the Interregnum had not been entirely discreditable to the House of Grafton. Gassy, a willing assistant, performed unwonted miracles in the way of dusting, at the same time keeping up an unending flow of conversation.

They were putting the finishing touches to the living-room, where David still sat, waited upon cheerfully by the Kid, when the doorbell rang vigorously. The door opened without ceremony and a strident voice in the hall called, “Barbara Grafton!”

“It’s Miss Bates!” exclaimed Barbara, in a low tone. “Run and take her into the library, Gassy.”

But it was too late.

“Oh, here you are!” said Miss Bates, appearing in the doorway. “I came right in because I thought you were probably not dressed to answer the bell. Barbara, I brought in some more plums because I know David ought to eat ’em to build him up.”

“I am so sorry,” said Barbara. “But father says they are still too much for him.”

“Your father don’t know, Barbara; no, he don’t. Men never know about such things. Now there ain’t much sugar in ’em—”

“Never mind!” interposed the Kid, courageously. “Never mind, Miss Bates, I’ll eat ’em. Jack says”—

“Hey?” ejaculated the spinster.

“Charles,” warned Barbara, “you—”

“Jack says to let you give ’em and we’ll eat ’em,” continued the Kid, determined to finish his sentence.

Miss Bates glared at him. “Barbara,” she said, “I don’t know why it is, but I get insulted by these children every time I put my nose into this house. Now I don’t want to complain, but I’ve a mind to tell you what Charles did to me last night. I was laying the table for supper, and I’d left the window open for air, and all of a sudden that child’s head was in the window, and he says, ‘Mercy on us, Birdine, is that all you’ve got for supper?’”

The Kid disappeared under the sofa like a whipped dog. Barbara closed her lips tight, to keep from smiling.

“Well, of course,” put in Gassy, “the Kid is always used to plenty of food, you see.”

Miss Bates glared again. “Is that why he wants to eat up my plums?” she inquired. “No, Barbara, I’ll take ’em back, since you won’t let David eat ’em. And I want to tell you now, that I don’t intend to come to this house again under any circumstances, since these children are so rude, till your ma comes home, no matter *how long* it is!”

“But she’s coming home to-day!” burst from both David and Gassy, in dismayed unison.

Miss Bates gave them a queer look, flashed a disdainful glance at Barbara, and left the house.

“It’s no use to scold you, Charles,” said Barbara, as she extricated the child from his hiding-place. “But I am glad that mother is coming to take the burden of your dreadful speeches. Now see if you *can* stay good until supper-time.”

She left the room to arrange the details of the feast, and as she passed through the hall, she came upon the letter marked “Personal” which she had left forgotten on the table.

“I declare!” said she, sitting down on the stairs again. “I believe I am going crazy with joy to-day. I have forgotten one thing after another.”

She opened the letter eagerly, and as she did so, stray words caught her eye,—“undoubted talent,”—“unquestionable success,” etc. She turned to the first page and read:—

DEAR LITTLE GIRL,—For you are a little girl to me, and always will be, in spite of your twenty-one years,—I have something to tell you which cannot wait until I reach home. It is also somewhat of a confession, and I am sure that you will absolve me when you have read this.

I wonder if you have realized how very entertaining your letters have been, and what a godsend they were to me in this tedious place. They were so clever that I could not help reading them to a few of the friends whom I have made here. One of them is Hugh S. Black, whom I have often mentioned, you remember, and who has been slowly recovering from an attack of nervous prostration. He grew very much interested in your letters,—so much so, that I had not the heart to refuse to read them. I told him of your desire to write, and of the piles of rejected

psychological studies which have been mounting up on your desk. In fact, you told him, yourself, although you were not aware of it. We have often talked you over, and he thinks that you have undoubted talent, and can gain unquestionable success in writing for publication, if you will be willing to attempt the kind of things that lie within your own experience. Mr. Black said the other day, "Your girl has wit, humor, an excellent power of description, the faculty of seeing things as they are, and of describing them from an original point of view. Why won't she write stories or sketches dealing with every-day life, instead of such nonsense as 'The Effect of Imagination on the Habits of the Child'?"

This morning, Mr. Black asked me if I would not request you to read over your letters and change them into proper form for a story, which he will be glad to publish serially in his magazine, if the finished product meets with his approval. This is a splendid opportunity for you, little daughter, and I advise you to grasp it.

Are you disappointed to find that your talents do not lie along the psychological paths of lofty, intellectual labor? Does this story of your experiences of one summer seem too trivial for your effort? I think not, my dear, if the change in the tone of your letters can be depended upon for inference. We shall talk this over when I am once more at home, and can relieve my brave, strong girl of the burdens which she has borne for four long months.

There was more in the letter, but Barbara did not read it. She danced about the hall with such abandon that her father opened his office door, and regarded her with amazement.

"Has my housekeeper taken leave of her senses?" he asked affectionately.

"On the contrary," returned Barbara, saucily, "she has just regained them. Father dear, I realize that we must not all aspire to high tragedy or classic sublimity. High comedy seems to be more in my line."

Her father looked at her with his eyes softening more and more. "Come in here," he said, and closed the door behind them.

"Barbara, my dear," he began, looking at her over his spectacles, "I have a kind of confession to make to you."

"Another one!" thought Barbara.

"When you came home last June, things were a little hard for you, and seemed still harder, didn't they?"

"Well, rather!" said Barbara, slangily.

"Your point of view was young and uncompromising, and—yes—rather toploftical."

"I know it."

Her father smiled. "You surveyed the world from a collegiate summit, and found it woefully lacking. Well, so it is lacking, but all the advice from all the lofty heights in the world will never make it better. We must come down into the plain, and struggle with the common herd, and help to raise it by our individual effort; glad to be a living, toiling part of great humanity, like every one else; never the isolated, censorious onlooker who does not share the common lot. This is one of the hardest lessons for youth to learn, and I have watched you learn it, during all these long, hard months."

"If I only have really learned it!" put in Barbara.

"I have stood aside," her father continued. "Sometimes I did not help you, even when I might, and you thought me undiscerning or abstracted. Barbara, my dear, you have done it all yourself, and I am very, very proud of my firstborn."

Barbara crimsoned with pleasure. "I've made awfully silly mistakes," she said, "and you have been so

dear and patient.”

She kissed her father gratefully. As she went upstairs, her mind was filled with wonder that she should ever have misunderstood him so completely, and have complacently ascribed to herself intellect and culture and knowledge superior to his. She found herself feeling actually grateful for the events of her life since June.

“What if I had never known his darlingness!” she said.

It was not many hours before Auburn knew of the expected arrival of Mrs. Grafton. Miss Bates had constituted herself an information bureau, and had flitted hither and thither with an alacrity not at all hindered by her rage against the younger Graftons.

About four o’clock in the afternoon, as Barbara was giving capable directions in the kitchen, a knock sounded on the door.

“I just ran in this way,” said Susan, “because I wanted to congratulate you, and to see if you don’t want this chocolate cake for supper. Barbara, what are you laughing at?”

“This is the third cake I have received to-day for mother,” giggled Barbara, “and four chickens are waiting to be consumed. But put it down, Sue dear, and Jack will make a hole in it very soon.”

“Well, anyway,” Susan declared, “it’s because every one loves your mother so much! And it is also because every one recognizes your pluck.”

“Everybody in this whole town is lovely!” answered Barbara.

Susan smiled. But there was no triumph in her face, only joy that her friend had come into her own.

“It is half-past five!” announced Barbara from the window-seat of the living-room. “Father has gone to the train almost an hour ahead of time. Everything in the house is in perfect order; supper is nearly ready; David isn’t tired; and we are all ‘neatly and tastefully attired’ for the occasion. Won’t mother be impressed!”

“Not by Gassy,” answered Jack. “Gassy has a hole in her stocking above her shoe, and I don’t know how many below. Her waist has two buttons missing in the back; still, her hair is somewhat improved, and that’s one comfort.”

“I look as well as you,” retorted Gassy, carrying the work-basket over to her sister. “You have some soot on your face, and I won’t tell you where, and nobody else shall, either.”

“Am I clean?” asked David, plaintively.

“Clean!” exclaimed Jack. “Why, David, you’re as clean as a piece of blank paper, and just as thin. Turn your face to mother when she comes in, for she won’t be able to see you if she catches a glimpse of you sideways.”

“How tiresome you are, Jack!” observed Gassy, condescendingly. “I—”

She was interrupted by a series of bumps and scrapings in the cellar below, followed by a strange wailing moan.

“Hark from the tombs a doleful sound!” cried Jack, rising. “I’ll bet a quarter it’s the Kid.”

It was the Kid. Clad in a clean white sailor suit, and finding time pressing heavily on his hands, he had bethought himself of a gift with which to meet his mother,—none other than one of the new kittens which had been born two weeks before and were now passing their infancy on an old rug at the bottom of a barrel in the cellar. Having made an expedition to the barrel, the Kid had endeavored to gain one of the feline offspring by reaching over into the dark depths, with a logical result of falling headlong into the barrel. The muffled shrieks which the family heard, and the sounds of scraping, were such as would naturally proceed from the attempts of a small boy to rescue himself from an uncomfortable posture. When Jack arrived upon the scene, the Kid had just succeeded in freeing himself by tipping over the barrel and crawling out. Being blinded and confused by the length of time in which he had been standing on his head, he had made a wild dive for the door, and found himself prone on the piles of coal on the cellar floor.

“Well, here’s a mess!” cried Jack, with disgust, picking him up and dragging him along to the upper regions. “Look at this, Barbara; and there are only ten minutes to change his clothes.”

Barbara hurried the little boy upstairs without a word of reproach. She washed him quickly, and was struggling with a stiff new linen suit, when the sound of a carriage came to her ears.

“I love you, Barbara, for changing me,” the Kid said humbly.

She kissed him affectionately. “Now your tie,—there!”

The carriage had stopped. She heard Jack’s excited voice downstairs. The Kid made a desperate wriggle from her and fled down the steps, shouting for his mother. Barbara felt a sudden pang as he left her,—a pang of loneliness and desertion. She stood still a moment, and then, almost before she had time to move, a quick step sounded on the stairs, a new, fresh mother came swiftly into the room, and two strong, firm arms held her close.

“Barbara, my brave, splendid daughter!” said the most motherly voice in the world.

Barbara’s reign was over.

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END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WHEN SHE CAME HOME FROM COLLEGE

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