

Polly Oliver's Problem eBook

Polly Oliver's Problem by Kate Douglas Wiggin

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PORTRAIT OF MRS. WIGGIN *Frontispiece*

MRS. OLIVER AND POLLY

"IT IS SOME OF THE STUDENTS"

"SHE OPENED THE BOOK AND READ"

[Transcriber's note: The second illustration was missing from the original book.]

POLLY OLIVER'S PROBLEM.

"Pretty Polly Oliver, my hope and my fear,
Pretty Polly Oliver, I've loved you so dear!"
DINAH MARIA MULOCK.



CHAPTER I.

A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

"I have determined only one thing definitely," said Polly Oliver; "and that is, the boarders must go. Oh, how charming that sounds! I've been thinking it ever since I was old enough to think, but I never cast it in such an attractive, decisive form before. 'The Boarders Must Go!' To a California girl it is every bit as inspiring as 'The Chinese Must Go.' If I were n't obliged to set the boarders' table, I'd work the motto on a banner this very minute, and march up and down the plaza with it, followed by a crowd of small boys with toy drums."

"The Chinese never did go," said Mrs. Oliver suggestively, from the sofa.

"Oh, that's a trifle; they had a treaty or something, and besides, there are so many of them, and they have such an object in staying."

"You can't turn people out of the house on a moment's warning."

"Certainly not. Give them twenty-four hours, if necessary. We can choose among several methods of getting rid of them. I can put up a placard with

BOARDERS, HO!

printed on it in large letters, and then assemble them in the banquet-hall and make them a speech."

"You would insult them," objected Mrs. Oliver feebly, "and they are perfectly innocent."

"Insult them? Oh, mamma, how unworthy of you! I shall speak to them firmly but very gently. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' I shall begin, 'you have done your best to make palatable the class of human beings to which you belong, but you have utterly failed, and you must go! Board, if you must, ladies and gentlemen, but not here! Sap, if you must, the foundations of somebody else's private paradise, but not ours. In the words of the Poe-et, "Take thy beaks from off our door.'" Then it will be over, and they will go out."

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“Slink out, I should say,” murmured Polly’s mother.

“Very well, slink out,” replied Polly cheerfully. “I should like to see them slink, after they’ve been rearing their crested heads round our table for generations; but I think you credit them with a sensitiveness they do not, and in the nature of things cannot, possess. There is something in the unnatural life which hardens both the boarder and those who board her. However, I don’t insist on that method. Let us try bloodless eviction,—set them quietly out in the street with their trunks; or strategy,—put one of them in bed and hang out the smallpox flag. Oh, I can get rid of them in a week, if I once set my mind on it.”

“There is no doubt of that,” said Mrs. Oliver meekly.

Polly’s brain continued to teem with sinister ideas.

“I shall make Mr. Talbot’s bed so that the clothes will come off at the foot every night. He will remonstrate. I shall tell him that he kicks them off, and intimate that his conscience troubles him, or he would never be so restless. He will glare. I shall promise to do better, yet the clothes will come off worse and worse, and at last, perfectly disheartened, he will go. I shall tell Mr. Greenwood at the breakfast-table, what I have been longing for months to tell him, that we can hear him snore, distinctly, through the partition. He will go. I shall put cold milk in Mrs. Caldwell’s coffee every morning. I shall mean well, you know, but I shall forget. She will know that I mean well, and that it is only girlish absent-mindedness, but she will not endure it very long; she will go. And so, by the exercise of a little ingenuity, they will depart one by one, remarking that Mrs. Oliver’s boarding-house is not what it used to be; that Pauline is growing a little ‘slack.’”

“Polly!” and Mrs. Oliver half rose from the sofa, “I will not allow you to call this a boarding-house in that tone of voice.”

“A boarding-house, as I take it,” argued Polly, “is a house where the detestable human vipers known as boarders are ‘taken in and done for.’”

“But we have always prided ourselves on having it exactly like a family,” said her mother plaintively. “You know we have not omitted a single refinement of the daintiest home-life, no matter at what cost of labor and thought.”

“Certainly, that’s the point,—and there you are, a sofa-invalid, and here am I with my disposition ruined for life; such a wreck in temper that I could blow up the boarders with dynamite and sleep peacefully after it.”

“Now be reasonable, little daughter. Think how kind and grateful the boarders have been (at least almost always), how appreciative of everything we have done for them.”



“Of course; it is n’t every day they can secure an—an—elderly Juno like you to carve meat for them, or a—well, just for the sake of completing the figure of speech—a blooming Hebe like me (I ’ve always wondered why it was n’t *Shebe!*) to dispense their tea and coffee; to say nothing of bromo for Mr. Talbot, cocoa for Mr. Greenwood, cambric tea for Mrs. Hastings, and hot water for the Darlings. I have to keep a schedule, and refer to it three times a day. This alone shows that boarders are n’t my vocation.”



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A bit of conversation gives the clue to character so easily that Mrs. Oliver and her daughter need little more description. You can see the pretty, fragile mother resting among her pillows, and I need only tell you that her dress is always black, her smile patient, her eyes full of peace, and her hands never idle save in this one daily resting-hour prescribed by the determined Miss Polly, who mounts guard during the appointed time like a jailer who expects his prisoner to escape if he removes his eagle eye for an instant.

The aforesaid impetuous Miss Polly has also told you something of herself in this brief interview. She is evidently a person who feels matters rather strongly, and who is wont to state them in the strongest terms she knows. Every word she utters shows you that, young as she looks, she is the real head of the family, and that her vigorous independence of thought and speech must be the result of more care and responsibility than ordinarily fall to the lot of a girl of sixteen.

Certain of her remarks must be taken with a grain of salt. Her assertion of willingness to blow up innocent boarders in their beds would seem, for instance, to indicate a vixenish and vindictive sort of temper quite unwarranted by the circumstances; but a glance at the girl herself contradicts the thought.

Item: A firm chin. She will take her own way if she can possibly get it; but *item*; a sweet, lovable mouth framed in dimples; a mouth that breaks into smiles at the slightest provocation, no matter how dreary the outlook; a mouth that quivers at the first tender word, and so the best of all correctives to the determined little chin below.

Item: A distinctly saucy nose; an aggressive, impertinent, spirited little nose, with a few freckles on it; a nose that probably leads its possessor into trouble occasionally.

Item: Two bright eyes, a trifle overproud and willful, perhaps, but candid and full of laughter.

Item: A head of brilliant, auburn hair; lively, independent, frisky hair, each glittering thread standing out by itself and asserting its own individuality; tempestuous hair that never “stays put;” capricious hair that escapes hairpins and comes down unexpectedly; hoydenish hair that makes the meekest hats look daring.

For the rest, a firm, round figure, no angles, everything, including elbows, in curves; blooming cheeks and smooth-skinned, taper-fingered hands tanned a very honest brown,—the hands of a person who loves beauty.

Polly Oliver’s love of beautiful things was a passion, and one that had little gratification; but luckily, though good music, pictures, china, furniture, and “purple and fine linen” were all conspicuous by their absence, she could feast without money and without price on the changeful loveliness of the Santa Ynez mountains, the sapphire tints of the

placid Pacific, and the gorgeous splendor of the Californian wild-flowers, so that her sense of beauty never starved.



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Her hand was visible in the modest sitting-room where she now sat with her mother; for it was pretty and homelike, although its simple decorations and furnishings had been brought together little by little during a period of two years; so that the first installments were all worn out, Polly was wont to remark plaintively, before the last additions made their appearance.

The straw matting had Japanese figures on it, while a number of rugs covered the worn places, and gave it an opulent look. The table-covers, curtains, and portieres were of blue jean worked in outline embroidery, and Mrs. Oliver's couch had as many pillows as that of an oriental princess; for Polly's summers were spent camping in a canon, and she embroidered sofa-cushions and draperies with frenzy during these weeks of out-of-door life.

Upon the cottage piano was a blue Canton ginger-jar filled with branches of feathery bamboo that spread its lace-like foliage far and wide over the ceiling and walls, quite covering the large spot where the roof had leaked. Various stalks of tropical-looking palms, distributed artistically about, concealed the gaping wounds in the walls, inflicted by the Benton children, who had once occupied this same apartment. Mexican water-jars, bearing peacock feathers, screened Mr. Benton's two favorite places for scratching matches. The lounge was the sort of lounge that looks well only between two windows, but Polly was obliged to place it across the corner where she really needed the table, because in that position it shielded from the public view the enormous black spots on the wall where Reginald Benton had flung the ink-bottle at his angel sister Pansy Belle.

Then there was an umbrella-lamp bestowed by a boarder whom Mrs. Oliver had nursed through typhoid fever; a banjo; plenty of books and magazines; and an open fireplace, with a great pitcher of yellow wild-flowers standing between the old-fashioned brass andirons.

Little Miss Oliver's attitude on the question of the boarders must stand quite without justification.

"It is a part of Polly," sighed her mother, "and must be borne with Christian fortitude."

Colonel Oliver had never fully recovered from a wound received in the last battle of the civil war, and when he was laid to rest in a quiet New England churchyard, so much of Mrs. Oliver's heart was buried with him that it was difficult to take up the burden of life with any sort of courage. At last her delicate health prompted her to take the baby daughter, born after her husband's death, and go to southern California, where she invested her small property in a house in Santa Barbara. She could not add to her income by any occupation that kept her away from the baby; so the boarders followed as a matter of course (a house being suitable neither for food nor clothing), and a constantly changing family of pleasant people helped her to make both ends meet, and to educate the little daughter as she grew from babyhood into childhood.



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Now, as Polly had grown up among the boarders, most of whom petted her, no one can account for her slightly ungrateful reception of their good-will; but it is certain that the first time she was old enough to be trusted at the table, she grew very red in the face, slipped down from her high chair, and took her bowl of bread and milk on to the porch. She was followed and gently reasoned with, but her only explanation was that she did n't "yike to eat wiv so many peoples." Persuasion bore no fruit, and for a long time Miss Polly ate in solitary grandeur. Indeed, the feeling increased rather than diminished, until the child grew old enough to realize her mother's burden, when with passionate and protecting love she put her strong young shoulders under the load and lifted her share, never so very prettily or gracefully,—it is no use trying to paint a halo round Polly's head,—but with a proud courage and a sort of desperate resolve to be as good as she could, which was not very good, she would have told you.

She would come back from the beautiful home of her friend, Bell Winship, and look about on her own surroundings, never with scorn, or sense of bitterness,—she was too sensible and sweet-natured for that,—but with an inward rebellion against the existing state of things, and a secret determination to create a better one, if God would only give her power and opportunity. But this pent-up feeling only showed itself to her mother in bursts of impulsive nonsense, at which Mrs. Oliver first laughed and then sighed.

"Oh, for a little, little breakfast-table!" Polly would say, as she flung herself on her mother's couch, and punched the pillows desperately. "Oh, for a father to say 'Steak, Polly dear?' instead of my asking, 'Steakor chop?' over and over every morning! Oh, for a lovely, grown-up, black-haired sister, who would have hundreds of lovers, and let me stay in the room when they called! Oh, for a tiny baby brother, fat and dimpled, who would crow, and spill milk on the tablecloth, and let me sit on the floor and pick up the things he threw down! But instead of that, a new, big, strange family, different people every six months, people who don't like each other, and have to be seated at opposite ends of the table; ladies whose lips tremble with disappointment if they don't get the second joint of the chicken, and gentlemen who are sulky if any one else gets the liver. Oh, mamma, I am sixteen now, and it will soon be time for me to begin taking care of you; but I warn you, I shall never do it by means of the boarders!"

"Are you so weak and proud, little daughter, as to be ashamed because I have taken care of you these sixteen years 'by means of the boarders,' as you say?"

"No, no, mamma! Don't think so badly of me as that. That feeling was outgrown long ago. Do I not know that it is just as fine and honorable as anything else in the world, and do I not love and honor you with all my heart because you do it in so sweet and dignified a way that everybody respects you for it? But it is n't my vocation. I would like to do something different, something wider, something lovelier, if I knew how, and were ever good enough!"



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“It is easy to ‘dream noble things,’ dear, but hard to do them ‘all day long.’ My own feeling is, if one reaches the results one is struggling for, and does one’s work as well as it lies in one to do it, that keeping boarders is as good service as any other bit of the world’s work. One is not always permitted to choose the beautiful or glorious task. Sometimes all one can do is to make the humble action fine by doing it ‘as it is done in heaven.’ Remember, ‘they also serve who only stand and wait.’”

“Yes, mamma,” said Polly meekly; “but,” stretching out her young arms hopefully and longingly, “it must be that they also serve who stand and *dare*, and I ’m going to try that first,—then I ’ll wait, if God wants me to.”

“What if God wants you to wait first, little daughter?”

Polly hid her face in the sofa-cushions and did not answer.

CHAPTER II.

FORECASTING THE FUTURE.

Two of Mrs. Oliver’s sitting-room windows looked out on the fig-trees, and the third on a cosy piazza corner framed in passion-vines, where at the present moment stood a round table holding a crystal bowl of Gold of Ophir roses, a brown leather portfolio, and a dish of apricots. Against the table leaned an old Spanish guitar with a yellow ribbon round its neck, and across the corner hung a gorgeous hammock of Persian colored threads, with two or three pillows of canary-colored China silk in one end. A bamboo lounging-chair and a Shaker rocker completed the picture; and the passer-by could generally see Miss Anita Ferguson reclining in the one, and a young (but not Wise) man from the East in the other. It was not always the same young man any more than the decorations were always of the same color.

“That’s another of my troubles,” said Polly to her friend Margery Noble, pulling up the window-shade one afternoon and pointing to the now empty “cosy corner.” “I don’t mind Miss Ferguson’s sitting there, though it used always to be screened off for my doll-house, and I love it dearly; but she pays to sit there, and she ought to do it; besides, she looks prettier there than any one else. Isn’t it lovely? The other day she had pink oleanders in the bowl, the cushions turned the pink side up,—you see they are canary and rose-color,—a pink muslin dress, and the guitar trimmed with a fringe of narrow pink ribbons. She was a dream, Margery! But she does n’t sit there with her young men when I am at school, nor when I am helping Ah Foy in the dining-room, nor, of course, when we are at table. She sits there from four to six in the afternoon and in the evening, the only times I have with mamma in this room. We are obliged to keep the window closed, lest we should overhear the conversation. That is tiresome enough in

warm weather. You see the other windows are shaded by the fig-trees, so here we sit,
in Egyptian darkness, mamma and I,

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during most of the pleasant afternoons. And if anything ever came of it, we would n't mind, but nothing ever does. There have been so many young men,—I could n't begin to count them, but they have worn out the seats of four chairs,—and why does n't one of them take her away? Then we could have a nice, plain young lady who would sit quietly on the front steps with the old people, and who would n't want me to carry messages for her three times a day.”

At the present moment, however, Miss Anita Ferguson, clad in a black habit, with a white rose in her buttonhole, and a neat black derby with a scarf of white *crepe de chine* wound about it, had gone on the mesa for a horseback ride, so Polly and Margery had borrowed the cosy corner for a chat.

Margery was crocheting a baby's afghan, and Polly was almost obscured by a rumpled, yellow dress which lay in her lap.

“You observe my favorite yellow gown?” she asked.

“Yes, what have you done to it?”

“Gin Sing picked blackberries in the colander. I, supposing the said colander to be a pan with the usual bottom, took it in my lap and held it for an hour while I sorted the berries. Result: a hideous stain a foot and a half in diameter, to say nothing of the circumference. Mr. Greenwood suggested oxalic acid. I applied it, and removed both the stain and the dress in the following complete manner;” and Polly put her brilliant head through an immense circular hole in the front breadth of the skirt.

“It 's hopeless, is n't it? for of course a patch won't look well,” said Margery.

“Hopeless? Not a bit. You see this pretty yellow and white striped lawn? I have made a long, narrow apron of it, and ruffled it all round. I pin it to my waist thus, and the hole is covered. But it looks like an apron, and how do I contrive to throw the public off the scent? I add a yoke and sash of the striped lawn, and people see simply a combination-dress. I do the designing, and my beloved little mother there will do the sewing; forgetting her precious Polly's carelessness in making the hole, and remembering only her cleverness in covering it.”

“Capital!” said Margery; “it will be prettier than ever. Oh dear! that dress was new when we had our last lovely summer in the canon. Shall we ever go again, all together, I wonder? Just think how we are all scattered,—the Winships traveling in Europe (I 'll read you Bell's last letter by and by); Geoffrey Strong studying at Leipsic; Jack Howard at Harvard, with Elsie and her mother watching over him in Cambridge; Philip and I on



the ranch as usual, and you here. We are so divided that it does n't seem possible that we can ever have a complete reunion, does it?"

"No," said Polly, looking dreamily at the humming-birds hovering over the honeysuckle; "and if we should, everything would be different. Bless dear old Bell's heart! What a lovely summer she must be having! I wonder what she will do."



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“Do?” echoed Margery.

“Yes; it always seemed to me that Bell Winship would do something in the world; that she would never go along placidly like other girls, she has so many talents.”

“Yes; but so long as they have plenty of money, Dr. and Mrs. Winship would probably never encourage her in doing anything.”

“It would be all the better if she could do something because she loved it, and with no thought of earning a living by it. Is n’t it odd that I who most need the talents should have fewer than any one of our dear little group? Bell can write, sing, dance, or do anything else, in fact; Elsie can play like an angel; you can draw; but it seems to me I can do nothing well enough to earn money by it; and that is precisely what I must do.”

“You ’ve never had any special instruction, Polly dear, else you could sing as well as Bell, or play as well as Elsie.”

“Well, I must soon decide. Mamma says next summer, when I am seventeen, she will try to spend a year in San Francisco and let me study regularly for some profession. The question is, what?—or whether to do something without study. I read in a magazine the other day that there are now three hundred or three thousand, I can’t remember which, vocations open to women. If it were even three hundred I could certainly choose one to my liking, and there would be two hundred and ninety-nine left over for the other girls. Mrs. Weeks is trying to raise silkworms. That would be rather nice, because the worms would be silent partners in the business and do most of the work.”

“But you want something without any risks, you know,” said Margery sagely. “You would have to buy ground for the silkworms, and set out the mulberries, and then a swarm of horrid insects might happen along and devour the plants before the worms began spinning.”

“‘Competition is the life of trade,’” said Polly. “No, that is n’t what I mean—‘Nothing venture, nothing have,’ that’s it. Then how would hens do? Ever so many women raise hens.”

“Hens have diseases, and they never lay very well when you have to sell the eggs. By the way, Clarence Jones, who sings in the choir,—you know, the man with the pink cheeks and corn-silk hair,—advertises in the ‘Daily Press’ for a ‘live partner.’ Now, there ’s a chance on an established hen-ranch, if he does n’t demand capital or experience.”

“It’s a better chance for Miss Ferguson. But she does n’t like Mr. Jones, because when he comes to call, his coat-pockets are always bulging with brown paper packages of a hen-food that he has just invented. The other day, when he came to see her, she was



out, and he handed me his card. It had a picture and advertisement of 'The Royal Dish-faced Berkshire Pig' on it; and I 'm sure, by her expression when she saw it, that she will never be his 'live partner.' No, I don't think I 'll have an out-of-door occupation, it's so trying to the complexion. Now, how about millinery? I could be an apprentice, and gradually rise until I imported everything direct from Paris."



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“But, Polly,” objected Margery, “you know you never could tie a bow, or even put a ribbon on your sailor hat.”

“But I could learn. Do you suppose all the milliners were called to their work by a consciousness of genius? Perish the thought! If that were true, there wouldn't be so many hideous hats in the shop windows. However, I don't pine for millinery; it's always a struggle for me to wear a hat myself.”

“You 've done beautifully the last year or two, dear, and you 've reaped the reward of virtue, for you 've scarcely a freckle left.”

“Oh, that isn't hats,” rejoined Polly, “that's the law of compensation. When I was younger, and did n't take the boarders so much to heart, I had freckles given to me for a cross; but the moment I grew old enough to see the boarders in their true light and note their effect on mamma, the freckles disappeared. Now, here 's an idea. I might make a complexion lotion for a living. Let me see what I 've been advised by elderly ladies to use in past years: ammonia, lemon-juice, cucumbers, morning dew, milk, pork rinds, kerosene, and a few other household remedies. Of course I 'm not sure which did the work, but why could n't I mix them all in equal parts,—if they would mix, you know, and let those stay out that would n't,—and call it the 'Olivera Complexion Lotion'? The trade-mark might be a cucumber, a lemon, and a morning dew-drop, *rampant*, and a frightened little brown spot *couchant*. Then on the neat label pasted on the bottles above the trade-mark there might be a picture of a spotted girl,—that's Miss Oliver before using her lotion,—and a copy of my last photograph,—that's Miss Oliver radiant in beauty after using her lotion.”

Margery laughed, as she generally did at Polly's nonsense.

“That sounds very attractive, but if you are anxious for an elegant and dignified occupation which shall restore your mother to her ancestral position, it certainly has its defects.”

“I know everything has its defects, everything except one, and I won't believe that has a single weak point.”

“Oh, Polly, you deceiver! You have a secret leaning toward some particular thing, after all!”

“Yes; though I have n't talked it over fully yet, even with mamma, lest she should think it one of my wild schemes; but, Margery, I want with all my heart to be a kindergartner like Miss Mary Denison. There would be no sting to me in earning my living, if only I could do it by working among poor, ragged, little children, as she does. I run in and stay half an hour with her whenever I can, and help the babies with their sewing or weaving, and I always study and work better myself afterward,—I don't know whether it's the children,



or Miss Denison, or the place, or all three. And the other day, when I was excused from my examinations, I stayed the whole morning in the kindergarten. When it was time for the games, and they were all



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on the circle, they began with a quiet play they call 'Silent Greeting,' and oh, Margery, they chose me to come in, of their own accord! When I walked into the circle to greet that smallest Walker baby my heart beat like a trip-hammer, I was so afraid I should do something wrong, and they would never ask me in again. Then we played 'The Hen and Chickens,' and afterward something about the birds in the greenwood; and one of the make-believe birds flew to me (I was a tree, you know, a whispering elm-tree), and built its nest in my branches, and then I smoothed its feathers and sang to it as the others had done, and it was like heaven! After the play was over, we modeled clay birds; and just as we were making the tables tidy, Professor Hohweg came in and asked Miss Denison to come into the large hall to play for the marching, as the music-teacher was absent. Then what did Miss Denison do but turn to me and say, 'Miss Oliver, you get on so nicely with the children, would you mind telling them some little story for me? I shall be gone only ten or fifteen minutes.' Oh, Margery, it was awful! I was more frightened than when I was asked to come into the circle; but the children clapped their hands and cried, 'Yes, yes, tell us a story!' I could only think of 'The Hen that Hatched Ducks,' but I sat down and began, and, as I talked, I took my clay bird and molded it into a hen, so that they would look at me whether they listened or not. Of course, one of the big seven-year-old boys began to whisper and be restless, but I handed him a large lump of clay and asked him to make a nest and some eggs for my hen, and that soon absorbed his attention. They listened so nicely,—you can hardly believe how nicely they listened! When I finished I looked at the clock. It had been nine minutes, and I could n't think what to do the other dreadful minutes till Miss Denison should come back. At last my eye fell on the blackboard, and that gave me an idea. I drew a hen's beak and then a duck's, a hen's foot and then a duck's, to show them the difference. Just then Miss Denison came in softly, and I confess I was bursting with pride and delight. There was the blackboard with the sketches, not very good ones, it is true, the clay hen and nest and eggs, and all the children sitting quietly in their wee red chairs. And Miss Denison said, 'How charming of you to carry out the idea of the morning so nicely! My dear little girl, you were made for this sort of thing, did you know it?'"

"Well, I should n't think you had patience enough for any sort of teaching," said Margery candidly.

"Neither did I suppose so myself, and I have n't any patience to spare, that is, for boarders, or dishes, or beds; but I love children so dearly that they never try my patience as other things do."

"You have had the play side of the kindergarten, Polly, while Miss Denison had the care. There must be a work-a-day side to it; I'm sure Miss Denison very often looks tired to death."



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“Of course!” cried Polly. “I know it ’s hard work; but who cares whether a thing is hard or not, if one loves it? I don’t mind work; I only mind working at something I dislike and can never learn to like. Why, Margery, at the Sunday-school picnics you go off in the broiling sun and sit on a camp-chair and sketch, while I play Fox and Geese with the children, and each of us pities the other and thinks she must be dying with heat. It ’s just the difference between us! You carry your easel and stool and paint-boxes and umbrella up the steepest hill, and never mind if your back aches; I bend over Miss Denison’s children with their drawing or building, and never think of my back-ache, do you see?”

“Yes; but I always keep up my spirits by thinking that though I may be tired and discouraged, it is worth while because it is Art I am working at; and for the sake of being an artist I ought to be willing to endure anything. You would n’t have that feeling to inspire and help you.”

“I should like to know why I would n’t,” exclaimed Polly, with flashing eyes. “I should like to know why teaching may not be an art. I confess I don’t know exactly what an artist is, or rather what the dictionary definition of art is; but sit down in Miss Burke’s room at the college; you can’t stay there half an hour without thinking that, rather than have her teach you anything, you would be an ignorant little cannibal on a desert island! She does n’t know how, and there is nothing beautiful about it. But look at Miss Denison! When she comes into her kindergarten it is like the sunrise, and she makes everything blossom that she touches. It is all so simple and sweet that it seems as if anybody could do it; but when you try it you find that it is quite different. Whether she plays or sings, or talks or works with the children, it is perfect. ‘It all seems so easy when you do it,’ I said to her yesterday, and she pointed to the quotation for the day in her calendar. It was a sentence from George MacDonald: ‘Ease is the lovely result of forgotten toil.’ Now it may be that Miss Mary Denison is only an angel; but I think that she ’s an artist.”

“On second thoughts, perhaps you are right in your meaning of the word, though it does n’t follow that all teachers are artists.”

“No; nor that all the painters are,” retorted Polly. “Think of that poor Miss Thomas in your outdoor class. Last week, when you were sketching the cow in front of the old barn, I sat behind her for half an hour. Her barn grew softer and softer and her cow harder and harder, till when she finished, the barn looked as if it were molded in jelly and the cow as if it were carved in red sandstone.”

“She ought not to be allowed to paint,” said Margery decisively.

“Of course she ought n’t! That’s just what I say; and I ought not to be allowed to keep boarders, and I won’t!”



“I must say you have wonderful courage, Polly. It seems so natural and easy for you to strike out for yourself in a new line that it must be you feel a sense of power, and that you will be successful.”



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Polly's manner changed abruptly as she glanced in at her mother's empty chair before she replied.

"Courage! Sometimes I think I have n't a morsel. I am a gilded sham. My knees tremble whenever I think of my future 'career,' as I call it. Mamma thinks me filled with a burning desire for a wider sphere of action, and so I am, but chiefly for her sake. Courage! There 's nothing like having a blessed, tired little mother to take care of,—a mother whom you want to snatch from the jaws of a horrible fate. That 's a trifle strong, but it's dramatic! You see, Margery, a woman like my mother is not going to remain forever in her present rank in her profession,—she is too superior; she is bound to rise. Now, what would become of her if she rose? Why, first, she would keep a country hotel, and sit on the front piazza in a red rocker, and chat with the commercial travelers; and then she would become the head of a summer resort, with a billiard-room and a bowling-alley. I must be self-supporting, and 'I will never desert Mr. Micawber,' so I should make beds and dust in Hotel Number One, and in Hotel Number Two entertain the guests with my music and my 'sprightly manners,'—that's what Mr. Greenwood calls them, and the only reason I am sorry we live in a republic is that I can't have him guillotined for doing it, but must swallow my wrath because he pays twenty dollars a week and seldom dines at home. Finally, in Hotel Number Three I should probably marry the ninepin-man or the head clerk, so as to consolidate the management and save salaries, and there would end the annals of the Olivers! No, Margery!" cried Polly, waving the scissors in the air, "everybody is down on the beach, and I can make the welkin ring if I like, so hear me: The boarders must go! How, when, and where they shall go are three problems I have n't yet solved; and what I shall find to take the place of them when they do go is a fourth problem, and the knottiest one of all!"

CHAPTER III.

THE DOCTOR GIVES POLLY A PRESCRIPTION.

As the summer wore away, Mrs. Oliver daily grew more and more languid, until at length she was forced to ask a widowed neighbor, Mrs. Chadwick, to come and take the housekeeping cares until she should feel stronger. But beef-tea and drives, salt-water bathing and tonics, seemed to do no good, and at length there came a day when she had not sufficient strength to sit up.

The sight of her mother actually in bed in the daytime gave Polly a sensation as of a cold hand clutching at her heart, and she ran for Dr. Edgerton in an agony of fear. But good "Dr. George" (as he was always called, because he began practice when his father, the old doctor, was still living) came home with her, cheered her by his hopeful view of the case, and asked her to call at his office that afternoon for some remedies.

After dinner was over, Polly kissed her sleeping mother, laid a rose on her pillow for good-by, and stole out of the room.



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Her heart was heavy as she walked into the office where the doctor sat alone at his desk.

“Good-day, my dear!” he said cordially, as he looked up, for she was one of his prime favorites. “Bless my soul, how you do grow, child! Why you are almost a woman!”

“I am quite a woman,” said Polly, with a choking sensation in her throat; “and you have something to say to me, Dr. George, or you would n’t have asked me to leave mamma and come here this stifling day; you would have sent the medicine by your office-boy.”

Dr. George laid down his pen in mild, amazement. “You are a woman, in every sense of the word, my dear! Bless my soul, how you do hit it occasionally, you sprig of a girl! Now, sit by that window, and we ’ll talk. What I wanted to say to you is this, Polly. Your mother must have an entire change. Six months ago I tried to send her to a rest-cure, but she refused to go anywhere without you, saying that you were her best tonic.”

Two tears ran down Polly’s cheeks.

“Tell me that again, please,” she said softly, looking out of the window.

“She said—if you will have the very words, and all of them—that you were sun and stimulant, fresh air, medicine, and nourishment, and that she could not exist without those indispensables, even in a rest-cure.”

Polly’s head went down on the windowsill in a sudden passion of tears.

“Hoity-toity! that ’s a queer way of receiving a compliment, young woman!”

She tried to smile through her April shower.

“It makes me so happy, yet so unhappy, Dr. George. Mamma has been working her strength away so many years, and I ’ve been too young to realize it, and too young to prevent it, and now that I am grown up I am afraid it is too late.”

“Not too late, at all,” said Dr. George cheerily; “only we must begin at once and attend to the matter thoroughly. Your mother has been in this southern climate too long, for one thing; she needs a change of air and scene. San Francisco will do, though it ’s not what I should choose. She must be taken entirely away from her care, and from everything that will remind her of it; and she must live quietly, where she will not have to make a continual effort to smile and talk to people three times a day. Being agreeable, polite, and good-tempered for fifteen years, without a single lapse, will send anybody into a decline. You ’ll never go that way, my Polly! Now, pardon me, but how much ready money have you laid away?”

“Three hundred and twelve dollars.”

“Whew!”

“It is a good deal,” said Polly, with modest pride; “and it would have been more yet if we had not just painted the house.”

“‘A good deal!’ my poor lambkin! I hoped it was \$1012, at least; but, however, you have the house, and that is as good as money. The house must be rented, at once, furniture, boarders, and all, as it stands. It ought to bring \$85 or \$95 a month, in these times, and you can manage on that, with the \$312 as a reserve.”



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“What if the tenant should give up the house as soon as we are fairly settled in San Francisco?” asked Polly, with an absolutely new gleam of caution and business in her eye.

“Brava! Why do I attempt to advise such a capable little person? Well, in the first place, there are such things as leases; and in the second place, if your tenant should move out, the agent must find you another in short order, and you will live, meanwhile, on the reserve fund. But, joking aside, there is very little risk. It is going to be a great winter for Santa Barbara, and your house is attractive, convenient, and excellently located. If we can get your affairs into such shape that your mother will not be anxious, I hope, and think, that the entire change and rest, together with the bracing air, will work wonders. I shall give you a letter to a physician, a friend of mine, and fortunately I shall come up once a month during the winter to see an old patient who insists on retaining me just from force of habit.”

“And in another year, Dr. George, I shall be ready to take care of mamma myself; and then—

“She shall sit on a cushion, and sew a fine seam,
And feast upon strawberries, sugar, and cream.”

“Assuredly, my Polly, assuredly.” The doctor was pacing up and down the office now, hands in pockets, eyes on floor. “The world is your oyster; open it, my dear,—open it. By the way,” with a sharp turn, “with what do you propose to open it?”

“I don’t know yet, but not with boarders, Dr. George.”

“Tut, tut, child; must n’t despise small things!”

“Such as Mr. Greenwood,” said Polly irrepressibly, “weight two hundred and ninety pounds; and Mrs. Darling, height six feet one inch; no, I’ll try not to despise small things, thank you!”

“Well, if there ’s a vocation, it will ‘call,’ you know, Polly. I’d rather like you for an assistant, to drive my horse and amuse my convalescents. Bless my soul! you’d make a superb nurse, except”—

“Except what, sir?”

“You’re not in equilibrium yet, my child; you are either up or down, generally up. You bounce, so to speak. Now, a nurse must n’t bounce; she must be poised, as it were, or suspended, betwixt and between, like Mahomet’s coffin. But thank Heaven for your high spirits, all the same! They will tide you over many a hard place, and the years will bring the ‘inevitable yoke’ soon enough, Polly,” and here Dr. George passed behind the



girl's chair and put his two kind hands on her shoulders. "Polly, can you be really a woman? Can you put the little-girl days bravely behind you?"

"I can, Dr. George." This in a very trembling voice.

"Can you settle all these details for your mother, and assume responsibilities? Can you take her away, as if she were the child and you the mother, all at once?"

"I can!" This more firmly.

"Can you deny yourself for her, as she has for you? Can you keep cheerful and sunny? Can you hide your fears, if there should be cause for any, in your own heart? Can you be calm and strong, if"—



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“No, no!” gasped Polly, dropping her head on the back of the chair and shivering like a leaf. “No, no; don’t talk about fears, Dr. George. She will be better. She will be better very soon. I could not live”—

“It is n’t so easy to die, my child, with plenty of warm young blood running pell-mell through your veins, and a sixteen-year-old heart that beats like a chronometer.”

“I could not bear life without mamma, Dr. George!”

“A human being, made in the image of God, can bear anything, child; but I hope you won’t have to meet that sorrow for many a long year yet. I will come in to-morrow and coax your mother into a full assent to my plans; meanwhile, fly home with your medicines. There was a time when you used to give my tonics at night and my sleeping-draught in the morning; but I believe in you absolutely from this day.”

Polly put her two slim hands in the kind doctor’s, and looking up with brimming eyes into his genial face said, “Dear Dr. George, you may believe in me; indeed, indeed you may!”

Dr. George looked out of his office window, and mused as his eyes followed Polly up the shaded walk under the pepper-trees.

“Oh, these young things, these young things, how one’s heart yearns over them!” he sighed. “There she goes, full tilt, notwithstanding the heat; hat swinging in her hand instead of being on her pretty head; her heart bursting with fond schemes to keep that precious mother alive. It’s a splendid nature, that girl’s; one that is in danger of being wrecked by its own impetuosity, but one so full and rich that it is capable of bubbling over and enriching all the dull and sterile ones about it. Now, if all the money I can rake and scrape together need not go to those languid, boneless children of my languid, boneless sister-in-law, I could put that brave little girl on her feet. I think she will be able to do battle with the world so long as she has her mother for a motive-power. The question is, how will she do it without?”

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOARDERS STAY, AND THE OLIVERS GO.

Dr. George found Mrs. Oliver too ill to be anything but reasonable. After a long talk about her own condition and Polly’s future, she gave a somewhat tearful assent to all his plans for their welfare, and agreed to make the change when a suitable tenant was found for the house.

So Polly eased the anxiety that gnawed at her heart by incredible energy in the direction of house-cleaning; superintending all sorts of scrubblings, polishings, and renovating of



carpets with the aid of an extra Chinaman, who was fresh from his native rice-fields and stupid enough to occupy any one's mind to the exclusion of other matters.

Each boarder in turn was asked to make a trip to the country on a certain day, and on his return found his room in spotless order; while all this time the tired mother lay quietly in her bed, knowing little or nothing of her daughter's superhuman efforts to be "good." But a month of rest worked wonders, and Mrs. Oliver finally became so like her usual delicate but energetic self that Polly almost forgot her fears, although she remitted none of her nursing and fond but rigid discipline.

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At length something happened; and one glorious Saturday morning in October, Polly saddled Blanquita, the white mare which Bell Winship had left in Polly's care during her European trip, and galloped over to the Nobles' ranch in a breathless state of excitement.

Blanquita was happy too, for Polly had a light hand on the rein and a light seat in the saddle. She knew there would be a long rest at the journey's end, and that, too, under a particularly shady pepper-tree; so both horse and rider were in a golden humor as they loped over the dusty road, the blue Pacific on the one hand, and the brown hills, thirsty for rain, on the other.

Polly tied Blanquita to the pepper-tree, caught her habit in one hand, and ran up the walnut-tree avenue to the Nobles' house. There was no one in; but that was nothing unusual, since a house is chiefly useful for sleeping purposes in that lovely climate. No one on the verandas, no one in the hammocks; after seeking for some little time she came upon Margery and her mother at work in their orange-tree sitting-room, Mrs. Noble with her mending-basket, Margery painting as usual.

The orange-tree sitting-room was merely a platform built under the trees, which in the season of blossoms shed a heavy fragrance in the warm air, and later on hung their branches of golden fruit almost into your very lap.

"Here you are!" cried Polly, plunging through the trees as she caught sight of Margery's pink dress. "You have n't any hats to swing, so please give three rousing cheers! The house is rented and a lease signed for a year!"

"That is good news, indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Noble, laying down her needle. "And who is the tenant?"

"Whom do you suppose? Mrs. Chadwick herself! She has been getting on very nicely with the housekeeping (part of the credit belongs to me, but no one would ever believe it), and the boarders have been gradually weaned from mamma and accustomed to the new order of things, so they are tolerably content. Ah Foy also has agreed to stay, and that makes matters still more serene, since he is the best cook in Santa Barbara. Mrs. Chadwick will pay eighty-five dollars a month. Dr. George thinks we ought to get more, but mamma is so glad to have somebody whom she knows, and so relieved to feel that there will be no general breaking up of the 'sweet, sweet home,' that she is glad to accept the eighty-five dollars; and I am sure that we can live in modest penury on that sum. Of course Mrs. Chadwick may weary in well-doing; or she may die; or she may even get married,—though that's very unlikely, unless one of the boarders can't pay his board and wants to make it up to her in some way. Heigho! I feel like a princess, like a capitalist, like a gilded society lady!" sighed Polly, fanning herself with her hat.



“And now you and your mother will come to us for a week or two, as you promised, won’t you?” asked Mrs. Noble. “That will give you time to make your preparations comfortably.”



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Polly took a note from her pocket and handed it to Mrs. Noble: "Mrs. Oliver presents her compliments to Mrs. Noble, and says in this letter that we accept with pleasure Mrs. Noble's kind invitation to visit her. Said letter was not to be delivered, in case Mrs. Noble omitted to renew the invitation; but as all is right, I don't mind announcing that we are coming the day after to-morrow."

"Oh, Polly, Polly! How am I ever to live without you!" sighed Margery. "First Elsie, then Bell, now you!"

"Live for your Art with a big A, Peggy, but it's not forever. By and by, when you are a successful artist and I am a successful something, in short, when we are both 'careering,' which is my verb to express earning one's living by the exercise of some splendid talent, we will 'career' together in some great metropolis. Our mothers shall dress in Lyons velvet and point-lace. Their delicate fingers, no longer sullied by the vulgar dishcloth and duster, shall glitter with priceless gems, while you and I, the humble authors of their greatness, will heap dimes on dimes until we satisfy ambition."

Mrs. Noble smiled. "I hope your 'career,' as you call it, will be one in which imagination will be of use, Polly."

"I don't really imagine all the imaginations you imagine I imagine," said Polly soberly, as she gave Mrs. Noble's hand an affectionate squeeze. "A good deal of it is 'whistling to keep my courage up.' But everything looks hopeful just now. Mamma is so much better, everybody is so kind, and do you know, I don't loathe the boarders half so much since we have rented them with the house?"

"They grow in beauty side by side,
They fill our home with glee.

"Now that I can look upon them as personal property, part of our goods and chattels, they have ceased to be disagreeable. Even Mr. Greenwood—you remember him, Margery?"

"The fat old man who calls you sprightly?"

"The very same; but he has done worse since that. To be called sprightly is bad enough, but yesterday he said that he shouldn't be surprised *if I married well—in—course—of—time!*"

Nothing but italics would convey the biting sarcasm of Polly's inflections, and no capitals in a printer's case could picture her flashing eyes, or the vigor with which she prodded the earth with her riding-whip.

"I agree with him, that it is not impossible," said Mrs. Noble teasingly, after a moment of silence.



“Now, dearest aunty Meg, don’t take sides with that odious man! If, in the distant years, you ever see me on the point of marrying well, simply mention Mr. Greenwood’s name to me, and I ’ll draw back even if I am walking up the middle aisle with an ivory prayer-book in my hand!”

“Just to spite Mr. Greenwood; that would be sensible,” said Margery.

“You could n’t be so calm if you had to sit at the same table with him day after day. He belongs at the second table by—by every law of his nature! But, as I was saying, now that we have rented him to Mrs. Chadwick with the rest of the furniture, and will have a percentage on him just as we do on the piano which is far more valuable, I have been able to look at him pleasantly.”



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"You ought to be glad that the boarders like you," said Margery reprovingly.

"They don't, as a rule; only the horrors and the elderly gentlemen approve of me. But good-by for to-day, aunty Meg. Come to the gate, Peggy dear!"

The two friends walked through the orange-grove, their arms wound about each other, girl-fashion. They were silent, for each was sorry to lose the other, and a remembrance of the dear old times, the unbroken circle, the peaceful schooldays and merry vacations, stole into their young hearts, together with visions of the unknown future.

As Polly untied Blanquita and gave a heroic cinch to the saddle, she gave a last searching look at Margery, and said finally, "Peggy dear, I am very sure you are blue this morning; tell your faithful old Pollykins all about it."

One word was enough for Margery in her present mood, and she burst into tears on Polly's shoulder.

"Is it Edgar again?" whispered Polly.

"Yes," she sobbed. "Father has given him three months more to stay in the university, and unless he does better he is to come home and live on the cattle-ranch. Mother is heart-broken over it; for you know, Polly, that Edgar will never endure such a life; and yet, dearly as he loves books, he is n't doing well with his studies. The president has written father that he is very indolent this term and often absent from recitations; and one of the Santa Barbara boys, a senior, writes Philip that he is not choosing good friends, nor taking any rank in his class. Mother has written him such a letter this morning! If he can read it without turning his back upon his temptations, whatever they may be, I shall never have any pride in him again; and oh, Polly, I have been so proud of him, my brilliant, handsome, charming brother!"

"Poor Edgar! I can't believe it is anything that will last. He is so bright and lovable; every one thought he would take the highest honors. Why, Margery, he is, or was, the most ambitious boy I ever knew, and surely, surely he cannot have changed altogether! Surely he will come to himself when he knows he may have to leave college unless he does his best. I'm so sorry, dear old Peggy! It seems heartless that my brighter times should begin just when you are in trouble. Perhaps mamma and I can do something for Edgar; we will try, you may be sure. Good-by, dearest; I shall see you again very soon."

Ten days later, Polly stood on the deck of the Orizaba just at dusk, looking back on lovely Santa Barbara as it lay in the lap of the foothills freshened by the first rains. The dull, red-tiled roofs of the old Spanish adobes gleamed through the green of the pepper-trees, the tips of the tall, straggling blue-gums stood out sharply against the sky, and the twin towers of the old Mission rose in dazzling whiteness above a wilderness of

verdure. The friendly faces on the wharf first merged themselves into a blurred mass of moving atoms, then sank into nothingness.

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Polly glanced into her stateroom. Mrs. Oliver was a good sailor, and was lying snug and warm under her blankets. So Polly took a camp-chair just outside the door, wrapped herself in her fur cape, crowded her tam-o'-shanter tightly on, and sat there alone as the sunset glow paled in the western sky and darkness fell upon the face of the deep.

The mesa faded from sight; and then the lighthouse, where she had passed so many happy hours in her childhood. The bright disk of flame shone clear and steady across the quiet ocean, seeming to say, *Let your light so shine! Let your light so shine! Good luck, Polly! Keep your own lamp filled and trimmed, like a wise little virgin!* And her heart answered, "Good-by, dear light! I am leaving my little-girl days on the shore with you, and I am out on the open sea of life. I shall know that you are shining, though I cannot see you. Good-by! Shine on, dear light! I am going to seek my fortune!"

CHAPTER V.

TOLD IN LETTERS.

Extracts from Polly Oliver's Correspondence.

SAN FRANCISCO, November 1, 188—.

DEAR MARGERY,—I have been able to write you only scraps of notes heretofore, but now that we are quite settled I can tell you about our new home. We were at a hotel for a week, as long as I, the family banker, felt that we could, afford it. At the end of that time, by walking the streets from morning till night, looking at every house with a sign "To Let" on it, and taking mamma to see only the desirable ones, we found a humble spot to lay our heads. It is a tiny upper flat, which we rent for thirty dollars a month. The landlady calls it furnished, but she has an imagination which takes even higher flights than mine. Still, with the help of the pretty things we brought with us, we are very cosy and comfortable. There is a tiny parlor, which, with our Santa Barbara draperies, table-covers, afternoon tea-table, grasses, and books, looks like a corner of the dear home sitting-room. Out of this parlor is a sunny bedroom with two single brass bedsteads, and space enough to spare for mamma's rocking-chair in front of a window that looks out on the Golden Gate. The dining-room just holds, by a squeeze, the extension-table and four chairs; and the dot of a kitchen, with an enchanting gas-stove, completes the suite.

We are dining at a restaurant a short distance off, at present, and I cook the breakfasts and luncheons; but on Monday, as mamma is so well, I begin school from nine to twelve each day under a special arrangement, and we are to have a little Chinese boy who will assist in the work and go home at night to sleep. His wages will be eight dollars a month, and the washing probably four dollars more. This, with the rent, takes forty-two

dollars from our eighty-five, and it remains to be seen whether it is too much. I shall walk one way to school, although it is sixteen squares and all up and down hill. . . .



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The rains thus far have been mostly in the night, and we have lovely days. Mamma and I take long rides on the cable-cars in the afternoon, and stay out at the Cliff House on the rocks every pleasant Saturday. Then we 've discovered nice sheltered nooks in the sand dunes beyond the park, and there we stay for hours, mamma reading while I study. We are so quiet and so happy; we were never alone together in our lives before. You, dear Peggy, who have always had your family to yourself, can hardly think how we enjoy being at table together, just we two. I take mamma's coffee to her and kiss her on the right cheek; then follows an egg, with another kiss on the left cheek; then a bit of toast, with a bear-hug, and so on. We have a few pleasant friends here, you know, and they come to see mamma without asking her to return the calls, as they see plainly she has no strength for society. . . . POLLY.

P. S. We have a remarkable front door, which opens with a spring located in the wall at the top of the stairs. It is a modern improvement and I never tire of opening it, even though each time I am obliged to go downstairs to close it again.

When Dr. George came last week, he rang the bell, and being tired with the long pull up the hill, leaned against the door to breathe. Of course I knew nothing of this, and as soon as I heard the bell I flew to open the door with my usual neatness and dispatch, when who should tumble in, full length, but poor dear Dr. George! He was so surprised, and the opposite neighbors were so interested, and I was so sorry, that I was almost hysterical. Dr. George insists that the door is a trap laid for unsuspecting country people.

November 9.

. . . The first week is over, and the finances did n't come out right at all. I have a system of bookkeeping which is original, simple, practical, and absolutely reliable. The house-money I keep in a cigar-box with three partitions (formerly used for birds' eggs), and I divide the month's money in four parts, and pay everything weekly.

The money for car-fare, clothing, and sundries I keep in an old silver sugar-bowl, and the reserve fund, which we are never to touch save on the most dreadful provocation, in a Japanese ginger-jar with a cover. These, plainly marked, repose in my upper drawer. Mamma has no business cares whatever, and everything ought to work to a charm, as it will after a while. But this first week has been discouraging, and I have had to borrow enough from compartment two, cigar-box, to pay debts incurred by compartment one, cigar-box. This is probably because we had to buy a bag of flour and ten pounds of sugar. Of course this won't happen every week. . . .

I wrote Ah Foy a note after we arrived, for he really seems to have a human affection for us. I inclose his answer to my letter. It is such a miracle of Chinese construction that it is somewhat difficult to get his idea; still I think I see that he is grateful for past favors; that he misses us; that the boarders are going on "very happy and joy;" that he is glad

mamma is better, and pleased with the teacher I selected for him. But here it is; judge for yourself:—

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SANTA BARBARA, November 5.

DEAR MY FREND.

I was joy pleased to received a letter from you how are Your getting along and my Dear if your leaves a go We but now I been it is here I am very sorry for are a your go to in San Francisco if any now did you been it is that here very happy and joy I am so glad for your are to do teachers for me but I am very much thank you dear my friend.

Good-By. AH FOY.

November 15,

. . . The first compartment, cigar-box, could n't pay back the money it borrowed from the second compartment, and so this in turn had to borrow from the third compartment. I could have made everything straight, I think, if we had n't bought a feather duster and a gallon of kerosene. The first will last forever, and the second for six weeks, so it is n't fair to call compartment number two extravagant. At the end of this month I shall remove some of the partitions in the cigar-box and keep the house-money in two parts, balancing accounts every fortnight. . . .

November 24.

. . . My bookkeeping is in a frightful snarl. There is neither borrowing nor lending in the cigar-box now, for all the money for the month is gone at the end of the third week. The water, it seems, was not included in the thirty dollars for the rent, and compartment three had to pay two dollars for that purpose when compartment two was still deeply in its debt. If compartment two had only met its rightful obligations, compartment three need n't have "failed up," as they say in New England; but as it is, poor compartment four is entirely bankrupt, and will have to borrow of the sugar-bowl or the ginger-jar. As these banks are not at all in the same line of business, they ought not to be drawn into the complications of the cigar-box, for they will have their own troubles by and by; but I don't know what else to do. . . .

December 2.

. . . It came out better at the end of the month than I feared, for we spent very little last week, and have part of the ten pounds of sugar, kerosene, feather duster, scrubbing-brush, blanc-mange mould, tapioca, sago, and spices with which to begin the next month. I suffered so with the debts, losses, business embarrassments, and failures of the four compartments that when I found I was only four dollars behind on the whole month's expenses, I knocked out all the compartments, and am not going to keep things in weeks. I made up the deficit by taking two dollars out of the reserve fund, and two dollars out of my ten-dollar gold piece that Dr. George gave me on my birthday.



I have given the ginger-jar a note of hand for two dollars from the cigar-box, and it has resumed business at the old stand. Compartment four, cigar-box, which is perfectly innocent, as it was borrowed out of house and home by compartment three, also had to give a note to the sugar-bowl, and I made the ginger-jar give me a note for my two dollars birthday-money.

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Whether all these obligations will be met without lawsuits, I cannot tell; but I know by the masterly manner in which I have fought my way through these intricate affairs with the loss of only four dollars in four weeks, that I possess decided business ability, and this gives me courage to struggle on.

December 30, 188-

. . . We are having hard times, dear old Margery, though I do not regret coming to San Francisco, for mamma could not bear the slightest noise or confusion, nor lift her hand to any sort of work, in her present condition. At any rate, we came by Dr. George's orders, so my conscience is clear. . . .

Mrs. Chadwick has sent us only sixty-five dollars this month, instead of eighty-five. Some of the boarders are behind in their payments. The Darlings have gone away, and "she hopes to do better next month." Mamma cannot bear to press her, she is so kind and well-meaning; so do not for the world mention the matter to Dr. George. I will write to him when I must, not before.

Meanwhile I walk to school both ways, saving a dollar and a quarter a month. Have found a cheaper laundry; one dollar more saved. Cut down fruit bill; one dollar more. Blacked my white straw sailor with shoe-blackening, trimmed it with two neckties and an old blackbird badly molted; result perfectly hideous, but the sugar-bowl, clothing, and sundry fund are out of debt and doing well. Had my faded gray dress dyed black, and trimmed the jacket with pieces of my moth-eaten cock's-feather boa; perfectly elegant, almost too gorgeous for my humble circumstances. Mamma looks at me sadly when I don these ancient garments, and almost wishes I had n't such "a wealthy look." I tell her I expect the girls to say, when I walk into the school-yard on Monday, "Who is this that cometh with dyed garments from Bozrah?"

Mamma has decided that I may enter a training-school for kindergartners next year; so I am taking the studies that will give me the best preparation, and I hope to earn part of my tuition fees, when the time comes, by teaching as assistant. . . .

I go over to Berkeley once a week to talk Spanish with kind Professor Salazar and his wife. They insist that it is a pleasure, and will not allow mamma to pay anything for the lessons. I also go every Tuesday to tell stories at the Children's Hospital. It is the dearest hour of the week. When I am distracted about bills and expenses and mamma's health and Mrs. Chadwick's mismanagements and Yung Lee's mistakes (for he is beautiful as an angel and stupid as a toad), I put on my hat and go out to the children, poor little things! They always have a welcome for me, bless them! and I always come back ready to take up my trials again. Edgar is waiting to take this to the post-box, so I must say good-night. He is such a pleasure to us and such a comfort to mamma. I know for the first time in my life the fun of having a brother.



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Ever your affectionate POLLYKINS.

The foregoing extracts from Polly's business letters give you an idea only of her financial difficulties. She was tempted to pour these into one sympathizing ear, inasmuch as she kept all annoyances from her mother as far as possible; though household economies, as devised by her, lost much of their terror.

Mrs. Oliver was never able to see any great sorrow in a monthly deficit when Polly seated herself before her cash-boxes and explained her highly original financial operations. One would be indeed in dire distress of mind could one refrain from smiling when, having made the preliminary announcement,—“The great feminine financier of the century is in her counting-room: let the earth tremble!”—she planted herself on the bed, oriental fashion, took pencil and account-book in lap, spread cigar-box, sugar-bowl, and ginger-jar before her on the pillows, and ruffled her hair for the approaching contest.

CHAPTER VI.

POLLY TRIES A LITTLE MISSIONARY WORK.

One change had come over their life during these months which, although not explained in Polly's correspondence, concerns our little circle of people very intimately.

The Olivers had been in San Francisco over a month, but though Edgar Noble had been advised of the fact, he had not come over from Berkeley to see his old friends. Polly had at length written him a note, which still remained unanswered when she started one afternoon on a trip across the bay for her first Spanish conversation with Professor Salazar. She had once visited the university buildings, but Professor Salazar lived not only at some distance from the college, but at some distance from everything else. Still, she had elaborate written directions in her pocket, and hoped to find the place without difficulty.

She had no sooner alighted at the station than she felt an uneasy consciousness that it was not the right one, and that she should have gone farther before leaving the railway. However, there was no certainty about it in her mind, so after asking at two houses half a mile apart, and finding that the inmates had never heard of Professor Salazar's existence, she walked down a shady road, hoping to find another household where his name and fame had penetrated.

The appointed hour for the lessons was half past three on Fridays, but it was after four, and Polly seemed to be walking farther and farther away from civilization.

“I shall have to give it up,” she thought; “I will go back to the station where I got off and wait until the next train for San Francisco comes along, which will be nobody knows when. How provoking it is, and how stupid I am! Professor Salazar will stay at home



for me, and very likely Mrs. Salazar has made butter-cakes and coffee, and here am I floundering in the woods! I 'll sit down under these trees and do a bit of Spanish, while I 'm resting for the walk back.”



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Just at this moment a chorus of voices sounded in the distance, then some loud talking, then more singing.

“It is some of the students,” thought Polly, as she hastily retired behind a tree until they should pass.

[Illustration: “It is some of the students.”]

But unfortunately they did not pass. Just as they came opposite her hiding-place, they threw themselves down in a sunny spot on the opposite side of the road and lighted their cigarettes.

“No hurry!” said one. “Let ’s take it easy; the train does n’t leave till 4.50. Where are you going, Ned?”

“Home, I suppose, where I was going when you met me. I told you I could only walk to the turn.”

“Home? No, you don’t!” expostulated half a dozen laughing voices; “we ’ve unearthed the would-be hermit, and we mean to keep him.”

“Can’t go with you to-night, boys, worse luck!” repeated the second speaker. “Got to cram for that examination or be plucked again; and one more plucking will settle this child’s university career!”

“Oh, let the examinations go to the dickens! What ’s the use?—all the same a hundred years hence. The idea of cramming Friday night! Come on!”

“Can’t do it, old chaps; but next time goes. See you Monday. Ta-ta!”

Polly peeped cautiously from behind her tree.

“I believe that voice is Edgar Noble’s, or else I ’m very much mistaken. I thought of it when I first heard them singing. Yes, it is! Now, those hateful boys are going to get him into trouble!”

Just at this moment four of the boys jumped from the ground and, singing vociferously

“He won’t go home any more,
He won’t go home any more,
He won’t go home any more,
Way down on the Bingo farm!”

rushed after young Noble, pinioned him, and brought him back.



“See here, Noble,” expostulated one of them, who seemed to be a commanding genius among the rest,—“see here, don’t go and be a spoil-sport! What ’s the matter with you? We ’re going to chip in for a good dinner, go to the minstrels, and then,—oh, then we ’ll go and have a game of billiards. You play so well that you won’t lose anything. And if you want money, Will’s flush, he ’ll lend you a ‘tenner.’ You know there won’t be any fun in it unless you ’re there! We ’ll get the last boat back to-night, or the first in the morning.”

A letter from his mother lay in Edgar’s pocket,—a letter which had brought something like tears to his eyes for a moment, and over which he had vowed better things. But he yielded, nevertheless,—that it was with reluctance did n’t do any particular good to anybody, though the recording angels may have made a note of it,—and strolled along with the other students, who were evidently in great glee over their triumph.

Meanwhile Polly had been plotting. Her brain was not a great one, but it worked very swiftly; Dr. George called it, chaffingly, a small mind in a very active state. Scarcely stopping to think, lest her courage should not be equal to the strain of meeting six or eight young men face to face, she stepped softly out of her retreat, walked gently down the road, and when she had come within ten feet of the group, halted, and, clearing her throat desperately, said, “I beg your pardon”—



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The whole party turned with one accord, a good deal of amazement in their eyes, as there had not been a sign of life in the road a moment before, and now here was a sort of woodland sprite, a “nut-brown mayde,” with a remarkably sweet voice.

“I beg your pardon, but can you tell me the way to Professor Salazar’s house? Why” (this with a charming smile and expression as of one having found an angel of deliverance),—“why, it is—is n’t it?—Edgar Noble of Santa Barbara!”

Edgar, murmuring “Polly Oliver, by Jove!” lifted his hat at once, and saying, “Excuse me, boys,” turned back and, gallantly walked at Polly’s side.

“Why, Miss Polly, this is an unexpected way of meeting you!”

(“Very unexpected,” thought Polly.) “Is it not, indeed? I wrote you a note the other day, telling you that we hoped to see you soon in San Francisco.”

“Yes,” said Edgar; “I did n’t answer it because I intended to present myself in person tomorrow or Sunday. What are you doing in this vicinity?” he continued, “or, to put it poetically,

“Pray why are you loitering here, pretty maid?”

“No wonder you ask. I am ‘floundering,’ at present. I came over to a Spanish lesson at Professor Salazar’s, and I have quite lost my way. If you will be kind enough to put me on the right road I shall be very much obliged, though I don’t like to keep you from your friends,” said Polly, with a quizzical smile. “You see the professor won’t know why I missed my appointment, and I can’t bear to let him think me capable of neglect; he has been so very kind.”

“But you can’t walk there. You must have gotten off at the wrong station; it is quite a mile, even across the fields.”

“And what is a mile, sir? Have you forgotten that I am a country girl?” and she smiled up at him brightly, with a look that challenged remembrance.

“I remember that you could walk with any of us,” said Edgar, thinking how the freckles had disappeared from Polly’s rose-leaf skin, and how particularly fetching she looked in her brown felt sailor-hat. “Well, if you really wish to go there, I’ll see you safely to the house and take you over to San Francisco afterward, as it will be almost dark. I was going over, at any rate, and one train earlier or later won’t make any difference.”

(“Perhaps it won’t and perhaps it will,” thought Polly.) “If you are sure it won’t be too much trouble, then”—

“Not a bit. Excuse me a moment while I run back and explain the matter to the boys.”



The boys did not require any elaborate explanation.

Oh, the power of a winsome face! No better than many other good things, but surely one of them, and when it is united to a fair amount of goodness, something to be devoutly thankful for. It is to be feared that if a lumpish, dumpish sort of girl (good as gold, you know, but not suitable for occasions when a fellow's will has to be caught "on the fly," and held until it settles to its work),—if that lumpish, dumpish girl had asked the way to Professor Salazar's house, Edgar Noble would have led her courteously to the turn of the road, lifted his hat, and wished her a pleasant journey.



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But Polly was wearing her Sunday dress of brown cloth and a jaunty jacket trimmed with sable (the best bits of an old pelisse of Mrs. Oliver's). The sun shone on the loose-dropping coil of the waving hair that was only caught in place by a tortoise-shell arrow; the wind blew some of the dazzling tendrils across her forehead; the eyes that glanced up from under her smart little sailor-hat were as blue as sapphires; and Edgar, as he looked, suddenly feared that there might be vicious bulls in the meadows, and did n't dare as a gentleman to trust Polly alone! He had n't remembered anything special about her, but after an interval of two years she seemed all at once as desirable as dinner, as tempting as the minstrels, almost as fascinating as the billiards, when one has just money enough in one's pocket for one's last week's bills and none at all for the next!

The boys, as I say, had imagined Edgar's probable process of reasoning. Polly was standing in the highroad where "a wayfaring man, though a fool," could look at her; and when Edgar explained that it was his duty to see her safely to her destination, they all bowed to the inevitable. The one called Tony even said that he would be glad to "swap" with him, and the whole party offered to support him in his escort duty if he said the word. He agreed to meet the boys later, as Polly's quick ear assured her, and having behaved both as a man of honor and knight of chivalry, he started unsuspectingly across the fields with his would-be guardian.

She darted a searching look at him as they walked along.

"Oh, how old and 'gentlemanly' you look, Edgar! I feel quite afraid of you!"

"I 'm glad you do. There used to be a painful lack of reverence in your manners, Miss Polly."

"There used to be a painful lack of politeness in yours, Mr. Edgar. Oh dear, I meant to begin so nicely with you and astonish you with my new grown-up manners! Now, Edgar, let us begin as if we had just been introduced; if you will try your best not to be provoking, I won't say a single disagreeable thing."

"Polly, shall I tell you the truth?"

"You might try; it would be good practice even if you did n't accomplish anything."

"How does that remark conform with your late promises? However, I 'll be forgiving and see if I receive any reward; I 've tried every other line of action. What I was going to say when you fired that last shot was this: I agree with Jack Howard, who used to say that he would rather quarrel with you than be friends with any other girl."



“It is nice,” said Polly complacently. “I feel a sort of pleasant glow myself, whenever I’ve talked to you a few minutes; but the trouble is that you used to fan that pleasant glow into a raging heat, and then we both got angry.”

“If the present ‘raging heat’ has faded into the ‘pleasant glow,’ I don’t mind telling you that you are very much improved,” said Edgar encouragingly. “Your temper seems much the same, but no one who knew you at fourteen could have foreseen that you would turn out so exceedingly well.”

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“Do you mean that I am better looking?” asked Polly, with the excited frankness of sixteen years.

“Exactly.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Edgar. I ’m a thousand times obliged. I ’ve thought so myself, lately; but it’s worth everything to have your grown-up, college opinion. Of course red hair has come into vogue, that’s one point in my favor, though I fear mine is a little vivid even for the fashion; Margery has done a water color of my head which Phil says looks like the explosion of a tomato. Then my freckles are almost gone, and that is a great help; if you examine me carefully in this strong light you can only count seven, and two of those are getting faint-hearted. Nothing can be done with my aspiring nose. I ’ve tried in vain to push it down, and now I ’m simply living it down.”

Edgar examined her in the strong light mischievously. “Turn your profile,” he said. “That’s right; now, do you know, I rather like your nose, and it’s a very valuable index to your disposition. I don’t know whether, if it were removed from your face, it would mean so much; but taken in connection with its surroundings, it’s a very expressive feature; it warns the stranger to be careful. In fact, most of your features are danger signals, Polly; I ’m rather glad I ’ve been taking a course of popular medical lectures on First Aid to the Injured!”

And so, with a great deal of nonsense and a good sprinkling of quiet, friendly chat, they made their way to Professor Salazar’s house, proffered Polly’s apologies, and took the train for San Francisco.

CHAPTER VII.

“WHERE IGNORANCE IS BLISS.”

The trip from Berkeley to San Francisco was a brilliant success from Edgar’s standpoint, but Polly would have told you that she never worked harder in her life.

“I ’ll just say ‘How do you do?’ to your mother, and then be off,” said Edgar, as they neared the house.

“Oh, but you surely will stay to dinner with us!” said Polly, with the most innocent look of disappointment on her face,—a look of such obvious grief that a person of any feeling could hardly help wishing to remove it, if possible. “You see, Edgar” (putting the latch-key in the door), “mamma is so languid and ill that she cannot indulge in many pleasures, and I had quite counted on you to amuse her a little for me this evening. But come up, and you shall do as you like after dinner.”



“I’ve brought you a charming surprise, mamacita!” called Polly from the stairs: “an old friend whom I picked up in the woods like a wild-flower and brought home to you.” (“Wild-flower is a good name for him,” she thought.)

Mrs. Oliver was delighted to see Edgar, but after the first greetings were over, Polly fancied that she had not closed the front door, and Edgar offered to go down and make sure.

In a second Polly crossed the room to her mother’s side, and whispered impressively, “Edgar *must* be kept here until after midnight; I have good reasons that I will explain when we are alone. Keep him somehow,—anyhow!”

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Mrs. Oliver had not lived sixteen years with Polly without learning to leap to conclusions. “Run down and ask Mrs. Howe if she will let us have her hall-bedroom tonight,” she replied; “nod your head for yes when you come back, and I ’ll act accordingly; I have a request to make of Edgar, and am glad to have so early an opportunity of talking with him.”

“We did close the door, after all,” said Edgar, coming in again. “What a pretty little apartment you have here! I have n’t seen anything so cosy and homelike for ages.”

“Then make yourself at home in it,” said Mrs. Oliver, while Polly joined in with, “Is n’t that a pretty fire in the grate? I ’ll give you one rose-colored lamp with your firelight. Here, mamacita, is the rocker for you on one side; here, Edgar, is our one ‘man’s chair’ for you on the other. Stretch out your feet as lazily as you like on my new goatskin rug. You are our only home-friend in San Francisco; and oh, how mamma will spoil you whenever she has the chance! Now talk to each other cosily while the ‘angel of the house’ cooks dinner.”

It may be mentioned here that as Mrs. Chadwick’s monthly remittances varied from sixty to seventy-five dollars, but never reached the promised eighty-five, Polly had dismissed little Yung Lee for a month, two weeks of which would be the Christmas vacation, and hoped in this way to make up deficiencies. The sugar-bowl and ginger-jar were stuffed copiously with notes of hand signed “Cigar-box,” but held a painfully small amount of cash.

“Can’t I go out and help Polly?” asked Edgar, a little later. “I should never have agreed to stay and dine if I had known that she was the cook.”

“Go out, by all means; but you need n’t be anxious. Ours is a sort of doll-house-keeping. We buy everything cooked, as far as possible, and Polly makes play of the rest. It all seems so simple and interesting to plan for two when we have been used to twelve and fourteen.”

“May I come in?” called Edgar from the tiny dining-room to Polly, who had laid aside her Sunday finery and was clad in brown Scotch gingham mostly covered with ruffled apron.

“Yes, if you like; but you won’t be spoiled here, so don’t hope it. Mamma and I are two very different persons. Tie that apron round your waist; I ’ve just begun the salad-dressing; is your intelligence equal to stirring it round and round and pouring in oil drop by drop, while I take up the dinner?”

“Fully. Just try me. I ’ll make it stand on its head in three minutes!”



Meanwhile Polly set on the table a platter of lamb-chops, some delicate potato chips which had come out of a pasteboard box, a dish of canned French peas, and a mound of currant-jelly.



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“That is good,” she remarked critically, coming back to her apprentice, who was toiling with most unnecessary vigor, so that the veins stood out boldly on his forehead. “You’re really not stupid, for a boy; and you have n’t ‘made a mess,’ which is more than I hoped. Now, please pour the dressing over those sliced tomatoes; set them on the side-table in the banquet-hall; put the plate in the sink (don’t stare at me!); open a bottle of Apollinaris for mamma,—dig out the cork with a hairpin, I ’ve lost the corkscrew; move three chairs up to the dining-table (oh, it’s so charming to have three!); light the silver candlesticks in the centre of the table; go in and bring mamma out in style; see if the fire needs coal; and I’ll be ready by that time.”

“I can never remember, but I fly! Oh, what an excellent slave-driver was spoiled in you!” said Edgar.

The simple dinner was delicious, and such a welcome change from the long boarding-house table at which Edgar had eaten for over a year. The candles gave a soft light; there was a bowl of yellow flowers underneath them. Mrs. Oliver looked like an elderly Dresden-china shepherdess in her pale blue wrapper, and Polly did n’t suffer from the brown gingham, with its wide collar and cuffs of buff embroidery, and its quaint full sleeves. She had burned two small blisters on her wrist: they were scarcely visible to the naked eye, but she succeeded in obtaining as much sympathy for them as if they had been mortal wounds. Her mother murmured ‘Poor darling wrist’ and ‘kissed the place to make it well.’ Edgar found a bit of thin cambric and bound up the injured member with cooling flour, Mistress Polly looking demurely on, thinking meanwhile how much safer he was with them than with the objectionable Tony. After the lamb-chops and peas had been discussed, Edgar insisted on changing the plates and putting on the tomato salad; then Polly officiated at the next course, bringing in coffee, sliced oranges, and delicious cake from the neighboring confectioner’s.

“Can’t I wash the dishes?” asked Edgar, when the feast was ended.

“They are not going to be washed, at least by us. This is a great occasion, and the little girl downstairs is coming up to clear away the dinner things.”

Then there was the pleasant parlor again, and when the candles were lighted in the old-fashioned mirror over the fireplace, everything wore a festive appearance. The guitar was brought out, and Edgar sang college songs till Mrs. Oliver grew so bright that she even hummed a faint second from her cosy place on the sofa.

And then Polly must show Edgar how she had made Austin Dobson’s “Milkmaid Song” fit “Nelly Ely,” and she must teach him the pretty words.

“Across the grass,
I saw her pass,
She comes with tripping pace;



A maid I know,
And March winds blow
Her hair across her face.
Hey! Dolly! Ho! Dolly!
Dolly shall be mine,
Before the spray is white with May
Or blooms the eglantine.”



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By this time the bandage had come off the burned wrist, and Edgar must bind it on again, and Polly shrieked and started when he pinned the end over, and Edgar turned pale at the thought of his brutal awkwardness, and Polly burst into a ringing peal of laughter and confessed that the pin had n't touched her, and Edgar called her a deceitful little wretch. This naturally occupied some time, and then there was the second verse:—

“The March winds blow,
I watch her go,
Her eye is blue and clear;
Her cheek is brown
And soft as down
To those who see it near.
Hey! Dolly! Ho! Dolly!
Dolly shall be mine,
Before the spray is white with May
Or blooms the eglantine.”

After this singing-lesson was over it was nearly eleven o'clock, but up to this time Edgar had shown no realizing sense of his engagements.

“The dinner is over, and the theatre party is safe,” thought Polly. “Now comes the ‘tug of war,’ that mysterious game of billiards.”

But Mrs. Oliver was equal to the occasion. When Edgar looked at his watch, she said: “Polly, run and get Mrs. Noble’s last letter, dear;” and then, when she was alone with Edgar, “My dear boy, I have a favor to ask of you, and you must be quite frank if it is not convenient for you to grant it. As to-morrow will be Saturday, perhaps you have no recitations, and if not, would it trouble you too much to stay here all night and attend to something for me in the morning? I will explain the matter, and then you can answer me more decidedly. I have received a letter from a Washington friend who seems to think it possible that a pension may be granted to me. He sends a letter of introduction to General M-----, at the Presidio, who, he says, knew Colonel Oliver, and will be able to advise me in the matter. I am not well enough to go there for some days, and of course I do not like to send Polly alone. If you could go out with her, give him the letter of introduction, and ask him kindly to call upon us at his leisure, and find out also if there is any danger in a little delay just now while I am ill, it would be a very great favor.”

“Of course I will, with all the pleasure in life, Mrs. Oliver,” replied Edgar, with the unspoken thought, “Confound it! There goes my game; I promised the fellows to be there, and they ’ll guy me for staying away! However, there ’s nothing else to do. I should n't have the face to go out now and come in at one or two o'clock in the morning.”



Polly entered just then with the letter.

“Edgar is kind enough to stay all night with us, dear, and take you to the Presidio on the pension business in the morning. If you will see that his room is all right, I will say good-night now. Our guest-chamber is downstairs, Edgar; I hope you will be very comfortable. Breakfast at half past eight, please.”

When the door of Mrs. Howe’s bedroom closed on Edgar, Polly ran upstairs, and sank exhausted on her own bed.



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“Now, mamma, ‘listen to my tale of woe!’ I got off at the wrong station,—yes, it was stupid; but wait: perhaps I was led to be stupid. I lost my way, could n’t find Professor Salazar’s house, could n’t find anything else. As I was wandering about in a woodsy road, trying to find a house of some kind, I heard a crowd of boys singing vociferously as they came through the trees. I did n’t care to meet them, all alone as I was, though of course there was nothing to be afraid of, so I stepped off the road behind some trees and bushes until they should pass. It turned out to be half a dozen university students, and at first I did n’t know that Edgar was among them. They were teasing somebody to go over to San Francisco for a dinner, then to the minstrels, and then to wind up with a game of billiards, and other gayeties which were to be prolonged indefinitely. What dreadful things may have been included I don’t know. A wretch named ‘Tony’ did most of the teasing, and he looked equal to planning any sort of mischief. All at once I thought I recognized a familiar voice. I peeped out, and sure enough it was Edgar Noble whom they were coaxing. He did n’t want to go a bit,—I ’ll say that for him,—but they were determined that he should. I didn’t mind his going to dinners and minstrels, of course, but when they spoke of being out until after midnight, or to-morrow morning, and when one beetle-browed, vulgar-looking creature offered to lend him a ‘tenner,’ I thought of the mortgage on the Noble ranch, and the trouble there would be if Edgar should get into debt, and I felt I must do something to stop him, especially as he said himself that everything depended on his next examinations.”

“But how did you accomplish it?” asked Mrs. Oliver, sitting up in bed and glowing with interest.

“They sat down by the roadside, smoking and talking it over. There was n’t another well-born, well-bred looking young man in the group. Edgar seemed a prince among them, and I was so ashamed of him for having such friends! I was afraid they would stay there until dark, but they finally got up and walked toward the station. I waited a few moments, went softly along behind them, and when I was near enough I cleared my throat (oh, it was a fearful moment!), and said, ‘I beg your pardon, but can you direct me to Professor Salazar’s house?’ and then in a dramatic tone, ‘Why, it is—is n’t it?—Edgar Noble of Santa Barbara!’ He joined me, of course. Oh, I can’t begin to tell you all the steps of the affair, I am so exhausted. Suffice it to say that he walked to Professor Salazar’s with me to make my excuses, came over to town with me, came up to the house, I trembling for fear he would slip through my fingers at any moment; then, you know, he stayed to dinner, I in terror all the time as the fatal hours approached and departed; and there he is, ‘the captive of my bow and spear,’ tucked up in Mrs. Howe’s best bed, thanks to your ingenuity! I could never have devised that last plot, mamma; it was a masterpiece!”



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“You did a kind deed, little daughter,” said Mrs. Oliver, with a kiss. “But poor Mrs. Noble! What can we do for her? We cannot play policemen all the time. We are too far from Edgar to know his plans, and any interference of which he is conscious would be worse than nothing. I cannot believe that he is far wrong yet. He certainly never appeared better; so polite and thoughtful and friendly. Well, we must let the morrow bring counsel.”

“I hope that smirking, odious Tony is disappointed!” said Polly viciously, as she turned out the gas. “I distinctly heard him tell Edgar to throw a handkerchief over my hair if we should pass any wild cattle! How I’d like to banish him from this vicinity! Invite Edgar to dinner next week, mamma; not too soon, or he will suspect missionary work. Boys hate to be missionaried, and I’m sure I don’t blame them. I hope he is happy downstairs in his little prison! He ought to be, if ignorance is bliss!”

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO FIRESIDE CHATS.

It was five o’clock Saturday afternoon, and Edgar Noble stood on the Olivers’ steps, Mrs. Oliver waving her hand from an upper window, and Polly standing on the stairs saying good-by.

“Come over to dinner some night, won’t you, Edgar?” she asked carelessly; “any night you like, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.”

“Wednesday, please, as it comes first!” said Edgar roguishly. “May I help cook it?”

“You not only may, but you must. Good-by.”

Polly went upstairs, and, after washing the lunch-dishes in a reflective turn of mind which did away with part of the irksomeness of the task, went into the parlor and sat on a stool at her mother’s feet.

A soft rain had begun to fall; the fire burned brightly; the bamboo cast feathery shadows on the wall; from a house across the street came the sound of a beautiful voice singing,

“Oh, holy night! the stars are brightly shining.
It is the night of the dear Saviour’s birth!”

All was peaceful and homelike; if it would only last, thought Polly.

“You are well to-night, mamacita.”



A look of repressed pain crossed Mrs. Oliver's face as she smoothed the bright head lying in her lap. "Very comfortable, dear, and very happy; as who would not be, with such a darling comfort of a daughter? Always sunny, always helpful, these last dear weeks,—cook, housekeeper, nurse, banker, all in one, with never a complaint as one burden after another is laid on her willing shoulders."

"Don't, mamma!" whispered Polly, seeking desperately for her handkerchief. "I can stand scolding, but compliments always make me cry; you know they do. If Ferdinand and Isabella had told Columbus to discover my pocket instead of America, he would n't have been as famous as he is now; there, I've found it. Now, mamma, you know your whole duty is to be well, well, well, and I'll take care of everything else."



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"I 've been thinking about Edgar, Polly, and I have a plan, but I shall not think of urging it against your will; you are the mistress of the house nowadays."

"I know what it is," sighed Polly. "You think we ought to take another boarder. A desire for boarders is like a taste for strong drink; once acquired, it is almost impossible to eradicate it from the system."

"I do think we ought to take this boarder. Not because it will make a difference in our income, but I am convinced that if Edgar can have a pleasant home and our companionship just at this juncture, he will break away from his idle habits, and perhaps his bad associations, and take a fresh start. I feel that we owe it to our dear old friends to do this for them, if we can. Of course, if it proves too great a tax upon you, or if I should have another attack of illness, it will be out of the question; but who knows? perhaps two or three months will accomplish our purpose. He can pay me whatever he has been paying in Berkeley, less the amount of his fare to and fro. We might have little Yung Lee again, and Mrs. Howe will be glad to rent her extra room. It has a fireplace, and will serve for both bedroom and study, if we add a table and student-lamp."

"I don't believe he will come," said Polly. "We are all very well as a diversion, but as a constancy we should pall upon him. I never could keep up to the level I have been maintaining for the last twenty-four hours, that is certain. It is nothing short of degradation to struggle as hard to amuse a boy as I have struggled to amuse Edgar. I don't believe he could endure such exhilaration week after week, and I am very sure it would kill me. Besides, he will fancy he is going to be watched and reported at headquarters in Santa Barbara!"

"I think very likely you are right; but perhaps I can put the matter so that it will strike him in some other light."

"Very well, mamacita; I 'm resigned. It will break up all our nice little two-ing, but we will be his guardian angel. I will be his guardian and you his angel, and oh, how he would dislike it if he knew it! But wait until odious Mr. Tony meets him to-night! What business is it of his if my hair is red! When he chaffs him for breaking his appointment, I dare say we shall never see him again."

"You are so jolly comfortable here! This house is the next best thing to mother," said Edgar, with boyish heartiness, as he stood on the white goatskin with his back to the Olivers' cheerful fireplace.

It was Wednesday evening of the next week. Polly was clearing away the dinner things, and Edgar had been arranging Mrs. Oliver's chair and pillows and footstool like the gentle young knight he was by nature.



What wonder that all the fellows, even “smirking Tony,” liked him and sought his company? He who could pull an oar, throw a ball, leap a bar, ride a horse, or play a game of skill as if he had been born for each particular occupation,—what wonder that the ne’er-do-wells and idlers and scamps and dullards battered at his door continually and begged him to leave his books and come out and “stir up things”!



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“If you think it is so ‘jolly,’” said Mrs. Oliver, “how would you like to come here and live with us awhile?”

This was a bombshell. The boy hesitated naturally, being taken quite by surprise. (“Confound it!” he thought rapidly, “how shall I get out of this scrape without being impolite! They would n’t give me one night out a week if I came!”) “I ’d like it immensely, you know,” he said aloud, “and it’s awfully kind of you to propose it, and I appreciate it, but I don’t think—I don’t see, that is, how I could come, Mrs. Oliver. In the first place, I ’m quite sure my home people would dislike my intruding on your privacy; and then,—well, you know I am out in the evening occasionally, and should n’t like to disturb you, besides, I ’m sure Miss Polly has her hands full now.”

“Of course you would be often out in the evening, though I don’t suppose you are a ‘midnight reveler.’ You would simply have a latch-key and go out and come in as you liked. Mrs. Howe’s room is very pleasant, as you know; and you could study there before your open fire, and join us when you felt like it. Is it as convenient and pleasant for you to live on this side of the bay, and go back and forth?”

“Oh yes! I don’t mind that part of it.” (“This is worse than the Inquisition; I don’t know but that she will get me in spite of everything!”)

“Oh dear!” thought Mrs. Oliver, “he does n’t want to come; and I don’t want him to come, and I must urge him to come against his will. How very disagreeable missionary work is, to be sure! I sympathize with him, too. He is afraid of petticoat government, and fears that he will lose some of his precious liberty. If I had fifty children, I believe I should want them all girls.”

“Besides, dear Mrs. Oliver,” continued Edgar, after an awkward pause, “I don’t think you are strong enough to have me here. I believe you ’re only proposing it for my good. You know that I ’m in a forlorn students’ boarding-house, and you are anxious to give me ’all the comforts of a home’ for my blessed mother’s sake, regardless of your own discomforts.”

“Come here a moment and sit beside me on Polly’s footstool. You were nearly three years old when Polly was born. You were all staying with me that summer. Did you know that you were my first boarders? You were a tiny fellow in kilts, very much interested in the new baby, and very anxious to hold her. I can see you now rocking the cradle as gravely as a man. Polly has hard times and many sorrows before her, Edgar! You are old enough to see that I cannot stay with her much longer.”

Edgar was too awed and too greatly moved to answer.

“I should be very glad to have you with us, both because I think we could in some degree take the place of your mother and Margery, and because I should be glad to feel

that in any sudden emergency, which I do not in the least expect, we should have a near friend to lean upon ever so little.”



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Edgar's whole heart went out in a burst of sympathy and manly tenderness. In that moment he felt willing to give up every personal pleasure, if he might lift a feather's weight of care from the fragile woman who spoke to him with such sweetness and trust. For there is nothing hopeless save meanness and poverty of nature; and any demand on Edgar Noble's instinct of chivalrous protection would never be discounted.

"I will come gladly, gladly, Mrs. Oliver," he said, "if only I can be of service; though I fear it will be all the other way. Please borrow me for a son, just to keep me in training, and I'll try to bear my honors worthily."

"Thank you, dear boy. Then it is settled, if you are sure that the living in the city will not interfere with your studies; that is the main thing. We all look to you to add fresh laurels to your old ones. Are you satisfied with your college life thus far?"

("They have n't told her anything. That 's good," thought Edgar.) "Oh yes; fairly well! I don't—I don't go in for being a 'dig,' Mrs. Oliver. I shall never be the valedictorian, and all that sort of thing; it does n't pay. Who ever hears of valedictorians twenty years after graduation? Class honors don't amount to much."

"I suppose they can be overestimated; but they must prove some sort of excellence which will stand one in good stead in after years. I should never advise a boy or girl to work for honors alone; but if after doing one's very best the honors come naturally, they are very pleasant."

"Half the best scholars in our class are prigs," said Edgar discontentedly. "Always down on the live fellows who want any sport. Sometimes I wish I had never gone to college at all. Unless you deny yourself every pleasure, and live the life of a hermit, you can't take any rank. My father expects me to get a hundred and one per cent. in every study, and thinks I ought to rise with the lark and go to bed with the chickens. I don't know whether he ever sowed any wild oats; if he did, it was so long ago that he has quite forgotten I must sow mine some time. He ought to be thankful they are such a harmless sort."

"I don't understand boys very well," said Mrs. Oliver smilingly. "You see, I never have had any to study, and you must teach me a few things. Now, about this matter of wild oats. Why is it so necessary that they should be sown? Is Margery sowing hers? I don't know that Polly feels bound to sow any."

"I dare say they are not necessities," laughed Edgar, coloring. "Perhaps they are only luxuries."

Mrs. Oliver looked at the fire soberly. "I know there may be plenty of fine men who have a discreditable youth to look back upon,—a youth finally repented of and atoned for; but that is rather a weary process, I should think, and they are surely no stronger men *because* of the 'wild oats,' but rather in *spite* of them."



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"I suppose so," sighed Edgar; "but it's so easy for women to be good! I know you were born a saint, to begin with. You don't know what it is to be in college, and to want to do everything that you can't and ought n't, and nothing that you can and ought, and get all tangled up in things you never meant to touch. However, we 'll see!"

Polly peeped in at the door very softly.

"They have n't any light; that 's favorable. He 's sitting on my footstool; he need n't suppose he is going to have *that* place! I think she has her hand on his arm,—yes, she has! And he is stroking it! Oh, you poor innocent child, you do not realize that that soft little hand of my mother's never lets go! It slips into a five and three-quarters glove, but you 'll be surprised, Mr. Edgar, when you discover you cannot get away from it. Very well, then; it is settled. I 'll go back and put the salt fish in soak for my boarder's breakfast. I seem to have my hands rather full!—a house to keep, an invalid mother, and now a boarder. The very thing I vowed that I never would have—another boarder; what grandmamma would have called an 'unstiddy boy boarder!"

And as Polly clattered the pots and pans, the young heathen in the parlor might have heard her fresh voice singing with great energy:

"Shall we, whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,—
Shall we to men benighted
The lamp of life deny?"

CHAPTER IX.

HARD TIMES.

The new arrangement worked exceedingly well.

As to Edgar's innermost personal feelings, no one is qualified to speak with any authority. Whether he experienced a change of heart, vowed better things, prayed to be delivered from temptation, or simply decided to turn over a new leaf, no one knows; the principal fact in his life, at this period, seems to have been an unprecedented lack of time for any great foolishness.

Certain unpleasant things had transpired on that eventful Friday night when he had missed his appointment with his fellow-students, which had resulted in an open scandal too disagreeable to be passed over by the college authorities; the redoubtable Tony had been returned with thanks to his fond parents in a distant part of the state, and two others had been temporarily suspended.



Edgar Noble was not too blind to see the happy chance that interfered with his presence on that occasion, and was sensible enough to realize that, had he been implicated in the least degree (he scorned the possibility of his taking any active part in such scurrilous proceedings), he would probably have shared Tony's fate.



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Existence was wearing a particularly dismal aspect on that afternoon when Edgar had met Polly Oliver in the Berkeley woods. He felt “nagged,” injured, blue, out of sorts with fate. He had not done anything very bad, he said to himself; at least, nothing half so bad as lots of other fellows, and yet everybody frowned on him. His father had, in his opinion, been unnecessarily severe; while his mother and sister had wept over him (by letter) as if he were a thief and a forger, instead of a fellow who was simply having a “little fling.” He was annoyed at the conduct of Scott Burton,—“king of snobs and prigs,” he named him,—who had taken it upon himself to inform Philip Noble of his (Edgar’s) own personal affairs; and he was enraged at being preached at by that said younger brother.

But of late everything had taken an upward turn, and by way of variety, existence turned a smiling face toward him. He had passed his examinations, most unexpectedly to himself, with a respectable percentage to spare. There was a time when he would have been ashamed of this meagre result. He was now, just a little, but the feeling was somewhat submerged in his gratitude at having “squeaked through” at all.

A certain inspired Professor Hope, who wondered what effect encouragement would have on a fellow who did n’t deserve any, but might possibly need it, came up to him after recitations, one day, and said:—

“Noble, I want to congratulate you on your papers in history and physics. They show signal ability. There is a plentiful lack of study evinced, but no want of grasp or power. You have talents that ought to put you among the first three men in the University, sir. I do not know whether you care to take the trouble to win such a place (it *is* a good deal of trouble), but you can win it if you like. That’s all I have to say, Noble. Good-morning!”

This unlooked-for speech fell like balm on Edgar’s wounded self-respect, and made him hold his head higher for a week; and, naturally, while his head occupied this elevated position, he was obliged to live up to it. He also felt obliged to make an effort, rather reluctantly, to maintain some decent standing in the classes of Professor Hope, even if he shirked in all the rest.

And now life, on the whole, save for one carking care that perched on his shoulder by day and sat on his eyelids at night, was very pleasant; though he could not flatter himself that he was absolutely a free agent.

After all ordinary engagements of concerts, theatres, lectures, or what not, he entered the house undisturbed, and noiselessly sought his couch. But one night, when he ventured to stay out till after midnight, just as he was stealing in softly, Mrs. Oliver’s gentle voice came from the head of the stairs, saying, “Good-night, Edgar, the lamp is lighted in your room!”



Edgar closed his door and sat down disconsolately on the bed, cane in hand, hat on the back of his head. The fire had burned, to a few glowing coals; his slippers lay on the hearth, and his Christmas “easy jacket” hung over the back of his great armchair; his books lay open under the student-lamp, and there were two vases of fresh flowers in the room: that was Polly’s doing.



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“Mrs. Oliver was awake and listening for me; worrying about me, probably; I dare say she thought I ’d been waylaid by bandits,” he muttered discontentedly. “I might as well live in the Young Women’s Christian Association! I can’t get mad with an angel, but I did n’t intend being one myself! Good gracious! why don’t they hire me a nurse and buy me a perambulator!”

But all the rest was perfect; and his chief chums envied him after they had spent an evening with the Olivers. Polly and he had ceased to quarrel, and were on good, frank, friendly terms. “She is no end of fun,” he would have told you; “has no nonsensical young-lady airs about her, is always ready for sport, sings all kinds of songs from grave to gay, knows a good joke when you tell one, and keeps a fellow up to the mark as well as a maiden aunt.”

All this was delightful to everybody concerned. Meanwhile the household affairs were as troublesome as they could well be. Mrs. Oliver developed more serious symptoms, and Dr. George asked the San Francisco physician to call to see her twice a week at least. The San Francisco physician thought “a year at Carlsbad, and a year at Nice, would be a good thing;” but, failing these, he ordered copious quantities of expensive drugs, and the reserve fund shrank, though the precious three hundred and twelve dollars was almost intact.

Poor Mrs. Chadwick sent tearful monthly letters, accompanied by checks of fifty to sixty-five dollars. One of the boarders had died; two had gone away; the season was poor; Ah Foy had returned to China; Mr. Greenwood was difficult about his meals; the roof leaked; provisions were dear; Mrs. Holmes in the next street had decided to take boarders; Eastern people were grumbling at the weather, saying it was not at all as reported in the guide-books; real-estate and rents were very low; she hoped to be able to do better next month; and she was Mrs. Oliver’s “affectionate Clementine Churchill Chadwick.”

Polly had held a consultation with the principal of her school, who had assured her that as she was so well in advance of her class, she could be promoted the next term, if she desired. Accordingly, she left school in order to be more with her mother, and as she studied with Edgar in the evening, she really lost nothing.

Mrs. Howe remitted four dollars from the monthly rent, in consideration of Spanish lessons given to her two oldest children. This experiment proved a success, and Polly next accepted an offer to come three times a week to the house of a certain Mrs. Baer to amuse (instructively) the four little Baer cubs, while the mother Baer wrote a “History of the Dress-Reform Movement in English-Speaking Nations.”

For this service Polly was paid ten dollars a month in gold coin, while the amount of spiritual wealth which she amassed could not possibly be estimated in dollars and cents. The ten dollars was very useful, for it procured the services of a kind, strong



woman, who came on these three afternoons of Polly's absence, put the entire house in order, did the mending, rubbed Mrs. Oliver's tired back, and brushed her hair until she fell asleep.

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So Polly assisted in keeping the wolf from the door, and her sacrifices watered her young heart and kept it tender. “Money may always be a beautiful thing. It is we who make it grimy.”

Edgar shared in the business conferences now. He had gone into convulsions of mirth over Polly’s system of accounts, and insisted, much against her will, in teaching her book-keeping, striving to convince her that the cash could be kept in a single box, and the accounts separated in a book.

These lessons were merry occasions, for there was a conspicuous cavity in Polly’s brain where the faculty for mathematics should have been.

“Your imbecility is so unusual that it ’s a positive inspiration,” Edgar would say. “It is n’t like any ordinary stupidity; there does n’t seem to be any bottom to it, you know; it ’s abnormal, it ’s fascinating, Polly!”

Polly glowed under this unstinted praise. “I am glad you like it,” she said. “I always like to have a thing first-class of its kind, though I can’t pride myself that it compares with your Spanish accent, Edgar; that stands absolutely alone and unapproachable for badness. I don’t worry about my mathematical stupidity a bit since I read Dr. Holmes, who says that everybody has an idiotic area in his mind.”

There had been very little bookkeeping to-night. It was raining in torrents. Mrs. Oliver was talking with General M—— in the parlor, while Edgar and Polly were studying in the dining-room.

Polly laid down her book and leaned back in her chair. It had been a hard day, and it was very discouraging that a new year should come to one’s door laden with vexations and anxieties, when everybody naturally expected new years to be happy, through January and February at least.

“Edgar,” she sighed plaintively, “I find that this is a very difficult world to live in, sometimes.”

Edgar looked up from his book, and glanced at her as she lay back with closed eyes in the Chinese lounging-chair. She was so pale, so tired, and so very, very pretty just then, her hair falling in bright confusion round her face, her whole figure relaxed with weariness, and her lips quivering a little, as if she would like to cry if she dared.

Polly with dimples playing hide and seek in rosy cheeks, with dazzling eyes, and laughing lips, and saucy tongue, was sufficiently captivating; but Polly with bright drops on her lashes, with a pathetic droop in the corners of her mouth and the suspicion of a tear in her voice,—this Polly was irresistible.

“What’s the matter, pretty Poll?”



“Nothing specially new. The Baer cubs were naughty as little demons to-day. One of them had a birthday-party yesterday, with four kinds of frosted cake. Mrs. Baer’s system of management is n’t like mine, and until I convince the children I mean what I say, they give me the benefit of the doubt. The Baer place is so large that Mrs. Baer never knows where disobedience may occur, and that she may be prepared she keeps one of Mr. Baer’s old slippers on the front porch, one in the carriage-house, one in the arbor, one in the nursery, and one under the rose hedge at the front gate. She showed me all these haunts, and told me to make myself thoroughly at home. I felt tempted to-day, but I resisted.”



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“You are working too hard, Polly. I propose we do something about Mrs. Chadwick. You are bearing all the brunt of other people’s faults and blunders.”

“But, Edgar, everything is so mixed: Mrs. Chadwick’s year of lease is n’t over; I suppose she cannot be turned out by main force, and if we should ask her to leave the house it might go unrented for a month or two, and the loss of that money might be as much as the loss of ten or fifteen dollars a month for the rest of the year. I could complain of her to Dr. George, but there again I am in trouble. If he knew that we are in difficulties, he would offer to lend us money in an instant, and that would make mamma ill, I am sure; for we are under all sorts of obligations to him now, for kindnesses that can never be repaid. Then, too, he advised us not to let Mrs. Chadwick have the house. He said that she had n’t energy enough to succeed; but mamma was so sorry for her, and so determined to give her a chance, that she persisted in letting her have it. We shall have to find a cheaper flat, by and by, for I ’ve tried every other method of economizing, for fear of making mamma worse with the commotion of moving.”

CHAPTER X.

EDGAR GOES TO CONFESSION.

“I ’m afraid I make it harder, Polly, and you and your mother must be frank with me, and turn me out of the Garden of Eden the first moment I become a nuisance. Will you promise?”

“You are a help to us, Edgar; we told you so the other night. We could n’t have Yung Lee unless you lived with us, and I could n’t earn any money if I had to do all the housework.”

“I ’d like to be a help, but I ’m so helpless!”

“We are all poor together just now, and that makes it easier.”

“I am worse than poor!” Edgar declared.

“What can be worse than being poor?” asked Polly, with a sigh drawn from the depths of her boots.

“To be in debt,” said Edgar, who had not the slightest intention of making this remark when he opened his lips.

Now the Olivers had only the merest notion of Edgar’s college troubles; they knew simply what the Nobles had told them, that he was in danger of falling behind his class. This, they judged, was a contingency no longer to be feared; as various remarks dropped by the students who visited the house, and sundry bits of information



contributed by Edgar himself, in sudden bursts of high spirits, convinced them that he was regaining his old rank, and certainly his old ambition.

“To be in debt,” repeated Edgar doggedly, “and to see no possible way out of it. Polly, I ’m in a peck of trouble! I ’ve lost money, and I ’m at my wits’ end to get straight again!”

“Lost money? How much? Do you mean that you lost your pocket-book?”

“No, no; not in that way.”

“You mean that you spent it,” said Polly. “You mean you overdrew your allowance.”



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“Of course I did. Good gracious, Polly! there are other ways of losing money than by dropping it in the road. I believe girls don’t know anything more about the world than the geography tells them,—that it’s a round globe like a ball or an orange!”

“Don’t be impolite. The less they know about the old world the better they get on, I dare say. Your colossal fund of worldly knowledge does n’t seem to make you very happy, just now. How could you lose your money, I ask? You ’re nothing but a student, and you are not in any business, are you?”

“Yes, I am in business, and pretty bad business it is, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I ’ve been winding myself up into a hard knot, the last six months, and the more I try to disentangle myself, the worse the thing gets. My allowance is n’t half enough; nobody but a miser could live on it. I ’ve been unlucky, too. I bought a dog, and some one poisoned him before I could sell him; then I lamed a horse from the livery-stable, and had to pay damages; and so it went. The fellows all kept lending me money, rather than let me stay out of the little club suppers, and since I ’ve shut down on expensive gayeties they’ve gone back on me, and all want their money at once; so does the livery-stable keeper, and the owner of the dog, and a dozen other individuals; in fact, the debtors’ prison yawns before me.”

“Upon my word, I ’m ashamed of you!” said Polly, with considerable heat. “To waste money in that way, when you knew perfectly well you could n’t afford it, was—well, it was downright dishonest, that’s what it was! To hear you talk about dogs, and lame horses, and club suppers, anybody would suppose you were a sporting man! Pray, what else do they do in that charming college set of yours?”

“I might have known you would take that tone, but I did n’t, somehow. I told you just because I thought you were the one girl in a thousand who would understand and advise a fellow when he knows he’s made a fool of himself and acted like a cur! I did n’t suppose you would call hard names, and be so unsympathizing, after all we have gone through together!”

“I ’m not!—I did n’t!—I won’t do it again!” said Polly incoherently, as she took a straight chair, planted her elbows on the table, and leaned her chin in her two palms. “Now let’s talk about it; tell me everything quickly. How much is it?”

“Nearly two hundred dollars! Don’t shudder so provokingly, Polly; that ’s a mere bagatelle for a college man, but I know it’s a good deal for me,—a good deal more than I know how to get, at all events.”

“Where is the debtors’ prison?” asked Polly in an awestruck whisper.



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“Oh, there is n’t any such thing nowadays! I was only chaffing; but of course, the men to whom I am in debt can apply to father, and get me in a regular mess. I ’ve pawned my watch to stave one of them off. You see, Polly, I would rather die than do it; nevertheless, I would write and tell father everything, and ask him for the money, but circumstances conspire just at this time to make it impossible. You know he bought that great ranch in Ventura county with Albert Harding of New York. Harding has died insolvent, and father has to make certain payments or lose control of a valuable property. It’s going to make him a rich man some time, but for a year or two we shall have to count every penny. Of course the fruit crop this season has been the worst in ten years, and of course there has been a frost this winter, the only severe one within the memory of the oldest inhabitant,—that’s the way it always is,—and there I am! I suppose you despise me, Polly?”

“Yes, I do!” (hotly)—“No, I don’t altogether, and I ’m not good enough myself to be able to despise people. Besides, you are not a despicable boy. You were born manly and generous and true-hearted, and these hateful things that you have been doing are not a part of your nature a bit; but I ’m ashamed of you for yielding to bad impulses when you have so many good ones, and—oh dear!—I do that very same thing myself, now that I stop to think about it. But how could you, *you*, Edgar Noble, take that evil-eyed, fat-nosed, common Tony Selling for a friend? I wonder at you!”

“He is n’t so bad in some ways. I owe him eighty dollars of that money, and he says he ’ll give me six months to pay it.”

“I ’m glad he has some small virtues,” Polly replied witheringly. “Now, what can we do, Edgar? Let us think. What can, what *can* we do?” and she leaned forward reflectively, clasping her knee with her hands and wrinkling her brow with intense thought.

That little “we” fell on Edgar’s loneliness of spirit consolingly; for it adds a new pang to self-distrust when righteous people withdraw from one in utter disdain, even if they are “only girls” who know little of a boy’s temptations.

“If you can save something each month out of your allowance, Edgar,” said Polly, finally, with a brighter look, “I can spare fifty or even seventy-five dollars of our money, and you may pay it back as you can. We are not likely to need it for several months, and your father and mother ought not to be troubled with this matter, now that it’s over and done with.”

The blood rushed to Edgar’s face as he replied stiffly: “I may be selfish and recklessly extravagant, but I don’t borrow money from girls. If you wanted to add the last touch to my shame, you ’ve done it. Don’t you suppose I have eyes, Polly Oliver? Don’t you suppose I ’ve hated myself ever since I came under this roof, when I have seen the way you worked and planned and plotted and saved and denied yourself? Don’t you suppose I ’ve looked at you twenty times a day, and said to myself, ’You miserable,



selfish puppy, getting yourself and everybody who cares for you into trouble, just look at that girl and be ashamed of yourself down to the ground!’ And now you offer to lend me money! Oh, Polly, I wouldn’t have believed it of you!”



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Polly felt convicted of sin, although she was not very clear as to the reason. She blushed as she said hastily, "Your mother has been a very good friend to us, Edgar; why should n't we help you a little, just for once? Now, let us go in to see mamma and talk it all over together!"

"If you pity me, Polly, don't tell her; I could not bear to have that saint upon earth worried over my troubles; it was mean enough to add a feather's weight to yours."

"Well, we won't do it, then," said Polly, with maternal kindness in her tone. "Do stop pacing up and down like a caged panther. We 'll find some other way out of the trouble; but boys are such an anxiety! Do you think, Edgar, that you have reformed?"

"Bless your soul! I 've kept within my allowance for two or three months. As Susan Nipper says, 'I may be a camel, but I 'm not a dromedary!' When I found out where I was, I stopped; I had to stop, and I knew it. I 'm all right now, thanks to—several things. In fact, I 've acquired a kind of appetite for behaving myself now, and if the rascally debts were only out of the way, I should be the happiest fellow in the universe."

"You cannot apply to your father, so there is only one thing to do,—that is, to earn the money."

"But how, when I 'm in the class-room three fourths of the day?"

"I don't know," said Polly hopelessly. "I can tell you what to do, but not how to do it; I 'm nothing but a miserable girl."

"I must stay in college, and I must dig and make up for lost time; so most of my evenings will be occupied."

"You must put all your 'musts' together," said Polly decisively, "and then build a bridge over them, or tunnel through them, or span them with an arch. We 'll keep thinking about it, and I'm sure something will turn up; I 'm not discouraged a bit. You see, Edgar," and Polly's face flushed with feeling as she drew patterns on the tablecloth with her tortoise-shell hairpin,—“you see, of course, the good fairies are not going to leave you in the lurch when you 've turned your back on the ugly temptations, and are doing your very best. And now that we 've talked it all over, Edgar, I 'm not ashamed of you! Mamma and I have been so proud of your successes the last month. She believes in you!"

"Of course," said Edgar dolefully; "because she knows only the best."

"But I know the best and the worst too, and I believe in you! It seems to me the best is always the truest part of one, after all. No, we are not going to be naughty any more; we are going to earn that hateful Tony's money; we are going to take all the class



honors, just for fun, not because we care for such trifles, and we are going home for the summer holidays in a blaze of glory!"

Edgar rose with a lighter heart in his breast than he had felt there for many a week. "Good-night, Parson Polly," he said rather formally, for he was too greatly touched to be able to command his tones; "add your prayers to your sermons, and perhaps you 'll bring the black sheep safely into the fold."



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The quick tears rushed to Polly's eyes; for Edgar's stiff manner sat curiously on him, and she feared she had annoyed him by too much advice. "Oh, Edgar," she said, with a quivering lip, "I did n't mean to pose or to preach! You know how full of faults I am, and if I were a boy I should be worses I was only trying to help a little, eves if I am younger and a girl! Don't—don't think I was setting myself up as better than you; that's so mean and conceited and small! Edgar dear, I am so proud to think you told me your troubles; don't turn away from me, or I shall think you are sorry you trusted me!" and Polly laid a persuasive, disarming hand on the lad's shoulder.

Suddenly Edgar's heart throbbed with a new feeling. He saw as in a vision the purity, fidelity, and tender yearning of a true woman's nature shining through a girl's eyes. In that moment he wished as never before to be manly and worthy. He seemed all at once to understand his mother, his sister, all women better, and with a quick impulsive gesture which he would not have understood a month before, he bent his head over astonished Polly's hand, kissed it reverently, then opened the door and went to his room without a word.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LADY IN BLACK.

"I 've had a little adventure," said Polly to her mother one afternoon. "I went out, for the sake of the ride, on the Sutler Street cable-cars with Milly Foster. When we came to the end of the line, Milly walked down to Greary Street to take her car home. I went with her to the corner, and as I was coming back I saw a lady in black alighting from an elegant carriage. She had a coachman and a footman, both with weeds on their hats, and she seemed very sad and grave; but she had such a sweet, beautiful face that I was sorry for her the first moment I looked at her. She walked along in front of me toward the cemetery, and there we met those boys that stand about the gate with bouquets. She glanced at the flowers as if she would like to buy some, but you know how hideous they always are, every color of the rainbow crowded in tightly together, and she looked away, dissatisfied. I don't know why she had n't brought some with her,—she looked rich enough to buy a whole conservatory; perhaps she had n't expected to drive there. However, Milly Foster had given me a whole armful of beautiful flowers,—you know she has a 'white garden:' there were white sweet peas, Lamarque roses, and three stalks of snowy Eucharist lilies. I need n't tell my own mother that I did n't stop to think twice; I just stepped up to her and said, 'I should like to give you my flowers, please. I don't need them, and I am sure they are just sweet and lovely enough for the place you want to lay them.'

"The tears came into her eyes,—she was just ready to cry at anything, you know,—and she took them at once, and said, squeezing my hand very tightly, 'I will take them, dear. The grave of my own, and my only, little girl lies far away from this,—the snow is falling



on it to-day,—but whenever I cannot give the flowers to her, I always find the resting-places of other children, and lay them there. I know it makes her happy, for she was born on Christmas Day, and she was full of the Christmas spirit, always thinking of other people, never of herself.'



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“She did look so pale, and sad, and sweet, that I began to think of you without your troublesome Polly, or your troublesome Polly without you; and she was pleased with the flowers and glad that I understood, and willing to love anything that was a girl or that was young,—oh, you know, *mamacita*,—and so I began to cry a little, too; and the first thing I knew I kissed her, which was most informal, if not positively impertinent. But she seemed to like it, for she kissed me back again, and I ran and jumped on the car, and here I am! You will have to eat your dinner without any flowers, *madam*, for you have a vulgarly strong, healthy daughter, and the poor lady in black has n’t.”

This was Polly’s first impression of “the lady in black,” and thus began an acquaintance which was destined before many months to play a very important part in Polly’s fortunes and misfortunes.

What the lady in black thought of Polly, then and subsequently, was told at her own fireside, where she sat, some six weeks later, chatting over an after-dinner cup of coffee with her brother-in-law.

“Take the armchair, John,” said Mrs. Bird; “for I have ‘lots to tell you,’ as the young folks say. I was in the Children’s Hospital about five o’clock to-day. I have n’t been there for three months, and I felt guilty about it. The matron asked me to go upstairs into the children’s sitting-room, the one Donald and I fitted up in memory of Carol. She said that a young lady was telling stories to the children, but that I might go right up and walk in. I opened the door softly, though I don’t think the children would have noticed if I had fired a cannon in their midst, and stood there, spellbound by the loveliest, most touching scene I ever witnessed. The room has an open fire, and in a low chair, with the firelight shining on her face, sat that charming, impulsive girl who gave me the flowers at the cemetery—I told you about her. She was telling stories to the children. There were fifteen or twenty of them in the room, all the semi-invalids and convalescents, I should think, and they were gathered about her like flies round a saucer of honey. Every child that could, was doing its best to get a bit of her dress to touch, or a finger of her hand to hold, or an inch of her chair to lean upon. They were the usual pale, weary-looking children, most of them with splints and weights and crutches, and through the folding-doors that opened into the next room I could see three more tiny things sitting up in their cots and drinking in every word with eagerness and transport.

“And I don’t wonder. There is magic in that girl for sick or sorrowing people. I wish you could have seen and heard her. Her hair is full of warmth and color; her lips and cheeks are pink; her eyes are bright with health and mischief, and beaming with love, too; her smile is like sunshine, and her voice as glad as a wild bird’s. I never saw a creature so alive and radiant, and I could feel that the weak little creatures drank in her strength and vigor, without depleting her, as flowers drink in the sunlight.



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“As she stood up and made ready to go, she caught sight of me, and ejaculated, with the most astonished face, ‘Why, it is my lady in black!’ Then, with a blush, she added, ‘Excuse me! I spoke without thinking—I always do. I have thought of you very often since I gave you the flowers; and as I did n’t know your name, I have always called you my lady in black.’

“‘I should be very glad to be your “lady” in any color,’ I answered, ‘and my other name is Mrs. Bird.’ Then I asked her if she would not come and see me. She said, ‘Yes, with pleasure,’ and told me also that her mother was ill, and that she left her as little as possible; whereupon I offered to go and see her instead.

“Now, here endeth the first lesson, and here beginneth the second, namely, my new plan, on which I wish to ask your advice. You know that all the money Donald and I used to spend on Carol’s nurses, physicians, and what not, we give away each Christmas Day in memory of her. It may be that we give it in monthly installments, but we try to plan it and let people know about it on that day. I propose to create a new profession for talented young women who like to be helpful to others as well as to themselves. I propose to offer this little Miss Oliver, say twenty-five dollars a month, if she will go regularly to the Children’s Hospital and to the various orphan asylums just before supper and just before bedtime, and sing and tell stories to the children for an hour. I want to ask her to give two hours a day only, going to each place once or twice a week; but of course she will need a good deal of time for preparation. If she accepts, I will see the managers of the various institutions, offer her services, and arrange for the hours. I am confident that they will receive my protegee with delight, and I am sure that I shall bring the good old art of story-telling into fashion again, through this gifted girl. Now, John, what do you think?”

“I heartily approve, as usual. It is a novelty, but I cannot see why it ’s not perfectly expedient, and I certainly can think of no other way in which a monthly expenditure of twenty-five dollars will carry so much genuine delight and comfort to so many different children. Carol would sing for joy if she could know of your plan.”

“Perhaps she does know it,” said Mrs. Bird softly.

And so it was settled.

Polly’s joy and gratitude at Mrs. Bird’s proposal baffles the powers of the narrator. It was one of those things pleasant to behold, charming to imagine, but impossible to describe. After Mrs. Bird’s carriage had been whirled away, she watched at the window for Edgar, and, when she saw him nearing the steps, did not wait for him to unlock the door, but opened it from the top of the stairs, and flew down them to the landing as lightly as a feather.

As for Edgar himself, he was coming up with unprecedented speed, and they nearly fell into each other's arms as they both exclaimed, in one breath, "Hurrah!" and then, in another, "Who told you?"



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“How did you know it?” asked Edgar. “Has Tom Mills been here?”

“What is anybody by the name of Mills to me in my present state of mind!” exclaimed Polly. “Have you some good news, too? If so, speak out quickly.”

“Good news? I should think I had; what else were you hurraing about? I ’ve won the scholarship, and I have a chance to earn some money! Tom Mills’s eyes are in bad condition, and the oculist says he must wear blue goggles and not look at a book for two months. His father wrote to me to-day, and he asks if I will read over the day’s lessons with Tom every afternoon or evening, so that he can keep up with the class; and says that if I will do him this great service he will be glad to pay me any reasonable sum. He ’ventured’ to write me on Professor Hope’s recommendation.”

“Oh, Edgar, that is too, too good!” cried Polly, jumping up and down in delight. “Now hear my news. What do you suppose has happened?”

“Turned-up noses have come into style.”

“Insulting! That is n’t the spirit I showed when you told me your good news.”

“You ’ve found the leak in the gas stove.”

“On the contrary, I don’t care if all the gas in our establishment leaks from now to—the millennium. Guess again, stupid!”

“Somebody has left you a million.”

“No, no!” (scornfully.) “Well, I can’t wait your snail’s pace. My lady in black, Mrs. Donald Bird, has been here all the afternoon, and she offers me twenty-five dollars a month to give up the Baer cubs and tell stories two hours a day in the orphan asylums and the Children’s Hospital! Just what I love to do! Just what I always longed to do! Just what I would do if I were a billionaire! Is n’t it heavenly?”

“Well, well! We are in luck, Polly. Hurrah! Fortune smiles at last on the Noble-Oliver household. Let’s have a jollification! Oh, I forgot. Tom Mills wants to come to dinner. Will you mind?”

“Let him come, goggles and all, we ’ll have the lame and the halt, as well as the blind, if we happen to see any. Mamma won’t care. I told her we ’d have a feast to-night that should vie with any of the old Roman banquets! Here ’s my purse; please go down on Sutter Street—ride both ways—and buy anything extravagant and unseasonable you can find. Get forced tomatoes; we’ll have ‘chops and tomato sauce’ a la Mrs. Bardell; order fried oysters in a browned loaf; get a quart of ice cream, the most expensive variety they have, a loaf of the richest cake in the bakery, and two chocolate eclairs apiece. Buy hothouse roses, or orchids, for the table, and give five cents to that dirty

little boy on the corner there. In short, as Frank Stockton says, 'Let us so live while we are up that we shall forget we have ever been down!'" and Polly plunged upstairs to make a toilet worthy of the occasion.

The banquet was such a festive occasion that Yung Lee's Chinese reserve was sorely tried, and he giggled more than once, while waiting on the table.



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Polly had donned a trailing black silk skirt of her mother's, with a white chuddah shawl for a court train, and a white lace waist to top it. Her hair was wound into a knot on the crown of her head and adorned with three long black ostrich feathers, which soared to a great height, and presented a most magnificent and queenly appearance.

Tom Mills, whose father was four times a millionaire, wondered why they never had such gay times at his home, and tried to fancy his sister Blanche sparkling and glowing and beaming over the prospect of earning twenty-five dollars a month.

Then, when bedtime came, Polly and her mother talked it all over in the dark.

"Oh, mamacita, I am so happy! It's such a lovely beginning, and I shall be so glad, so glad to do it! I hope Mrs. Bird did n't invent the plan for my good, for I have been frightfully shabby each time she has seen me, but she says she thinks of nothing but the children. Now we will have some pretty things, won't we? And oh! do you think, not just now, but some time in the distant centuries, I can have a string of gold beads?"

"I do, indeed," sighed Mrs. Oliver. "You are certainly in no danger of being spoiled by luxury in your youth, my poor little Pollykins; but you will get all these things some time, I feel sure, if they are good for you, and if they belong to you. You remember the lines I read the other day:—

"Hast not thy share? On winged feet,
Lo! it rushes thee to meet;
And all that Nature made thy own,
Floating in air or pent in stone,
Will rive the hills and swim the sea
And, like thy shadow, follow thee."

"Yes," said Polly contentedly; "I am satisfied. My share of the world's work is rushing to meet me. To-night I could just say with Sarah Jewett's Country Doctor, 'My God, I thank thee for my future.'"

CHAPTER XII.

THE GREAT SILENCE.

The months of April and May were happy ones. The weather was perfect, as only California weather understands the art of being; the hills were at their greenest; the wind almost forgot to blow; the fields blazed in wild-flowers; day after day rose in cloudless splendor, and day after day the Golden Gate shone like a sapphire in the sun.

Polly was inwardly nervous. She had the "awe of prosperity" in her heart, and everything seemed too bright to last.



Both she and Edgar were very busy. But work that one loves is no hardship, especially when one is strong and young and hopeful, and when one has great matters at stake, such as the health and wealth of an invalid mother, or the paying off of disagreeable debts.

Even the limp Mrs. Chadwick shared in the general joy; for Mr. Greenwood was so utterly discouraged with her mismanagement of the house, so determined not to fly to ills he knew not of, and so anxious to bring order out of chaos, that on the spur of the moment one day he married her. On the next day he discharged the cook, hired a better one the third, dunned the delinquent boarder the fourth, and collected from him on the fifth; so the May check (signed Clementine Chadwick Greenwood) was made out for eighty-five dollars.



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But in the midst of it all, when everything in the outside world danced with life and vigor, and the little house could hardly hold its sweet content,—without a glimmer of warning, without a moment's fear or dread, without the precious agony of parting, Mrs. Oliver slipped softly, gently, safely, into the Great Silence.

Mercifully it was Edgar, not Polly, who found her in her accustomed place on the cushions, lying with closed eyelids and smiling lips.

It was half past five. . . . Polly must have gone out at four, as usual, and would be back in half an hour. . . . Yung Lee was humming softly in the little kitchen. . . . In five minutes Edgar Noble had suffered, lived, and grown ten years. He was a man. . . . And then came Polly,—and Mrs. Bird with her, thank Heaven!—Polly breathless and glowing, looking up at the bay window for her mother's smile of welcome.

In a few seconds the terrible news was broken, and Polly, overpowered with its awful suddenness, dropped before it as under a physical blow.

It was better so. Mrs. Bird carried her home for the night, as she thought, but a merciful blur stole over the child's tired brain, and she lay for many weeks in a weary illness of delirium and stupor and fever.

Meanwhile, Edgar acted as brother, son, and man of the house. He it was who managed everything, from the first sorrowful days up to the closing of the tiny upper flat where so much had happened: not great things of vast outward importance, but small ones,—little miseries and mortifications and struggles and self-denials and victories, that made the past half year a milestone in his life.

A week finished it all! It takes a very short time, he thought, to scatter to the winds of heaven all the gracious elements that make a home. Only a week; and in the first days of June, Edgar went back to Santa Barbara for the summer holidays without even a sight of his brave, helpful girl-comrade.

He went back to his brother's congratulations, his sister's kisses, his mother's happy tears, and his father's hearty hand-clasp, full of renewed pride and belief in his eldest son. But there was a shadow on the lad's high spirits as he thought of gay, courageous, daring Polly, stripped in a moment of all that made life dear.

"I wish we could do something for her, poor little soul," he said to his mother in one of their long talks in the orange-tree sitting-room. "Tongue cannot tell what Mrs. Oliver has been to me, and I'm not a bit ashamed to own up to Polly's influence, even if she is a girl and two or three years younger than I am. Hang it! I'd like to see the fellow that could live under the same roof as those two women, and not do the best that was in him! Has n't Polly some relatives in the East?"



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“No near ones, and none that she has ever seen. Still, she is not absolutely alone, as many girls would be under like circumstances. We would be only too glad to have her here; the Howards have telegraphed asking her to spend the winter with them in Cambridge; I am confident Dr. Winship will do the same when the news of Mrs. Oliver’s death reaches Europe; and Mrs. Bird seems to have constituted herself a sort of fairy Godmother in chief. You see everybody loves Polly; and she will probably have no less than four homes open to her. The fact is, if you should put Polly on a desert island, the bees and the butterflies and the birds would gather about her; she draws everything and everybody to her magically. Then, too, she is not penniless. Rents are low, and she cannot hope to get quite as much for the house as before, but even counting repairs, taxes, and furnishings, we think she is reasonably certain of fifty dollars a month.”

“She will never be idle, unless this sorrow makes a great change in her. Polly seems to have been created to ‘become’ by ‘doing.’”

“Yet she does not in the least relish work, Edgar. I never knew a girl with a greater appetite for luxury. One cannot always see the deepest reasons in God’s providence as applied to one’s own life and character; but it is often easy to understand them as one looks at other people and notes their growth and development. For instance, Polly’s intense love for her invalid mother has kept her from being selfish. The straitened circumstances in which she has been compelled to live have prevented her from yielding to self-indulgence or frivolity. Even her hunger for the beautiful has been a discipline; for since beautiful things were never given to her ready-made, she has been forced to create them. Her lot in life, which she has always lamented, has given her a self-control, a courage, a power, which she never would have had in the world had she grown up in luxury. She is too young to see it, but it is very clear to me that Polly Oliver is a glorious product of circumstances.”

“But,” objected Edgar, “that is not fair. You are giving all the credit to circumstances, and none to Polly’s own nature.”

“Not at all. If there had not been the native force to develop, experience would have had nothing to work upon. As it is, her lovely childish possibilities have become probabilities, and I look to see the girlish probabilities blossom into womanly certainties.”

Meanwhile Polly, it must be confessed, was not at the present time quite justifying the good opinion of her friends.

She had few of the passive virtues. She could bear sharp stabs of misfortune, which fired her energy and pride, but she resented pin pricks. She could carry heavy, splendid burdens cheerfully, but she fretted under humble cares. She could serve by daring, but not by waiting. She would have gone to the stake or the scaffold, I think, with tolerable grace; but she would probably have recanted any article of faith if she had been confronted with life-imprisonment.



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Trouble that she took upon herself for the sake of others, and out of love, she accepted sweetly. Sorrows that she did not choose, which were laid upon her without her consent, and which were “just the ones she did *not* want, and did *not* need, and would *not* have, and could *not* bear,”—these sorrows found her unwilling, bitter, and impatient.

Yet if life is a school and we all have lessons to learn in it, the Great Teacher will be unlikely to set us tasks which we have already finished. Some review there must be, for certain things are specially hard to keep in mind, and have to be gone over and over, lest they fade into forgetfulness. But there must be continued progress in a life school. There is no parrot repetition, sing-song, meaningless, of words that have ceased to be vital. New lessons are to be learned as fast as the old ones are understood. Of what use to set Polly tasks to develop her bravery, when she was already brave?

Courage was one of the little jewels set in her fairy crown when she was born, but there was a round, empty space beside it, where Patience should have been. Further along was Daring, making a brilliant show, but again there was a tiny vacancy waiting for Prudence.

The crown made a fine appearance, on the whole, because the large jewels were mostly in place, and the light of these blinded you to the lack of the others; but to the eye of the keen observer there was a want of symmetry and completeness.

Polly knew the unfinished state of her fairy crown as well as anybody else. She could not plead ignorance as an excuse; but though she would have gone on polishing the great gems with a fiery zeal, she added the little jewels very slowly, and that only on compulsion.

There had been seven or eight weeks of partial unconsciousness, when the sorrow and the loneliness of life stole into her waking dreams only vaguely and at intervals; when she was unhappy, and could not remember why; and slept, to wake and wonder and sleep again.

Then there were days and weeks when the labor of living was all that the jaded body could accomplish; when memory was weak; when life began at the pillow, and ended at the foot of the bed, and the universe was bounded by the chamber windows.

But when her strength came back, and she stood in the middle of the floor, clothed and in her right mind, well enough to remember,—oh! then indeed the deep waters of bitterness rolled over poor Polly’s head and into her heart, and she sank beneath them without a wish or a struggle to rise.

“If it had been anything else!” she sobbed. “Why did God take away my most precious, my only one to live for, when I was trying to take care of her, trying to be good, trying to give back the strength that had been poured out on me,—miserable, worthless me!



Surely, if a girl was willing to do without a father and sisters and brothers, without good times and riches, willing to work like a galley slave, willing to 'scrimp' and plan and save for ever and ever; surely 'they' might be willing that she should keep her mother!"



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Poor Polly! Providence at this time seemed nothing more than a collection of demons which she classified under the word “they,” and which she felt certain were scourging her pitilessly and needlessly. She could not see any reason or justification in “their” cruelties,—for that was the only term she could apply to her afflictions.

Mrs. Bird had known sorrow, and she did her best to minister to the troubled and wrong little heart; but it was so torn that it could be healed only by the soft balm of Time.

Perhaps, a long while after such a grief,—it is always “perhaps” in a great crisis, though the certainty is ours if we will but grasp it,—perhaps the hidden meaning of the sorrow steals gently into our softened hearts. We see, as in a vision, a new light by which to work; we rise, cast off the out-grown shell, and build us a more stately mansion, in which to dwell till God makes that home also too small to hold the ever-growing soul!

CHAPTER XIII.

A GARDEN FLOWER, OR A BANIAN-TREE.

In August Mr. John Bird took Polly to the Nobles’ ranch in Santa Barbara, in the hope that the old scenes and old friends might soothe her, and give her strength to take up the burden of life with something of her former sunshiny spirit.

Edgar was a junior now, back at his work, sunburned and strong from his summer’s outing. He had seen Polly twice after his return to San Francisco; but the first meeting was an utter failure, and the second nearly as trying. Neither of them could speak of the subject that absorbed their thoughts, nor had either courage enough to begin other topics of conversation. The mere sight of Edgar was painful to the girl now, it brought to mind so much that was dear, so much that was past and gone.

In the serenity of the ranch-life, the long drives with Margery and Philip, the quiet chats with Mrs. Noble, Polly gained somewhat in strength; but the old “spring,” vitality, and enthusiasm had vanished for the time, and the little circle of friends marveled at this Polly without her nonsense, her ready smiles, her dancing dimples, her extravagances of speech.

Once a week, at least, Dr. George would steal an hour or two, and saddle his horse to take Polly for a gallop over the hills, through the canons, or on the beach.

His half-grave, half-cheery talks on these rides did her much good. He sympathized and understood and helped, even when he chided, and Polly sometimes forgot her own troubles in wondering whether Dr. George had not suffered and overcome a good many of his own.



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“You make one great error, my child,” he once said, in response to one of Polly’s outbursts of grief; “and it is an error young people very naturally fall into. You think that no one was ever chastened as you are. You say, with Jeremiah, ‘No prophet is afflicted like unto this prophet!’ Now you are simply bearing your own share of the world’s trouble. How can you hope to escape the universal lot? There are dozens of people within sight of this height of land who have borne as much, and must bear as much again. I know this must seem a hard philosophy, and I should not preach it to any but a stout little spirit like yours, my Polly. These things come to all of us; they are stern facts; they are here, and they must be borne; but it makes all the difference in the world how we bear them. We can clench our fists, close our lips tightly, and say, ‘Since I must, I can;’ or we can look up and say cheerfully, ‘I will!’ The first method is philosophical and strong enough, but there is no sweetness in it. If you have this burden to carry, make it as light, not as heavy, as you can; if you have this grief to endure, you want at least to come out of it sweeter and stronger than ever before. It seems a pity to let it go for nothing. In the largest sense of the word, you can live for your mother now as truly as you did in the old times; you know very well how she would have had you live.”

Polly felt a sense of shame steal over her as she looked at Dr. George’s sweet, strong smile and resolute mouth, and she said, with the hint of a new note in her voice:—

“I see, and I will try; but how does one ever learn to live without loving,—I mean the kind of loving I had in my life? I know I can live for my mother in the largest sense of the word, but to me all the comfort and sweetness seems to tuck itself under the word in its ‘little’ sense. I shall have to go on developing and developing until I am almost developed to death, and go on growing and growing in grace until I am ready to be caught up in a chariot of fire, before I can love my mother ‘in the largest sense of the word.’ I want to cuddle my head on her shoulder, that’s what I want. Oh, Dr. George, how does one contrive to be good when one is not happy? How can one walk in the right path when there does n’t seem to be any brightness to go by?”

“My dear little girl,” and Dr. George looked soberly out on the ocean, dull and lifeless under the gray October sky, “when the sun of one’s happiness is set, one lights a candle called ‘Patience,’ and guides one’s footsteps by that!”

“If only I were not a rich heiress,” said Polly next morning, “I dare say I should be better off; for then I simply could n’t have gone to bed for two or three months, and idled about like this for another. But there seems to be no end to my money. Edgar paid all the bills in San Francisco, and saved twenty out of our precious three hundred and twelve dollars. Then Mrs.



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Greenwood's rent-money has been accumulating four months, while I have been visiting you and Mrs. Bird; and the Greenwoods are willing to pay sixty dollars a month for the house still, even though times are dull; so I am hopelessly wealthy,—but on the whole I am very glad. The old desire to do something, and be something, seems to have faded out of my life with all the other beautiful things. I think I shall go to a girls' college and study, or find some other way of getting through the hateful, endless years that stretch out ahead! Why, I am only a little past seventeen, and I may live to be ninety! I do not see how I can ever stand this sort of thing for seventy-three years!"

Mrs. Noble smiled in spite of herself. "Just apply yourself to getting through this year, Polly dear, and let the other seventy-two take care of themselves. They will bring their own cares and joys and responsibilities and problems, little as you realize it now. This year, grievous as it seems, will fade by and by, until you can look back at it with resignation and without tears."

"I don't want it to fade!" cried Polly passionately. "I never want to look back at it without tears! I want to be faithful always; I want never to forget, and never to feel less sorrow than I do this minute!"

"Take that blue-covered Emerson on the table, Polly; open it at the essay on 'Compensation,' and read the page marked with the orange leaf."

The tears were streaming down Polly's cheeks, but she opened the book, and read with a faltering voice:—

"We cannot part with our f—fr—friends. We cannot let our angels go. [Sob.] We do not see that they only go out that archangels may come in. . . . We do not believe there is any force in to-day to rival or re-create that beautiful yesterday. [Sob.] We linger in the ruins of the old tent where once we had shelter. . . . We cannot again find aught so dear, so sweet, so graceful. [Sob.] But we sit and weep in vain. We cannot stay amid the ruins. The voice of the Almighty saith, 'Up and onward for evermore!' . . . The sure years reveal the deep remedial force that underlies all sorrow. . . . 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."

[Illustration: "She opened the book and read."]

"Do you see, Polly?"

"Yes, I see; but oh, I was so happy being a garden flower with the sunshine on my head, and I can't seem to care the least little bit for being a banian-tree!"



“Well,” said Mrs. Noble, smiling through her own tears, “I fear that God will never insist on your ‘yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men’ unless you desire it. Not all sunny garden flowers become banian-trees by the falling of the walls. Some of them are crushed beneath the ruins, and never send any more color or fragrance into the world.”



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“The garden flower had happiness before the walls fell,” said Polly. “It is happiness I want.”

“The banian-tree had blessedness after the walls fell, and it is blessedness I want; but then, I am forty-seven, and you are seventeen!” sighed Mrs. Noble, as they walked through the orange orchard to the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

EDGAR DISCOURSES OF SCARLET RUNNERS.

One day, in the middle of October, the mail brought Polly two letters: the first from Edgar, who often dashed off cheery scrawls in the hope of getting cheery replies, which never came; and the second from Mrs. Bird, who had a plan to propose.

Edgar wrote:—

. . . “I have a new boarding-place in San Francisco, a stone’s throw from Mrs. Bird’s, whose mansion I can look down upon from a lofty height reached by a flight of fifty wooden steps,—good training in athletics! Mrs. Morton is a kind landlady and the house is a home, in a certain way,—

“But oh, the difference to me
'Twixt tweedledum and tweedledee!

“There is a Morton girl, too; but she neither plays nor sings nor jokes, nor even looks,—in fine, she is not Polly! I have come to the conclusion, now, that girls in a house are almost always nuisances,—I mean, of course, when, they are not Pollies. Oh, why are you so young, and so loaded with this world’s goods, that you will never need me for a boarder again? Mrs. Bird is hoping to see you soon, and I chose my humble lodging on this hill-top because, from my attic’s lonely height, I can watch you going in and out of your ‘marble halls;’ and you will almost pass my door as you take the car. In view of this pleasing prospect (now, alas! somewhat distant), I send you a scrap of newspaper verse which prophesies my sentiments. It is signed ‘M. E. W.,’ and Tom Mills says whoever wrote it knows you.”

WHEN POLLY GOES BY.

'T is but poorly I 'm lodged in a little side-street,
Which is seldom disturbed by the hurry of feet,
For the flood-tide of life long ago ebbed away
From its homely old houses, rain-beaten and gray;
And I sit with my pipe in the window, and sigh
At the buffets of fortune—till Polly goes by.



There 's a flaunting of ribbons, a flurry of lace,
And a rose in the bonnet above a bright face,
A glance from two eyes so deliriously blue
The midsummer seas scarcely rival their hue;
And once in a while, if the wind 's blowing high,
The sound of soft laughter as Polly goes by.

Then up jumps my heart and begins to beat fast.
"She 's coming!" it whispers. "She 's here!
She has passed!"

While I throw up the sash and lean breathlessly down
To catch the last glimpse of her vanishing gown,
Excited, delighted, yet wondering why
My senses desert me if Polly goes by.



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Ah! she must be a witch, and the magical spell
She has woven about me has done its work well,
For the morning grows brighter, and gayer the air
That my landlady sings as she sweeps down the stair;
And my poor lonely garret, up close to the sky,
Seems something like heaven when Polly goes by.

“P. S. Tony has returned to the university. He asked after the health of the ‘sunset-haired goddess’ yesterday. You ’d better hurry back and take care of me! No, joking aside, don’t worry about me, little missionary; I ’ve outgrown Tony, and I hope I don’t need to be reformed oftener than once a year.

“Yours ever, EDGAR.

“P. S. No. II. I saw you twice after—you know—and I was dumb on both occasions. Of all people in the world I ought to have been able to say something helpful to you in your trouble, I, who lived with you and your dear mother through all those happy months before she left us. It will be just the same when I see you again: I shall never be able to speak, partly, I suppose, because I am a man, or on the road to becoming one. I know this is making you cry; I can see the tears in your eyes across all the distance; but it is better even that you should cry than that you should think me cold or unmindful of your sorrow. Do you know one of the sacred memories of my life? It is that, on that blessed night when your mother asked me to come and live under her roof, she said she should be glad to feel that in any sudden emergency you and she would, have a near friend to lean upon. There was a ‘royal accolade,’ if you like! I felt in an instant as if she had bestowed the order of knighthood upon me, and as if I must live more worthily in order to deserve her trust. How true it is, Polly, that those who believe in us educate us!

“Do you remember (don’t cry, dear!) that night by the fireside,—the night when we brought her out of her bedroom after three days of illness,—when we sat on either side of her, each holding a hand while she told us the pretty romance of her meeting and loving your father? I slipped the loose wedding ring up and down her finger, and stole a look at her now and then. She was like a girl when she told that story, and I could not help thinking it was worth while to be a tender, honorable, faithful man, to bring that look into a woman’s face after eighteen years. Well, I adored her, that is all I can say; and I can’t say even that, I have to write it. Don’t rob me, Polly, of the right she gave me, that of being a ‘near friend to lean upon.’ I am only afraid, because you, more than any one else, know certain weaknesses and follies of mine, and, indeed, pulled me out of the pit and held me up till I got a new footing. I am afraid you will never have the same respect for me, nor believe that a fellow so weak as I was could be strong enough to lean upon. Try me once, Polly, just to humor me, won’t



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you? Give me something to do,—something *hard*! Lean just a little, Polly, and see how stiff I 'll be,—no, bother it, I won't be stiff, I'll be firm! To tell the truth, I can never imagine you as 'leaning;' though they say you are pale and sad, and out of sorts with life. You remind me of one of the gay scarlet runners that climb up the slender poles in the garden below my window. The pole holds up the vine at first, of course, but the vine keeps the pole straight; not in any ugly and commonplace fashion, but by winding round, and round about it, and hanging its blossoms in and out and here and there, till the poor, serviceable pole is forgotten in the beauty that makes use of it.

“Good-by, little scarlet runner! You will bloom again some day, when the storm that has beaten you down has passed over and the sky is clear and the sun warm. Don't laugh at me, Polly!

“Always yours, whether you laugh or not,

“EDGAR.”

“P. S. No. III. I should n't dare add this third postscript if you were near enough to slay me with the lightning of your eye, but I simply wish to mention that a wise gardener chooses young, strong timber for *poles*,—saplings, in fact! *Mr. John Bird is too old for this purpose*. Well seasoned he is, of course, and suitable as a prop for a century-plant, but not for a scarlet runner! I like him, you know, but I 'm sure he 'd crack if you leaned on him; in point of fact, he 's a little cracked now! E. N.”

The ghost of a smile shone on Polly's April face as she folded Edgar's letter and laid it in its envelope; first came a smile, then a tear, then a dimple, then a sob, then a wave of bright color.

“Edgar is growing up so fast,” she thought, “I shall soon be afraid to scold him or advise him, and

“‘What will poor Robin do then, poor thing?’

“Upon my word, if I caught him misbehaving nowadays, I believe I should hesitate to remonstrate with him. He will soon be capable of remonstrating with me, at this rate. He is a goose,—oh, there 's no shadow of doubt as to that, but he 's an awfully nice goose.”

Mrs. Bird's letter ran thus:—

“MY DEAREST POLLYKINS:—We have lived without you just about as long as we can endure it. The boys have returned to school and college. Mr. Bird contemplates one more trip to Honolulu, and brother John and I need some one to coddle and worry



over. I have not spoken to you of your future, because I wished to wait until you opened the subject. It is too late for you to begin your professional training this year, and I think you are far too delicate just now to undertake so arduous a work; however, you are young, and that can wait for a bit. As to the story-telling in the hospitals and asylums, I wish you could find courage and strength to go on with that, not for your own sake alone, but for the sake of others.



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“As I have told you before, the money is set aside for that special purpose, and the work will be carried on by somebody. Of course I can get a substitute if you refuse, and that substitute may, after a little time, satisfy the impatient children, who flatten their noses against the window-panes and long for Mias Pauline every day of their meagre lives. But I fear the substitute will never be Polly! She may ‘rattle round in your place’ (as somebody said under different circumstances), but she can never fill it! Why not spend the winter with us, and do this lovely work, keeping up other studies if you are strong enough? It will be so sweet for you to feel that out of your own sadness you can comfort and brighten the lives of these lonely, suffering children and these motherless or fatherless ones. It will seem hard to begin, no doubt; but new life will flow in your veins when you take up your active, useful work again. The joyousness that God put into your soul before you were born, my Polly, is a sacred trust. You must not hide it in a napkin, dear, or bury it, or lose it. It was given to you only that you should share it with others. It was intended for the world at large, though it was bestowed upon you in particular. Come, dear, to one who knows all about it,—one whom you are sweet enough to call

“YOUR FAIRY GODMOTHER.”

“Mrs. Noble,” said Polly, with a sober smile, “the Ancon sails on the 20th, and I am going to sail with her.”

“So soon? What for, dear?”

“I am going to be a banian-tree, if you please,” answered Polly.

CHAPTER XV.

LIFE IN THE BIRDS’ NEST.

Polly settled down in the Birds’ Nest under the protecting wing of Mrs. Bird, and a very soft and unaccustomed sort of shelter it was.

A room had been refurnished expressly for the welcome guest, and as Mrs. Bird pushed her gently in alone, the night of her arrival, she said, “This is the Pilgrim Chamber, Polly. It will speak our wishes for us.”

It was not the room in which Polly had been ill for so many weeks; for Mrs. Bird knew the power of associations, and was unwilling to leave any reminder of those painful days to sadden the girl’s new life.

As Polly looked about her, she was almost awed by the dazzling whiteness. The room was white enough for an angel, she thought. The straw matting was almost concealed by a mammoth rug made of white Japanese goatskins sewed together; the paint was



like snow, and the furniture had all been painted white, save for the delicate silver lines that relieved it. There were soft, full curtains of white bunting fringed with something that looked like thistle-down, and the bedstead had an overhanging canopy of the same. An open fire burned in the little grate, and a big white and silver rattan chair was drawn cosily before it. There was a girlish dressing-table with its

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oval mirror draped in dotted muslin; a dainty writing-desk with everything convenient upon it; and in one corner was a low bookcase of white satinwood. On the top of this case lay a card, "With the best wishes of John Bird," and along the front of the upper shelf were painted the words: "Come, tell us a story!" Below this there was a rich array of good things. The Grimms, Laboulaye, and Hans Christian Andersen were all there. Mrs. Ewing's "Jackanapes" and Charles Kingsley's "Water-Babies" jostled the "Seven Little Sisters" series; Hawthorne's "Wonder-Book" lay close to Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare;" and Whittier's "Child-Life in Prose and Poetry" stood between Mary Howitt's "Children's Year" and Robert Louis Stevenson's "Child's Garden of Verses."

Polly sat upon the floor before the bookcase and gloated over her new treasures, each of which bore her name on the fly-leaf.

As her eye rose to the vase of snowy pampas plumes and the pictured Madonna and Child above the bookcase, it wandered still higher until it met a silver motto painted on a blue frieze that finished the top of the walls where they met the ceiling.

Polly walked slowly round the room, studying the illuminated letters: "*And they laid the Pilgrim in an upper chamber, and the name of the chamber was Peace.*"

This brought the ready tears to Polly's eyes. "God seems to give me everything but what I want most," she thought; "but since He gives me so much, I must not question any more: I must not choose; I must believe that He wants me to be happy, after all, and I must begin and try to be good again."

She did try to be good. She came down to breakfast the next morning, announcing to Mrs. Bird, with her grateful morning kiss, that she meant to "live up to" her room. "But it's going to be difficult," she confessed. "I shall not dare to have a naughty thought in it; it seems as if it would be written somewhere on the whiteness!"

"You can come and be naughty in my bachelor den, Polly," said Mr. Bird, smiling. "Mrs. Bird does n't waste any girlish frills and poetic decorations and mystical friezes on her poor brother-in-law! He is done up in muddy browns, as befits his age and sex."

Polly insisted on beginning her work the very next afternoon; but she had strength only for three appointments a week, and Mrs. Bird looked doubtfully after her as she walked away from the house with a languid gait utterly unlike her old buoyant step.

Edgar often came in the evenings, as did Tom and Blanche Mills, and Milly Foster; but though Polly was cheerful and composed, she seldom broke into her old flights of nonsense.



On other nights, when they were alone, she prepared for her hours of story-telling, and in this she was wonderfully helped by Mr. Bird's suggestions and advice; for he was a student of literature in many languages, and delighted in bringing his treasures before so teachable a pupil.



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“She has a sort of genius that astonishes me,” said he one morning, as he chatted with Mrs. Bird over the breakfast-table.

Polly had excused herself, and stood at the farther library window, gazing up the street vaguely and absently, as if she saw something beyond the hills and the bay. Mrs. Bird’s heart sank a little as she looked at the slender figure in the black dress. There were no dimples about the sad mouth, and was it the dress, or was she not very white these latter days?—so white that her hair encircled her face with absolute glory, and startled one with its color.

“It is a curious kind of gift,” continued Mr. Bird, glancing at his morning’ papers. “She takes a long tale of Hans Andersen’s, for instance, and after an hour or two, when she has his idea fully in mind, she shows me how she proposes to tell it to the younger children at the Orphan Asylum. She clasps her hands over her knees, bends forward toward the firelight, and tells the story with such simplicity and earnestness that I am always glad she is looking the other way and cannot see the tears in my eyes. I cried like a school-girl last night over ‘The Ugly Duckling.’ She has natural dramatic instinct, a great deal of facial expression, power of imitation, and an almost unerring taste in the choice of words, which is unusual in a girl so young and one who has been so imperfectly trained. I give her an old legend or some fragment of folk-lore, and straight-way she dishes it up for me as if it had been bone of her bone and marrow of her marrow; she knows just what to leave out and what to put in, somehow. You had one of your happy inspirations about that girl, Margaret,—she is a born story-teller. She ought to wander about the country with a lute under her arm. Is the Olivers’ house insured?”

“Good gracious, Jack! you have a kangaroo sort of mind! How did you leap to that subject? I’m sure I don’t know, but what difference does it make, anyway?”

“A good deal of difference,” he answered nervously, looking into the library (yes, Polly had gone out); “because the house, the furniture, and the stable were burned to the ground last night,—so the morning paper says.”

Mrs. Bird rose and closed the doors. “That does seem too dreadful to be true,” she said. “The poor child’s one bit of property, her only stand-by in case of need! Oh, it can’t be burned; and, if it is, it must be insured. I’m afraid a second blow would break her down completely just now, when she has not recovered from the first.”

Mr. Bird went out and telegraphed to Dr. George Edgerton;—

Is Oliver house burned? What was the amount of insurance, if any?
Answer.

JOHN BIRD.

At four o’clock the reply came:—



House and outbuildings burned. No insurance. Have written particulars. Nothing but piano and family portraits saved.
GEORGE EDGERTON.



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In an hour another message, marked "Collect," followed the first one:—

House burned last night. Defective flue. No carelessness on part of servants or family. Piano, portraits, ice-cream freezer, and wash-boiler saved by superhuman efforts of husband. Have you any instructions? Have taken to my bed. Accept love and sympathy.

CLEMENTINE CHADWICK GEEENWOOD.

So it was true. The buildings were burned, and there was no insurance.

I know you will say there never is, in stories where the heroine's courage is to be tested, even if the narrator has to burn down the whole township to do it satisfactorily. But to this objection I can make only this answer: First, that this house really did burn down; secondly, that there really was no insurance; and thirdly, if this combination of circumstances did not sometimes happen in real life, it would never occur to a story-teller to introduce it as a test for heroes and heroines.

"Well," said Mrs. Bird despairingly, "Polly must be told. Now, will you do it, or shall I? Of course you want me to do it! Men never have any courage about these things, nor any tact either."

At this moment the subject of conversation walked into the room, hat and coat on, and an unwonted color in her cheeks. Edgar Noble followed behind. Polly removed her hat and coat leisurely, sat down on a hassock on the hearth rug, and ruffled her hair with the old familiar gesture, almost forgotten these latter days.

Mrs. Bird looked warningly at the tell-tale yellow telegrams in Mr. Bird's lap, and strove to catch his eye and indicate to his dull masculine intelligence the necessity of hiding them until they could devise a plan of breaking the sad news.

Mrs. Bird's glance and Mr. Bird's entire obliviousness were too much for Polly's gravity. To their astonishment she burst into a peal of laughter.

"My lodging is on the cold, cold ground,
And hard, very hard is my fare!"

she sang, to the tune of "Believe me, if all those endearing young charms." "So you know all about it, too?"

"How did you hear it?" gasped Mrs. Bird.

"I bought the evening paper to see if that lost child at the asylum had been found. Edgar jumped on the car, and seemed determined that I should not read the paper until I reached home. He was very kind, but slightly bungling in his attentions. I knew then that something was wrong, but just what was beyond my imagination, unless Jack



Howard had been expelled from Harvard, or Bell Winship had been lost at sea on the way home; so I persisted in reading, and at last I found the fatal item. I don't know whether Edgar expected me to faint at sight! I'm not one of the fainting sort!"

"I'm relieved that you can take it so calmly. I have been shivering with dread all day, and Jack and I have been quarreling as to which should break it to you."



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“Break it to me!” echoed Polly, in superb disdain. “My dear Fairy Godmother, you must think me a weak sort of person! As if the burning down of one patrimonial estate could shatter my nerves! What is a passing home or so? Let it burn, by all means, if it likes. ‘He that is down need fear no fall.’”

“It is your only property,” said Mr. Bird, trying to present the other side of the case properly, “and it was not insured.”

“What of that?” she asked briskly. “Am I not housed and fed like a princess at the present moment? Have I not two hundred and fifty dollars in the bank, and am I not earning twenty-five dollars a month with absolute regularity? Avaunt, cold Fear!”

“How was it that the house was not insured?” asked Mr. Bird.

“I ’m sure I don’t know. It was insured once upon a time, if I remember right; when it got uninsured, I can’t tell. How do things get uninsured, Mr. Bird?”

“The insurance lapses, of course, if the premium is n’t regularly paid.”

“Oh, that would account for it!” said Polly easily. “There were quantities of things that were n’t paid regularly, though they were always paid in course of time. You ought to have asked me if we were insured, Edgar,—you were the boy of the house,—insurance is n’t a girl’s department. Let me see the telegrams, please.”

They all laughed heartily over Mrs. Greenwood’s characteristic message.

“Think of ‘husband’ bearing that aged ice-cream freezer and that leaky boiler to a place of safety!” exclaimed Polly. “All that was left of them, left of six hundred! Well, my family portraits, piano, freezer, and boiler will furnish a humble cot very nicely in my future spinster days. By the way, the land did n’t burn up, I suppose, and that must be good for something, is n’t it?”

“Rather,” answered Edgar; “a corner lot on the best street in town, four blocks from the new hotel site! It’s worth eighteen hundred or two thousand dollars, at least.”

“Then why do you worry about me, good people? I ’m not a heroine. If I were sitting on the curbstone without a roof to my head, and did n’t know where I should get my dinner, I should cry! But I smell my dinner” (here she sniffed pleasurably), “and I think it ’s chicken! You see, it’s so difficult for me to realize that I ’m a pauper, living here, a pampered darling in the halls of wealth, with such a large income rolling up daily that I shall be a prey to fortune-hunters by the time I am twenty! Pshaw! don’t worry about me! This is just the sort of diet I have been accustomed to from my infancy! I rather enjoy it!”

Whereupon Edgar recited an impromptu nonsense verse:—



“There ’s a queer little maiden named Polly,
Who always knows when to be jolly.
When ruined by fire
Her spirits rise higher.
This most inconsistent Miss Polly.”

CHAPTER XVI.



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THE CANDLE CALLED PATIENCE.

The burning of the house completely prostrated Mrs. Clementine Churchill Chadwick Greenwood, who, it is true, had the actual shock of the conflagration to upset her nervous system, though she suffered no financial loss.

Mr. Greenwood was heard to remark that he wished he could have foreseen that the house would burn down, for now he should have to move anyway, and if he had known that a few months before, why—

Here the sentence always ended mysteriously, and the neighbors finished it as they liked.

The calamity affected Polly, on the other hand, very much like a tonic. She felt the necessity of “bracing” to meet the fresh responsibilities that seemed waiting for her in the near future; and night and day, in sleeping and waking, resting and working, a plan was formulating itself in the brain just roused from its six months’ apathy,—a novel, astonishing, enchanting, revolutionary plan, which she bided her time to disclose.

The opportunity came one evening after dinner, when Mrs. Bird, and her brother, Edgar and herself, were gathered in the library.

The library was a good place in which to disclose plans, or ask advice, or whisper confidences. The great carved oak mantel held on the broad space above the blazing logs the graven motto, “Esse Quod Opto.” The walls were lined with books from floor half-way to ceiling, and from the tops of the cases Plato, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and the Sage of Concord looked down with benignant wisdom. The table in the centre was covered with a methodical litter of pamphlets and magazines, and a soft light came from the fire and from two tall, shaded lamps.

Mr. Bird, as was his wont, leaned back in his leather chair, puffing delicate rings of smoke into the air. Edgar sat by the centre table, idly playing with a paper-knife. Mrs. Bird sat in her low rocking-chair with a bit of fancy-work, and Polly, on the hearth rug, leaned cosily back against her Fairy Godmother’s knees.

The clinging tendrils in Polly’s nature, left hanging so helplessly when her mother was torn away, reached out more and more to wind themselves about lovely Mrs. Bird, who, notwithstanding her three manly sons, had a place in her heart left sadly vacant by the loss of her only daughter.

Polly broke one of the pleasant silences. An open fire makes such delightful silences, if you ever noticed. When you sit in a room without it, the gaps in the conversation make everybody seem dull; the last comer rises with embarrassment and thinks he must be going, and you wish that some one would say the next thing and keep the ball rolling.



The open fire arranges all these little matters with a perfect tact and grace all its own. It is acknowledged to be the centre of attraction, and the people gathered about it are only supernumeraries. It blazes and crackles and snaps cheerily, the logs break and fall, the coals glow and fade and glow again, and the dull man can always poke the fire if his wit desert him. Who ever feels like telling a precious secret over a steam-heater?



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Polly looked away from everybody and gazed straight into the blaze.

“I have been thinking over a plan for my future work,” she said, “and I want to tell it to you and see if you all approve and think me equal to it. It used to come to me in flashes, after this Fairy Godmother of mine opened an avenue for my surplus energy by sending me out as a story-teller; but lately I have n’t had any heart for it. Work grew monotonous and disagreeable and hopeless, and I ’m afraid I had no wish to be useful or helpful to myself or to anybody else. But now everything is different. I am not so rich as I was (I wish, Mr. Bird, you would not smile so provokingly when I mention my riches!), and I must not be idle any longer; so this is my plan, I want to be a story-teller by profession. Perhaps you will say that nobody has ever done it; but surely that is an advantage; I should have the field to myself for a while, at least. I have dear Mrs. Bird’s little poor children as a foundation. Now, I would like to get groups of other children together in somebody’s parlor twice a week and tell them stories,—the older children one day in the week and the younger ones another. Of course I have n’t thought out all the details, because I hoped my Fairy Godmother would help me there, if she approved of my plan; but I have ever so many afternoons all arranged, and enough stories and songs at my tongue’s end for three months. Do you think it impossible or nonsensical, Mr. Bird?”

“No,” said he thoughtfully, after a moment’s pause. “It seems on the first hearing to be perfectly feasible. In fact, in one sense it will not be an experiment at all. You have tried your powers, gained self-possession and command of your natural resources; developed your ingenuity, learned the technicalities of your art, so to speak, already. You propose now, as I understand, to extend your usefulness, widen your sphere of action, address yourself to a larger public, and make a profession out of what was before only a side issue in your life. It’s a new field, and it ’s a noble one, taken in its highest aspect, as you have always taken it. My motto for you, Polly, is Goethe’s couplet:—

“What you can do, or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

“Make way for the story-teller!” cried Edgar. “I will buy season tickets for both your groups, if you will only make your limit of age include me. I am only five feet ten, and I ’ll sit very low if you ’ll admit me to the charmed circle. Shall you have a stage name? I would suggest ‘The Seraphic Sapphira.’”

“Now, don’t tease,” said Polly, with dignity; “this is in sober earnest. What do you think, Fairy Godmother? I ’ve written to my dear Miss Mary Denison in Santa Barbara, and she likes the idea.”

“I think it is charming. In fact, I can hardly wait to begin. I will be your business manager, my Pollykins, and we ’ll make it a success, if it is possible. If you ’ll take me

into your confidence and tell me what you mean to do, I will plan the hows and whens and wheres.”



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“You see, dear people,” continued Polly, “it is really the only thing that I know how to do; and I have had several months’ experience, so that I ’m not entirely untrained. I ’m not afraid any more, so long as it is only children; though the presence of one grown person makes me tongue-tied. Grown-up people never know how to listen, somehow, and they make you more conscious of yourself. But when the children gaze up at you with their shining eyes and their parted lips,—the smiles just longing to be smiled and the tear-drops just waiting to glisten,—I don’t know what there is about it, but it makes you wish you could go on forever and never break the spell. And it makes you tremble, too, for fear you should say anything wrong. You seem so close to children when you are telling them stories; just as if a little, little silken thread spun itself out from one side of your heart through each of theirs, until it came back to be fastened in your own again; and it holds so tight, so tight, when you have done your best and the children are pleased and grateful.”

For days after this discussion Polly felt as if she were dwelling on a mysterious height from which she could see all the kingdoms of the earth. She said little and thought much (oh, that this should come to be written of Polly Oliver!). The past which she had regretted with such passionate fervor still fought for a place among present plans and future hopes. But she was almost convinced in these days that a benevolent Power might after all be helping her to work out her own salvation in an appointed way, with occasional weariness and tears, like the rest of the world.

It was in such a softened mood that she sat alone in church one Sunday afternoon at vespers. She had chosen a place where she was sure of sitting quietly by herself, and where the rumble of the organ and the words of the service would come to her soothingly. The late afternoon sun shone through the stained-glass windows, bringing out the tender blue on the Madonna’s gown, the white on the wings of angels and robes of newborn innocents, the glow of rose and carmine, with here and there a glorious gleam of Tyrian purple. Then her eyes fell on a memorial window opposite her. A mother bowed with grief was seated on some steps of rough-hewn stones. The glory of her hair swept about her knees. Her arms were empty; her hands locked; her head bent. Above stood a little child, with hand just extended to open a great door, which was about to uncloset and admit him. He reached up his hand fearlessly (“and that is faith,” thought Polly), and at the same time he glanced down at his weeping mother, as if to say, “Look up, mother dear! I am safely in.”

Just then the choir burst into a grand hymn which was new to Polly, and which came to her with the force of a personal message:—

“The Son of God goes forth to war,
A kingly crown to gain;
His blood-red banner streams afar—
Who follows in His train?
Who best can drink his cup of woe,



Triumphant over pain,
Who patient bears his cross below,
He follows in His train.”



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Verse after verse rang in splendid strength through the solemn aisles of the church, ending with the lines:—

“O God, to us may strength be given
To follow in His train!”

Dr. George’s voice came to Polly as it sounded that gray October afternoon beside the sea; “When the sun of one’s happiness is set, one lights a candle called ‘Patience,’ and guides one’s footsteps by that.”

She leaned her head on the pew in front of her, and breathed a prayer. The minister was praying for the rest of the people, but she needed to utter her own thought just then.

“Father in heaven, I will try to follow; I have lighted my little candle, help me to keep it burning! I shall stumble often in the darkness, I know, for it was all so clear when I could walk by my darling mother’s light, which was like the sun, so bright, so pure, so strong! Help me to keep the little candle steady, so that it may throw its beams farther and farther into the pathway that now looks so dim.”

* * * * *

Polly sank to sleep that night in her white bed in the Pilgrim Chamber; and the name of the chamber was Peace indeed, for she had a smile on her lips,—a smile that looked as if the little candle had in truth been lighted in her soul, and was shining through her face as though it were a window.

CHAPTER XVII.

POLLY LAUNCHES HER SHIPS.

There were great doings in the Birds Nest.

A hundred dainty circulars, printed in black and scarlet on Irish linen paper, had been sent to those ladies on Mrs. Bird’s calling-list who had children between the ages of five and twelve, that being Polly’s chosen limit of age.

These notes of invitation read as follows:—

“Come, tell us a story!”

THE CHILDREN’S HOUR.



Mrs. Donald Bird requests the pleasure of your company from 4.30 to 5.30 o'clock on Mondays or Thursdays from November to March inclusive.

FIRST GROUP: Mondays. Children from 5 to 8 years.

SECOND GROUP: Thursdays. " " 8 " 12 years.

Each group limited in number to twenty-four.

Miss Pauline Oliver will tell stories suitable to the ages of the children, adapted to their prevailing interests, and appropriate to the special months of the year.

These stories will be chosen with the greatest care, and will embrace representative tales of all classes,—narrative, realistic, scientific, imaginative, and historical. They will be illustrated by songs and black-board sketches. Terms for the Series (Twenty Hours), Five Dollars.

R.S.V.P.

Polly felt an absolute sense of suffocation as she saw Mrs. Bird seal and address the last square envelope.

"If anybody does come," she said, somewhat sadly, "I am afraid it will be only that the story hour is at your lovely house."



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“Don’t be so foolishly independent, my child. If I gather the groups, it is only you who will be able to hold them together. I am your manager, and it is my duty to make the accessories as perfect as possible. When the scenery and costumes and stage-settings are complete, you enter and do the real work, I retire, and the sole responsibility for success or failure rests upon your shoulders; I should think that would be enough to satisfy the most energetic young woman. I had decided on the library as the scene of action; an open fire is indispensable, and that room is delightfully large when the centre-table is lifted out: but I am afraid it is hardly secluded enough, and that people might trouble you by coming in; so what do you think of the music-room upstairs? You will have your fire, your piano, plenty of space, and a private entrance for the chicks, who can lay their wraps in the hall as they pass up. I will take the large Turkish rug from the red guest-chamber,—that will make the room look warmer,—and I have a dozen other charming devices which I will give you later as surprises.”

“If I were half as sure of my part as I am of yours, dear Fairy Godmother, we should have nothing to fear. I have a general plan mapped out for the stories, but a great deal of the work will have to be done from week to week, as I go on. I shall use the same programme in the main for both groups, but I shall simplify everything and illustrate more freely for the little ones, telling the historical and scientific stories with much more detail to the older group. This is what Mr. Bird calls my ‘basic idea,’ which will be filled out from week to week according to inspiration. For November, I shall make autumn, the harvest, and Thanksgiving the starting-point. I am all ready with my historical story of ‘The First Thanksgiving,’ for I told it at the Children’s Hospital last year, and it went beautifully.

“I have one doll dressed in Dutch costume, to show how the children looked that the little Pilgrims played with in Holland; and another dressed like a Puritan maiden, to show them the simple old New England gown. Then I have two fine pictures of Miles Standish and the Indian chief Massasoit.

“For December and January I shall have Christmas and winter, and frost and ice and snow, with the contrasts of eastern and Californian climates.”

“I can get the Immigration Bureau to give you a percentage on that story, Polly,” said Uncle Jack Bird, who had strolled in and taken a seat. “Just make your facts strong enough, and you can make a handsome thing out of that idea.”

“Don’t interrupt us, Jack,” said Mrs. Bird; “and go directly out, if you please. You were not asked to this party.”

“Where was I?” continued Polly. “Oh yes,—the contrast between Californian and eastern winters; and January will have a moral story or two, you know,—New Year’s resolutions, and all that. February will be full of sentiment and patriotism,—St. Valentine’s Day and Washington’s Birthday,—I can hardly wait for that, there are so

many lovely things to do in that month. March will bring in the first hint of spring. The winds will serve for my science story; and as it chances to be a presidential year, we will celebrate Inauguration Day, and have some history, if a good many subscribers come in.”



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“Why do you say ‘if,’ Polly? Multitudes of names are coming in. I have told you so from the beginning.”

“Very well, then; when a sufficient number of names are entered, I should like to spend ten dollars on a very large sand-table, which I can use with the younger group for illustrations. It is perfectly clean work, and I have helped Miss Denison and her children to do the loveliest things with it. She makes geography lessons,—plains, hills, mountains, valleys, rivers, and lakes; or the children make a picture of the story they have just heard. I saw them do ‘Over the River and through the Wood to Grandfather’s House we go,’ ‘Washington’s Winter Camp at Valley Forge,’ and ‘The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.’ I have ever so many songs chosen, and those for November and December are almost learned without my notes. I shall have to work very hard to be ready twice a week!”

“Too hard, I fear,” said Mrs. Bird anxiously.

“Oh, no; not a bit too hard! If the children are only interested, I shall not mind any amount of trouble. By the way, dear Mrs. Bird, you won’t let the nurses or mothers stand in the doorways? You will please see that I am left quite alone with the children, won’t you?”

“Certainly; no mothers shall be admitted, if they make you nervous; it is the children’s hour. But after two or three months, when you have all become acquainted, and the children are accustomed to listening attentively, I almost hope you will allow a few nurses to come in and sit in the corners,—the ones who bring the youngest children, for example; it would be such a means of education to them. There ’s another idea for you next year,—a nurses’ class in story-telling.”

“It would be rather nice, would n’t it?—and I should be older then, and more experienced. I really think I could do it, if Miss Denison would help me by talks and instructions. She will be here next year. Oh, how the little plan broadens out!”

“And, Polly, you have chosen to pay for your circulars, and propose to buy your sand-table. This I agree to, if you insist upon it; though why I shouldn’t help my godchild I cannot quite understand. But knowing you were so absorbed in other matters that you would forget the frivolities, and remembering that you have been wearing the same two dresses for months, I have ventured to get you some pretty gowns for the ‘story hours,’ and I want you to accept them for your Christmas present. They will serve for all your ‘afternoons’ and for our home dinners, as you will not be going out anywhere this winter.”

“Oh, how kind you are, Mrs. Bird! You load me with benefits, and how can I ever repay you?”



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“You do not have to repay them to me necessarily, my child; you can pass them over, as you will be constantly doing, to all these groups of children, day after day. I am a sort of stupid, rich old lady who serves as a source of supply. My chief brilliancy lies in devising original methods of getting rid of my surplus in all sorts of odd and delightful ways, left untried, for the most part, by other people. I’ve been buying up splendid old trees in the outskirts of certain New England country towns,—trees that were in danger of being cut down for wood. Twenty-five to forty dollars buys a glorious tree, and it is safe for ever and ever to give shade to the tired traveler and beauty to the landscape. Each of my boys has his pet odd scheme for helping the world to ‘go right.’ Donald, for instance, puts stamps on the unstamped letters displayed in the Cambridge post-office, and sends them spinning on their way. He never receives the thanks of the careless writers, but he takes pleasure in making things straight. Paul writes me from Phillips Academy that this year he is sending the nine Ruggles children (a poor family of our acquaintance) to some sort of entertainment once every month. Hugh has just met a lovely girl who has induced him to help her maintain a boarding establishment for sick and deserted cats and dogs; and there we are!”

“But I’m a young, strong girl, and I fear I’m not so worthy an object of charity as a tree, an unstamped letter, an infant Ruggles, or a deserted cat! Still, I know the dresses will be lovely, and I had quite forgotten that I must be clothed in purple and fine linen for five months to come. It would have been one of my first thoughts last year, I am afraid; but lately this black dress has shut everything else from my sight.”

“It was my thought that you should give up your black dress just for these occasions, dear, and wear something more cheerful for the children’s sake. The dresses are very simple, for I’ve heard you say you can never tell a story when you are ‘dressed up,’ but they will please you, I know. They will be brought home this evening, and you must slip them all on, and show yourself to us in each.”

They would have pleased anybody, even a princess, Polly thought, as she stood before her bed that evening patting the four pretty new waists, and smoothing with childlike delight the folds of the four pretty skirts. It was such an odd sensation to have four dresses at a time!

They were of simple and inexpensive materials, as was appropriate; but Mrs. Bird's exquisite taste and feeling for what would suit Polly's personality made them more attractive than if they had been rich or expensive.

There was a white China silk, with belt and shoulder-knots of black velvet; a white Japanese crepe, with purple lilacs strewed over its surface, and frills of violet ribbon for ornament; a Christmas dress of soft, white camel's hair, with bands of white-fox fur round the slightly pointed neck and elbow-sleeves; and, last of all, a Quaker gown of silver-gray nun's cloth, with a surplice and full undersleeves of white crepe-lisse.



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"I 'm going to be vain, Mrs. Bird!" cried Polly, with compunction in her voice. "I 've never had a real beautiful, undyed, un-made-over dress in my whole life, and I shall never have strength of character to own four at once without being vain!"

This speech was uttered through the crack of the library door, outside of which Polly stood, gathering courage to walk in and be criticised.

"Think of your aspiring nose, Sapphira!" came from a voice within.

"Oh, are you there too, Edgar?"

"Of course I am, and so is Tom Mills. The news that you are going to 'try on' is all over the neighborhood! If you have cruelly fixed the age limit so that we can't possibly get in to the performances, we are going to attend all the dress rehearsals. Oh, ye little fishes! what a seraphic Sapphira! I wish Tony were here!"

She was pretty, there was no doubt about it, as she turned around like a revolving wax figure in a show-window, and assumed absurd fashion-plate attitudes; and pretty chiefly because of the sparkle, intelligence, sunny temper, and vitality that made her so magnetic.

Nobody could decide which was the loveliest dress, even when she had appeared in each one twice. In the lilac and white crepe, with a bunch of dark Parma violets thrust in her corsage, Uncle Jack called her a poem. Edgar asserted openly that in the Christmas toilet he should like to have her modeled in wax and put in a glass case on his table; but Mrs. Bird and Tom Mills voted for the Quaker gray, in which she made herself inexpressibly demure by braiding her hair in two discreet braids down her back.

"The dress rehearsal is over. Good-night all!" she said, as she took her candle. "I will say 'handsome is as handsome does' fifty times before I go to sleep, and perhaps—I only say perhaps—I may be used to my beautiful clothes in a week or two, so that I shall be my usual modest self again."

"Good-night, Polly," said the boys; "we will see you to-morrow."

"'Pauline,' if you please, not 'Polly.' I ceased to be Polly this morning when the circulars were posted. I am now Miss Pauline Oliver, story-teller by profession."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR: REPORTED IN A LETTER BY AN EYE-WITNESS.



It was the last Monday in March, and I had come in from my country home to see if I could find my old school friend, Margaret Crosby, who is now Mrs. Donald Bird, and who is spending a few years in California.

The directory gave me her address, and I soon found myself on the corner of two beautiful streets and before a very large and elegant house. This did not surprise me, as I knew her husband to be a very wealthy man. There seemed to be various entrances, for the house stood with its side to the main street; but when I had at last selected a bell to ring, I became convinced that I had not, after all, gone to the front door. It was too late to retreat, however, and very soon the door was opened by a pretty maid-servant in a white cap and apron.



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"You need n't have rung, 'm; they goes right in without ringing to-day," she said pleasantly.

"Can I see Mrs. Bird?" I asked.

"Well, 'm," she said hesitatingly, "she 's in Paradise."

"Lovely Margaret Crosby dead! How sudden it must have been," I thought, growing pale with the shock of the surprise; but the pretty maid, noticing that something had ruffled my equanimity, went on hastily:—

"Excuse me, 'm. I forgot you might be a stranger, but the nurses and mothers always comes to this door, and we 're all a bit flustered on account of its bein' Miss Pauline's last 'afternoon,' and the mothers call the music-room 'Paradise,' 'm, and Mr. John and the rest of us have took it up without thinkin' very much how it might sound to strangers."

"Oh, I see," I said mechanically, though I did n't see in the least; but although the complicated explanation threw very little light on general topics, it did have the saving grace of assuring me that Margaret Bird was living.

"Could you call her out for a few minutes?" I asked. "I am an old friend, and shall be disappointed not to see her."

"I 'm sorry, 'm, but I could n't possibly call her out; it would be as much as my place is worth. Her strict orders is that nobody once inside of Paradise door shall be called out."

"That does seem reasonable," I thought to myself.

"But," she continued, "Mrs. Bird told me to let young Mr. Noble up the stairs so 't he could peek in the door, and as you 're an old friend I hev n't no objections to your goin' up softly and peekin' in with him till Miss Pauline 's through,—it won't be long, 'm."

My curiosity was aroused by this time, and I came to the conclusion that "peekin' in the door" of Paradise with "young Mr. Noble" would be better than nothing; so up I went, like a thief in the night.

The room was at the head of the stairs, and one of the doors was open, and had a heavy portiere hanging across it. Behind this was young Mr. Noble, "peekin'" most greedily, together with a middle-aged gentleman not described by the voluble parlor maid. They did n't seem to notice me; they were otherwise occupied, or perhaps they thought me one of the nurses or mothers. I had heard the sound of a piano as I crossed the hall, but it was still now. I crept behind young Mr. Noble, and took a good "peek" into Paradise.



It was a very large apartment, one that looked as if it might have been built for a ball-room; at least, there was a wide, cushioned bench running around three sides of it, close to the wall. On one side, behind some black and gold Japanese screens, where they could hear and not be seen, sat a row of silent, capped and aproned nurse-maids and bonneted mammas. Mrs. Bird was among them, lovely and serene as an angel still, though she has had her troubles. There was a great fireplace in the room, but it was banked up with purple and white lilacs. There was a bowl of the same flowers on the grand piano, and a clump of bushes sketched in chalk on a blackboard. Just then a lovely young girl walked from the piano and took a low chair in front of the fireplace.



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Before her there were grouped ever so many children, twenty-five or thirty, perhaps. The tots in the front rows were cosy and comfortable on piles of cushions, and the seven or eight year olds in the back row were in seats a little higher. Each child had a sprig of lilac in its hand. The young girl wore a soft white dress with lavender flowers scattered all over it, and a great bunch of the flowers in her belt.

She was a lovely creature! At least, I believe she was. I have an indistinct remembrance that her enemies (if she has any) might call her hair red; but I could n't stop looking at her long enough at the time to decide precisely what color it was. And I believe, now that several days have passed, that her nose turned up; but at the moment, whenever I tried to see just how much it wandered from the Grecian outline, her eyes dazzled me and I never found out.

As she seated herself in their midst, the children turned their faces expectantly toward her, like flowers toward the sun.

"You know it 's the last Monday, dears," she said; "and we 've had our good-by story."

"Tell it again! Sing it again!" came from two kilted adorers in the back row.

"Not to-day;" and she shook her head with a smile. "You know we always stop within the hour, and that is the reason we are always eager to come again; but this sprig of lilac that you all hold in your hands has something to tell; not a long story, just a piece of one for another good-by. I think when we go home, it we all press the flowers in heavy books, and open the books sometimes while we are away from each other this summer, that the sweet fragrance will come to us again, and the faded blossom will tell its own story to each one of us. And this is the story," she said, as she turned her spray of lilac in her fingers.

* * * * *

There was once a little lilac-bush that grew by a child's window. There was no garden there, only a tiny bit of ground with a few green things in it; and because there were no trees in the crowded streets, the birds perched on the lilac-bush to sing, and two of them even built a nest in it once, for want of something larger.

It had been a very busy lilac-bush all its life: drinking up moisture from the earth and making it into sap; adding each year a tiny bit of wood to its slender trunk; filling out its leaf-buds; making its leaves larger and larger; and then—oh, happy, happy time!—hanging purple flowers here and there among its branches.

It always felt glad of its hard work when Hester came to gather some of its flowers just before Easter Sunday. For one spray went to the table where Hester and her mother ate together; one to Hester's teacher; one to the gray stone church around the corner,

and one to a little lame girl who sat, and sat, quite still, day after day, by the window of the next house.



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But one year—this very last year, children—the lilac-bush grew tired of being good and working hard; and the more it thought about it, the sadder and sorrier and more discouraged it grew. The winter had been dark and rainy; the ground was so wet that its roots felt slippery and uncomfortable; there was some disagreeable moss growing on its smooth branches; the sun almost never shone; the birds came but seldom; and at last the lilac-bush said, “I will give up: I am not going to bud or bloom or do a single thing for Easter this year! I don’t care if my trunk does n’t grow, nor my buds swell, nor my leaves grow larger! If Hester wants her room shaded, she can pull the curtain down; and the lame girl can”—*do without*, it was going to say, but it did n’t dare—oh, it did n’t dare to think of the poor little lame girl without any comforting flowers; so it stopped short and hung its head.

Six or eight weeks ago Hester and her mother went out one morning to see the lilac-bush.

“It does n’t look at all as it ought,” said Hester, shaking her head sadly. “The buds are very few, and they are all shrunken. See how limp and flabby the stems of the leaves look!”

“Perhaps it is dead,” said Hester’s mother, “or perhaps it is too old to bloom.”

“I like that!” thought the lilac-bush.

“I ’m not dead and I ’m not dying, though I ’d just as lief die as to keep on working in this dark, damp, unpleasant winter, or spring, or whatever they call it; and as for being past blooming, I would just like to show her, if it was n’t so much trouble! How old does she think I am, I wonder? There is n’t a thing in this part of the city that is over ten years old, and I was n’t planted first, by any means!”

And then Hester said, “My darling, darling lilac-bush! Easter won’t be Easter without it; and lame Jenny leans out of her window every day as I come from school, and asks, ‘Is the lilac budding?’”

“Oh dear!” sighed the little bush. “I wish she would n’t talk that way; it makes me so nervous to have Jenny asking questions about me! It starts my sap circulating, and I shall grow in spite of me!”

“Let us see what we can do to help it,” said Hester’s mother. “Take your trowel and dig round the roots first.”

“They ’ll find a moist and sticky place and be better able to sympathize with me,” thought the lilac.

“Then put in some new earth, the richest you can get, and we ’ll snip off all the withered leaves and dry twigs, and see if it won’t take a new start.”



“I shall have to, I believe, whether I like it or not, if they make such a fuss about me!” thought the lilac-bush. “It seems a pity if a thing can’t stop growing and be let alone and die if it wants to!”

But though it grumbled a trifle at first, it felt so much better after Hester and her mother had spent the afternoon caring for it, that it began to grow a little just out of gratitude,—and what do you think happened?



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“George Washington came and chopped it down with his little hatchet,” said an eager person in front.

“The lame girl came to look at it,” sang out a small chap in the back row.

No, (the young girl answered, with an irrepressible smile), it was a cherry-tree that George Washington chopped, Lucy; and I told you, Horatio, that the poor lame girl could n’t walk a step. But the sun began to shine,—that is the first thing that happened. Day after day the sun shone, because everything seems to help the people and the things that help themselves. The rich earth gave everything it had to give for sap, and the warm air dried up the ugly moss that spoiled the beauty of its trunk.

Then the lilac-bush was glad again, and it could hardly grow fast enough, because it knew it would be behind time, at any rate; for of course it could n’t stand still, grumbling and doing nothing for weeks, and get its work done as soon as the other plants. But it made sap all clay long, and the buds grew into tiny leaves, and the leaves into larger ones, and then it began to group its flower-buds among the branches. By this time it was the week before Easter, and it fairly sat up nights to work.

Hester knew that it was going to be more beautiful than it ever was in its life before (that was because it had never tried so hard, though of course Hester could n’t know that), but she was only afraid that it would n’t bloom soon enough, it was so very late this spring.

But the very morning before Easter Sunday, Hester turned in her sleep and dreamed that a sweet, sweet fragrance was stealing in at her open window. A few minutes later she ran across her room, and lo! every cluster of buds on the lilac-bush had opened into purple flowers, and they were waving in the morning sunshine as if to say, “We are ready, Hester! We are ready, after all!”

And one spray was pinned in the teacher’s dress,—it was shabby and black,—and she was glad of the flower because it reminded her of home.

And one spray stood in a vase on Hester’s dining-table. There was never very much dinner in Hester’s house, but they did not care that day, because the lilac was so beautiful.

One bunch lay on the table in the church, and one, the loveliest of all, stood in a cup of water on the lame girl’s window-sill; and when she went to bed that night she moved it to the table beside her head, and put her thin hand out to touch it in the dark, and went to sleep smiling.

And each of the lilac flowers was glad that the bush had bloomed.

* * * * *



The children drew a deep breath. They smoothed their flower-sprays gently, and one pale boy held his up to his cheek as if it had been a living thing.

“Tell it again,” cried the tomboy.

“Is it true?” asked the boy in kilts.

“I think it is,” said the girl gently. “Of course, Tommy, the flowers never tell us their secrets in words; but I have watched that lilac-bush all through the winter and spring, and these are the very blossoms you are holding to-day. It seems true, doesn’t it?”

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“Yes,” they said thoughtfully.

“Shall you press yours, Miss Polly, and will it tell you a story, too, when you look at it?” asked one little tot as they all crowded about her for a good-by kiss.

Miss Polly caught her up in her arms, and I saw her take the child’s apron and wipe away a tear as she said, “Yes, dear, it will tell me a story, too,—a long, sad, sweet, helpful story!”