

FILLMORE PARKER

THE HICKORY
LIMB

Parker Fillmore
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Mother, may I go out to swim?
Yes, my darling daughter;
Hang your clothes on a hickory limb,
And don't go near the water.

Gladys Bailey had a parasol in one hand and a card-case in the other. From her own wide experience in social usage, she was going to initiate the twins into the mystery of formal calls. She had told them earlier in the day that they might bring their younger sister, but later reflection decided her to withdraw this permission. As Katherine and Alice were ready first, it was easy to explain to them her reasons.

"Four," Gladys said, "are too many to go calling. Margery's too little for our crowd anyway, and, besides, that would make three from one family. We had just better start before she comes down."

For a moment the twins looked doubtful; then, as usual, agreed. Thereupon, all three cautiously tiptoed off the porch and

down the lawn. Before they reached the street, Margery was after them, calling: "Wait a minute, Katherine! Wait, Alice!"

The twins had barely time to slip through the gate and hear Gladys's low injunction, "Don't let her come," when Margery was upon them.

"You can't come with us, Margery," Katherine began, with an assumption of innocence.

"Why, Katherine, you promised I could."

"That was for to-morrow," suggested Alice weakly.

Margery looked from her sisters to Gladys, who was staring vaguely across the street. Her excessive aloofness was suspicious, and Margery instantly jumped to conclusions.

"I bet I know what's the matter. That old Gladys Bailey doesn't want me. But I'm going anyhow! I don't care what she says! I'm going!"

And, throwing herself against the gate, Margery pushed and kicked and shook, while Katherine and Alice, holding it shut from the outside, blushed with embarrassment that Gladys should hear, and whispered fiercely, "Margery, keep still!"

But Margery would not keep still. At that moment she was remembering against Gladys many a former indignity. How she hated her – how she had always hated her for her prim, deceitful, grown-up manners, for her patronizing airs, and, most of all, for the strange influence she wielded over Margery's own sisters and brother. It was bad enough that the twins should hang upon her words, but worse, far worse, that even Henry, that model

of discretion, should be so completely taken in as to look upon Gladys with an interest which bordered dangerously near to admiration. Secure in the esteem of Katherine and Alice, and conscious of her sway over Henry, Gladys saw no reason to conciliate the youngest member of the family. "Margery's too little for our crowd," she would say, and, while Margery fumed and fought, would calmly reiterate the statement until it came to be accepted as fact. Gladys never fought. As on this afternoon, she was always the general, who, so to speak, directed from afar the onslaughts of the actual combatants.

Though outnumbered two to one, Margery had the spirit of a host, and for a while victory hung doubtful. Then fate decided the issue, and, in guise of the maternal voice from the window, called Margery off.

"Margery Blair," the voice commanded, "stop that noise this instant! Aren't you ashamed to tease the girls so? Stop it! Do you hear me?"

Yes, Margery heard; and, knowing from experience the futility of argument, she stopped.

"Are we ready?" Gladys Bailey asked, suddenly awakening, as it were, from a reverie. The twins, a little heated from their exertions, were quite ready, and, holding their card-cases – envelopes filled with cards of home manufacture – in young-ladyish fashion, they started off, copying, as best they could, the mincing steps of Gladys.

If Margery shouted after them no parting taunt, it was not

because she had none ready. The ear corresponding to the maternal voice was probably still at the window; and Margery, though desperate enough for any fate sufficiently tragic, disliked the thought of spending the afternoon in bed. Therefore she kept an outward silence. But her heart would not be still, and every little outraged feeling in her body, finding a voice of its own, clamored aloud: "Oh, if we could only pay 'em back! Oh, if we could only pay 'em back!" Margery, alas! had not yet learned that forgiveness is sweeter than revenge. Of course she would forgive them if, say, a milk-wagon should run over her and she had only a few hours to live. Then how they would cry! But as it was too late in the afternoon for any milk-wagons to be about, such a death-bed forgiveness was clearly out of the question. So the one thing left was revenge.

Yet what revenge was possible? None, absolutely none. That afternoon she was utterly powerless to shake by any act of hers the equanimity of those three complacent young persons. There was nothing belonging to them which she could smash, hide, or appropriate. There was nothing they had ever said or done which now, in her hour of need, she could use against them. They were in fact so impossibly, so hopelessly – no, not exactly virtuous, but *proper*, that the mere contemplation of their colorless lives threw Margery into a most deplorable state of hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness.

As the hopelessness of revenge settled on Margery's spirit, a feeling of loneliness began to creep over her. She could think

of nothing to do, and of nobody to whom she might appeal for sympathy or amusement. The limitless expanse of an idle afternoon stretched out before her like a desert. Henry had gone fishing, and Willie Jones — *Willie Jones!* With that name came a dazzling thought, a plan full-blown, a balm sweet to her soul, a glorious solution!

Margery skipped up to the porch and called out in a coaxing, pleasant tone: "Mamma, may I take a little walk?" The maternal voice, plainly relieved that the storm had spent itself, gave consent, and Margery danced out the front gate and up the street, her heart thumping fast in exultation.

O-oh! Let Katherine and Alice distribute as many of their calling-cards as possible, for soon they will have no further use for them. Soon – to be exact, by the time they get home – they will be disgraced, horribly disgraced, and no one will ever care to receive them or their visits again. Even Gladys, their adored Gladys, will give them one cold glance of scorn and turn her back. It was hard, certainly, not to be able to include Gladys in the impending doom. But, after all, Katherine and Alice were the more culpable, for had they not cast aside all feelings of sisterly relationship? Let them, then, bear the brunt of the punishment.

After a fashion Margery was grateful to Gladys, for it was really Gladys who had placed in her hands the weapon she was about to use. Gladys was forever saying to Katherine and Alice: "If you're not careful, Margery will disgrace you all some day. Then how will you feel? No one will play with you; no one will

even speak to you on the street. And it won't be your fault, either. But, you see, everybody'll know Margery is your sister."

Yes, every one would know, and Margery, as she skipped along, gloated in the thought. It went without saying that, in disgracing the others, Margery was willing to sacrifice herself. Willing? She was almost too willing. In fact, it must be confessed that there was something in the present undertaking which, quite apart from all anticipations of revenge, hummed a gay little tune in her ear, and tempted her hurrying feet into many a frisky little side-step. From time to time she had to nudge herself, as it were, to remember that her purpose was one of retributive justice, that the end was what her soul hungered after – not the means.

She gave a passing regret to the afternoon shoes she was wearing, the white stockings, the clean dress, the great pink bow of ribbon in her hair. Likely enough these would be sadly draggled before the deed was done. But even that thought did not check her haste nor cause her for one second to pause or look back.

Her road lay toward the open country. At last, leaving behind all lines of houses, she crawled under a barbed-wire fence into a broad meadow where a few cows were grazing; then over a creek into another meadow, and up to a grassy knoll just ahead. From beyond it faint shouts were coming. At the foot of the knoll Margery rested a few moments, then pushed bravely on to the very gate of her adventure.

From the top of the knoll she looked down the other side to a

tiny pond where five little boys were playing and splashing. The minute they spied Margery they sank to their chins in the muddy water and raised frantic hands and voices:

"Go 'way from here! Go 'way from here! We're swimmin'! We're swimmin'!"

With considerable inward trepidation but outward calm, Margery descended toward them.

"We're swimmin'! We're swimmin'!" the little boys kept on shouting inanely until Margery was forced to make some acknowledgment of the information.

"Oh!" she called out in sarcasm undisguised, "I thought you was flying!"

That seemed to make the little boys angry. They redoubled their cries and gesticulations.

"Go 'way from here! Go 'way from here! You're a girl! You're a girl!"

"Is that so? I'm a girl, am I? I'm so glad to hear it!"

Margery sat down near the water's edge and gazed across defiantly at the little boys, who were clustered together at the far end of the pond. They were not her match at sarcasm and so were forced to answer with inarticulate jeers. For a few seconds no more words were exchanged. Then one of the boys attempted a parley.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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