

# WIGGIN KATE SMITH

THE GIRL AND THE  
KINGDOM

Kate Wiggin

**The Girl and the Kingdom**

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## **Kate Douglas Smith Wiggin**

# **The Girl and the Kingdom / Learning to Teach**

Along, busy street in San Francisco. Innumerable small shops lined it from north to south; horse cars, always crowded with passengers, hurried to and fro; narrow streets intersected the broader one, these built up with small dwellings, most of them rather neglected by their owners. In the middle distance other narrow streets and alleys where taller houses stood, and the windows, fire escapes, and balconies of these, added great variety to the landscape, as the families housed there kept most of their effects on the outside during the long dry season.

Still farther away were the roofs, chimneys and smoke stacks of mammoth buildings—railway sheds, freight depots, power houses and the like—with finally a glimpse of docks and wharves and shipping. This, or at least a considerable section of it, was the kingdom. To the ordinary beholder it might have looked ugly, crowded, sordid, undesirable, but it appeared none of these things to the lucky person who had been invested with some sort of modest authority in its affairs.

The throne from which the lucky person viewed the empire was humble enough. It was the highest of the tin shop steps at the corner of Silver and Third streets, odd place for a throne, but one commanding a fine view of the inhabitants, their dwellings, and their activities. The activities in plain sight were somewhat limited in variety, but the signs sported the names of nearly every nation upon the earth. The Shubeners, Levis, Ezekiels and Appels were generally in tailoring or secondhand furniture and clothing, while the Raffertys, O'Flanagans and McDougalls dispensed liquor. All the most desirable sites were occupied by saloons, for it was practically impossible to quench the thirst of the neighborhood, though many were engaged in a valiant effort to do so. There were also in evidence, barbers, joiners, plumbers, grocers, fruit-sellers, bakers and venders of small wares, and there was the largest and most splendidly recruited army of do-nothings that the sun ever shone upon. These forever-out-of-workers, leaning against every lamp post, fence picket, corner house, and barber pole in the vicinity, were all male, but they were mostly mated to women fully worthy of them, their wives doing nothing with equal assiduity in the back streets hard by.—Stay, they did one thing, they added copiously to the world's population; and indeed it seemed as if the families in the community that ought to have had few children, or none at all, (for their country's good) had the strongest prejudice to race suicide. Well, there was the kingdom and there were the dwellers therein, and the lucky person on the steps was a girl. She did not know at first that it was a kingdom, and the kingdom never at any time would have recognized itself under that name, for it was anything but a sentimental neighborhood. The girl was somewhat too young for the work she was going to do, and considerably too inexperienced, but she had a kindergarten diploma in her pocket, and being an ardent follower of Froebel she thought a good many roses might blossom in the desert of Tar Flat, the rather uneuphonious name of the kingdom.

Here the discreet anonymity of the third person must be cast aside and the regrettable egotism of the first person allowed to enter, for I was a girl, and the modest chronicle of my early educational and philanthropic adventures must be told after the manner of other chronicles.

The building in Silver Street which was to be the scene of such beautiful and inspiring doings (I hoped) as had been seldom observed on this planet, was pleasant and commodious. It had been occupied by two classes of an overcrowded primary school, which had now been removed to a fine modern building. The two rooms rented for this pioneer free kindergarten of the Pacific Coast were (Alas!) in the second story but were large and sunny. A broad flight of twenty wooden steps led from street to first floor and a long stairway connected that floor with the one above. If anyone had realized what those fifty or sixty stairs meant to the new enterprise, in labor and weariness, in wasted time and strength of teachers and children—but it was difficult to find ideal conditions in a crowded neighborhood.

The first few days after my arrival in San Francisco were spent in the installing of stove, piano, tables, benches and working materials, and then the beautifying began, the creation of a room so attractive and homelike, so friendly in its atmosphere, that its charm would be felt by every child who entered it. I was a stranger in a strange city, my only acquaintances being the trustees of the newly formed Association. These naturally had no technical knowledge, (I am speaking of the Dark Ages, when there were but two or three trained kindergartners west of the Rocky Mountains) and the practical organization of things—a kindergarten of fifty children in active operation—this was my department. When I had anything to show them they were eager and willing to help, meantime they could and did furnish the sinews of war, standing sponsors to the community for the ideals in education we were endeavoring to represent. Here is where the tin shop steps came in. I sat there very often in those sunny days of late July, 1878, dreaming dreams and seeing visions; plotting, planning, helping, believing, forecasting the future. "Hills peeped o'er hills and Alps on Alps."

I take some credit to myself that when there were yet no such things as Settlements and Neighborhood Guilds I had an instinct that this was the right way to work.

"This school," I thought, "must not be an exotic, a parasite, an alien growth, not a flower of beauty transplanted from a conservatory and shown under glass; it must have its roots deep in the neighborhood life, and there my roots must be also. No teacher, be she ever so gifted, ever so consecrated, can sufficiently influence the children under her care for only a few hours a day, unless she can gradually persuade the parents to be her allies. I must find then the desired fifty children under school age (six years in California) and I must somehow keep in close relation to the homes from which they come."

How should I get in intimate touch with this strange, puzzling, foreign community, this big clump of poverty-stricken, intemperate, overworked, lazy, extravagant, ill-assorted humanity leavened here and there by a God-fearing, thrifty, respectable family? There were from time to time children of widows who were living frugally and doing their best for their families who proved to be the leaven in my rather sorry lump.

Buying and borrowing were my first two aids to fellowship. I bought my luncheon at a different bakery every day and my glass of milk at a different dairy. At each visit I talked, always casually, of the new kindergarten, and gave its date of opening, but never "solicited" pupils. I bought pencils, crayons, and mucilage of the local stationers; brown paper and soap of the grocers; hammers and tacks of the hardware man. I borrowed many things, returned them soon, and thus gave my neighbors the satisfaction of being helpful. When I tried to borrow the local carpenter's saw he answered that he would rather come and do the job himself than lend his saw to a lady. The combination of a lady and edged tools was something in his mind so humorous that I nervously changed the subject. (If he is still alive I am sure *he* is an Anti-Suffragist!) I was glad to display my school room to an intelligent workman, and a half hour's explanation of the kindergarten occupations made the carpenter an enthusiastic convert. This gave me a new idea, and to each craftsman, in the vicinity, I showed the particular branch of kindergarten handiwork that might appeal to him, whether laying of patterns, in separate sticks and tablets, weaving, drawing, rudimentary efforts at designing, folding and cutting of paper, or clay modelling.

I had the great advantage of making all of my calls in shops, and thus I had not the unpleasant duty of visiting people's houses uninvited, nor the embarrassment of being treated as peddlers of patronage and good advice are apt to be treated. Besides, in many cases, the shops and homes (Heaven save the mark!) were under one roof, and children scuttled in and out, behind and under the counters and over the thresholds into the street. They were all agog with curiosity and so were the women. A mother does not have to be highly cultured to perceive the advantage of a place near by where she can send her four or five year olds free of charge and know that they are busy and happy for several hours a day.

I know, by long experience with younger kindergartners and social workers in after years, that this kind of "visiting" presents many perplexities to persons of a certain temperament, but I never entered any house where I felt the least sensation of being out of place. I don't think this flexibility is a gift of especially high order, nor that it would be equally valuable in all walks of life, but it is of great service in this sort of work. Whether I sat in a stuffed chair or on a nailkeg or an inverted washtub it was always equally agreeable to me. The "getting into relation," perfectly, and without the loss of a moment, gave me a sense of mental and spiritual exhilaration. I never had to adapt myself elaborately to a strange situation in order to be in sympathy. I never said to myself: "But for God's grace I might be the woman on that cot; unloved, uncared for, with a new-born child at my side and a dozen men drinking in the saloon just on the other side of the wall \* \* \* or that mother of five—convivial, dishonest, unfaithful \* \* \* or that timid, frail, little creature struggling to support a paralytic husband." I never had to give myself logical reasons for being where I was, nor wonder what I should say; my one idea was to keep the situation simple and free from embarrassment to any one; to be as completely a part of it as if I had been born there; to be helpful without being intrusive; to show no surprise whatever happened; above all to be cheerful, strong and bracing, not weakly sentimental.

As the day of opening approached an unexpected and valuable aide-de-camp appeared on the scene. An American girl of twelve or thirteen slipped in the front door one day when I was practicing children's songs, whereupon the following colloquy ensued.

"What's this place goin' to be?"

"A kindergarten."

"What's that?"

Explanation suited to the questioner, followed.

"Can I come in afternoons, on my way home from school and see what you do?"

"Certainly."

"Can I stay now and help round?"

"Yes indeed, I should be delighted."

"What's the bird for?"

"What are all birds for?" I answered, just to puzzle her.

"I dunno. What's the plants and flowers for?"

"What are all flowers for?" I demanded again.

"But I thought 'twas a school."

"It is, but it's a new kind."

"Where's the books?"

"The children are going to be under six; we shan't have reading and writing."

We sat down to work together, marking out and cutting brown paper envelopes for the children's sewing or weaving, binding colored prints with gold paper and putting them on the wall with thumb tacks, and arranging all the kindergarten materials tidily on the shelves of the closets. Next day was a holiday and she begged to come again. I consented and told her that she might bring a friend if she liked and we would lunch together.

"I guess not," she said, with just a hint of jealousy in her tone. "You and I get on so well that mebbe we'd be bothered with another girl messin' around, and she'd be one more to wash up for after lunch."

From that moment, the Corporal, as I called her, was a stanch ally and there was seldom a day in the coming years when she did not faithfully perform all sorts of unofficial duties, attaching herself passionately to my service with the devotion of a mother or an elder sister. She proved at the beginning a kind of travelling agent for the school haranguing mothers on the street corners and addressing the groups of curious children who gathered at the foot of the school steps.

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