

**WIGGIN KATE
SMITH**

MARM LISA

Kate Wiggin
Marm Lisa

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36323716

Marm Lisa:

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| I | 4 |
| II | 14 |
| III | 22 |
| IV | 32 |
| V | 40 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 42 |

Kate Douglas Smith Wiggin

Marm Lisa

I

EDEN PLACE

Eden Place was a short street running at right angles with Eden Square, a most unattractive and infertile triangle of ground in a most unattractive but respectable quarter of a large city.

It was called a square, not so much, probably, because it was triangular in shape, as because it was hardly large enough to be designated as a park. As to its being called 'Eden,' the origin of that qualifying word is enveloped in mystery; but it is likely that the enthusiastic persons who projected it saw visions and dreamed dreams of green benches under umbrageous trees, of a green wire fence, ever green, and of plots of blossoming flowers filling the grateful air with unaccustomed fragrance.

As a matter of fact, the trees had always been stunted and stubby, the plants had never been tended, and all the paint had been worn off the benches by successive groups of working-men out of work. As for the wire fence, it had been much used as a means of ingress and egress by the children of the neighbourhood, who preferred it to any of the gateways, which

they considered hopelessly unimaginative and commonplace, offering no resistance to the budding man of valour or woman of ambition.

Eden Place was frequented mostly by the children, who found it an admirable spot to squabble, to fight, and to dig up the hapless earth; and after them, by persons out of suits with fortune.

These (generally men) adorned the shabby benches at all times, sleeping, smoking, reading newspapers, or tracing uncertain patterns in the gravel with a stick,—patterns as uncertain and aimless as themselves. There were fewer women, because the unemployed woman of this class has an old-fashioned habit, or instinct, of seeking work by direct assault; the method of the male being rather to sit on a bench and discuss the obstacles, the injustices, and the unendurable insults heaped by a plutocratic government in the path of the honest son of toil.

The corner house of Eden Place was a little larger than its neighbours in the same row. Its side was flanked by a sand-lot, and a bay window, with four central panes of blue glass, was the most conspicuous feature of its architecture. In the small front yard was a microscopic flower-bed; there were no flowers in it, but the stake that held up a stout plant in the middle was surmounted by a neat wooden sign bearing the inscription, 'No Smoking on these Premises.' The warning seemed superfluous, as no man standing in the garden could have put his pipe in his mouth without grazing either the fence or the house, but the owner of the 'premises' possibly wished to warn the visitor at the

very threshold.

All the occupied houses in Eden Place were cheerful and hospitable in their appearance, and were marked by an air of liveliness and good-fellowship. Bed linen hung freely from all the windows, for there was no hard and fast law about making up beds at any special hour, though a remnant of superstition still existed that it was a good thing to make up a bed before you slept in it. There were more women on their respective front steps, and fewer in their respective kitchens, in Eden Place than in almost any other locality in the city. That they lived for the most part in close and friendly relations could be seen from the condition of the fences between the front yards, whose upper rails fairly sagged with the weight of gossip.

One woman, living in the middle of the row, evidently possessed somewhat different views, for she had planted vines on each of her division fences, rented her parlour to a lodger who only slept there, kept all her front curtains drawn, and stayed in the hack of her house. Such retribution as could legally be wreaked upon this offensive and exclusive person was daily administered by her two neighbours, who stood in their doors on either side and conversed across her house and garden with much freedom and exuberance. They had begged the landlord to induce her to take up her abode elsewhere; but as she was the only tenant who paid her rent regularly, he refused to part with her.

Any one passing the 'No Smoking' sign and entering the front door of Mrs. Grubb's house, on the corner, would have turned

off the narrow uncarpeted hall into the principal room, and, if he were an observing person, would have been somewhat puzzled by its appearance. There were seven or eight long benches on one side, yet it had not the slightest resemblance to a schoolroom.

The walls were adorned with a variety of interesting objects. There was a chart showing a mammoth human hand, the palm marked with myriads of purple lines. There were two others displaying respectively the interior of the human being in the pink-and-white purity of total abstinence, and the same interior after years of intemperance had done their fatal work; a most valuable chart this last, and one that had quenched the thirst of many a man.

The words '*Poverty Must Go*' were wrought in evergreen letters over the bay window, and various texts were printed in red and black and tacked to the wall in prominent places. These were such as—

'To be a Flesh-Eater is to be a Shedder of Blood and a Destroyer of God's Innocent Creatures.'

'Now that Man has Begun to Ascend in the Scale of Being, let Woman Reach Down a Strong, Tender Hand and Aid him in his Struggle for Moral and Spiritual Elevation.'

'Let the Pleasure Field be as Large as Possible. Pains and Fears Lessen Growth.'

'I Believe that to Burden, to Bond, to Tax, to Tribute, to Impoverish, to Grind, to Pillage, to Oppress, to Afflict, to Plunder, to Vampire the Life Labouring to Create Wealth is the

Unpardonable Sin.

Over the mantel-shelf was a seaweed picture in a frame of shells, bearing the inscription, '*Unity Hall, Meeting-Place of the Order of Present Perfection.*' On a table, waiting to be hung in place, was an impressive sort of map about four feet square.

This, like many of the other ornaments in the room, was a trifle puzzling, and seemed at first, from its plenitude of coloured spots, to be some species of moral propaganda in a state of violent eruption. It proved, however, on closer study, to be an ingenious pictorial representation of the fifty largest cities of the world, with the successful establishment of various regenerating ideas indicated by coloured discs of paper neatly pasted on the surface. The key in the right-hand corner read—

| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Temperance | Blue. |
| Single Tax | Green. |
| Cremation | Orange. |
| Abolition of War | Red. |
| Vegetarianism | Purple. |
| Hypnotism | Yellow. |
| Dress Reform | Black. |
| Social Purity | Blush Rose. |
| Theosophy | Silver. |
| Religious Liberty | Magenta. |
| Emancipation of Woman | Crushed Strawberry. |

A small gold star, added to the coloured spot, hovering

over the name of a city, was explained, in the lower left-hand corner, as denoting the fact that the Eldorado face-powder was exclusively used there, and that S. Cora Grubb was the sole agent for the Pacific coast.

Joseph's coat faded into insignificance in comparison with the city of Mrs. Grubb's present residence, which appeared to be a perfect hot-bed of world-saving ideas, and was surrounded by such a halo of spots that it would have struck the unregenerate observer as an undesirable place in which to live, unless one wished to be broken daily on the rack of social progress.

This front room was Mrs. Grubb's only parlour. The seven benches were rather in the way and seemingly unnecessary, as the lady attended meetings morning, noon, and night in halls hired for that purpose; but they gave her a feeling of security, as, in case one of her less flourishing societies should be ejected from its hall, or in case she should wake up in the middle of the night and want to hold a meeting of any club when all the halls were closed, the benches in the parlour would make it possible without a moment's loss of time.

The room connecting with this was the family banquet-hall and kitchen in one, and as Mrs. Grubb's opinions on diet were extremely advanced, it amply served the purpose.

There were three bedrooms upstairs, and the whole establishment was rather untidy in its aspect; but, though it might have been much cleaner, it is only fair to say that it might also have been much dirtier.

The house was deserted. The only sound came from the back yard, and it was the echo of children's voices. It was not at all a merry prattle; it was a steady uproar interrupted by occasional shrieks and yells, a clatter of falling blocks, beatings of a tin pan, a scramble of feet, a tussle, with confusion of blows and thumps, and then generally a temporary lull in the proceedings, evidently brought about by some sort of outside interference. If you had pushed open the wire door, you would have seen two children of four or five years disporting themselves in a sand-heap. One was a boy and one a girl; and though they were not at all alike in feature or complexion, there was an astonishing resemblance between them in size, in figure, in voice, in expression, and, apparently, in disposition.

Sitting on a bench, watching them as a dog watches its master's coat, was a girl of some undeterminable age,—perhaps of ten or twelve years. She wore a shapeless stout gingham garment, her shoes were many sizes too large for her, and the laces were dangling. Her nerveless hands and long arms sprawled in her lap as if they had no volition in them. She sat with her head slightly drooping, her knees apart, and her feet aimlessly turned in. Her lower lip hung a little, but only a little, loosely. She looked neither at earth nor at sky, but straight at the two belligerents, with whose bloodthirsty play she was obliged to interfere at intervals. She held in her lap a doll made of a roll of brown paper, with a waist and a neck indicated by gingham strings. Pieces of ravelled rope were pinned on the head part, but there was no other attempt to

assist the imagination. She raised her dull eyes; they seemed to hold in their depths a knowledge of aloofness from the happier world, and their dumb sorrow pierced your very heart, while it gave you an irresistible sense of aversion. She smiled, but the smile only gave you a new thrill; it was vacant and had no joy in it, rather an uncommunicable grief. As she sat there with her battered doll, she was to the superficial eye repulsive, but to the eye that pierces externals she was almost majestic in her mysterious loneliness and separation.

The steam-whistle of a factory near by blew a long note for twelve o'clock, and she rose from her bench, took the children by the hand, and dragged them, kindly but firmly, up the steps into the kitchen. She laid her doll under a towel, but, with a furtive look at the boy, rolled it in a cloth and tucked it under her skirt at the waist-line. She then washed the children's faces, tied on their calico bibs, and pushed them up to the pine table. While they battered the board and each other with spoons and tin mugs, she went automatically to a closet, took a dish of cold porridge and turned it into three bowls, poured milk over it, spread three thick slices of wheat bread with molasses from a cup, and sat down at the table. After the simple repast was over, she led the still reluctant (constitutionally reluctant) twins up the staircase and put them, shrieking, on a bed; left the room, locking the door behind her in a perfunctory sort of way as if it were an everyday occurrence, crouched down on the rug outside, and, leaning her head back against the wall, took her doll from under her skirt,

for this was her playtime, her hour of ease.

Poor little 'Marm Lisa,' as the neighbours called her! She had all the sorrows and cares of maternity with none of its compensating joys.

II

MISTRESS MARY'S GARDEN

“Mistress Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?”

“With silver bells and cockle shells,
And little maids all in a row.”

Mistress Mary's Garden did grow remarkably well, and it was wonderfully attractive considering the fact that few persons besides herself saw anything but weeds in it.

She did not look in the least a 'contrary' Miss Mary, as she stood on a certain flight of broad wooden steps on a sunny morning; yet she was undoubtedly having her own way and living her own life in spite of remonstrances from bevy of friends, who saw no shadow of reason or common-sense in her sort of gardening. It would have been foolish enough for a young woman with a small living income to cultivate roses or violets or lavender, but this would at least have been poetic, while the arduous tilling of a soil where the only plants were little people 'all in a row' was something beyond credence.

The truth about Mistress Mary lay somewhere in the *via media* between the criticisms of her sceptical friends and the encomiums of her enthusiastic admirers. In forsaking society

temporarily she had no rooted determination to forsake it eternally, and if the incense of love which her neophytes for ever burned at her shrine savoured somewhat of adoration, she disarmed jealousy by frankly avowing her unworthiness and lack of desire to wear the martyr's crown. Her happiness in her chosen vocation made it impossible, she argued, to regard her as a person worthy of canonisation; though the neophytes were always sighing to

‘have that little head of hers
Painted upon a background of pale gold.’

She had been born with a capacity for helping lame dogs over stiles; accordingly, her pathway, from a very early age, had been bestrewn with stiles, and processions of lame dogs ever limping towards them. Her vocation had called her so imperiously that disobedience was impossible. It is all very well if a certain work asks one in a quiet and courteous manner to come and do it, when one has time and inclination; but it is quite another matter if it coaxes one so insistently that one can do nothing else properly, and so succumbs finally to the persuasive voice. Still, the world must be mothered somehow, and there are plenty of women who lack the time or the strength, the gift or the desire, the love or the patience, to do their share. This gap seems to be filled now and then by some inspired little creature like Mistress Mary, with enough potential maternity to mother an orphan asylum; too

busy, too absorbed, too radiantly absent-minded to see a husband in any man, but claiming every child in the universe as her very own. There was never anywhere an urchin so dirty, so ragged, so naughty, that it could not climb into Mistress Mary's lap, and from thence into her heart. The neophytes partook of her zeal in greater or less degree, and, forsaking all probability of lovers (though every one of them was young and pretty), they tied on their white aprons and clave only unto her. Daily intercourse with a couple of hundred little street Arabs furnished a field for the practice of considerable feminine virtue, and in reality the woman's kingdom at the top of the broad wooden steps was a great 'culture engine' of spiritual motherhood.

It certainly was a very merry place, and if its presiding geniuses were engaged in conscious philanthropy, the blighting hallmark was conspicuous by its absence. Peals of laughter rang through the rooms; smiling faces leaned from the upstairs windows, bowing greeting to the ashman, the scissors-grinder, the Italian and Chinese vegetable-vendors, the rag-sack-and-bottle man, and the other familiar figures of the neighbourhood.

It was at the end of a happy, helpful day that Mistress Mary stood in the front door and looked out over her kingdom.

There was a rosy Swedish girl sitting on the floor of a shop window opposite and washing the glass. She had moved the fresh vegetables aside and planted herself in the midst of them.

There she sat among the cabbages and turnips and other sweet things just out of the earth; piles of delicate green lettuce buds,

golden carrots bursting into feathery tops, ruddy beets, and pink-checked. It was pretty to see the honest joy of her work and the interest of her parted lips, when, after polishing the glass, it shone as crystal clear as her own eyes. A milkman stopping to look at her (and small wonder that he did) poured nearly a quart of cream on the ground, and two children ran squabbling under the cart to see if they could catch the drippings in their mouths. They were Atlantic and Pacific Simonson with Marm Lisa, as usual, at their heels. She had found her way to this corner twice of late, because things happened there marvellous enough to stir even her heavy mind. There was a certain flight of narrow, rickety steps leading to a rickety shanty, and an adjacent piece of fence with a broad board on top. Flower-pots had once stood there, but they were now lying on the ground below, broken into fragments. Marm Lisa could push the twins up to this vantage-ground, and crawl up after them. Once ensconced, if they had chosen the right time of day, interesting events were sure to be forthcoming. In a large playground within range of vision, there were small children, as many in number as the sands of the seashore. At a given moment, a lovely angel with black hair and a scarlet apron would ring a large bell. Simultaneously, a lovely angel with brown hair and a white apron would fly to the spot, and the children would go through a mysterious process like the swarming of bees around a queen. Slowly, reluctantly, painfully, the swarm settled itself into lines in conformance with some hidden law or principle unknown to Marm Lisa. Then, when comparative order had been evolved

from total chaos, the most beautiful angel of all would appear in a window; and the reason she always struck the onlookers as a being of beauty and majesty was partly, perhaps, because her head seemed to rise from a cloud of white (which was in reality only a fichu of white mull), and partly because she always wore a slender fillet of steel to keep back the waves of her fair hair. It had a little point in front, and when the sun shone on its delicate, fine-cut prisms it glittered like a halo. After the appearance of this heavenly apparition the endless lines of little people wended their way into the building, and enchanting strains of music were wafted through the open windows, supplemented sometimes by the inspiring rattle of drums and the blare of instruments hitherto indissolubly associated with street parades.

Who? Why? Whence? Whither? What for? These were some of the questions that assailed Marm Lisa's mind, but in so incoherent a form that she left them, with all other questions, unanswered. Atlantic and Pacific were curious, too, but other passions held greater sway with them; for when the children disappeared and the music ceased, they called loudly for more, and usually scratched and pinched Marm Lisa as they were lifted down from the fence; not seeing daily how anybody else could be held answerable for the cessation of the entertainment, and scratches and pinches being the only remedial agencies that suggested themselves.

On this particular occasion there were no bells, no music, and no mysterious swarming; but the heavenly apparition sat on

the broad steps. Yes, it was she! Blue-grey eyes with darker lashes sweeping the warm ivory of her cheeks, sweet true lips for ever parting in kind words, the white surplice and apron, and the rememberable steel fillet. She had a little child in her lap (she generally had, by the way), and there were other tots clinging fondly to her motherly skirts. Marm Lisa stood at the foot of the steps, a twin glued to each side. She stared at Mistress Mary with open-mouthed wonder not unmixed with admiration.

‘That same odd child,’ thought Mary. ‘I have seen her before, and always with those two little vampires hanging to her skirts. She looks a trifle young to have such constant family cares; perhaps we had better “lend a hand.”’

‘Won’t you come in?’ she asked, with a smile that would have drawn a sane person up the side of a precipice.

Atlantic turned and ran, but the other two stood their ground. ‘Won’t you come up and see us?’ she repeated. ‘There are some fishes swimming in a glass house; come and look at them.’

Marm Lisa felt herself dragged up the steps as by invisible chains, and even Pacific did not attempt to resist the irresistible.

Atlantic, finding himself deserted by his comrades, gave a yell of baffled rage, and scrambled up the steps after them. But his tears dried instantly at the sight of the room into which they were ushered; as large as any of the halls in which Aunt Cora spent her days, and how much more beautiful! They roved about, staring at the aquarium, and gazing at the rocking-horse, the piano, the drum, the hanging gardens, with speechless astonishment.

Lisa shambled at their heels, looking at nothing very long; and when Rhoda (one of the neophytes), full of sympathy at the appearance of the wild, forlorn, unkempt trio, sat herself down on a sofa and gathered them about a wonderful picture-book, Mistress Mary's keen eyes saw that Lisa's gaze wandered in a few minutes. Presently she crept over the floor towards a table, and, taking a string from it, began to blow it to and fro as it hung from her fingers. Rhoda's glance followed Mary's; but it was only a fleeting one, for the four eyes of the twins were riveted on hers with devouring eagerness, while they waited for her explanation of the pictures. At the end of half an hour, in which the children had said little or nothing, they had contrived to reveal so many sorrowful and startling details of their mental, moral, and physical endowment, that Mistress Mary put on her hat.

'I will go home with them,' she said. 'There is plenty of work here for somebody; I could almost hope that it won't prove ours.'

'It will,' replied Rhoda, with a stifled sigh. 'There is an old Eastern legend about the black camel that comes and lies down before the door of him upon whom Heaven is going to lay her chastening hand. Every time I have seen that awful trio on the fence-top, they were fairly surrounded by black camels in my imagination. Mistress Mary, I am not sure but that, in self-defence, we ought to become a highly specialised *Something*. We are now a home, a mother, a nursery, a labour bureau, a divorce court, a registry of appeals, a soup kitchen, an advisory hoard,

and a police force. If we take *her*, what shall we be?’

‘We will see first where she belongs,’ smiled Mary. (Nobody could help smiling at Rhoda.) ‘Somebody has been neglecting his or her duty. If we can make that somebody realise his delinquencies, all the better, for the responsibility will not be ours. If we cannot, why, the case is clear enough and simple enough in my mind. We certainly do not want “*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*” written over this, of all doors.’

Rhoda’s hand went up to an imaginary cap in a gesture of military obedience. ‘Very well, my general. I fly to prepare weapons with which to fight Satan. You, of course, will take *her*; oh, my dear, I’m almost afraid you oughtn’t! I choose the bullet-headed blonde twin who says his name is “Lanty,” and reserve for Edith the bursting-with-fat brunette twin who calls herself “Ciffy.” Edith’s disciplinary powers have been too much vaunted of late; we shall see if Ciffy ruffles her splendid serenity.’

III

A FAMILY POLYGON

Mrs. Grubb's family circle was really not a circle at all; it was rather a polygon—a curious assemblage of distinct personages.

There was no unity in it, no membership one of another. It was four ones, not one four. If some gatherer of statistics had visited the household, he might have described it thus:—

Mrs. S. Cora Grubb, widow, aged forty years.

'Alisa Bennett, feeble-minded, aged ten or twelve years.

'Atlantic and Pacific Simonson, twins, aged four years.'

The man of statistics might seek in vain for some principle of attraction or cohesion between these independent elements; but no one who knew Mrs. Grubb would have been astonished at the sort of family that had gathered itself about her. Queer as it undoubtedly was at this period, it had, at various times, been infinitely queerer. There was a certain memorable month, shortly after her husband's decease, when Mrs. Grubb allowed herself to be considered as a compensated hostess, though the terms 'landlady' and 'boarder' were never uttered in her hearing.

She hired a Chinese cook, who slept at home; cleared out, for the use of Lisa and the twins, a small storeroom in which she commonly kept Eldorado face-powder; and herself occupied a sofa in the apartment of a friend of humanity in the next street.

These arrangements enabled her to admit an experimenter on hypnotism, a mental healer who had been much abused by the orthodox members of her cult, and was evolving a method of her own, an ostensible delegate to an Occidental Conference of Religions, and a lady agent for a flexible celluloid undershirt. For a few days Mrs. Grubb found the society of these persons very stimulating and agreeable; but before long the hypnotist proved to be an unscrupulous gentleman, who hypnotised the mental healer so that she could not heal, and the Chinese cook so that he could not cook. When, therefore, the delegate departed suddenly in company with the celluloid-underwear lady, explaining by a hurried postal card that they would 'remit' from Chicago, she evicted the other two boarders, and retired again to private life.

This episode was only one of Mrs. Grubb's many divagations, for she had been a person of advanced ideas from a comparatively early age. It would seem that she must have inherited a certain number of 'views,' because no human being could have amassed, in a quarter of a century, as many as she held at the age of twenty-five. She had then stood up with Mr. Charles Grubb, before a large assembly, in the presence of which they promised to assume and continue the relation of husband and wife so long as it was mutually agreeable. As a matter of fact it had not been mutually agreeable to Mr. Grubb more than six months, but such was the nobility of his character that he never disclosed his disappointment nor claimed any immunity from the responsibilities of the marriage state. Mr. Grubb was a timid,

conventional soul, who would have given all the testimony of all the witnesses of his wedding ceremony for the mere presence of a single parson; but he imagined himself in love with Cora Wilkins, and she could neither be wooed nor won by any of the beaten paths that led to other women. He foolishly thought that the number of her convictions would grow less after she became a wife, little suspecting the fertility of her mind, which put forth a new explanation of the universe every day, like a strawberry plant that devotes itself so exclusively to 'runners' that it has little vigour left for producing fruit.

The town in New York where they lived proving to be too small, narrow, and bigoted to hold a developing soul like Mrs. Grubb's, she persuaded her husband to take passage for California, where the climate might be supposed more favourable to the growth of saving ideas. Mr. Grubb would, of course, be obliged to relinquish his business, but people could buy and sell anywhere, she thought, and as for her, she wanted nothing but unlimited space in which to expand.

There was money enough for an economical journey and a month or two of idleness afterwards; and as Mrs. Grubb believed everything in the universe was hers, if she only chose to claim it, the question of finances never greatly troubled her. They sailed for the golden West, then, this ill-assorted couple, accompanied by Mrs. Grubb's only sister, who had been a wife, was now a widow, and would shortly become a mother. The interesting event occurred much sooner than had been anticipated. The

ship became the birthplace of the twins, who had been most unwelcome when they were thought about as one, and entirely offensive when found to be two. The mother did not long survive the shock of her surprise and displeasure, and after naming the babies Atlantic and Pacific, and confiding them distinctly to the care of Mr., not Mrs., Grubb, she died, and was buried at sea, not far from Cape Horn. Mrs. Cora enjoyed at first the dramatic possibilities of her position on the ship, where the baby orphans found more than one kindly, sentimental woman ready to care for them; but there was no permanent place in her philosophy for a pair of twins who entered existence with a concerted shriek, and continued it for ever afterwards, as if their only purpose in life was to keep the lungs well inflated. Her supreme wish was to be freed from the carking cares of the flesh, and thus for ever ready to wing her free spirit in the pure ether of speculation.

You would hardly suppose that the obscure spouse of Mrs. Grubb could wash and dress the twins, prepare their breakfast, go to his work, come home and put them to bed, four or five days out of every seven in the week; but that is what he did, accepting it as one phase of the mysterious human comedy (or was it tragedy?) in which he played his humble part.

Mrs. Grubb was no home spirit, no goddess of the hearth. She graced her family board when no invitation to refresh herself elsewhere had been proffered, and that she generally slept in her own bed is as strong a phrase as can be written on the subject. If she had been born in Paris, at the proper

time, she would have been the leader of a salon; separated from that brilliant destiny by years, by race, and by imperious circumstance, she wielded the same sort of sceptre in her own circumscribed but appreciative sphere. No social occasion in Eden Place was complete without Mrs. Grubb. With her (and some light refreshment), a party lacked nothing; without her, even if other conditions were favourable, it seemed a flat, stale, and unprofitable affair. Like Robin Adair,

‘She made the ball so fine;
She made th’ occasion shine.’

Mrs. Grubb hanging on her front gate, duster in hand (she never conversed quite as well without it, and never did anything else with it), might have been a humble American descendant of Madame de Staël talking on the terrace at Coppet, with the famous sprig of olive in her fingers. She moved among her subjects like a barouche among express wagons, was heard after them as a song after sermons. That she did not fulfil the whole duty of woman did not occur to her fascinated constituents. There was always some duller spirit who could slip in and ‘do the dishes,’ that Mrs. Grubb might grace a *conversazione* on the steps or at the gate. She was not one of those napkin people who hide their talents, or who immure their lights under superincumbent bushels. Whatever was hers was everybody’s, for she dispensed her favours with a liberal hand. She would never have permitted

a child to suffer for lack of food or bed, for she was not at heart an unkind woman. You could see that by looking at her vague, soft brown eyes,—eyes that never saw practical duties straight in front of them,—liquid, star-gazing, vision-seeing eyes, that could never be focussed on any near object, such as a twin or a cooking-stove. Individuals never interested her; she cared for nothing but humanity, and humanity writ very large at that, so that once the twins nearly died of scarlatina while Mrs. Grubb was collecting money for the children of the yellow-fever sufferers in the South.

But Providence had an eye for Mr. Grubb's perplexities. It does not and cannot always happen, in a world like this, that vice is assisted to shirk, and virtue aided to do, its duty; but any man as marvellously afflicted as Mr. Grubb is likely to receive not only spiritual consolation, but miraculous aid of some sort.

The spectacle of the worthy creature as he gave the reluctant twins their occasional bath, and fed them on food regularly prescribed by Mrs. Grubb, and almost as regularly rejected by them, would have melted the stoniest heart. And who was the angel of deliverance? A little vacant-eyed, half-foolish, almost inarticulate child, whose feeble and sickly mother was dragging out a death-in-life existence in a street near by. The child saw Mr. Grubb wheeling the twins in a double perambulator: followed them home; came again, and then again, and then again; hung about the door, fell upon a dog that threatened to bite them, and drove it away howling; often stood over the perambulator with a sunshade for three hours at a time, without moving a muscle;

and adored Mr. Grubb with a consuming passion. There was no special reason for this sentiment, but then Alisa Bennett was not quite a reasonable being. Mr. Grubb had never been adored before in his life; and to say the truth, his personality was not winning. He had a pink, bald head, pale blue eyes, with blond tufts for eyebrows, and a pointed beard dripping from his chin, which tended to make him look rather like an invalid goat. But as animals are said to have an eye for spirits, children have an eye for souls, which is far rarer than an eye for beautiful surfaces.

Mr. Grubb began by loathing Alisa, then patiently suffered her, then pitied, then respected, then loved her. Mrs. Grubb seldom saw her, and objected to nothing by which she herself was relieved of care. So Lisa grew to be first a familiar figure in the household, and later an indispensable one.

Poor Mrs. Bennett finally came to the end of things temporal. ‘Dying is the first piece of good luck I ever had,’ she said to Mr. Grubb. ‘If it turns out that I’ve brought a curse upon an innocent creature, I’d rather go and meet my punishment half-way than stay here and see it worked out to the end.’

“In my Father’s house are many mansions,” stammered Mr. Grubb, who had never before administered spiritual consolation.

She shook her head. ‘If I can only get rid of this world, it’s all I ask,’ she said; ‘if the other one isn’t any better, why, it can’t be any worse! Feel under the mattress and you’ll find money enough to last three or four years. It’s all she’ll ever get, for she hasn’t a soul now to look to for help. That’s the way we human beings arrange

things,—we, or the Lord, or the Evil One, or whoever it is; we bring a puzzle into the world, and then leave it for other people to work out—if they can! Who'll work out this one? Who'll work out this one? Perhaps she'll die before the money's gone; let's hope for the best.'

'Don't take on like that!' said Mr. Grubb despairingly,—'don't!

Pray for resignation, can't you?'

'Pray!' she exclaimed scornfully. 'Thank goodness, I've got enough self-respect left not to pray!—Yes, I must pray, I *must* . . . Oh, God! I do not ask forgiveness for him or for myself; I only beg that, in some way I cannot see, we may be punished, and she spared!'

And when the stricken soul had fled from her frail body, they who came to prepare her for the grave looked at her face and found it shining with hope.

It was thus that poor little Alisa Bennett assumed maternal responsibilities at the age of ten, and gained her sobriquet of 'Marm Lisa.' She grew more human, more tractable, under Mr. Grubb's fostering care; but that blessed martyr had now been dead two years, and she began to wear her former vacuous look, and to slip back into the past that was still more dreadful than the present.

It seemed to Mrs. Grubb more than strange that she, with her desire for freedom, should be held to earth by three children not flesh of her flesh—and such children. The father of the twins had been a professional pugilist, but even that fact could never

sufficiently account for Pacific Simonson. She had apparently inherited instincts from tribes of warlike ancestors who skulked behind trees with battle-axes, and no one except her superior in size and courage was safe from her violent hand. She had little, wicked, dark eyes and crimson, swollen cheeks, while Atlantic had flaxen hair, a low forehead, and a square jaw. He had not Pacific's ingenuity in conceiving evil; but when it was once conceived, he had a dogged persistency in carrying it out that made him worthy of his twin.

Yet with all these crosses Mrs. Grubb was moderately cheerful, for her troubles were as nebulous as everything else to her mind. She intended to invent some feasible plan for her deliverance sooner or later, but she was much more intent upon development than deliverance, and she never seemed to have the leisure to break her shackles. Nothing really mattered much. Her body might be occasionally in Eden Place, but her soul was always in a hired hall. She delighted in joining the New Order of Something,—anything, so long as it was an Order and a new one,—and then going with a selected committee to secure a lodge-room or a hall for meetings. She liked to walk up the dim aisle with the janitor following after her, and imagine brilliant lights (paid for by collection), a neat table and lamp and pitcher of iced water, and herself in the chair as president or vice-president, secretary or humble trustee. There was that about her that precluded the possibility of simple membership. She always rose into office the week after she had joined any society. If

there was no office vacant, then some bold spirit (generally male) would create one, that Mrs. Grubb might not wither in the privacy of the ranks. Before the charter members had fully learned the alphabet of their order and had gained a thorough understanding of the social revolution it was destined to work, Mrs. Grubb had mastered the whole scheme and was unfolding it before large classes for the study of the higher theory. The instant she had a tale to tell she presumed the 'listening earth' to be ready to hear it. The new Order became an old one in course of time, and, like the nautilus. Mrs. Grubb outgrew her shell and built herself a more stately chamber. Another clue to the universe was soon forthcoming, for all this happened in a city where it is necessary only for a man to open his lips and say, 'I am a prophet', and followers flock unto him as many in number as the stars. She was never disturbed that the last clue had brought her nowhere; she followed the new one as passionately as the old, and told her breathless pupils that their feet must not be weary, for they were treading the path of progress; that these apparently fruitless excursions into the domain of knowledge all served as so many milestones in their glorious ascent of the mountain of truth.

IV

MARM LISA IS TRANSPLANTED

It was precisely as Rhoda thought and feared. The three strange beings who had drifted within Mistress Mary's reach had proved to belong to her simply because they did not belong to anybody else. They did not know their names, the streets in which they lived, or anything else about which they were questioned, but she had followed them home to the corner house of Eden Place, although she failed, on the occasion of that first visit, to find Mrs. Grubb within. There was, however, a very voluble person next door, who supplied a little information and asked considerable more. Mrs. Sylvester told Mary that Mrs. Grubb was at that moment presiding over a meeting of the Kipling Brothers in Unity Hall, just round the corner.

'They meet Tuesdays and Thursdays at four o'clock,' she said, 'and you'd find it a real treat if you like to step over there.'

'Thank you, I am rather busy this afternoon,' replied Mary.

'Do you wish to leave any name or message? Did you want a setting?'

'A sitting?' asked Mary vaguely. 'Oh no, thank you; I merely wished to see Mrs. Grubb—is that the name?'

'That's it, and an awful grievance it is to her—Mrs. S. Cora Grubb. You have seen it in the newspapers, I suppose; she

has a half column "ad." in the *Sunday Observer* once a month.

Wouldn't you like your nails attended to? I have a perfectly splendid manicure stopping with me.'

'No, thank you. I hoped to see Mrs. Grubb, to ask if her children can come and spend the morning with me to-morrow.'

'Oh, that'll be all right; they're not her children; she doesn't care where they go; they stay in the back yard or on the sand-lot most of the time: she's got something more important to occupy her attention. Say, I hope you'll excuse me, but you look a little pale. If you were intending to get some mental healing from Mrs. Grubb, why, I can do it; she found I had the power, and she's handed all her healing over to me. It's a new method, and is going to supersede all the others, we think. My hours are from ten to twelve, and two to four, but I could take you evenings, if you're occupied during the day. My cures are almost as satisfactory as Mrs. Grubb's now, though I haven't been healing but six months last Wednesday.'

'Fortunately I am very well and strong,' smiled Mistress Mary.

'Yes, that's all right, but you don't know how soon sickness may overtake you, if you haven't learned to cast off fear and practise the denials. Those who are living in error are certain to be affected by it sooner or later, unless they accept the new belief. Why don't you have your nails done, now you're here?

My manicure has the highest kind of a polish,—she uses pumice powder and the rose of Peru lustre; you ought to try her; by taking twenty tickets you get your single treatments for thirty-

five cents apiece. Not this afternoon? Well, some other time, then. It will be all right about the children and very good of you to want them. Of course you can't teach them anything, if that's your idea. Belief in original sin is all against my theories, but I confess I can't explain the twins without it. I sometimes wonder I can do any healing with them in the next house throwing off evil influences. I am treating Lisa by suggestion, but she hasn't responded any yet. Call again, won't you? Mrs. Grubb is in from seven to eight in the morning, and ten-thirty to eleven-thirty in the evening. You ought to know her; we think there's nobody like Mrs. Grubb; she has a wonderful following, and it's growing all the time; I took this house to be near her. Good afternoon. By the way, if you or any of your friends should require any vocal culture, you couldn't do better than take of Madame Goldmarker in No. 17. She can make anybody sing, they say. I'm taking of her right along, and my voice has about doubled in size. I ought to be leading the Kipling Brothers now, but my patients stayed so late to-day I didn't get a good start. Good afternoon.'

The weeks wore on, and the children were old friends when Mary finally made Mrs. Grubb's acquaintance; but in the somewhat hurried interviews she had with that lady at first, she never seemed able to establish the kind of relation she desired.

The very atmosphere of her house was chaotic, and its equally chaotic mistress showed no sign of seeking advice on any point.

'Marm Lisa could hardly be received in the schools,' Mary told the listening neophytes one afternoon when they were all

together. "There ought of course to be a special place for her and such as she, somewhere, and people are beginning to see and feel the importance of it here; but until the thought and hope become a reality the State will simply put the child in with the idiots and lunatics, to grow more and more wretched, more hopeless, more stupid, until the poor little light is quenched in utter darkness.

There is hope for her now, I am sure of it. If Mrs. Grubb's neighbours have told me the truth, any physical malady that may be pursuing her is in its very first stages; for, so far as they know in Eden Place, where one doesn't look for exact knowledge, to be sure, she has had but two or three attacks ("dizziness" or "faintness" they called them) in as many years. She was very strange and intractable just before the last one, and much clearer in her mind afterwards. They think her worse of late, and have advised Mrs. Grubb to send her to an insane asylum if she doesn't improve. She would probably have gone there long ago if she had not been such a valuable watch-dog for the twins; but she does not belong there,—we have learned that from the doctors.

They say decisively that she is curable, but that she needs very delicate treatment. My opinion is that we have a lovely bit of rescue-work sent directly into our hands in the very nick of time.

All those in favour of opening the garden gates a little wider for Marm Lisa respond by saying "Ay!"

There was a shout from the neophytes that shook the very rafters—such a shout that Lisa shuttled across the room, and, sitting down on a stool at Mistress Mary's feet, looked up at her

with a dull, uncomprehending smile. Why were those beloved eyes full of tears? She could not be displeased, for she had been laughing a moment before. She hardly knew why, but Mistress Mary's wet eyes tortured her; she made an ejaculation of discomfort and resentment, and taking the corner of her apron wiped her new friend's face softly, gazing at her with a dumb sorrow until the smile came back; then she took out her string and her doll and played by herself as contentedly as usual.

It was thus that heaven began to dawn on poor Marm Lisa.

At first only a physical heaven: temporary separation from Atlantic and Pacific; a chair to herself in a warm, sunshiny room; beautiful, bright, incomprehensible things hanging on the walls; a soft gingham apron that her clumsy fingers loved to touch; brilliant bits of colour and entrancing waves of sound that roused her sleeping senses to something like pleasure; a smile meeting her eyes when she looked up—oh! she knew a smile—God lets love dwell in these imprisoned spirits! By-and-by all these new sensations were followed by thoughts, or something akin to them.

Her face wore a brooding, puzzled look, 'Poor little soul, she is feeling her growing-pains!' said Mistress Mary. It was a mind sitting in a dim twilight where everything seems confused. The physical eye appears to see, but the light never quite pierces the dimness nor reflects its beauty there. If the ears hear the song of birds, the cooing of babes, the heart-beat in the organ tone, then the swift little messengers that fly hither and thither in my mind and yours, carrying echoes of sweetness unspeakable, tread more

slowly here, and never quite reach the spirit in prison. A spirit in prison, indeed, but with one ray of sunlight shining through the bars,—a vision of duty. Lisa's weak memory had lost almost all trace of Mr. Grubb as a person but the old instinct of fidelity was still there in solution, and unconsciously influenced her actions.

The devotion that first possessed her when she beheld the twins as babies in the perambulator still held sway against all their evil actions. If they plunged into danger she plunged after them without a thought of consequences. There was, perhaps, no real heroism in this, for she saw no risks and counted no cost: this is what other people said, but Mistress Mary always thought Marm Lisa had in her the stuff out of which heroes and martyrs are made. She had never walked in life's sunny places; it had always been the valley of the shadow for her. She was surrounded by puzzles with never any answer to one of them, but if only she had comprehended the truth, it was these very puzzles that were her salvation. While her feeble mind stirred, while it wondered, brooded, suffered,—enough it did all these too seldom,—it kept itself alive, even if the life were only like the flickering of a candle. And now the candle might flicker, but it should never go out altogether, if half a dozen pairs of women's hands could keep it from extinction; and how patiently they were outstretched to shield the poor apology for a flame, and coax it into burning more brightly!

'Let the child choose her own special teacher,' said Mistress Mary; 'she is sure to have a strong preference.'

‘Then it will be you,’ laughed Helen.

‘Don’t be foolish; it may be any one of us and it will prove nothing in any case, save a fancy that we can direct to good use.

She seldom looks at anybody but you,’ said Edith.

‘That is true,’ replied Mary thoughtfully. ‘I think she is attracted by this glittering steel thing in my hair. I am going to weave it into Helen’s curly crop some day, and see whether she misses it or transfers her affection. I have made up my mind who is the best teacher for her, and whom she will chose.’

Rhoda gave a comical groan. ‘Don’t say it’s I,’ she pleaded. ‘I dread it. Please I am not good enough, I don’t know how; and besides, she gives me the creeps!’

Mistress Mary turned on Rhoda with a reproachful smile, saying, ‘You naughty Rhoda, with the brightest eyes, the swiftest feet, the nimblest fingers, the lightest heart among us all, why do you want to shirk?’

Mistress Mary had noted the fact that Lisa had refused to sit in an unpainted chair, but had dragged a red one from another room and ensconced herself in it, though it was uncomfortably small.

Now Rhoda was well named, for she was a rose of a girl, with damask cheeks that glowed like two Jacqueminot beauties. She was much given to aprons of scarlet linen, to collars and belts of red velvet, and she had a general air of being fresh, thoroughly alive, and in a state of dewy and perennial bloom. Mary was right in her surmise, and whenever she herself was out of Lisa’s sight or reach the child turned to Rhoda instinctively and obeyed

her implicitly.

V

HOW THE NEW PLANT GREW

‘Now, Rhoda dear,’ said Mistress Mary one day, when Lisa had become somewhat wonted to her new surroundings, ‘you are to fold your hands respectfully in your lap and I will teach you things,—things which you in your youth and inexperience have not thought about as yet. The other girls may listen, too, and catch the drippings of my wisdom. I really know little about the education of defective children, but, thank heaven, I can put two and two together, as Susan Nipper said. The general plan will be to train Lisa’s hands and speak to her senses in every possible way, since her organs of sense are within your reach, and those of thought are out of it. The hardest lesson for such a child to learn is the subordination of its erratic will to our normal ones. Lisa’s attention is the most hopeful thing about her and encourages me more than anything else. It is not as if there were no mental processes existing; they are there, but in a very enfeebled state. Of course she should have been under skilled teaching the six years, but, late as it is, we couldn’t think of giving up a child who can talk, use her right hand, dress herself, go upon errands, recognise colours, wash dishes; who is apparently neither vicious nor cunning, but who, on the contrary, has lived four years under the same roof with Mrs. S. Cora Grubb without

rebellion or violence or treachery! Why, dear girls, such a task, if it did not appeal to one on the moral, certainly would on the intellectual, side. Marm Lisa will teach us more in a year, you may be sure, than we shall teach her. Let us keep a record of our experiments; drop all materials that seem neither to give her sensations nor wake her discriminative power, and choose others that speak to her more clearly. Let us watch her closely, both to penetrate the secret of her condition and to protect the other children. What a joy, what a triumph to say to her some dear day, a few years hence, "You poor, motherless bairn, we have swept away the cobwebs of your dreams, given you back your will, put a clue to things in your hand: now go on and learn to live and be mistress of your own life under God!"

It was at such a moment, when Mary's voice trembled, and her eyes shone through a mist of tears like two victorious stars, that a hush fell upon the little group, and the spirit of the eternal child descended like a dove, its pure wings stirring the silence of each woman's heart. At such a moment, their daily work, with its round of harsh, unlovely, beautiful, discouraging, hopeful, helpful, heavenly duties, was transfigured, and so were they. The servant was transformed by the service, and the service by the servant. They were alone together, each heart knit to all the others by the close bond of a common vocation; and though a heretofore unknown experience, it seemed a natural one when Mistress Mary suddenly bent her head, and said softly:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.