

WIGGIN KATE SMITH

THE FLAG-RAISING

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| I | 5 |
| II | 9 |
| III | 12 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 13 |

Kate Douglas Wiggin

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I

A DIFFERENCE IN HEARTS

"I DON' know as I cal'lated to be the makin' of any child," Miranda had said as she folded Aurelia's letter and laid it in the light-stand drawer. "I s'posed of course Aurelia would send us the one we asked for, but it's just like her to palm off that wild young one on somebody else."

"You remember we said that Rebecca, or even Jenny might come, in case Hannah could n't," interposed Jane.

"I know we did, but we hadn't any notion it would turn out that way," grumbled Miranda.

"She was a mite of a thing when we saw her three years ago," ventured Jane; "she's had time to improve."

"And time to grow worse!"

"Won't it be kind of a privilege to put her on the right track?" asked Jane timidly.

"I don' know about the privilege part; it'll be considerable work, I guess. If her mother hasn't got her on the right track by now, she won't take to it herself all of a sudden."

This depressed and depressing frame of mind had lasted until the eventful day dawned on which Rebecca was to arrive.

"If she makes as much work after she comes as she has before, we might as well give up hope of ever gettin' any rest," sighed Miranda as she hung the dish towels on the barberry bushes at the side door.

"But we should have had to clean house, Rebecca or no Rebecca," urged Jane; "and I can't see why you've scrubbed and washed and baked as you have for that one child, nor why you've about bought out Watson's stock of dry goods."

"I know Aurelia if you don't," responded Miranda. "I've seen her house, and I've seen that batch o' children, wearin' one another's clothes and never carin' whether they had 'em on right side out or not; I know what they've had to live and dress on, and so do you. That child will like as not come here with a bundle o' things borrowed from the rest o' the family. She'll have Hannah's shoes and John's undershirts and Mark's socks most likely. I suppose she never had a thimble on her finger in her life, but she'll know the feelin' o' one before she's been here many days. I've bought a piece of unbleached muslin and a piece o' brown gingham for her to make up; that'll keep her busy. Of course she won't pick up anything after herself; she probably never saw a duster, and she'll be as hard to train into our ways as if she was a heathen."

"She'll make a dif'rence," acknowledged Jane, "but she may turn out more biddable than we think."

"She'll mind when she's spoken to, biddable or not," remarked Miranda with a shake of the last towel.

Miranda Sawyer had a heart, of course, but she had never used it for any other purpose than the pumping and circulating of blood. She was just, conscientious, economical, industrious; a regular attendant at church and Sunday-school, and a member of the State Missionary and Bible societies, but in the presence of all these chilly virtues you longed for one warm little fault, or lacking that, one likable failing, something to make you sure that she was thoroughly alive. She had never had any education other than that of the neighborhood district school, for her desires and ambitions had all pointed to the management of the house, the farm, and the dairy. Jane, on the other hand, had gone

to an academy, and also to a boarding-school for young ladies; so had Aurelia; and after all the years that had elapsed there was still a slight difference in language and in manner between the elder and the two younger sisters.

Jane, too, had had the inestimable advantage of a sorrow; not the natural grief at the loss of her aged father and mother, for she had been resigned to let them go; but something far deeper. She was engaged to marry young, Tom Carter, who had nothing to marry on, it is true, but who was sure to have, some time or other. Then the war broke out. Tom enlisted at the first call. Up to that time Jane had loved him with a quiet, friendly sort of affection, and had given her country a mild emotion of the same sort. But the strife, the danger, the anxiety of the time, set new currents of feeling in motion. Life became something other than the three meals a day, the round of cooking, washing, sewing, and churchgoing. Personal gossip vanished from the village conversation. Big things took the place of trifling ones,—sacred sorrows of wives and mothers, pangs of fathers and husbands, self-denials, sympathies, new desire to bear one another's burdens. Men and women grew fast in those days of the nation's trouble and danger, and Jane awoke from the vague dull dream she had hitherto called life to new hopes, new fears, new purposes. Then after a year's anxiety, a year when one never looked in the newspaper without dread and sickness of suspense, came the telegram saying that Tom was wounded; and without so much as asking Miranda's leave, she packed her trunk and started for the South. She was in time to hold Tom's hand through hours of pain; to show him for once the heart of a prim New England girl when it is ablaze with love and grief; to put her arms about him so that he could have a home to die in, and that was all;—all, but it served.

It carried her through weary months of nursing—nursing of other soldiers for Tom's dear sake; it sent her home a better woman; and though she had never left Riverboro in all the years that lay between, and had grown into the counterfeit presentment of her sister and of all other thin, spare, New England spinsters, it was something of a counterfeit, and underneath was still the faint echo of that wild heartbeat of her girlhood. Having learned the trick of beating and loving and suffering, the poor faithful heart persisted, although it lived on memories and carried on its sentimental operations mostly in secret.

"You're soft, Jane," said Miranda once; "you allers was soft, and you allers will be. If't wa'n't for me keeping you stiffened up, I b'lieve you'd leak out o' the house into the dooryard."

It was already past the appointed hour for Mr. Cobb and his coach to be lumbering down the street.

"The stage ought to be here," said Miranda, glancing nervously at the tall clock for the twentieth time. "I guess everything's done. I've tacked up two thick towels back of her washstand and put a mat under her slop-jar; but children are awful hard on furniture. I expect we sha'n't know this house a year from now." Jane's frame of mind was naturally depressed and timorous, having been affected by Miranda's gloomy presages of evil to come. The only difference between the sisters in this matter was that while Miranda only wondered how they could endure Rebecca, Jane had flashes of inspiration in which she wondered how Rebecca would endure them. It was in one of these flashes that she ran up the back stairs to put a vase of apple blossoms and a red tomato-pincushion on Rebecca's bureau.

The stage rumbled to the side door of the brick house, and Mr. Cobb handed Rebecca out like a real lady passenger. She alighted with great circumspection, put a bunch of flowers in her aunt Miranda's hand, and received her salute; it could hardly be called a kiss without injuring the fair name of that commodity. "You need n't 'a'bothered to bring flowers," remarked that gracious and tactful lady; "the garden's always full of 'em here when it comes time."

Jane then kissed Rebecca, giving a somewhat better imitation of the real thing than her sister.

"Put the trunk in the entry, Jeremiah, and we'll get it carried upstairs this afternoon," she said.

"I'll take it up for ye now, if ye say the word, girls."

"No, no; don't leave the horses; somebody'll be comin' past, and we can call 'em in."

"Well, good-by, Rebecca; good-day, Mirandy 'n' Jane. You've got a lively little girl there. I guess she'll be a first-rate company keeper."

Miss Sawyer shuddered openly at the adjective "lively" as applied to a child; her belief being that though children might be seen, if absolutely necessary, they certainly should never be heard if she could help it. "We're not much used to noise, Jane and me," she remarked acidly.

Mr. Cobb saw that he had spoken indiscreetly, but he was too unused to argument to explain himself readily, so he drove away, trying to think by what safer word than "lively" he might have described his interesting little passenger.

"I'll take you up and show you your room, Rebecca," Miss Miranda said. "Shut the mosquito nettin' door tight behind you, so's to keep the flies out; it ain't fly time yet, but I want you to start right; take your parcel along with you and then you won't have to come down for it; always make your head save your heels. Rub your feet on that braided rug; hang your hat and cape in the entry as you go past."

"It's my best hat," said Rebecca.

"Take it upstairs then and put it in the clothes-press; but I shouldn't 'a' thought you'd 'a' worn your best hat on the stage."

"It's my only hat," explained Rebecca. "My every-day hat was n't good enough to bring. Sister Fanny's going to finish it."

"Lay your parasol in the entry closet."

"Do you mind if I keep it in my room, please? It always seems safer."

"There ain't any thieves hereabouts, and if there was, I guess they wouldn't make for your sunshade; but come along. Remember to always go up the back way; we don't use the front stairs on account o' the carpet; take care o' the turn and don't ketch your foot; look to your right and go in. When you've washed your face and hands and brushed your hair you can come down, and by and by we'll unpack your trunk and get you settled before supper. Ain't you got your dress on hind side foremost?"

Rebecca drew her chin down and looked at the row of smoked pearl buttons running up and down the middle of her flat little chest. "Hind side foremost? Oh, I see! No, that's all right. If you have seven children you can't keep buttonin' and unbuttonin' 'em all the time—they have to do themselves. We're always buttoned up in front at our house. Mira's only three, but she's buttoned up in front, too."

Miranda said nothing as she closed the door, but her looks were more eloquent than words.

Rebecca stood perfectly still in the centre of the floor and looked about her. There was a square of oilcloth in front of each article of furniture and a drawn-in rug beside the single four poster, which was covered with a fringed white dimity counterpane.

Everything was as neat as wax, but the ceilings were much higher than Rebecca was accustomed to. It was a north room, and the window, which was long and narrow, looked out on the back buildings and the barn.

It was not the room, which was far more comfortable than Rebecca's own at Sunnybrook Farm, nor the lack of view, nor yet the long journey, for she was not conscious of weariness; it was not the fear of a strange place, for she adored new places and new sensations; it was because of some curious blending of uncomprehended emotions that Rebecca stood her beloved pink sunshade in the corner, tore off her best hat, flung it on the bureau with the porcupine quills on the under side, and stripping down the dimity spread, precipitated herself into the middle of the bed and pulled the counterpane over her head.

In a moment the door opened with a clatter of the latch.

Knocking was a refinement quite unknown in Riverboro, and if it had been heard of, it would never have been wasted on a child. Miss Miranda entered, and as her eye wandered about the vacant room, it fell upon a white and tempestuous ocean of counterpane, an ocean breaking into strange movements of wave and crest and billow.

"Rebecca!"

The tone in which the word was voiced gave it all the effect of having been shouted from the housetops.

A dark ruffled head and two frightened eyes appeared above the dimity spread.

"What are you layin' on your good bed in the daytime for, messin' up the feathers, and dirtyin' the comforter with your dusty boots?"

Rebecca rose guiltily. There seemed no excuse to make. Her offense was beyond explanation or apology.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Mirandy-something came over me; I don't know what."

"Well, if it comes over you very soon again we'll have to find out what 't is. Spread your bed up smooth this minute, for 'Bijah Flagg's bringin' your trunk upstairs, and I wouldn't let him see such a cluttered-up room for anything; he'd tell it all over town."

When Mr. Cobb had put up his horses that night he carried a kitchen chair to the side of his wife, who was sitting on the back porch.

"I brought a little Randall girl down on the stage from Maplewood to-day, mother. She's related to the Sawyer girls an' is goin' to live with 'em," he said, as he sat down and began to whittle. "She's Aurelia's child, the sister that ran away with Susan Randall's son just before we come here to live."

"How old a child?"

"Bout ten, or somewhere along there, an' small for her age; but land! she might be a hundred to hear her talk! She kept me jumpin' tryin' to answer her! Of all the queer children I ever come across she's the queerest. She ain't no beauty—her face is all eyes; but if she ever grows up to them eyes an' fills out a little she'll make folks stare. Land, mother! I wish 't you could 'a' heard her talk."

"I don't see what she had to talk about, a child like that, to a stranger," replied Mrs. Cobb.

"Stranger or no stranger, 't would n't make no difference to her. She'd talk to a pump or a grindstone; she'd talk to herself ruther 'n keep still."

"What did she talk about?"

"Blamed if I can repeat any of it. She kept me so surprised I didn't have my wits about me. She had a little pink sunshade—it kind o' looked like a doll's umberella, 'n' she clung to it like a burr to a woolen stockin'. I advised her to open it up—the sun was so hot; but she said no, 't would fade, an' she tucked it under her dress. 'It's the dearest thing in life to me,' says she, 'but it's a dreadful care.' Them's the very words, an' it's all the words I remember. 'It's the dearest thing in life to me, but it's an awful care!'"—here Mr. Cobb laughed aloud as he tipped his chair back against the side of the house. "There was another thing, but I can't get it right exactly. She was talkin' 'bout the circus parade an' the snake charmer in a gold chariot, an' says she, 'She was so beautiful beyond compare, Mr. Cobb, that it made you have lumps in your throat to look at her.' She'll be comin' over to see you, mother, an' you can size her up for yourself, I don't know how she'll git on with Mirandy Sawyer—poor little soul!"

This doubt was more or less openly expressed in Riverboro, which, however, had two opinions on the subject; one that it was a most generous thing in the Sawyer girls to take one of Aurelia's children to educate, the other that the education would be bought at a price wholly out of proportion to its real value.

Rebecca's first letters to her mother would seem to indicate that she cordially coincided with the latter view of the situation.

II

REBECCA'S POINT OF VIEW

DEAR MOTHER,—I am safely here. My dress was not much tumbled and Aunt Jane helped me press it out. I like Mr. Cobb very much. He chews tobacco but throws newspapers straight up to the doors of the houses. I rode outside with him a little while, but got inside before I got to Aunt Miranda's house. I did not want to, but thought you would like it better. Miranda is such a long word that I think I will say Aunt M. and Aunt J. in my Sunday letters. Aunt J. has given me a dictionary to look up all the hard words in. It takes a good deal of time and I am glad people can talk without stoping to spell. It is much eesier to talk than write and much more fun. The brick house looks just the same as you have told us. The parler is splendid and gives YOU creeps and chills when you look in the door. The furnature is ellergant too, and all the rooms but there are no good sitting-down places exsept in the kitchen. The same cat is here but they never save the kittens and the cat is too old to play with. Hannah told me once you ran away to be married to father and I can see it would be nice. If Aunt M. would run away I think I should like to live with Aunt J. She does not hate me as bad as Aunt M. does. Tell Mark he can have my paint box, but I should like him to keep the red cake in case I come home again. I hope Hannah and John do mot get tired doing my work.

Your affectionate friend

REBECCA.

P. S. Please give the piece of poetry to John because he likes my poetry even when it is not very good. This piece is not very good but it is true but I hope you won't mind what is in it as you ran away.

This house is dark and dull and dreer
No light doth shine from far or near
Its like the tomb.

And those of us who live herein
Are almost as dead as serrafim
Though not as good.

My guardian angel is asleep
At leest he doth not virgil keep
Ah! Woe is me!

Then give me back my lonely farm
Where none alive did wish me harm
Dear home of youth!

P.S. again. I made the poetry like a piece in a book but could not get it right at first. You see "tomb" and "good" do not sound well together but I wanted to say "tomb" dreadfully and as serrafim are always good I could n't take that out. I have made it over now. It does not say my thoughts as well but think it is more right.

Give the best one to John as he keeps them in a box with his bird's eggs. This is the best one.

SUNDAY THOUGHTS BY REBECCA ROWENA RANDALL

This house is dark and dull and drear
No light doth shine from far or near
Nor ever could.

And those of us who live herein
Are most as dead as seraphim
Though not as good.

My guardian angel is asleep
At least he doth no vigil keep
But far doth roam.

Then give me back my lonely farm
Where none alive did wish me harm,
Dear childhood home!

DEAR MOTHER,—I am thrilling with unhappyness this morning. I got that out of a book called Cora The Doctor's Wife. Cora's husband's mother was very cross and unfeeling to her like Aunt M. to me. I wish Hannah had come instead of me for it was Hannah that Aunt M. wanted and she is better than I am and does not answer back so quick. Are there any peaces of my buff calico. Aunt J. wants enough to make a new waste, button behind, so I wont look so outlandish. The stiles are quite pretty in Riverboro and those at Meeting quite ellergant, more so than in Temperance.

This town is stilish, gay and fair,
And full of wellthy riches rare,
But I would pillow on my arm
The thought of my sweet Brookside Farm.

School is pretty good. The Teacher can answer more questions than the Temperance one but not so many as I can ask. I am smarter than all the girls but one but not so smart as two boys. Emma Jane can add and subtract in her head like a streak of lightning and knows the spelng book right through but has no thoughts of any kind. She is in the Third Reader but does not like stories in books. I am in the Sixth Reader but just because I cannot say the seven multiplication Table Miss Dearborn threttens to put me in the baby primer class with Elijah and Elisha Simpson little twins.

Sore is my heart and bent my stubborn pride,
With Lijah and with Lisha am I tied,

My soul recoyles like Cora Doctor's Wife,
Like her I feer I cannot bare this life.

I am going to try for the speling prize but fear I cannot get it. I would not care but wrong speling looks dreadful in poetry. Last Sunday when I found seraphim in the dictionary I was ashamed I had made it serrafim but seraphim is not a word you can guess at like another long one, outlandish, in this letter which spells itself. Miss Dearborn says use the words you can spell and if you cant spell seraphim make angel do but angels are not just the same as seraphims. Seraphims are brighter whiter and have bigger wings and I think are older and longer dead than angels which are just freshly dead and after a long time in heaven around the great white throne grow to be seraphims.

I sew on brown gingham dresses every afternoon when Emma Jane and the Simpsons are playing house or running on the Logs when their mothers do not know it. Their mothers are afraid they will drown and aunt M. is afraid I will wet my clothes so will not let me either. I can play from half past four to supper and after supper a little bit and Saturday afternoons. I am glad our cow has a calf and it is spotted. It is going to be a good year for apples and hay so you and John will be glad and we can pay a little more morgage. Miss Dearborn asked us what is the object of eddication and I said the object of mine was to help pay off the morgage. She told Aunt M. and I had to sew extra for punishment because she says a morgage is disgrace like stealing or smallpox and it will be all over town that we have one on our farm. Emma Jane is not morgaged nor Richard Carter nor Dr. Winship but the Simpsons are.

Rise my soul, strain every nerve,
Thy morgage to remove,
Gain thy mother's heartfelt thanks
Thy family's grateful love.

Pronounce family quick or it won't sound right.
Your loving little friend
REBECCA.

DEAR JOHN,—YOU remember when we tide the new dog in the barn how he bit the rope and howled. I am just like him only the brick house is the barn and I can not bite Aunt M. because I must be grateful and eddication is going to be the making of me and help you pay off the mortgage when we grow up.

Your loving
BECKY.

III

WISDOM'S WAYS

THE day of Rebecca's arrival had been Friday, and on the Monday following she began her education at the school which was in Riverboro Centre, about a mile distant. Miss Sawyer borrowed a neighbor's horse and wagon and drove her to the schoolhouse, interviewing the teacher, Miss Dearborn, arranging for books, and generally starting the child on the path that was to lead to boundless knowledge.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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