Raymond Evelyn

Divided Skates

Evelyn Raymond

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CHAPTER I.
THE WAY IT BEGAN

Nobody except Miss Lucy Armacost would have thought of starting an orphan asylum with one orphan. Even she might not have done it but for Molly Johns. As for Molly, she never dreamed of such a thing.

She was just careering down the avenue one windy afternoon in early December, upon one roller skate, and Miss Lucy was just coming up the block, walking rather unsteadily upon her two small feet. The dear little old lady was so tiny and so timid, and the wind so big and boisterous, that even without the accident she would have had difficulty in climbing the slope to her big house on the corner.

This was the way of it. Molly was making a reckless speed toward the bottom of the hill, swinging one arm to keep herself in balance, and now and then just touching the foot which wore no skate to the pavement; with the free hand she grasped the thin little fingers of a ragged boy, who also wore one skate, and forced him along beside her at her own rapid pace.

She was talking and laughing and singing, apparently all in one breath, just as she always was, and the thin little boy was doing his best to imitate her. Between them they made such a jolly racket that they heard nothing else, not even the trolley cars whizzing by, till Miss Lucy screamed:

"Oh! my dears! my dears!"

Down they all went in a heap; and it was the first time in her life that Miss Lucy remembered to have made such an exhibition of herself.

"The idea! – of my falling flat in the public street! Oh! this is dreadful!"

Molly and the boy were up almost as quick as they were down, and each had an arm about the lady, while the girl's tones were full of shame and sympathy.

"Oh! please forgive me! I am so sorry! I didn't see you and he didn't, and we were having such a good time. Are you hurt? Are you hurt very much? Shall I call a policeman? Would you like an ambulance? Are you the lady that lives in the house on the Avenue, the corner house with sixteen rooms and a garden and side yard, and – "

Miss Armacost was also upon her feet once more and had regained her self-possession. After one hasty glance around, she had satisfied herself that her mishap had not been observed by "the neighbors," and her dignity had promptly returned.

"Whoever I may be, you are certainly the girl who asks questions!" she returned, rather crisply.

"Yes'm, I reckon I am. I'm Molly Johns. I live on Side Street. My house is the one runs right back of your garden. That's the way I knew you. I often see you out around, pottering."

"Oh! you do, do you? You are a very observing young person – at the wrong times."

Molly opened her big gray eyes to their widest.

The little old lady was as odd as she looked, after all. Then she reflected that when people spoke in that tone of voice they were usually suffering in some manner. It was the very sound Father Johns' speech had, whenever he came home from an especially hard day's toil and his rheumatism bothered him. She again slipped her strong arm about Miss Lucy's waist and remarked, anxiously:

"I do believe I did hurt you badly! Please lean on me and I'll help you home in a jiffy. Then some of your 'girls' will take care of you."

By "girls" Molly meant servants, of which there were at least three in the big corner house.

"Very well. The sooner we bring this episode to an end the better pleased I shall be," answered the other. In reality, she had been more touched than she herself quite understood by the frank commiseration in Molly's eyes, and she could not remember when anybody had clasped her body so affectionately. The sensation it gave her was an odd one; else a person so eminently correct and punctilious as Miss Armacost would never have walked the whole length of the finest block on the Avenue, and in full sight of her aristocratic neighbors' windows, within the embrace of a girl from Side Street.

"But, my child, you should be more careful. You might have broken my bones."

"Yes'm, I might; might-be's aren't half so bad as did-do's," returned Molly airily, and again Miss Lucy flashed a penetrating glance into the merry, freckled face.

But there was no disrespect manifest upon it, and the lady remarked:

"You seem a very cheerful person."

"Why, of course. Aren't you?"

"Sometimes. But how you hobble along on that one skate! Why in the world don't you use two, or go without entirely?"

"Well, you see, if I wore both, Towsley couldn't have any. If he wore both and I none, there'd be nobody to teach him how. That's why."

"What – what did you say his name was?"

Miss Lucy was very thankful that the dirty little urchin was on the further side of Molly, who was quite clean, and that her own dainty garments could not be soiled by contact with his.

"He doesn't know, exactly. The folks around call him 'Towsley,' 'cause his hair's never combed, except once in a while when I take him in hand. It's such a pretty yellow color, too, isn't it? It seems a pity it couldn't always be tidy, doesn't it?"

Molly had a disconcerting habit of appealing to anybody near for confirmation of any opinion she expressed, and this was annoying to Miss Lucy. She considered it distinctly ill-bred, and whatever was ill-bred was disagreeable to her. She was very glad that she had reached the big marble steps which led up to her own front door, and she disengaged herself from Molly's supporting arm with a brisk little motion which emphasized her words:

"This thing has gone far enough!"

But the girl from Side Street didn't notice this. She rarely did notice unpleasant small things. She hadn't time; being always so busy looking after the larger pleasant ones, of which her world seemed full.

"Yes, I suppose it has. I'm so glad, more glad than I can say, that I didn't hurt you. It would have made me so unhappy, and I just hate to be unhappy."

"Oh! you do, do you?"

"Yes'm. Well, if you think you're all right now, Towsley and I'll just take another try at it and see if we can't keep our eyes right front next time. Good-by. I hope you'll not feel shook up, afterward, as mother did the day she fell down-stairs. Didn't appear to hurt her a mite, then, but she was all trembling and queer-headed for a week afterward. Come on, Tows! I didn't have but fifteen minutes for play, to begin with, and a lot of that's been wasted already. Good-by."

Before the servant had opened the door to admit her mistress the two children and the one pair of skates had whisked away to the foot of the block; this time, however, keeping well to the asphalt in the centre of the Avenue, where they would not be apt to collide with anything smaller than a horse and wagon, which would be better able to resist their onslaught than Miss Lucy had been.

"Why, mistress! Whatever has happened? Your cloak is all dusty and your bonnet – "

Miss Armacost interrupted. She had not thought of any damage to her attire, and her servant's exclamation revived unpleasant ideas. After all, the neighbors might have seen and commented; might even, at that moment, be gazing at her from behind their lace curtains. The thought was painful, and

the lady retreated through her vestibule into the dimness of the hall beyond. There she paused and bade her maid:

"Wait where you are, Mary, till those two children come back up the Avenue. Then ask them to step inside."

Much wondering, Mary remained. "Whatever does mistress want with such truck? Side Street, even Alley, kids they look to be. Pshaw! That's the girl from the house in the rear. 'Jolly Molly,' the youngsters call her. She's the smartest one I ever saw. Say, hello! Molly! Oh, Molly!"

It wasn't so easy skating up hill, and the children approached more slowly than they had descended; yet as soon as the girl came within reach of Mary's summons she let go her playmate's hand and ran to the foot of the steps.

"What is it? Did she really get hurt?"

"Hurt? I don't know what you're talking about. I only know that my mistress wants to see you, for some reason or another, and that it's mighty cold standing here. Come in. Yes. I suppose she wants you both. She said 'children.'"

Molly whisked off Towsley's skate, then her own, and hastily dragged him after her up into the house.

"That's so. I suppose it is cold standing, though we didn't notice it skating. We did have such fun. Come, boy; don't be bashful. It's the same lady, isn't it?"

"Yes. 'Spose it is. 'Tain't the same house, though."

"That's no matter. It's but a house, after all's said and done. A little bigger and nicer than we're used to, but my father says folks are the same sort all the world round, and he knows. John Johns knows a heap. Come on. Just mind your manners, sharp."

Thus beguiled, Towsley shuffled on his worn shoes after his more confident guide into a distant, sunny back parlor. There Miss Armacost had laid aside her hat and wrap and sat resting in an easy-chair. In its depths she looked even smaller and frailer than she had done out of doors, but also very much more determined and at home.

"Just like she'd been sitting in big chairs and giving orders all her life," as Molly afterward expressed it.

"Did you want us, ma'am?"

"Yes, I did. You may sit down."

"Thank you. Sit down, Towsley."

Molly promptly availed herself of the permission given, while her admiring gaze roved over the apartment, but the shyer boy dared not seat himself upon any of those handsome satin-covered chairs. He slunk behind Molly, casting his eyes down and nervously twirling his cap. For, little vagrant though he was, his street life had already taught him that it was the correct thing for lads and men to bare the head in the presence of a lady.

Now he did not know that this one simple action on his part did more to interest Miss Lucy in him than an hour's argument would have done. For the first time she observed that his hair was of a lovely color, as Molly had suggested, and that after a good shampooing it would be even beautiful in texture. From his hair to his eyes was not far; and the fleeting glimpses she caught of them, as they timidly uplifted, showed them a clear hazel. Long silky lashes swept the thin cheek and – but it's better to go no further at present. There was too much soil of the street upon the rest of the little face to make it pleasing in Miss Lucy's sight. Besides, her dainty nose already detected a peculiar odor, one unfamiliar to her home, and that in her mind she designated as the "poor smell." Which was not surprising, since not even Molly could have told when Towsley's ragged clothing had been cleansed by soap and water.

To relieve herself, as well as him, the lady pointed to a carved, wooden stool in the bay window, and Towsley went to it. The stool could be washed and thus purified after contact with the child's dusty garments, as the satin chairs could not be.

Another servant came in and placed a silver tray upon a table. The tray bore a plate of fruit cake and some saucers of ice-cream; and at sight of these luxuries Towsley's shyness almost disappeared. He was such a very hungry little boy. He always had been hungry, for the scraps which he picked up out of garbage barrels and at the back-doors of houses were not very satisfying. He began to stare at the food in a fascinated way that made Miss Lucy also stare, but at him. She had never seen just such a look on anybody's face, and though it expressed greediness it did not shock her, as she felt it ought to do. Because it was so ill-bred!

Just then, while Towsley was watching the ice-cream begin to melt, the portiere was again lifted and the maid re-entered, leading a fat, fuzzy dog. She led him by a beautiful blue satin ribbon, and he blundered along in a haphazard sort of way that was exceedingly curious.

Molly's gaze left the pictures on the walls to regard him.

"Why, what a funny creature! He is really almost as broad as he is long, and how he does wobble! What sort of a dog is he? What's the matter with him? What – why – "

Her questions died upon her lips, and they remained parted in surprise as she watched what followed. For the maid spread a white towel upon the carpet before the register and placed an exquisite saucer of finest china upon the towel. Into the saucer she ladled a generous helping of the cream, and seizing the poodle's head with one vigorous hand thrust his black nose into the frozen mass.

Sir Christopher drew back his head and sneezed, then immediately sought to feel the cream again. His actions were so odd that Molly again demanded:

"What is the matter with him?"

"He is blind," answered Miss Lucy sadly. "He is very old. Seventeen years last summer, and he has lost all his teeth. He suffers greatly with the rheumatism – "

"So does father! He uses a liniment and it helps him. I might run and get you some. I'm sure mother would be glad to lend it to you. She is a real good neighbor, mother is. I never heard of a dog with the rheumatism, and – isn't he funny? The funniest thing I've seen to-day! Does he always have his table set in that way? Won't he break the saucer? He's fumbling it all around, and he's as stiff in his joints as father ever was the very worst day he's had. I'll run and get – "

But Miss Armacost held up a protesting hand.

"Don't trouble, I beg. Sir Christopher is past cure. Besides, I could not endure the odor of any liniment. He has had the best advice in the city. My own doctor has treated him, as a great favor, of course, and out of consideration for my feelings. But the case is hopeless. It is but a matter of time and – and we must part."

"Why – why – he's only a dog, isn't he?" exclaimed the too frank girl from Side Street.

"Indeed! If he is, there are some dogs which are higher than some people. He has been my constant companion for seventeen years and – and – Mary, help that boy to some of that cream. His eyes will come out of his head if he stares at it much longer. Give him plenty, and a big slice of cake."

"Yes, mistress; but he does look as if he'd enjoy his victuals better if his face was washed first."

Poor Towsley! Only that terrible shyness, which again gripped him so that he turned all cold and shivery, prevented him making a dash for the door and liberty. The glances of both mistress and servant seemed to pierce him like knives; and he wished – oh! how he wished! – that he had never walked into that trap of a parlor to be scorned and talked at as if he were a wooden boy.

But Molly was nothing if not loyal, and she came to the rescue in fine style.

"No doubt he'd like his face clean same as another; but if a body doesn't happen to have a bowl and towels handy, what is a body going to do? If we'd known we were coming to pay this visit I'd a had him in to our kitchen and scrubbed and combed him well. But we didn't. We just met, out on the Avenue, and tried a skate together. That's all. But it makes me think my fifteen minutes is more than up. I must go home right away. Mother'll be displeased if I'm disobedient and overstay. So if you please, ma'am, I'll be going."

Again Miss Lucy lifted her white hand to stay proceedings.

"Wait, child. How impetuous you are! Mary, just step to this girl's house and tell her mother where she is; also that I request the favor of her company for a short time. Assure Mrs. – What did you say your name was?"

"Johns, ma'am. Father's John Johns, mother's Mary. I'm Molly, then come the three J's, and Sarah Jane – Never mind, though. You'd not be apt to remember or care. Shall I sit by Towsley? I think he'd feel more comfortable if I did."

"Certainly, if you like. Please help yourself, since Mary has gone on my errand. No, I thank you. I do not care for any."

Miss Armacost caught the astonishment in Towsley's eyes as she thus indifferently declined ice-cream, and was amused by it. A whimsical impulse seized her to furnish the waif with all of the dainty which he could possibly consume, and satisfy his craving for one time, at least. In all her life she had never seen any person eat the cold stuff as he did. His mouth opened like a trap, a spoonful went into it, the mouth closed, reopened, another spoonful – no pause, no effort of swallowing, no lingering enjoyment of a delicious dish. She remarked:

"You like ice-cream, Towsley, I perceive."

"Um'm."

"Can't you take time to answer properly?"

"Ye-e-m, but it's – melt – ing," jerked out the boy between dips. Yet the greediness was dying out of his face and a serene content taking its place. All unconsciously to their owner the boy's feet began to swing themselves back and forth, occasionally hitting the base of the stool upon which he sat.

Miss Armacost did not know that this was a habit of all young children and a sign of material enjoyment; but she was just beginning to worry about her stool and the damage he would do it, when her attention was diverted to Sir Christopher.

He had licked feebly, and half disdainfully, at his own saucer of cream, then curled himself round upon the towel beside it. But he could not lie still. Up and down, around and about, he turned and twisted, and all the time emitting groans that clearly bespoke distress of some sort, and that his mistress fancied were almost human in tone.

"Why, my blessed doggie! What ails him, the dear? Is he sick? Does he ache all over? Tell Miss Lucy, Chrissy, tell what is wrong with her pet!"

"Why!" cried Molly, aghast. "Why! you talk to him just as mother does to Ivanora or Idelia! Does he understand you? Can he tell?"

"Yes. He understands. But there's something seriously wrong with him. He was never so bad as this. Ring for one of the girls, child. Ring at once."

Molly knew nothing about bells. In her own little home of six rooms there was no bell at all except one at the front door, and she looked around in some perplexity, wishing to obey but not knowing how.

"Stupid!" cried Miss Lucy, springing toward the wall and touching the button which sent an electric signal to the basement of the house; then, as Mary returned from her errand to Side Street, demanding anxiously:

"What have you been giving Sir Christopher?"

"Why, nothing, ma'am, but his regular food."

"Did he take his oatmeal this morning as he should?"

"No, ma'am. He never takes it if he can help. He hates it; and when I tried to force him to-day, he was that sharp and snappish I was afraid. There's a deal of hydrophobia about, I'm hearing."

"Hydrophobia? Nonsense. What else has he had?"

"I really couldn't say, ma'am."

"Somebody must say. Call the cook."

When Chloe's black face showed in the parting of the door curtains Miss Lucy hurled her excited inquiries into the placid countenance.

"Chloe, what have you been giving Sir Christopher? against my orders, for nobody except myself and Mary is ever to feed him. What is it? Don't be so slow. It is important I should know. I may be able to save his life if he is in danger. What? Eh?"

"Well, ma'am," drawled the negress, in her leisurely way which nothing could alter, "I dunno as I've guv him anything to speak of. Nothing wuth mentioning, leastways. Just a little of that nice lobster salad was left from luncheon; and a cup of custard; being more 'an would go in the floating island. Then a mere taste of the ice-cream, out the freezer was meant for the kitchen, an' he seemed to relish it right well. He licked a right smart of the custard, and as for the lobster, you know yourself, Miss Lucy, he's always plumb crazy for shell-fish. Not like most dogs, Chrissy isn't, won't touch such victuals. He just dotes on anything comes out the salt water, and I – "

Miss Armacost had drawn her slight figure to its utmost height and stood regarding her servant with eyes that fairly blazed her indignation.

"Lobster salad and boiled custard! Not to include the ice-cream, even. A deadly combination; and you may have the satisfaction, if you enjoy it, of knowing that your thoughtless indulgence of his appetite will probably cost him his life. You may go. Send Jefferson for the dog doctor over on Penn Street. And, Mary, you carry him up to my room. Lift him gently, poor fellow! I'm afraid we'll lose him this time."

There was unaffected grief in the little lady's tone, but Chloe was heard to mutter, composedly, as she departed kitchenward:

"A good riddance, I say. Time he died if his living's going to make fools of human beings."

Miss Armacost led the way, Mary carried the moaning poodle, and Molly's curiosity, getting the better of all other considerations, forced her to bring up the rear.

There followed a dreadful half-hour, in which the girl forgot that she should be at home, because of the hurry and excitement in Miss Lucy's upper sitting-room. By the end of that time Sir Christopher had ceased to suffer the ills of age and indiscretion, and lay quite still upon the silken cushions of his basket where his mistress had placed him.

When she found he was really dead the lady went away by herself, with her grief that was so real to her, yet might have seemed so foolish to others. Molly stole softly out of the house to tell the unusual happenings of her play hour to the sympathetic ears in Side Street. The short winter day came to a close. Darkness filled the back parlor where the forgotten Towsley had remained to enjoy his treat; and where, at length, the heat and quietude overcame him, so that he slipped from the hard stool to the soft carpet and fell asleep.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Miss Armacost re-entered the room and touched another electric button. Instantly the place was flooded with light, and then she discovered the child.

"My, my! what a start that gave me! That boy here yet! What in the world shall I do with him? The threatened snow-storm has come and seems like the beginning of a blizzard. He didn't belong to that Molly, she said, but of course he can't stay here. I – I – Oh, dear! Troubles never come singly. I can't keep him all night. I simply cannot. Yet I wouldn't turn even a dog – "

When Miss Armacost's thoughts reached this point she seemed to see Sir Christopher looking up into her face suggestively. He had been only a dog, to be sure, and this was only a street vagabond; yet the suggestion her mind had received really so staggered the mistress of the corner house on the Avenue that she suddenly sat down and clasped her hands in nervous trepidation.

"What – what – if I should – actually do it! What would the neighbors say!"

"Ma'am?" asked the waif, drowsily, sitting up and regarding his surroundings with surprise. "I – I – Where am I at?"

"At – home, my child," answered Miss Lucy, with a gasp at her own daring.

CHAPTER II.
CONFLICTING IDEAS

Towsley was now fully awake; and, what was better, he seemed to have lost his shyness during his nap.

"Um'm. Home. That's where folks live that has 'em. This is yours, I s'pose. Well, I'm much obliged to you, ma'am, and I'll be getting on, I guess. Must be dark out-doors, else you wouldn't have the lamps lit, and I must have slept a good while. It was terrible warm and nice, and I couldn't help it. I hope I haven't done no harm, ma'am, and good-night."

This was Miss Lucy's opportunity; her last chance, as she realized. The waif had not at all comprehended her meaning when she spoke of "home," and so she had not committed herself. Many thoughts surged through her troubled mind. She remembered that she was the last of an old, aristocratic family, which had always believed in its womenkind being domestic and not at all strong-minded. She had been inclined to think that other women, who instituted "homes," or engaged in any sort of public charity, rather stepped beyond the limits of good breeding, and had felt herself superior to them.

Then there were the neighbors. It was an old-fashioned, handsome "square" on which her house stood, and everybody owned his or her home. It was the pride of these people that there was never a house to let. And, indeed, it was a charming locality. Each residence stood upon a double lot, which gave a pretty, open-air sort of appearance to the place; and since there were so few families which could live upon the block, yet remained there so long, each became thoroughly acquainted with the habits and circumstances of the others.

This was sometimes unfortunate. Miss Lucy felt it so now. She went through the long drawing-room and peered between her own lace curtains into the park which filled the centre of the square, and was another of its aristocratic features. She noticed that the trees were loaded with the snow which was accumulating rapidly; and, as a car rattled by, its roof was heaped with a light drift, and the motorman was slapping his breast with his free arm to keep himself warm.

"Those horrid cars!" thought the little lady. "With all our efforts to prevent, we couldn't keep them off the Avenue. They are so distinctly plebeian – yet convenient. I suppose it would upset the whole neighborhood worse than they did if I should do it. They might even come and remonstrate; and I should die of shame if I did anything to make myself objectionable to the neighbors. My grandfather's was the first house built here. It was his taste selected and perfected that square, and his firmness which kept it so exclusive till the land about was all sold and its future assured. What would he say if I should do it! Yet, why shouldn't I? I'm lonesome much of the time, and now that Sir Christopher is gone there's nobody left. I – I – "

Just then a great gust of wind caught up an armful of snow, so to speak, and tossed it against the shining window where Miss Lucy stood. That decided her; and it was like the little lady to be extremely cautious and timid up to a certain point, then to rush energetically toward the opposite extreme. She turned from the spot with a jerk and hurried into the inner room.

Not a moment too soon. Towsley had taken his ragged cap in his hand, fastened his torn jacket by its one button, and was shuffling carefully along the hall toward the front door. Miss Armacost espied him just in time.

"Wait, child. I've something to say to you. Come back into the light and warmth. It's cold and dark outside."

"Yes'm. So I s'pose," he answered, obeying her rather reluctantly.

"Don't you want to stay? Isn't it pretty here?"

"Oh, yes'm. It's mighty pretty. But, you see, if I don't get down to the office early, the other kids'll get my place. If I lose it once I mayn't never get it again."

"The office? Your place? What do you mean?"

"Down to th' *Express*. There's some steam holes in the sidewalk, you know, and they're as warm as summer. We newsboys lie around 'em, waiting for our papers, and sleep there till they're ready. Each of us has his own spot, and mine's an inside one, close to the wall of the building. You ain't so likely to get trod on if you're inside, and the whole crew's after my 'bed.' If I shouldn't get there to look out for it, and another fellow got it, it'd be all day for Towsley. So I'll be going, ma'am, and much obliged for the stuff."

Poor Miss Lucy's face had grown very white. She had never heard anything so pitiful as this, yet the lad explained his circumstances in a cheery, matter-of-fact way that showed he found nothing depressing in them.

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me that that story is true?"

"What about it? I ain't meaning anything, only telling why I've got to hurry. Could you, please, ma'am, say the time of night?"

"It's a little after nine."

"That all? Then I can take it easy. Too late for the night papers, and the mornings ain't out till four o'clock, about."

"To go to such a 'bed,' on such a night, after a supper of ice-cream and cake! I've always skipped such articles in the newspapers, for they're so unpleasant, and I've never half believed them. But you mean it, do you?"

"That I must go? I don't know what you want me to say. I guess I've slept my wits away, as Molly says."

"Towsley, ring that bell. My! what a name!"

But the lady was pleased to see that he had remembered how to summon Mary, and as soon as that young woman appeared she was directed to get a supper ready in the breakfast-room.

"At once. Put on any cold meat there happens to be, and warm up the soup was left from dinner. I couldn't touch it, you know, I was feeling so sad. Get plenty of bread and butter, and milk – and, yes, a piece of mince pie. Mrs. Livingston, across the square, never gives her children pie. She believes in oatmeal as a staple diet, but their grandmother indulges them when they visit her. For once, I fancy, it won't hurt, and in the future I'll – Oh! what a lot I shall have to learn; and how delightfully exciting it all is! Mary, don't stare at me like that. It's impertinent. I know you don't mean it so, and you think I'm a little flighty. Well, I am. Very flighty, indeed! But – fancy old Madame Satterlee's face!"

"Ma'am?" asked the puzzled servant, really afraid that grief for Sir Christopher had upset her mistress' mind.

"I said: Get a supper ready in the breakfast-room. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. For one or two?"

"For two. For this young gentleman and myself."

"The land's sake!" ejaculated the waitress, as she obeyed, though more astonished than ever. "Young gentleman, says she!"

Towsley began to understand that he was to have supper. He would not have troubled about such a small matter, of his own accord, remembering the cream and cake; but since it was mentioned he did feel a sort of emptiness inside, and his hazel eyes grew eager again. Miss Lucy's own eyes were looking at the fire in the grate, and she was not, therefore, offended a second time by the child's greediness. She was seeing pictures in the coals, and all of them were of Towsley – though such a different Towsley from the real one. Presently a doubt arose in her mind. Supposing that there should be some obstacle to her carrying out the plans which the pictures in the fire suggested? She turned suddenly and rather sharply upon the lad:

"Have you any people?"

"Ma'am?"

"Child, never say that. 'Ma'am' is vulgar and belongs to servants. Gentlefolks use the person's name instead. You should have said, 'Miss Armacost?' or 'Miss Lucy?'"

"Miss Lucy?"

"That's right. You are quick-witted. That's in your favor. I asked about your people; who they are and where they live."

"I don't know as I've got any. There's Molly – she's about the nicest one I know. Of course, there's Mother Molloy, up alley, where I stay sometimes, with the other kids. That's when I have the cash to pay up. Mother don't take in nobody for nothing, Mother don't. Can't blame her, neither. It's business. And once when I fell and got scared of the hospital she was real good to me. She made me tea and done up my head and treated me real square. When I got well I gave her something. Course I wanted to buy her a shirt waist, but they hadn't any big enough, so I bought her a ring with a red stone. The ring was too small, but she could put it away for a keepsake. She's dreadful fat, Mother Molloy is. She gets real good stuff to eat, 'cause the kids she keeps regular are on the best streets; and the 'coons' that live in the big houses save a lot for them. One of the boys works your kitchen, I believe. And – there's Mary."

Miss Armacost rose and led the way to the basement. She was very much perplexed. Not that she wavered in her decision to take in this homeless boy and provide for his welfare, but because he did not at all fit in with her previous ideas of what such a child should be. He was neither humble nor bold, and now that he had forgotten his shyness was keen and business-like. He neither complained of his poverty nor was ashamed of it; and his manner as he walked toward the table and drew out a chair for Miss Armacost was as gallant as possible.

"That's the checker!" he said to himself. "That's the way I've seen the gentlemen do in the hotel dining-rooms when I've been peeking through, or the waiters, I mean. The gentlemen would have done it, if the waiters hadn't been there, and it goes. Some day, when I own the papers I sell now, I'll know just how to act. Ma'am – I mean, Miss Armacost? Did you speak?"

"I – Yes, I did. I thought that as you had had a nap since – since you had made your toilet, it would be as well to make yourself fresh before meat. There's a bowl and water in that closet; and towels."

"Well, I declare!" thought the watchful Mary. "If that don't beat all! 'Stead of ordering the little chap to wash himself, or even me to do it for him, she's treating him same's if he was a Livingston or Satterlee, himself. And – he's doing it! My land! he's doing it."

Towsley retired to the pantry and drew some water in the bowl. Such lavatories were familiar enough to him, among the railway stations and hotel corridors which he frequented to sell his papers, but he had never seen one more richly appointed than this. He was rather short for the stationary bowl, but he succeeded in wetting the tips of his very dirty fingers and drawing them down over his face. This operation left streaks of a lighter color upon the dusty cheeks and several dingy marks upon the damask towel which he applied to dry them. With the silver-backed brush which lay beside the bowl he made a frantic dab at his tangled hair, shook himself deeper into his over-large jacket, and presented himself before his hostess.

Concealing a smile at his peculiar appearance she motioned him to his place, with the remark:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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