

Maniates Belle Kanaris

Our Next-Door Neighbors



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Chapter I

About Silvia and Myself

Some people have children born unto them, some acquire children and others have children thrust upon them. Silvia and I are of the last named class. We have no offspring of our own, but yesterday, today, and forever we have those of our neighbor.

We were born and bred in the same little home-grown city and as a small boy, even, I was Silvia's worshiper, but perforce a worshiper from afar.

Her upcoming had been supervised by a grimalkin governess who drew around the form of her young charge the awful circle of exclusiveness, intercourse with child-kind being strictly prohibited.

Children are naturally gregarious little creatures, however, and Silvia on rare occasions managed to break parole and make adroit escape from surveillance. Then she would speed to the top of the boundary wall that separated the stable precincts from an alluring alley which was the playground of the plebeian progeny of the humble born.

To the circle of dirty but fascinating ragamuffins she became an interested tangent, a silent observer. Here I had my first meeting with her. I was not of her class, neither was I to the alley born, but sailed in the sane mid-channel that ameliorates the distinction between high and low life.

On this eventful day I was taking a short cut on my way to school. One of the group of alleyites, with the inherent friendliness of the unchartered but big-hearted members of the silt of the stream of humans, had proffered to little Silvia a chip on which was a patch of mud designed to become a fruitcake stuffed with pebbles in lieu of raisins and frosted with moistened ashes. Before the enticing pastime of transformation was begun, however, Silvia was swiftly snatched from the contaminating midst and borne away over the ramparts.

Thereafter I haunted the alley, hoping for another glimpse of the little picture girl on the wall. At last I attained my desire. One Saturday afternoon I saw her coming, alone, down a long rosebush bordered path. A thrill ran through me. Our eyes met. Yet all I found to say was: "C'mon over."

She responded to this invitation and I helped her over the wall. She looked longingly at the Irish playing in the mud, but a clean sandpile in my own backyard not far away seemed to me a more fitting environment for one so daintily clad.

We played undisturbed for a never-to-be-forgotten half hour and then they found her out. Reprimanding voices jangled and the whole world was out of tune.

Thereafter a strict watch was kept on little Silvia's movements and I saw her only at rare intervals, when she was going into church or as she rode past our house. She always remembered me and on such meetings a faint, reminiscent smile lighted the somber little face and her eyes met mine as if in a mysterious promise.

She grew up an outlawed, isolated child deprived of her birthright, but in spite of the handicaps of so barren a childhood, she achieved young womanhood unspoiled and in possession of her early democratic tendencies.

When I was making a modest start in a legal way, her parents died and left her with that most unprofitable of legacies, an encumbered estate. Then I dared to renew our acquaintance begun on the sandpile. She went to live with a poor but practical relation and was initiated into the science of stretching an inadequate income to meet everyday needs. In time I wooed and won her.

We set up housekeeping in a small, thriving mid-Western city where I secured a partnership in a legal firm. Silvia had all the requisites of mind and manner and Domestic Science necessary to a "hearth-and home-" maker.

We lived in a house which was one of many made to the same measure with the inevitable street porch, big window, trimmed lawn in front and garden in the rear. We had attained the standard of prosperity maintained in our home town by keeping "hired help" and installing a telephone, so our social status was fixed.

There was but one adjunct missing to our little Arcadia. While at a word or look children flocked to me like friendly puppies in response to a call, to Silvia they were still an unknown quantity.

I had hoped that her understanding and love for children might be developed in the usual and natural way, but we had now been married ten years and this hope had not been realized.

She had tried most assiduously to cultivate an acquaintance with members of child-world, but into that kingdom there is no open sesame. The sure keen intuition of a child recognizes on sight a kindred spirit and Silvia's forced advances met with but indifferent response. She wistfully proposed to me one day that we adopt a child. My doubts as to the advisability of such a course were confirmed by Huldah, our strong staff in household help. In our section of the country servants were generally quite conversant with the intimate and personal affairs of the home.

"Don't you never do it, Mr. Wade," she counseled. "Ready-mades ain't for the likes of her."

When, in acting on this advice, I vetoed Silvia's lukewarm proposition, I was convinced of Huldah's wisdom by seeing the look of relief that flashed into my wife's troubled countenance, and I knew that her suggestion had been but a perfunctory prompting of duty.

Time alone could overcome the effects of her early environment!

Chapter II

Introducing Our Next-door Neighbors

One morning Silvia and I lingered over our coffee cups discussing our plans for the coming summer, which included visits from my sister Beth and my college chum, Rob Rossiter. We wished to avoid having their arrivals occur simultaneously, however, because Rob was a woman-hater, or thought he was. We decided to have Beth pay her visit first and later take Rob with us on our vacation trip to some place where the fishing facilities would be to our liking. However, summer vacation time like our plans was yet far, vague and dim.

While I was putting on my overcoat, Silvia had gone to the window and was looking pensively at the vacant house next to ours.

"I fear," she said abruptly and irrelevantly, "that we are destined to receive no part of Uncle Issachar's fortune."

Uncle Issachar was a wealthy but eccentric relative of my wife. He had made us no wedding gift beyond his best wishes, but he had then informed us that at the birth of each of our prospective sons he should place in the bank to Silvia's account the sum of five thousand dollars. We had never invited him to visit us or made any overtures in the way of communication with him, lest he should think we were cultivating his acquaintance from

mercenary motives.

While I was debating whether the lament in Silvia's tone was for the loss of the money or the lack of children, she again spoke; this time in a tone which had lost its languor.

"There is a big moving van in front of the house next door. At last we will have some near neighbors."

"Are they unloading furniture?" I asked inanely, crossing to the window.

"No; course not," came cheerfully from Huldah, who had come in to remove the dishes. "Most likely they are unloading lions and tigers."

As I have already intimated, Huldah was a privileged servant.

"They are unloading children!" explained Silvia, in a tone implying that Huldah's sarcastic implication would be infinitely more preferable. "The van seems to be overflowing with them—a perfect crowd. Do you suppose the house is to be used as an orphan asylum?"

"I think not," I assured her as I counted the flock. Five children would seem like a crowd to Silvia.

"Boys!" exclaimed Huldah tragically, as she joined us for a survey. "I'll see that they don't keep the grass off our lawn."

Late that afternoon I opened the outer door of the dining-room in response to the rap of strenuously applied knuckles.

A lad of about eleven years with the sardonic face of a satyr and diabolically bright eyes peered into the room.

"We're going to have soup for dinner," he announced, "and

mother wants to borrow a soup plate for father to eat his out of.”

Silvia stared at him aghast. She seemed to feel something compelling in the boy's personnel, however, and she went to the china closet and brought forth a soup plate which she handed to him without comment.

In silence we watched him run across the lawn, twirling the plate deftly above his head in juggler fashion.

The next day when we sat down to dinner our new young neighbor again appeared on our threshold.

“Halloa!” he called chummily. “We are going to have soup again and we want a soup plate for father.”

“Where is the one I loaned you yesterday?” demanded Silvia in a tone far below thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, while her features assumed a frigidity that would have congealed father's favorite sustenance had it been in her vicinity.

“Oh, we broke that!” he casually and cheerfully explained.

With much reluctance Silvia bestowed another plate upon the young applicant.

“Wait!” I said as he started to leave, “don't you want the soup tureen, too, or the ladle and some soup spoons?”

“No, thank you,” he answered politely. “None of the rest of us like soup, so we dish father's up in the kitchen. He doesn't like soup particularly, but he eats it because it goes down quick and lets him have more time for work.”

This time as he sped homeward, he didn't spin the plate in air, but tried out a new plan of balancing it on a stick.

"I think," I suggested gently, when our young neighbor was lost to our sorrowful sight, "that it might be well to invest in another dozen or so of soup plates. I will see about getting them at wholesale rates. Our supply will soon give out if our new neighbors continue to cultivate the soup and borrowing habit."

"I will buy some at the five cent store," replied Silvia. "I think I had better call upon them tomorrow and see what manner of people they can be."

When I came home the next day it was quite evident that she had called.

"Well," I inquired, "what do they keep—a soup house?"

"They are literary people, the highest of high-brows. Their name is Polydore, and the head of the house—"

"Mr. or Mrs.?" I interrupted.

"The head of the house," pursued Silvia, ignoring my question, "is a collector."

"So I inferred. Has he a large collection of soup plates?"

"She collects antiquities and writes their history. He pursues science."

"They were seemingly communicative. What did they look like?"

"I didn't see them. After I rang I heard a woman's voice bidding some one not to answer the bell. She said she couldn't be bothered with interruptions, so I went on up the street to call on Mrs. Fleming, who told me all about them. She was also refused admittance when she called. On my way home I met that boy—"

that awful boy—”

She paused, evidently overcome by the consideration of his awfulness.

“He had been digging bait—”

Again she paused as if words were inadequate for her climax.

“Well,” I encouraged.

“He was carrying his bait—horrid, wriggling angleworms—in our soup plate!”

“Then it is not broken yet!” I exclaimed joyfully. “Let us hope it is given an antiseptic bath before father’s next indulgence in consommé. After dinner I will go over and try my luck at paying my respects to the soup savant.”

“They won’t let you in.”

“In that case I shall follow their lead of setting aside all ceremony and formality and admit myself, as their heir apparent does here.”

After dinner and my twilight smoke, I went next door, first asking Silvia if there was anything we needed that I could borrow, just to show them there were no hard feelings.

My third vigorous ring brought results. A slipshod servant appeared and reluctantly seated me in the hall. She read with seeming interest the card I handed to her and then, pushing aside some mangy looking portières, vanished from view.

She evidently delivered my card, for I heard a woman’s voice read my name, “Mr. Lucien Wade.”

After another short interval the slovenly servant returned and

offered me my card.

“She seen it,” she assured me in answer to my look of surprise.

She again put the portières between us and I was obliged to own myself baffled in my efforts to break in. I was showing myself out when my onward course was deflected by a troop of noisy children leaded by the soup plate skirmisher, who was the oldest and apparently the leader of the brood.

“Oh, halloa!” he greeted me with the air of an old acquaintance, “didn’t you see the folks?”

On my informing him that I had seen no one but the servant, he exclaimed:

“Oh, that chicken wouldn’t know enough to ask you in! Just follow us. Mother wouldn’t remember to come out.”

I was loth to force my presence on mother, but by this time my hospitable young friend had pulled the portières so strenuously that they parted from the pole, and I was presented willy nilly to the collector of antiquities, who had the angular sharp-cut face and form of a rocking horse. She was seated at a table strewn with books and papers, writing at a rate of speed that convinced me she was in the throes of an inspiration. I forebore to interrupt. My scruples, however, were not shared by her eldest son. He gave her elbow a jog of reminder which sent her pencil to the floor.

“Mother!” he shouted in megaphone voice, “here’s the man next door—the one we get our soup plates from.”

She looked up abstractedly.

“Oh,” she said in dismayed tone, “I thought you had gone. I am

very much engaged in writing a paper on modern antiquities.”

I murmured some sort of an apology for my untimely interruption.

“I am so absorbed in my great work,” she explained, “that I am oblivious to all else. I have the rare and great gift of concentration in a marked degree.”

I was quite sure of this fact. She took another pencil from a supply box and resumed her literary occupation. As my presence seemed of so little moment, I lingered.

“Mother,” shouted one of the boys, snatching the pencil from her grasp, “I’m hungry. I didn’t have any supper.”

“Yes, you did!” she asserted. “I saw Gladys give you a bowl of bread and milk.”

“Emerald took it away from me and drank it up.”

“Didn’t neither!” denied a shaggy looking boy. “I spilled it.”

He accompanied this denial by a fierce punch in his accuser’s ribs.

“Here!” said the author of Modern Antiquities, taking a nickel from her pocket, “go get yourself some popcorn, Demetrius.”

“I ain’t Demetrius! I’m Pythagoras.”

“It makes no difference. Go and get it and don’t speak to me again tonight.”

The boy had already snatched the coin, and he now started for the exit, but his outgoing way was instantly blocked by a promiscuous pack of pugilistic Polydores, and an ardent and general onslaught followed.

I endeavored to untangle the arms and legs of the attackers and the attacked in a desire to rescue the youngest, a child of two, but I soon beat a retreat, having no mind to become a punching bag for Polydores.

The concentrator at the writing table, looking up vaguely, perceived the general joust.

“How provoking!” she exclaimed indignantly. “I was in search of an antonym and now they’ve driven it out of my memory.”

I politely offered my sympathy for her loss.

“Did you ever see such misbehaved children?” she asked casually and impersonally as she calmly surveyed the free-for-all fight.

“Children always misbehave before company,” I remarked propitiatingly. “Of course they know better.”

“Why no, they don’t!” she declared, looking at me in surprise, “they—”

At this instant the errant antonym evidently flashed upon her mental vision and her pencil hastened to record it and then flew on at lightning speed.

I was about to try to make an escape when a momentary cessation of hostilities was caused by the entrance of a moth-eaten, abstracted-looking man. As the *two-year-old* hailed him as “fadder”, I gathered that he was the person responsible for the family now fighting at his feet.

“What’s the trouble?” he asked helplessly.

“She gave Thag a nickel,” explained the eldest boy, “and we

want it.”

The man drew a sigh of relief. The solution of this family problem was instantly and satisfactorily met by an impartial distribution of nickels.

With demoniac whoops of delight, the contestants fled from the room.

I introduced myself to the man of the house, who seemed to realize that some sort of compulsory conventionalities must be observed. He looked hopelessly at his wife, and seeing that she was beyond response to an S O S call to things mundane, he frankly but impressively informed me that I must expect nothing of them socially as their lives were devoted to research and study. The children, however, he assured me, could run over frequently to see us.

I instinctively felt that my call was considered ended, so I took my departure. I related the details of my neighborly visit to Silvia, but her sense of humor was not stirred. It was entirely dominated by her dread of the young Polydores.

“How many children are there?” she asked faintly. “More than the five you said you counted that first day?”

“They seemed not so many as much. That is, though I suppose in round numbers there are but five, yet each of those five is equal to at least three ordinary children.”

“Are they all boys? Huldah says the youngest wears dresses.”

“Nevertheless he is a boy. They are all unmistakably boys. I think they must have been born with boots on and,” conscious

of the imprints of my shins, “hobnail boots at that. Even the youngest, a two-year old, seems to have been graduated from Home Rule.”

“I can’t bear to think of their going to bed hungry,” she said wistfully. “Think of that unnatural mother expecting them to satisfy their hunger by popcorn.”

“They didn’t though,” I assured her. “I saw them stop a street vender below here and invest their nickels in hot dogs.”

“Hot dogs!” repeated Silvia in horror.

“Wienerwursts,” I hastened to interpret.

Chapter III

In Which We Are Pestered by Polydores

Our life now became one long round of Polydores. They were with us burr-tight, and attached themselves to me with dog-like devotion, remaining utterly impervious to Silvia's aloofness and repulses. At last, however, she succumbed to their presence as one of the things inevitable.

"The Polydores are here to stay," she acknowledged in a calmness-of-despair voice.

"They don't seem to be homebodies," I allowed.

The children were not literary like the other productions of their profound parents, but were a band of robust, active youngsters unburdened with brains, excepting Ptolemy of soup plate fame. Not that he betrayed any tendencies toward a learned line, but he was possessed of an occult, uncanny, wizard-like wisdom that was disconcerting. His contemplative eyes seemed to search my soul and read my inmost thoughts.

Pythagoras, Emerald, and Demetrius, aged respectively nine, eight, and seven, were very much alike in looks and size, being so many pinched caricatures of their mother. To Silvia they were bewildering whirlwinds, but Huldah, who seemed to have difficulty in telling them apart, always classified them as "Them three", and Silvia and I fell into the habit of referring to them in

the same way. Huldah could not master the Polydore given names either by memory or pronunciation. Ptolemy, whose name was shortened to "Tolly" by Diogenes, she called "Polly." When she was on speaking terms with "Them three" she nicknamed them "Thaggy, Emmy, and Meetie."

Diogenes, the two-year old, was a Tartar when emulating his brothers. Alone, he was sometimes normal and a shade more like ordinary children.

When they first began swarming in upon us, Silvia drew many lines which, however, the Polydores promptly effaced.

"They shall not eat here, anyway," she emphatically declared.

This was her last stand and she went down ingloriously.

One day while we were seated at the table enjoying some of Huldah's most palatable dishes, Ptolemy came in. There ensued on our part a silence which the lad made no effort to break. Silvia and I each slipped him a side glance. He stood statuesque, watching us with the mute wistfulness of a hungry animal. There were unwonted small red specks high upon his cheekbones, symptoms, Silvia thought, of starvation.

She was moved to ask, though reluctantly and perfunctorily:

"Haven't you been to dinner, Ptolemy?"

"Yes," he admitted quickly, "but I could eat another."

Assuming that the forced inquiry was an invitation, before protest could be entered he supplied himself with a plate and helped himself to food. His need and relish of the meal weakened Silvia's fortifications.

This opening, of course, was the wedge that let in other Polydores, and thereafter we seldom sat down to a meal without the presence of one or more members of the illustrious and famished family, who made themselves as entirely at home as would a troop of foraging soldiers. Silvia gazed upon their devouring of food with the same surprised, shocked, and yet interested manner in which one watches the feeding of animals.

"I suppose he ought not to eat so many pickles," she remarked one day, as Emerald consumed his ninth Dill.

"You can't kill a Polydore," I assured her.

I never opened a door but more or less Polydores fell in. They were at the left of us and at the right of us, with Diogenes always under foot. We had no privacy. I found myself waking suddenly in the night with the uncomfortable feeling that Ptolemy lurked in a dark corner or two of my bedroom.

Even Silvia's boudoir was not free from their invasion. But one door in our house remained closed to them. They found no open sesame to Huldah's apartment.

"I wish she would let me in on her system," I said. "I wonder how she manages to keep them on the outside?"

"I can tell you," confided Silvia. "Emerald and Demetrius went in one day and she dropped Demetrius out the window and kicked Emerald out the door. You know, Lucien, you are too softhearted to resort to such measures."

"I was once," I confessed, "but I think under Polydore régime I am getting stoical enough to follow in Huldah's footsteps and

go her one better.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Diogenes.

Silvia screamed.

Turning to see what the latest Polydore perpetration might be, I saw that Diogenes was frothing at the mouth.

“Oh, he’s having a fit!” exclaimed Silvia frantically. “Call Huldah! Put him in a hot bath. Quick, Lucien, turn on the hot water.”

“Not I,” I refused grimly. “Let him have a fit and fall in it.”

“He ain’t got no fit,” was the cheerful assurance of Pythagoras, as he sauntered in.

“Your mother would have one,” I told him, “if she could hear your English.”

“What is the matter with him?” asked Silvia. “Does he often foam in this way?”

“He’s been eating your tooth powder,” explained Pythagoras. “He likes it ’cause it tastes like peppermint, and then he drank some water before he swallowed the powder and it all fizzed up and run out his mouth.”

“I wondered,” said Silvia ruefully, “what made my tooth powder disappear so rapidly. What shall I do!”

“Resort to strategy!” I advised. “Lock up your powder hereafter and fill an empty bottle with powdered alum or something worse and leave it around handy.”

“Lucien!” exclaimed my wife, who could not seem to recover

from this latest annoyance, “I don’t see how you can be so fond of children. I did hope—for your sake and—on account of Uncle Issachar’s offer that I’d like to have one—but I’d rather go to the poorhouse! I’d almost lose your affection rather than have a child.”

“But, Silvia!” I remonstrated in dismay, “you shouldn’t judge all by these. They’re not fair samples. They’re not children—not home-grown children.”

“I should say not!” agreed Huldah, who had come into the room. “They are imps—imps of the devil.”

I believe she was right. They had a generally demoralizing effect on our household. I was growing irritable, Silvia careworn. Even Huldah showed their influence by acquiring the very latest in slang from them. Once in a while to my amusement I heard Silvia unconsciously adopting the Polydore argot.

As the result of their better nourishment at our table, the imps of the devil daily grew more obstreperous and life became so burdensome to Silvia that I proposed moving away to a childless neighborhood.

“They’d find us out,” said Silvia wearily, “wherever we went. Distance would be no obstacle to them.”

“Then we might move out of town, as a last resort,” I suggested. “Rob says he thinks there is a good legal field in—”

“No, Lucien,” vetoed Silvia. “You’ve a fine practice here, and then there’s that attorneyship for the Bartwell Manufacturing Company.”

My hope of securing this appointment meant a good deal to us. We were now living up to every cent of my income and though we had the necessities, it was the luxuries of life I craved—for Silvia's sake. She was a lover of music and we had no piano. She yearned to ride and she had no horse. We both had longings for a touring-car and we wanted to travel.

"I've thought of a scheme for a little respite from the sight and sound of the Polydores," I remarked one day. "We'll enter them in the public school. There are four more weeks yet before the long summer vacation."

"That would be too good to be true," declared Silvia. "Five or six hours each day, and then, too, their department will be so dreadful that they will have to stay after school hours."

I thought more likely their department would lead to suspension, but forbore to wet-blanket Silvia's hopes.

I made my second call upon the male head of the House of Polydore to recommend and urge that its young scions be sent to the public school. I had misgivings as to the outcome of my proposition, as the Polydore parents believed themselves to be the only fount of learning in the town. To my surprise and intense gratification, my suggestion met with no objections whatever. Felix Polydore referred me to his wife and said he would abide by her decision. I found her, of course, buried in books, but remembering Ptolemy's mode of gaining attention, I peremptorily closed the volume she was studying.

My audacity attained its object and I proffered my request,

laying great stress on the quietude she would gain thereby. She replied that attendance at school would doubtless do them no harm, although she expressed her belief that the most thorough educations were those obtained outside of schools.

Silvia was wafted into the eighth heaven of bliss and then some, as the result of my diplomatic mission. Of course the task of preparing pupils out of the pestiferous Polydores devolved upon her, but she was actively aided by the eager and willing Huldah and between them they pushed the project that promised such an elysium with all speed. The prospective pupils themselves were not wildly enthusiastic over this curtailment of their liberty, but Huldah won the day by proposing that they carry their luncheon with them, promising an abundant supply of sugared doughnuts and small pies.

Pythagoras foresaw recreation ahead in the opportunity to “lick all the kids,” and I assumed that Ptolemy had deep laid schemes for the outmaneuvering of teachers, but as his left hand never made confidant of his right, I could not expect to fathom the workings of his mind.

Early on a Monday morning, therefore, our household arose to lick our Polydore protégés into a shape presentable for admission to school. It took two hours to pull up stockings and make them stay pulled, tie shoestrings, comb out tangles, adjust collars and neckties, to say nothing of vigorous scrubblings to five grimy faces and ten dirt-stained hands.

At last with an air of achievement Silvia corralled her round-

up and unloaded the four eldest upon the public school and then proceeded to install the protesting Diogenes in a nursery kindergarten. Huldah stood in the doorway as they marched off and sped the parting guests with a muttered "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

Silvia returned radiant, but her rejoicing was shortlived. She had scarcely taken off her hat and gloves when the four oldest came trooping and whooping into the house.

"What's the matter?" gasped Silvia.

"Got to be vaccinated," explained Ptolemy with an appreciative grin. Of all the Polydores he was the one who had least objected to scholastic pursuits, but he seemed quite jubilant at our discomfiture.

We were somewhat reluctant to undertake the responsibility of their inoculation, especially after Ptolemy told us that his mother didn't believe in vaccination.

"I'll take 'em down and get 'em vaccinated right," declared Huldah. "Their ma won't never notice the scars, and if one of you young uns blabs about it," she added, turning upon them ferociously, "I'll cut your tongue out."

"Suppose there should be some ill result from it," said Silvia apprehensively.

"Don't you worry!" exclaimed Huldah. "Most likely it won't amount to anything. It'll take some new kind of scabs to work in these brats. They're too tough to take anything. Come on now with me," she commanded, "and after it's done, I'll get you each

an ice cream sody.”

Through Huldah’s efficiency the vaccination was quickly accomplished and the children of our neighbor were reluctantly accepted by the school authorities.

The Polydores were not parted by reason of dissimilarity of age or learning, as they were put into the ungraded room. To keep them there enrolled taxed to the utmost our ingenuity in the way of framing excuses for their repeated cases of tardiness and suspension.

Silvia felt a little remorseful when she listened to the tale of woe recited to her by their teacher at a card party one Saturday afternoon.

“She said,” my wife repeated, “that yesterday Pythagoras brought two mice to school in his marble-bag and let them loose. She doesn’t believe in corporal punishment, but she determined to experiment with its effect on Pythagoras, so she kept him and Emerald, who was slightly implicated, after school and sent the latter out to get a whip. When he came back he said: ‘I couldn’t find any stick, but here’s some rocks you can throw at him,’ and handed her a hat full of stones. This made her too hysterical to try her experiment, so she took away his recess for a week.”

“We ought to make her a present,” I observed.

“She said,” continued Silvia, “that they had given her nervous prostration, but she had no time to prostrate, and if she didn’t succeed in getting them graded by the coming fall term, she should accept an offer of marriage she had received from a cross-

eyed man, and you know how unlucky that would be, Lucien!”

“We may be driven to worse things than that by fall,” I replied ruefully.

Chapter IV

In Which We Take Boarders

Four weeks of unalloyed bliss and then the summer vacation times arrived, bringing joy to the heart of the Polydores and the teacher of the ungraded room, but deep gloom to the hearthside of the Wades.

One misfortune always brings another. A rival applicant received the coveted attorneyship and we bade a sad farewell to piano, saddle-horse, automobile and journey, the furnishings to our Little House of Dreams.

"I did want you to have a car, Lucien," sighed Silvia, regretfully, "and you worked so hard this last year, you need a trip. Won't you go somewhere with Rob—without me?"

I assured her it would be no vacation without her.

"Do you know, Lucien," she proposed diffidently, "I think it would be an excellent plan to invite Uncle Issachar to visit us. He knows no more about children than I do—than I did, I mean, and if he should see the Polydores he'd give us five thousand each for the children we didn't have."

I wouldn't consent to this plan. I had met Uncle Issachar once. He was a crusty old bachelor with a morbid suspicion that everyone was working him for his money. I don't wonder he thought so. He had no other attractions.

Perceiving the strength of my opposition Silvia sweetly and sagaciously refrained from further pressure.

“We should not repine,” she said. “We have health and happiness and love. What are pianos and cars and trips compared to such assets?”

What, indeed! I admitted that things might be worse.

Alas! All too soon was my statement substantiated. That night after we had gone to bed, I heard a taxicab sputtering away at the house next door.

“The Polydores must have unexpected guests,” I remarked.

“I trust they brought no children with them,” murmured Silvia drowsily.

The next morning while we were at breakfast, the odor of June roses wafting in through the open window, the delicious flavor of red-ripe strawberries tickling our palate, and the anticipation of rice griddle-cakes exhilarating us, the millennium came.

For the five young Polydores bore down upon us *en masse*.

“Father and mother have gone away,” proclaimed Ptolemy, who was always spokesman for the quintette.

This intelligence was of no particular interest to us—not then, at least. We rarely saw father and mother Polydore, and they were apparently of no need to their offspring.

Ptolemy’s next announcement, however, was startling and effective in its dramatic intensity.

“We’ve come over to stay with you while they are away.”

I laughed; jocosely, I thought.

Silvia paid no heed to my forced hilarity, but ejaculated gaspingly:

“Why, what do you mean!”

“They have gone away somewhere,” enlightened our oracle. “They went to the train last night in a taxi. They have gone somewhere to find out something about some kind of aborigines.”

“Which reminds me,” I remarked reminiscently, “of the man who traveled far and vainly in search of a certain plant which, on his return, he found growing beside his own doorstep.”

Silvia paid no heed to my misplaced pleasantry. She was right—as usual. It was no time for levity.

“I don’t see,” spoke my unappreciative wife, addressing Ptolemy, “why their absence should make any difference in your remaining at home. Gladys can cook your meals and put Diogenes to bed as usual.”

“Gladys has gone,” piped Demetrius. “She left yesterday afternoon. She was only staying till she could get her pay.”

“Father forgot to get another girl in her place,” informed Ptolemy, “and he forgot to tell mother he had forgotten until just before they went to the train. She said it didn’t matter—that we could just as well come over here and stay with you.”

“She said,” added Pythagoras, “that you were so crazy over children, that probably you’d be glad to have us stay with you all the time.”

My last strawberry remained poised in mid-air. It was quite

apparent to me now that there was nothing funny about this situation.

“Milk, milk!” whimpered Diogenes, pulling at Silvia’s dress and making frantic efforts to reach the cream pitcher.

Huldah had come in with the griddle-cakes during this avalanche of news.

“Here, all you kids!” commanded our field marshal, as she picked up Diogenes, “beat it to the kitchen, and I’ll give you some breakfast. Hustle up!”

The Polydores, whose eyes were bulging with expectancy and semi-starvation, tumbled over each other in their eagerness to “hustle up and beat it to the kitchen.” Our oiler of troubled waters followed, and there was assurance of a brief lull.

“What shall we do!” I exclaimed helplessly when the door had closed on the last Polydore. I felt too limp and impotent to cope with the situation. Not so Silvia.

“Do!” she echoed with an intensity of tone and feeling I had never known her to display. “Do! We’ll do something, I am sure! I will not for a moment submit to such an imposition. Who ever heard of such colossal nerve! That father and mother should be brought back and prosecuted. I shall report them to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. But we won’t wait for such procedure. We’ll express each and every Polydore to them at once.”

“I should certainly do that P.D.Q. and C.O.D.,” I acquiesced, “if the Polydore parents could be located, but you know the

abodes of aborigines are many and scattered.”

My remarks seemed to fall as flat as the flapjacks I was siruping.

Silvia arose, determination in every lineament and muscle, and crossed the room. She opened the door leading into the kitchen.

“Ptolemy,” she demanded, “where have your father and mother gone?”

He came forward and replied in a voice somewhat smothered by cakes and sirup.

“I don’t know. They didn’t say.”

“We can find out from the ticket-agent,” I optimistically assured her.

“They never bother to buy tickets. Pay on the train,” Ptolemy explained.

My legal habit of counter-argument asserted itself.

“We can easily ascertain to what point their baggage was checked,” I remarked, again essaying to maintain a rôle of good cheer.

But the pessimistic Ptolemy was right there with another of his gloom-casting retaliations.

“They only took suit-cases and they always keep them in the car. Here’s a check father said to give you to pay for our board. He said you could write in any amount you wanted to.”

“He got a lot of dough yesterday,” informed Pythagoras, “and he put half of it in the bank here.”

Ptolemy handed over a check which was blank except for Felix Polydore's signature.

"I don't see," I weakly exclaimed when my wife had closed the kitchen door, "why she put them off on *us*. Why didn't she trade her brats off for antiques?"

Silvia eyed the check wistfully. I could read the unspoken thought that here, perhaps, was the opportunity for our much-desired trip.

"No, Silvia," I answered quickly, "not for any number of blank checks or vacation trips shall you have the care and annoyance of those wild Comanches."

"I know what I'll do!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I'll go right down to the intelligence office and get anything in the shape of a maid and put her in charge of the Polydore caravansary with double wages and every night out and any other privileges she requests."

This seemed a sane and sensible arrangement, and I wended my way to my office feeling that we were out of the woods.

When I returned home at noon, I found that we had only exchanged the woods for water—and deep water at that.

I beheld a strange sight. Silvia sat by our bedroom window twittering soft, cooing nonsensical nothings to Diogenes, who was clasped in her arms, his flushed little face pressed close to her shoulder.

"He's been quite ill, Lucien. I was frightened and called the doctor. He said it was only the slight fever that children are

subject to. He thought with good care that he'd be all right in a few days."

"Did you succeed in getting a cook to go to the Polydore?" I asked anxiously. "You'll need a nurse to go there, too, to take care of Diogenes."

She looked at me reproachfully and rebukingly.

"Why, Lucien! You don't suppose I could send this sick baby back to that uninviting house with only hired help in charge! Besides, I don't believe he'd stay with a stranger. He seems to have taken a fancy to me."

Diogenes confirmed this belief by a languid lifting of his eyelids, as he feelingly patted her cheek with his baby fingers.

I forebore to suggest that the fancy seemed to be mutual. Diogenes, sick, was no longer an "imp of the devil", but a normal, appealing little child. It occurred to me that possibly the care of a sick Polydore might develop Silvia's tiny germ of child-ken.

"Keep him here of course," I agreed, "but—the other children must return home."

"Diogenes would miss them," she said quickly, "and the doctor says his whims must be humored while he is sick. He is almost asleep now. I think he will let me put him down in his own little bed. Ptolemy brought it over here. Pull back the covers for me, Lucien. There!"

Diogenes half opened his eyes, as she laid him in the bed and smiled wanly.

"Mudder!" he cooed.

Silvia flushed and looked as if she dreaded some expression of mirth from me. Relieved by my silence and a suggestion of moisture in the region of my eyes—the day was quite warm—she confessed:

“He has called me that all the morning.”

“It would be a wise Polydore that knows its own parents,” I observed.

The slight illness of Diogenes lasted three or four days. I still shudder to recall the memory of that hideous period. Silvia’s time and attention were devoted to the sick child. Huldah was putting in all her leisure moments at the dentist’s, where she was acquiring her third set of teeth, and joy rode unconfined and unrestrained with our “boarders.”

Polydore proclivities made the Reign of Terror formerly known as the French Revolution seem like an ice cream festival. I don’t regard myself as a particularly nervous man, but there’s a limit! Their war whoops and screeches got on my nerves and temper to the extent of sending me into their midst one evening brandishing a whip and commanding immediate silence. I got it. Not through fear of chastisement, for fear was an emotion unknown to a Polydore, but from astonishment at so unexpected a procedure from so unexpected a source. Heretofore I had either ignored them or frolicked with them. Before they had recovered from their shock, Silvia appeared on the scene.

“Diogenes,” she informed them, “was not used to such unwonted quiet, and was fretting at the unaccustomed stillness.

Would the boys please play Indian or some of their games again?"

The boys would. I backed from the room, the whip behind me, carefully kept without Silvia's angle of vision. Before Ptolemy resumed his rôle of chief, he bestowed a knowing and maddening wink upon me.

I wished that we had remained neighbor-less. I wished that the aborigines would scalp Felix Polydore and the writer of Modern Antiquities. Then we could land their brats on the Probate Court. I wished that this were the reign of Herod. I vowed I would backslide from the Presbyterian faith since it no longer included in its articles of belief the eternal damnation of infants. How long, O Catiline, would—

A paralyzing suspicion flashed into the maelstrom of my vituperative maledictions. I rushed wildly upstairs to our combination bedroom, sickroom, and nursery, where Silvia sat like a guardian angel beside the Polydore patient.

"Silvia," I shouted excitedly, "do you suppose those diabolical Polydore parents purposely played this trick on us? Was it a premeditated Polydore plan to abandon their young? And can you blame them for playing us for easy marks? Could any parents, Polydore, or otherwise, ever come back to such fiends as these?"

"Hush!" she cautioned, without so much as a glance in my direction. "You'll wake Diogenes!"

Wake Diogenes! Ye Gods! And she had also implored the brothers of Diogenes to continue their anvil chorus! This took

the last stitch of starch from my manly bosom. Spiritless and spineless I bore all things, believed all things—but hoped for nothing.

Chapter V

In Which We Take a Vacation

Diogenes finally convalesced to his former state of ruggedness and obstreperousness. He continued, however, to cling to Silvia and to call her “mudder.” To my amusement the other children followed suit and she was now “muddered” by all the Polydores.

“I am glad,” I remarked, “that they scorn to include me in their adoption. I wouldn’t fancy being ‘faddered’ by the Polydores.”

“You won’t be,” Ptolemy, appearing seemingly from nowhere, assured me. “We’ve named you stepdaddy.”

“If it be possible, Silvia,” I implored, “let this cup pass from me.”

“I am going down to the intelligence office today,” replied Silvia soothingly. “Diogenes is well enough to go home now, and I can run over there every evening and see that he is properly put to bed.”

I went down town feeling like a mule relieved of his pack.

When I came home that afternoon, I found Silvia sitting on the shaded porch serenely sewing. A Sabbath-like stillness pervaded. Not a Polydore in sight or sound.

“Oh!” I cried buoyantly. “The Polydores have been returned to their home station!”

“No,” she replied calmly. “They told me at the intelligence

office that it would be absolutely impossible to persuade, bribe, or hire a servant to assume the charge of the Polydore place.”

“I suppose,” I said glumly, “that Gladys gave the job a double cross. But will you please account for the phenomenon of the utter absence of Polydores at the present period? Has Huldah at last carried out her oft-repeated threat of exterminating the Polydore race?”

“Pythagoras,” explained Silvia dejectedly, “has gone to the doctor’s. He broke his wrist this morning. Diogenes is lost and Emerald has gone to look for him—”

“Oh, why hunt him up?” I remonstrated. “Maybe Emerald, too, will get lost or strayed or stolen.”

“Huldah,” continued Silvia, “has locked Demetrius in the cellar. I am unable to report on Ptolemy. Huldah is half sick, but she won’t go to bed. She said no beds in Bedlamite for her. But I have a wonderful plan to suggest. There is relief in sight if you will consent.”

“I will consent to any committable crime on the calendar,” I assured her, “that will lead to the parting of the Polydore path from ours. Divulge.”

“We both need a change and rest. Today I heard of a most alluring, inexpensive, unfrequented resort called Hope Haven. Unfashionable, fine fishing, beautiful scenery, twelve miles from a railroad, and a stage stops there but once a day.”

“If there is such a place, we’ll go there at once, though why such an enticing spot should be unfrequented is beyond me. Do

we leave the Polydores to their fate, or as a town charge?”

“We’ll leave them to Huldah. She offered to keep them here if we’d take the outing. She said she’d either give them free rein or beat their brains out.”

“Then I see where the Polydores land in a juvenile jail, or else I return to defend Huldah for a charge of murder. We’ll take our departure by night—tomorrow night—and like the Arabs, or the Polydore parents, silently steal away.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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