

Speed Nell

Molly Brown's College

Friends



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

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CHAPTER I

NANCE OLDHAM

“I am so afraid Nance will be changed,” sighed Molly as she put the finishing touches to the room her old friend was to occupy.

“I’ll wager anything she is the same old Nance Oldham,” insisted Professor Green, obediently mounting the ladder to hang the last snowy curtain at the broad, deep window in the guest chamber overlooking the campus. “I think she is the kind of girl who will always be the same. Is that straight?”

“A little bit lower at this end – there! What a comfort you are, Edwin!” and Molly viewed the effect approvingly.

“Pretty good general houseworker, eh?” and the dignified professor of English at Wellington College ran nimbly down the ladder and hugged his wife. She submitted with very good grace to his embraces in spite of the fact that the fresh bureau scarves and table covers with which she was preparing to decorate her old friend’s room were included in the demonstration of affection.

Professor Edwin Green always declared that he never expected to catch up on all the years he had loved Molly Brown and had been forced to let “concealment like a worm in the bud feed on his damask cheek.” He and Molly had been married almost four years on that day in March when he was assisting in the imposing rite of hanging curtains in the guest chamber, and she was still as wonderful to him as she had been on that day they had walked through the Forest of Fontainebleau and he had confessed his love. She was the same charming girl who had lingered too long in the cloisters and been locked in to be rescued by him on her first day at college, now so many years ago.

Indeed, Molly Brown has changed very little since last we saw her. Little Mildred is walking and talking and singing little tunes and saying Mother Goose rhymes. She even knows her letters upside down and no other way, having learned them from blocks, presumably standing on her curly head as she acquired the knowledge.

There is another baby in the nursery now: little Dodo, whose real name is George, a remarkably satisfactory infant who sleeps when he should and wakes in a good humor, taking the proper nourishment at the proper hours and going back to sleep. Molly had learned the great secret of young motherhood from her first born: not to take parenthood too solemnly and seriously, and to realize that Mother Nature is the very best mother of all and babies thrive most when left as much as possible to her all-wise and tender care.

Nance Oldham, Molly’s old friend and roommate at college, was coming at last to make her long promised visit to the Greens. Little wonder that Molly feared she would be changed! Nance’s path in life had not been strewn with roses. No doubt my readers will remember that Mrs. Oldham, her mother, was a clever woman, lecturer, suffrage agitator, anything but a homemaker. When Nance finished college she had gone back to Vermont and dutifully kept house for her neglected father, although her secret ambition was to teach. Mr. Oldham had been so happy in having a home of his own that Nance had felt fully repaid for her sacrifice. Her mother, too, had at last realized the delights of home, when someone else had the trouble of keeping it, and had spent much more time with her family than she had for many years.

A lingering illness had attacked Mr. Oldham and after two years of tender nursing on the part of his daughter and futile ineffectual attempts at tenderness on the part of his wife, the poor man had passed away. Then it was that Nance’s friends had felt that her career might begin, but Mrs. Oldham

had suddenly decided that she could not live without the husband who had been ever patient with her vagaries and she had gone into a slow decline. More nursing and self-denial for the patient Nance!

She was an orphan now and although she was in reality little more than a girl she felt old and settled, that the little youth she had ever had, had left her years ago. Molly had written her immediately on hearing of Mrs. Oldham's death, declaring that she and her Edwin were ready and eager for the long-deferred visit. "I say 'visit,'" wrote Molly, "but I want you to make your home with us. Little Mildred calls you Aunt Nance and Dodo will call you the same as soon as he can talk."

The guest chamber was now in perfect order. The fresh curtains hung as straight as a learned professor of English could hang them, the bureau scarf and table cover were smooth and spotless, and on the window sill blossomed a pot of sweet violets sent by Mrs. McLean from her own greenhouse.

"I wonder about Nance and Andy McLean," said Molly, as she and her husband were walking to the station to meet their guest.

"Wonder what about them?"

"Wonder if they will ever marry!"

"Pooh! I fancy it was just a schoolgirl affair. They don't often amount to much."

"Schoolgirl affairs can be right serious, as you of all others should know!"

"Thank goodness, some of them!" said Edwin devoutly.

"I reckon Nance will be in deep mourning," sighed Molly. "I hate mourning, – I mean long veils and crêpe trimmings."

"So do I, – a relic of barbarism!"

"I'll give up my literary club for a while. I know Nance will not feel like seeing a lot of young people."

Professor Green said nothing but he felt it was rather hard on Wellington that any of its pleasures should be curtailed because of the death of a lady in Vermont. But Molly must do what she thought best. He hoped their guest would not put too long a face on life and would not prove inconsolable.

The long train stopped at the little station at Wellington and Molly and her husband eagerly scanned the few passengers who alighted from the Pullman. One lady in a long crêpe veil got an embrace from the impulsive Molly but she turned out to be an utter stranger and not the beloved Nance.

"She didn't come!" cried Molly.

"Oh yes, she did, but she came on a day coach," and there was Nance hugging Molly and shaking hands with Professor Green at the same time.

That gentleman was viewing his wife's old friend with great satisfaction. Instead of the long crêpe veil and the lugubrious black-clothed figure, here was a slight young woman in a neat brown suit and furs, with a close brown velvet toque and a chic little dotted brown veil.

"Nance! I was expecting –"

"Of course you were expecting to find me swathed in black. I am doing what Mother asked me to do. She hated mourning and so did Father and I am a fright in black and it would have meant a new outfit, which I can ill afford, and so –"

"And so you are a sensible girl," said Professor Green approvingly, as he took possession of her traveling bag and trunk check.

"Oh, Nance, you are not changed one bit!" cried Molly.

"You are changed a lot," said the truthful Nance, "but you are more beautiful. In fact, you never were really beautiful before, but now, now –"

"Oh, spare my blushes!" cried Molly, who did not spare herself but blushed and blushed and blushed again.

Nance was the same little brown-eyed person with the same honest look out of those eyes. In repose her mouth did have a slight droop at the corners but otherwise she might have been a college

girl still, so youthful were her lines and so clear and rosy her healthy skin. Her hair was as Molly had always remembered it, smooth and glossy with much brushing and every lock in place.

“Are you tired, honey? If you are, we can go home in the bus,” suggested Molly. “Look what a fine motor bus we have now! Do you remember the old yellow one with the lame horses?”

“Do I? And also that I met you right at this station when we were both freshmen and we rode up in that bus together. Oh, Molly, it is wonderful to be here with you! No, I’m not tired, so let’s walk.”

The professor was due for lectures and the girls left him without reluctance. Even husbands were superfluous when such old friends met after being separated for so many years. There was so much to talk about, so many loose threads to catch up, so much belated news that had not seemed important enough to write.

“I’m dying to see the children.”

“They are lovely! There is Mildred now waving to us from your window. I wonder what she is doing in there. I do hope she has not got into mischief,” said Molly uneasily.

The guest chamber was still spotless and Molly breathed a sigh of relief. She had had visions of the irrepressible Mildred’s making dolly sheets of the bureau scarf or of putting her black kitten to sleep in the snowy bed. The chubby imp was standing with her back to the window, her hands behind her. Her golden curls made a halo around her charming face, her brown eyes were soft and dreamy and her rosebud mouth looked as though butter would not melt in it.

“Come, darling, and speak to Aunt Nance,” said Molly.

“Ain’t no Aunt Nance!”

“Mildred!”

“Never mind, Molly! Don’t force her. She and I will end by being sweethearts, I am sure,” said Nance laughing.

“Never mind, Dodo will be your sweetheart now,” declared Molly, going through all the agony of motherhood when the offspring refuses to be polite. “You may go to Katy, Mildred,” in a tone as severe as she could make it.

Mildred sidled around, carefully keeping her back to her mother.

“What have you in your hand, darling?”

“Fings!”

“What things?”

“I been a-tuttin’.”

“Scissors! Oh, Mildred, you know how afraid your mother is for you to play with scissors! What am I to do with you?”

Mildred made a sudden resolution. Why not throw herself on the mercy of this new aunt for protection. She darted by her mother and sprang into the ready arms of Nance.

“I been a-tuttin’ a bunch of vi’lets for my Aunt Nance – an’ I been a-fwingin’ her curtains all pretty for her.”

In one hand she had tightly clasped a huge pair of shears and in the other the violets which she had ruthlessly culled from the pot sent by Mrs. McLean.

“Oh, Mildred, see what you have done,” agonized Molly. “Mrs. McLean sent them to you, Nance. I am so sorry they are spoiled.”

“But they are not,” declared Nance, trying to keep down the blush that would come at the knowledge that Andy McLean’s mother had shown her this attention. “We can put this dear little bunch in water, and I am sure there are many more buds to bloom. Let’s see, Mildred.”

“Deed they is! I wouldn’t cut no li’l baby buds off for nothin’ or nothin’. ’Tain’t no bad Milly in this house.”

“But the curtains!” wailed poor Molly when she viewed the neat fringes that her daughter had so carefully slashed with the great shears.

“Now don’t worry about that,” insisted Nance. “Mildred and I are going to cut them off and hem them up. Aren’t we, Mildred? Very short curtains are all the style now, anyhow.”

“Yes!” exclaimed the wily Mildred eagerly, “the windows likes to show they silk stockings, jes’ like the ladies.”

“Oh, you darling!” cried Nance, sinking down and holding the child in her arms, while Molly rescued the long and dangerous shears.

“Now, Muvver, you needn’t to worry no mo’, Aunt Nance an’ I is done made up an’ I done forgive her an’ all.”

“But how about you! Who has forgiven you?”

“Me! I done forgive myself ’long with Aunt Nance. I say right easy way down inside me: ‘Milly, ’scuse me!’ An’ then way down inside me say mos’ politeful: ‘You’s ’scusable, darlin’ chil’.”

“Molly, how can you resist her?” asked Nance.

“Well, I don’t reckon I can,” said Molly, whimsically. “But you won’t do it any more, will you, Mildred?”

“No’m, never in my world – cross my heart an’ wish I may die – bake a puddin’ bake a pie did you ever tell a lie yes you did you know you did you broke yo’ mammy’s teapot lid.”

“Some of Kizzie’s nonsense!” laughed Molly, remembering in her childhood saying exactly the same thing.

And so Nance Oldham was received into the home of the Edwin Greens. Already she had won the approval of the master by appearing in colors and not swathed in black (men always do hate mourning). Mildred had decided to love and honor and make her obey. Little Dodo soon accepted her lap as an especially nice place to spend his few waking moments, and Molly’s love and welcome were assured from the beginning of time.

CHAPTER II

BY THE FIRELIGHT

The only home Nance Oldham had ever known she had made herself after she left college. Her childhood and girlhood had been spent in boarding houses with her patient father, while her brilliant mother made occasional hurried and preoccupied visits to them. There had been a time when Nance had felt bitterly towards her mother because she was not as other mothers were, but the realization had finally come to her that her mother could no more be as other mothers than other mothers could be as Mrs. Oldham was. She had decided that instead of her mother's being a mistake, that she, Nance, was the mistake. She should never have been born; but now that she was born she intended to make the best of it. The fact that she had never had a home made a home just that much more precious and desirable in her eyes.

What a lovely home this square old brick house on the campus made! Nance remembered well in her college days that it was not such a very attractive place, rather bleak, in fact. It needed a mistress, the soul of a house; and now in place of the blank uncurtained windows of old days, Molly's genial hospitality and kindness seemed to look out from every pane of glass. The college girls named Mrs. Edwin Green "The Fairy Godmother of Wellington." She was called into consultation on every occasion. The President of Wellington wondered if it were not incumbent upon her to offer Molly a salary for her services.

"I don't know what we would do without her. I believe the college would simply go to pieces without Mrs. Edwin Green."

The students, old and young, rich and poor, flocked to the brick house which they dubbed "The Square Deal." There Molly administered advice and love and sympathy with absolute impartiality, also with perfect unconsciousness that she was the guiding star of the student body.

"She is the only really truly democratic person I ever knew, – of course, besides O. Henry, and I didn't exactly know him," Billie McKym declared. "She and O. Henry simply don't regard money one way or the other in their judgment of persons. Now most social workers think of the rich as necessary evils in the way of pocketbooks and such. They really take no interest in anyone who does not need financial or moral help, but Molly and O. Henry are just as good to the rich as the poor."

Billie was back at Wellington taking extra courses that she wasn't certain what she was to do with, but she felt anything was preferable to coming out into society in New York, which was the inevitable sequence the moment she was through with college.

Billie rather resented the guest at the Square Deal as did many of Molly's youthful friends.

"There's never any seeing Molly alone now," she grumbled.

"Never!" agreed Mary Neil, a red-headed junior who had what she termed a "mash" on Mrs. Green. Molly, being totally unaware of this, was ever causing the poor girl to turn green with jealousy.

"To think of her stopping the 'Would-be's' just because Miss Oldham's mother died, and she didn't even think enough of her to put on mourning," asserted Lilian Swift as she peeped in the mirror over the mantel to adjust her own very becoming black and white hat, worn as second mourning for a great-aunt who had left her a legacy.

These girls were assembled in the library at the Greens', waiting to see their friend. That evening the "Would-be Authors' Club" was to have met, but Molly, their president, had felt it best to postpone it because of Nance's recent bereavement. The "Would-be Authors" was now a flourishing organization with a waiting list that almost stretched around the campus. They met together for mutual benefit and encouragement and sometimes for discouragement. The only requisite for membership was to scribble at fiction. On coming into this club it was necessary to pledge oneself to take a criticism like a man. No matter how severe a drubbing your story called forth, you must smile and smile.

“Girls, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting, but Mildred had got chewing-gum in her hair and I simply had to get it out before her whole wig stuck together,” said Molly as she came in with Dodo in her arms and Mildred trotting after her like a veritable little colt following its dam. “My friend, Miss Oldham, will be down in a moment.”

The girls looked at one another meaningly.

“I want all of you to like my friend,” continued Molly, as though she could divine their thoughts. “She has had a hard time and she needs the companionship of young people more than anyone I know.”

Molly then told them of Nance’s devotion to her mother and father, of her thwarted ambition, of her unselfishness and cleverness.

“It seems strange for her not to wear mourning for her mother,” said Lilian.

“Perhaps it does, but when you think of it, what you wear has nothing to do with your feelings. It is in a way part of Nance’s unselfishness that she did not put on mourning. Her father disliked it, her mother could not abide it, and as she said, it meant a new outfit which she could ill afford. It is a great deal easier just to give up to grief and exude gloom than it is to be cheerful and radiate light and happiness.”

Molly was in a measure irritated by Lilian’s criticism of her beloved Nance, but Lilian was a person who always spoke her mind no matter what was involved, and she had a certain sturdiness and honesty of opinion that disarmed one.

“Well, that’s all right,” she answered bluntly, “but while she is being so unselfish about her clothes, why doesn’t she spunk up a bit about the ‘Would-be Authors?’”

“What about them?”

“Why, postponing the meeting because she is in such deep grief.”

“That wasn’t Nance. I am responsible for that foolishness. She only found out about it to-day and declares she will go back to Vermont if I dare make a single change in my way of living. I want all of you to get messages to the club to be sure and come this evening.”

“Bully for Nance!” cried Billie McKym.

Nance came into the room just as Billie was cheering her.

“I’m mighty glad it’s bully for me, if I’m the Nance. But why ‘Bully for Nance?’”

“Just because you are here with Mrs. Green and can come to our literary club this evening,” said Billie with a straight face.

“But I am no scribbler,” declared Nance.

“But you are a wonderful critic,” said Molly. “Among so many scribblers it is well to have one sane person willing to compose the audience. It is my turn to read to-night and I want your criticism.”

“If I can come in that capacity, I am more than willing,” smiled Nance as she settled herself to her knitting.

“I remember many times you saved me from making a bombastic goose of myself on my college themes,” laughed Molly. “What I flattered myself was pathos, under your cool judgment turned out often to be bathos.”

Molly leaned over and gave her friend an affectionate pat. At this show of love, Mary Neil jumped up so suddenly that she upset little Mildred, who was sitting on the sofa by her, and without saying a word rushed from the room.

“What on earth!” exclaimed Molly.

“The suddenness of Mary, – that’s all,” declared Billie.

“Good title for a story!” said Lilian, getting out a note-book.

“Oh, you scribblers!” laughed Nance.

Little Mildred was picked up and comforted and in a short while the visitors took their departure.

“Molly, do you know what was the matter with that interesting looking red-headed girl?” asked Nance as they settled to the delights of a twilight chat, while Nance busily plied her knitting needles on the long drab scarf that seemed to grow under her agile fingers like magic.

“I have no idea.”

“She was jealous of me. I noticed how she looked at me when I came in and she never said a single word while all of us were chatting. Then the moment you gave me a little pat, she jumped up as though she had received an electric shock and fled.”

“Absurd! I hate to think it of Mary.”

“It’s true all the same. Didn’t you know she was crazy about you?”

“No, and I don’t want to know it. A girl had better be beau-crazy than have these silly cases with other girls. I am going to put a stop to it in some way.”

“How, may I ask?”

“I might do like Peg Woffington and put my hair up in curl papers and appear at my very worst.”

“Well, dearie, your worst might be so much better than some person’s best that that might not work. But don’t think I’ve got a case on you.”

“Never! We were foolish enough college girls but we never were that foolish. I can’t remember anyone in our crowd having these silly mashes. Can you?”

“Unless it was the affair Judy Kean had with Adele Windsor. Do you remember when poor Judy turned up with her hair dyed a blue black?”

“Do I?” and the friends went off into peals of laughter just as Mrs. McLean ushered herself into the firelit room.

“The door was open so I came right in,” announced that dear woman. She caught Nance’s hands in a strong grasp and drew the girl towards her. “I am glad to see you, my dear,” she said simply. Her well-remembered Scotch accent fell pleasingly on Nance’s ear.

“The violets were lovely. I thank you so much,” faltered Nance.

Molly wondered at the embarrassment of her friend. She had longed to talk to Nance about Andy McLean but did not know how to begin. She shrank from prying into her guest’s affairs, but the eternal feminine in her was on the alert for the romance she had no doubt was there.

“And now I must tell you all about Andy,” said his fond mother. “I know you want to hear about him, – eh?”

“Indeed we do,” put in Molly quickly, while Nance tried to go on with her knitting, but I am afraid dropped more stitches than she picked up.

“He has resigned from the hospital staff in New York where he was doing so splendidly and is to go to France as an ambulance surgeon.”

“Oh!” came involuntarily from Nance.

“Splendid!” cried Molly.

“It is what he should do,” declared his Spartan mother. “His father and I would not have it otherwise. Of course, the States will be at war before the month is out and Andy might wait and enlist with his own country, but in the meantime he is needed, and sadly needed, by my country, mine and his father’s.”

“He will come see you before he sails, will he not?” asked Molly.

“Of course! He may spend a month with us.”

“That will be splendid indeed.”

Nance said nothing, but the flames that sprang from the wood fire lit up a very rosy countenance.

“I must be going now. I only ran in for a moment to bring the news of my Andy and to see this little friend again. Come to see me, both of you,” and the doctor’s wife was gone.

“Molly! I should never have come to you!” said Nance the moment the door closed on their visitor. Katy, the Irish nurse, had come for the baby. Little Mildred had fallen asleep, her head in Nance’s lap.

“My darling girl! Why?”

“I can’t spoil Andy’s visit to his mother. If I am here, it will be spoiled.”

“Nance, how can you say so?”

“Because it is the truth. He will have to see me, and he hates me.”

“He couldn’t!”

“He left me two years ago in a rage and swore it was over for good and all; and he couldn’t have said such things to me if he had not hated me.”

“And you – do you hate him?”

“Of course not!” and again the flickering fire showed off her blushes.

“Did you say nothing to him but nice things?”

“We-ll, not exactly, – but he said the things he said first.”

“Were the things he said worse than the things you said?”

“No!” with a toss of her independent head, “I gave him back as good as he sent.”

“You shouldn’t have done it. You knew how the things he said hurt, and with your superior knowledge of what it meant to be wounded, you were cruel to hurt him so.”

“But he should have known! That kind of philosophy is above me. Suppose the Allies conducted their warfare under those principles, what would become of us? Germany hit first and France and Belgium knew how it hurt, and so they should not have hit back. There is a big hole in your reasoning, honey.”

“But that is not the same. Germany and France didn’t love one another, while you and Andy – ”

“Well, it is all over now!” and Nance composed herself and tried to go on with her knitting. Molly thought in her heart perhaps it was not so “over” as Nance thought.

“Why did you and Andy quarrel?”

“I had promised when Father no longer needed me that I would – would – marry him. How could I tell that Mother would want to come live with me when poor Father was gone? Andy came as soon as he learned of Father’s death and seemed to think I could pick right up and marry him, and when I objected to such unseemly haste he said I had been flirting with him. The idea of such a thing! He got it into his head that Dr. Flint, the physician who had been with us through poor Father’s long illness, was the cause of my holding back.”

“A young doctor?”

“Ye-es!”

“Was he – was he – attentive?”

“Perhaps – well, yes – he did propose to me but I had no idea of accepting him. Andy should have known me well enough to realize that I couldn’t be so low as to jilt him. When Andy came, Mother had just told me that she never expected to leave me again. I never did have a chance to tell this to him, he was so angry and so jealous. He wanted me to marry him immediately and leave Vermont, – and how could I when Mother was home, sick and miserable and reproaching herself for having been away from Father so much?”

“Did your mother not know of your engagement to Andy?”

“No-o! You see, poor Mother was not – was not the kind of mother one confided in much. Afterwards, when I nursed her through all those months, she was so softened if I had had anything to confide I should have done so, but then there was nothing left to confide.”

“Poor old Nance!” said Molly lovingly.

“Well, I’m not sorry for myself a bit. No doubt I might have gone whining to Andy and made him take back all the things he said, but I am no whiner. It was a good thing we found out in time we could say such things to each other!”

“Maybe it was a good thing to find out in time how it hurt to say such things and have such things said to one, and then it would never happen again,” said the hopeful Molly.

Nance divined that Molly was thinking how best she could bring these two estranged lovers together, and determined to frustrate any matchmaking plans the young matron might be hatching.

“Promise me, Molly, you will not say a thing to Andy or to anyone. It is something that is hopelessly mixed up and my pride would never recover if Andy should know that I cared.”

“You do care then?”

“Of course I care! I never had very many friends and if I cared for Andy enough to engage myself to him, I could not get over it ever, I am afraid. But you have not promised yet.”

“I promise,” said Molly sadly. “But if you love Andy, it does seem so foolish – ”

“But remember you have promised!”

CHAPTER III

THE WOULD-BE'S

What a chattering there was as the crowd of girls gathered for the weekly meeting of their literary club! Professor Green beat a hasty retreat from the library. He declared that listening to schoolgirl fiction was no treat to him. Besides there was so much to be read concerning the war in that month of March, 1917, and little time in which to read it. War was an obsession with Edwin Green. Waking and sleeping it was ever with him. He regretted his being unable to enlist as a private in the French army, so strong were his sympathies with that struggling nation. Certain that his country would finally drop its neutrality and come out strongly for democracy and the Allies, he could hardly wait for the final declaration of war. He had his den, safe from the encroachments of the "Would-be Authors' Club," and there he ensconced himself with enough newspapers and magazines to furnish reading matter for the whole of Wellington.

The rules of the club were as follows: Two pieces of original fiction must be read at each meeting. A chairman for the evening must be appointed by the two performers. All manuscript must be written legibly if not typewritten, so that the club need not have to wait while the author tried to read her own writing. Criticism must be given and taken in good humor and good faith.

Molly, in forming this club, had endeavored to have in it only those students who were really interested in short story writing and ambitious to perfect themselves, but in spite of her ideals there were some members who were in it for the fun they got out of it or for a certain prestige they fancied they would gain from these weekly meetings at the home of the popular wife of a popular professor. These slackers were constantly bringing excuses for plots when their time came to read, or trying to work off on the club old essays and theses on various subjects not in the least related to fiction.

"You are to read this evening, I believe, Mary," said Molly to Mary Neil as the library filled. "You missed last time and so got put on this week."

"Yes – I – that is – you see, I sat up all night trying to finish a story but couldn't get it to suit me."

"Did you bring it?"

"Oh no, it was too much in the rough."

"That's too bad, Mary!" cried Lilian Swift. "There are plenty of us who had things to read and you cut us out of the chance."

"Surely some of you must have brought things," said Molly, trying not to smile, knowing full well that in almost every pocket of the really and truly "Would-be's" some gem of purest ray serene in the shape of a manuscript was only waiting to be dived for. The self-conscious expression on at least a dozen faces put her mind at rest in regard to the program of the evening.

"It seems I have the appointing of a chairman for the meeting in my power, since the other reader has fallen out of the running," said Molly, looking as severely as she could look at the sullen, handsome Mary Neil, "so I appoint Billie McKym."

Billie, a most ardent scribbler, had been drawn into the procession of short-story fiends by her dear friend Thelma Larson, who was destined to become famous as a writer of fiction. Billie had no great talent but she possessed a fresh breezy line of dialogue that covered a multitude of sins in the way of plot formation, motivation, crisis, climax and what not.

"Remember, Billie, the chair is not the floor," teased one of the members.

Billie was a great talker and although she was no pronounced success as a writer of fiction, she was a good critic of the performance of others.

"Just for that I'll ask you, Miss Smarty, to serve as vice, and when I have something important to say I'll put you in the chair for keeps."

“Oh, let Mrs. Green begin and stop squabbling,” demanded a girl who had a plot she was dying to divulge and devoutly hoped she would be called on when their hostess got through.

“Then begin!” and Billie rapped for order.

Molly took her seat by the reading-lamp and opened her manuscript. Having to read before the club was just as exciting to Molly as to the veriest freshman. Her cheeks flushed and her hand trembled a wee bit.

“Silly of me to get stage fright but I can’t help it,” she laughed.

“How do you reckon we feel then?” drawled a little girl from Alabama, who only the week before had been torn limb from limb by the relentless “Would-be’s.”

“This is a story that I have sent on many a journey and it always comes back to its doting mother. I have received several personal letters about it – ”

“Oh, wonderful!” came from several members.

“Only think, the most encouraging thing that has happened to me yet was once a Western magazine kept my manuscript almost three weeks,” sighed a willowy maiden.

“Now please criticize it just as severely as you can. I want to sell it, and something must be done to it before the editors will take it,” begged Molly, getting over her ridiculous stage fright.

“Fire away!” said parliamentary Billie.

“How long is it?” asked Lilian Swift.

“About five thousand words, I think!”

“Whew!” blew the girl who hoped to get her plot in edgewise.

There was a general laugh and then Molly cleared her throat for action. “First, let me tell you I saw a clipping in the *New York Times* asking for Fairy Godmothers for the soldiers. That was what put the idea in my head. The title is: ‘Fairy Godmothers Wanted.’”

You could have heard a pin drop while Molly read, and occasionally one did hear the scratching of a pencil wielded by a member who was on a critical war-path.

CHAPTER IV

FAIRY GODMOTHERS WANTED

The ballroom was crowded but very quiet. The belle of the ball was the night nurse, deftly accomplishing the many duties that fall to the share of a night nurse. A letter must be written for a poor Gascon who had lost his right arm; a Bedouin chief must be watered every five minutes; a little red-headed Irishman begging for morphine to ease his pain, and a sad Cockney lad sobbing because he was “‘omesick for ’Ammersmith,” must be comforted.

The beautiful old château had been converted into a hospital early in the war and the *salle de bal* was given over to the convalescents. The convalescent male is a very difficult proposition, and the little nurse sometimes felt her burden was greater than she could bear. There was so much to do for these sick soldiers besides nurse them. One thing, she must good-naturedly submit to being made love to in many different languages. She could stand all but the Bedouin chief.

“He seems so like our darkeys at home,” she had whispered to the one American who was getting well rather faster than he liked to admit.

This American wanted to get well and be back in the trenches, but who was to make love to the pretty night nurse in good old American when he left the convalescent ward?

“You promised to do something for me to-night. Don’t forget! You must be almost through with all of these fellows.”

“Ready in a minute!” She flitted down between the rows of cots, tucking in the covers here, plumping up a pillow there. The Bedouin was watered for the last time that night and finally closed his rolling black eyes.

“Now, what is it?” she asked, sinking down on a stool by the American’s bed, which was placed in an alcove at one end of the great salon. “If it is writing a letter, thank goodness, it won’t have to be in the second person singular in French. Why do you suppose they teach us such formal French at school? I can’t *tutoyer* for the life of me.”

“Same here! *Je t’aime*’s all I know. But I don’t want you to write a letter for me. I want you to read some. But first I must know your really truly name. I – I – like you too much just to have to call you nurse.”

“Mary Grubb!”

“No! Not really?”

“Yes! I’d like to know what is the matter with my name. It is a perfectly good name, I reckon.”

“Yes, Mary is beautiful – but – the other! Never mind, you can change it.”

“I have no desire to do so, at least not for many a day. I think Grubb is especially nice. It suggests Sally Lunn and batter bread.”

“There now, I would know you are from the South even if your dear little ‘reckons’ didn’t come popping out every now and then. Do you know, I have a friend who lives in Kentucky, and when the war is over I have been planning to go see her, but now – but now – I am afraid she won’t want to see me.”

“You mean the scars?” and she looked pityingly at the young man and put her firm little hand on his head. “Why, they will not amount to much. They will just make you look interesting. Your eyes will be well, I just know they will. Look at this long scar that has given the most trouble! It has turned to a pleasing pink and will be almost gone in a few months. You see you are so healthy.”

“It isn’t altogether the scars. If you think they are pretty, maybe she will, too. There is something else. I want to read over all this packet of letters before I decide something. You had better begin or that big, black, bounding beggar over there will begin to whine for water again. After you read the letters, maybe I will tell you the other reason why my friend in Kentucky might not want to see me.”

He took from under his pillow a packet of little blue letters, tightly tied with a piece of twine. “Here they are! These letters have meant a lot to me while I was in the trenches. They still mean a lot to me. They were written by my Fairy Godmother.”

“Oh! Are they love letters?”

“No, indeed! I wouldn’t ask a woman to read another woman’s love letters. I wouldn’t let anyone but you read these letters, but my eyes are too punk to read them myself and I have to – to hear them to decide something, something very important.”

“All right! A nurse is a kind of father confessor and what one hears professionally is sacred.”

“But, my dear, I am not thinking of you as a nurse.”

“But I am thinking of you as a patient.”

She slipped the top letter from the packet and turned it over. “So your name is Stephen Scott!”

“Didn’t you know my name, either? How funny!”

“I only know the names of the patients who have charts, and you are too well to waste a chart on. We nurses call you the convalescent American. Sure these are not love letters?”

“Of course!” impatiently. “But if you don’t want to read them to me, just say so. Maybe you are tired. Of course you are. You look pale and your little hand is trembling.”

“No, no! I am not tired! Let me begin.”

The *salle de bal* of the old château was very quiet. The wounded soldiers were dropping off to sleep one by one. Even the Bedouin chief had stopped rolling his eyes and was softly snoring. In a low clear voice she read the letters.

My dear Godson:

It is so wonderful to be a Godmother that I can hardly contain myself for joy. It is through an advertisement I saw in a New York paper, headed Fairy Godmothers Wanted, that I happen to have you and you happen to have me. I consider our introduction quite regular as it came through the wife of a great general.

I wonder how you like belonging to me? I wonder if you are as alone in the world and homeless as I am. I wonder if you are big or little, dark or fair, old or young. I wonder all kinds of things about you, – after all, it makes no difference, any of these things. You are my Godson and every day I am going to pray for you and think about you. I am going to send you presents and write you long letters and send you newspapers. The only trouble about it is by the time I get hold of English papers they will be weeks and weeks old. I wonder if American magazines and papers would appeal to you. I wonder what kind of presents you would like, – not beaded antimacassars and not mouchoir cases surely. I will knit you a sweater maybe, but I am not very fond of knitting.

This business of being a Fairy Godmother is a very serious one, more serious than being a real mother, I believe. A real mother can at least do something towards forming the character of her child, but a Fairy Godmother has her child presented to her and takes it as the husband used to take his bride in the old English prayer book: “With all her debts and scandals upon her.” The worst of it is that she is ignorant what those debts and scandals are. I don’t even know what kind of smoke to send you. Are you middle-aged and sedate and do you smoke a corn-cob pipe? Are you young and giddy and do you live on cigarettes? A terrible possibility has entered into my mind! Are you one of those awful persons that uses what our darkeys call “eatin’ tobacco”? If so, I shall begin to train you immediately.

Perhaps you want to know something about me. There is not much to know. I am an orphan of independent means and character. Being the first, enables me to be the second, which sounds like a riddle but isn’t. You see I have rafts and oodlums of kin, and if I did not have an income of my own they would step in and coerce me

even more than they do. I said in the beginning that I was homeless. I am not really that, but the trouble is I have too many homes. I must spend the winter with Aunt Sally and the spring with Cousin Kate. Cousin Maria and Uncle Bruce want me to take White Sulphur by storm with them as chaperones; and so it is from one year's end to the other, kind relations planning for me. I am bored to death with it all and am even now preparing a bomb to throw in this camp of overzealous kin. But I'll tell you about that later, – that is, if you want to hear about it. I may be boring you stiff. If I am, it is an easy matter for you to repudiate me and tell Mrs. Johnson to get you a more agreeable Godmother.

My numerous family does not at all approve of my being a Godmother. They think I am too young for the responsibility and have entered upon it too lightly. I even heard Aunt Sally whisper to Cousin Maria: "Just like her mother!" That means in their minds that I am headstrong and difficult. You see my mother was also of independent means and character. Also (I whisper this) she was not a Southerner. That is as serious in a Southerner's eyes as not being British is in yours. They think it is very forward of me to be writing to a man what has not been properly introduced. Uncle Bruce suggests that you may not even be born. I tell him soldiers don't have to be born and that the bravest soldiers that were ever known sprang up from dragon's teeth.

I am sending you as my first present all kinds of tobacco, even plug. I must not let my prejudices get away with me. If my dear Godson likes "eatin' tobacco," he shall have it. If you don't indulge in it, give it to some soldier less dainty. For my part, I should think the trenches would be dirty enough without adding to them.

I want to tell you that I like your name. I think Stephen Scott sounds very manly and upstanding, somehow. I am hoping for a letter from you just to give me an inkling of your tastes. Of course I know one of the duties of a Fairy Godmother is not to worry her charge, and I don't want to worry you but to help you. I think of you in those damp, nasty ditches eating all kinds of food, served in all kinds of ways. (I am sure what should be hot is cold, and what should be cold is hot.) And when I sit down to batter-bread and fried chicken I can hardly force it down, I do so want you to have it instead of me.

*Your affectionate Godmother,
Polly Nelson.*

The night nurse quietly folded up the first letter and slipped it back in its blue envelope. She had a whimsical, amused expression on her face.

"What are you smiling over? Don't you think that is a nice letter?"

"I didn't say it wasn't."

"But you didn't say it was. I think that is a sweet letter. I tell you it meant a lot to me. Of course, I am not the homeless Tommy she thought I was. I fancy I have as many Aunt Sallies and Cousin Marias as she has, but they happen to be in New England."

"You are not an orphan, then!"

"Oh, yes! I'm an orphan all right enough, but I am related to half of Massachusetts and all of Boston."

"Did you tell your Fairy Godmother that?"

"No, – that's what makes me feel so bad. I was afraid she would stop being my Godmother if she found out I was – well, not exactly poor, so I – I didn't exactly lie –"

"You didn't exactly tell the truth, either," and the night nurse curled her pretty lip and looked disgusted.

“Oh, please don’t be angry with me, too. I know she will be. I have simply got to tell her the truth about myself. I did let her know I am an American. I am going to write her a letter just as soon as I can see to do it. But go on with the next, please. You are sure it is not tiring you too much?”

“Sure,” and the night nurse slipped out another.

My dear Godson:

It was very nice of you to answer my letter so promptly. I am so glad you are an American and do not chew tobacco. You must not feel compelled to answer all my letters because you must be very busy and I have very little to do, so little that I am becoming very restless. I have thrown the bomb in the camp of the enemy, my kin. They are shattered into smithereens. I am going to enter a hospital, take training, and just as soon as I am capable go to France with the Red Cross nurses. I should like to go immediately but I want to be a help not a hindrance, and they say all the untrained persons who butt in on the war zone are a nuisance. Six months of training should make me fit, don’t you think? But how should you know?

I am very happy at the thought of being of some use. I owe it all to you, my dear Godson. If I had not been presented with you I should never have thought of such a thing. Just as soon as I realized that over in the trenches was a human being who wanted to hear from me and whom I could help, I began to take a new interest in the war and all the soldiers, and then I began to feel that maybe I, insignificant little I, might be of some use to those poor soldiers, some use besides just knitting foolish caps and mittens and sending the *Saturday Evening Post* and cigarettes. I only wish I could go immediately. My training begins to-morrow. Aunt Sally and Cousin Maria feel that it is a terrible blot on the family name. They are sure someone will say that I am doing this because I am not a success in society, although they say over and over that I am. I don’t know whether I am or not, all I know is that society is not a success with me. Uncle Bruce is rather nice about it all.

There are so many I’s in this letter I am mortified. I believe writing to a Godson in the trenches is almost like keeping a diary. I am sending you some cards and poker chips (but you mustn’t play for money). I’d hate to think that my presents exerted a poor moral influence on my dear Godson. Would you mind just dropping a hint as to what kind of presents would be most acceptable? I have never been in the habit of giving presents to men and the kinds of presents some of my friends give would not be very appropriate, it seems to me. Silver match boxes and cigarette holders would not be very useful, nor would silk socks with initials embroidered on them be much better. Do you like chocolate drops and poetry?

*Your affectionate Fairy Godmother,
Polly Nelson.*

The night nurse laughed outright at the close of the letter and Stephen Scott reached out for the packet from which she was extracting a third blue envelope.

“If you are going to make fun of them, you can stop.”

“I wasn’t making fun. I was just thinking what funny presents girls do give men.”

“Well, so they do, but my little Godmother gave me bully presents, – cigarettes to burn, home-made molasses candy and beaten biscuit. She had lots of imagination in the presents she sent and the blessed child never did burden me with a work-box but sent me a gross of safety-pins that beat all the sewing kits on earth. I don’t believe you like my Godmother much.”

“Don’t you? Well, I do.”

“You should like her because somehow you remind me of her.”

“Oh! Have you seen her?”

“Only in my mind’s eye. I begged her for a picture of herself but she has never sent it. She has promised it, though. You see I got to answering her letters in the same spirit in which she wrote to me, only I was not quite so frank, I am afraid. She told me everything about herself while I told her only my thoughts. I never did tell her I was not a homeless soldier of fortune. She thinks I am absolutely friendless and dependent on my pay as a private for my living. Sometimes I wish I didn’t have a sou – at least I have felt that way – but now – ”

“But now what?”

“But now I don’t think it is so bad to have a little tin,” and he held one of the little stained hands in his for a moment.

She gently withdrew it and opened a third letter. This was full of hospital experiences and so were all that followed. The tone of them became more intimate and friendly. The desire to serve was ever uppermost – just to get in the War Zone and help.

“I got awfully stuck on her, somehow,” confessed the man. “She was so sweet and so girlish – I did not say so for fear of scaring her off, but I used to write her pretty warm ones, I am afraid.”

“Why afraid?”

“Don’t you know?”

“How should I know?”

“Why, honey, you must see that I am head over heels in love with you. I oughtn’t to be telling it to you when I have written my little Godmother that as soon as the war is over I am going to find her and tell her the same thing. But, somehow, I was loving her only on paper and in my mind; but you – you – I love you with every bit of my heart, soul and body.” He caught her hand and all of the poor little slim blue letters slipped from the twine and scattered over the floor.

“Oh, the poor little letters!” she cried. “Is that all they mean to you?”

“Oh, honey, they meant a lot to me and still do, but they are just letters and you are – you.”

“But how about the letters you wrote Miss Polly Nelson? Are they just letters to her and nothing more? Don’t you think it is possible that she may have treasured your letters, especially the pretty warm ones, and be looking forward to the end of the war with the same eagerness that you have felt up to – say – ”

“The minute I laid eyes on you. At first I used to dream maybe you were she, but I began to feel that she must be much – younger – somehow, than you. You are so capable, so mature in a way. She is little more than a child and you are a grown woman.”

“I am twenty-one – but the war ages one.”

“I don’t mean you look old – I just mean you seem so sensible.”

“And Miss Nelson didn’t?”

“I don’t mean that, I just mean she seemed immature. But suppose you read the last letter. And couldn’t you do it with one hand and let me hold the other?”

“Certainly not!” and the night nurse stooped and gathered the scattered letters. Leaning over may have accounted for the rosy hue that overspread her countenance.

“You certainly read her writing mighty easily. I had a hard time at first. I think she writes a rotten fist, although there is plenty of character in it, dear little Godmother!”

“Humph! Do you think so? I wouldn’t tell her that if I were you – I mean that you think her fist is rotten.”

“Of course not, but begin, please, and say – couldn’t you manage with one hand?”

But the night nurse was adamant and drew herself up very primly and began to read:

My dear Godson:

I am afraid gratitude has got the better of you. You must not feel that because a girl in America has written you a pile of foolish letters and sent you a few little paltry presents, you must send her such very loverlike letters in return. I am disappointed in you, Godson. I had an idea that you were steadier. Just suppose I were a designing

female who was going to hold you up and drag you through the wounded-affections court? There is quite enough in your last two letters to justify such a proceeding. It may be only your poverty that will restrain me. In the first place, you don't know me from Adam or rather Eve. I may be a Fairy Godmother with a crooked back and a black cat, who prefers a broom-stick to a limousine; I may have a hare-lip and a mean disposition; I may write vers libre and believe in dress reform. In fact I am a pig in a poke and you are a very foolish person to think you want to carry me off without ever looking at me. I won't say that I don't want to see you and know you, because I do. I have been very honest with you in my letters because, as I told you once, it has seemed almost like keeping a diary to write to you, and I think a person who is not honest in a diary is as bad as the person who cheats at solitaire. When the war is over if you want to look me up you will find me in Louisville, Kentucky. When you do find me, I want you to be nothing but my Godson. You may not like me a bit and I may find you unbearable, – somehow, I don't believe I shall, though. I do hope you will like me, too. One thing I promise – that is, not to fall in love with anyone else until I have looked you over. And you – I fancy you see no females to fall in love with.

I never let myself think about your getting killed. As Fairy Godmother I cast a spell about you to protect you. There are times when I almost wish you could be safely wounded. Those are the times when I doubt the efficacy of my prayers and the powers of my fairy gifts.

And now for the news: I am going to the front! I have worked it by strategy. A girl I know has had all her papers made out ready to join the Red Cross nurses, and now at the last minute her young man has stepped in and persuaded her to marry him instead. I have cajoled the papers from her and am leaving in a few hours. Aunt Sally and Cousin Kate, Uncle Bruce and Cousin Maria are half demented. They don't know how I worked it or I am sure they would have the law on me for perjury. I am free, white, and twenty-one now, and they could control me in no other way. Good-by, Godson! I wonder if we will meet somewhere in France. I will write you when I can, but I am afraid I shall not be able to send any more presents for a while.
Your affectionate Godmother.

“Now don't you hate and despise me for telling you what I did just now? You see she says she will at least not fall in love with anyone else until she looks me over, and think what I have done! What must I do? I am going to try not to tell you I love you any more until that other girl knows what a blackguard I am, but you must understand all the time that I do.”

“I understand nothing, Mr. Stephen Scott. I am simply the night nurse in the convalescent ward and you have asked me to read some letters to you, and I have read them; and now it is my duty to forget what is in them, and I am going to do it, – I have done it. All I can say is that you might give Miss Polly Nelson the chance to find someone else she likes better than she does you before you are so quick to take for granted she will stick to her bargain, too. If there is any jilting going on, we Southern girls rather prefer to be the jilters than the jiltees.”

“Don't say jilting! It isn't fair. Please be good to me! I am so miserable.”

The night nurse smiled in spite of herself and felt his pulse.

“There now! Just as I thought! You have worked yourself up into an abnormal pulse and I shall have to start a chart on you.”

“Abnormal nothing! How is a fellow's pulse to remain normal when you put your dear little fingers on his wrist? But I forgot! I am not going to make love to you until I can let my Godmother know. Maybe she has met some grand English Tommy by this time – ” And then he groaned aloud and cried: “But I don't want her to do that, either!”

“Blessed if I’m not in love with two girls,” he thought.

The night nurse sat quietly down to her charts after having gone the rounds of her ward. All was quiet. The convalescent soldiers were sleeping peacefully, dreaming of home, she hoped. Scott stirred restlessly now and then. He could not sleep but watched the busy little stained hand of the night nurse as it glided rapidly over the charts. She had no light but that of a guttering candle, carefully shaded from her patients’ eyes, but Scott could see her well-poised head and fine profile as she bent over her writing. How lovely she was! Would she ever listen to him? How she stood up for her sex, – and still she did not exactly repulse him. What a strange name for a girl like that to have! Grubb! It was preposterous. Indeed, he felt it his duty to make her change that name as soon as possible. Polly Nelson is a pretty name – dear little Godmother! Would she despise him, too, like this other girl? But did this other one despise him?

The night nurse made her rounds again and then left the ward for a moment. When she returned, she came to the American’s bedside.

“A letter has just come for you, Mr. Scott.”

“For me? Splendid! Will you read it to me?”

“Yes, if you cannot possibly see to do it yourself.”

“I might, but I’d rather not.”

“It is in the same rotten fist of those I read you to-night.”

“My Fairy Godmother! I – I – believe I can see to read that myself.”

She handed him the letter. Her hand was trembling a little and so was his. She brought the guttering candle and he opened his letter.

Somewhere in France.

My dear Godson:

I have always been so frank with you that I feel I must make a confession. I promised you in my last letter, the one I wrote just before I left home, that I would not fall in love with anyone until after the war, when you were to present yourself in Louisville and we were to view each other for the first time. Dear Godson – I have not kept my word. They say a man falls in love with his nurse often because of the feeling he has for his mother. She makes it seem as though he were a little child again. I reckon a nurse falls in love with her patient because he seems so like a little boy. She loves him first because of the maternal instinct. Be that as it may, I am in love with one of my patients. I tell you this fearing you may be wounded and you may fall in the hands of a cap and apron, and from a feeling of noblesse oblige you may not grasp the happiness within your reach.

God bless you, my dear Godson!

Always,

Your Fairy Godmother.

P. S. – He is an American.

A great tear rolled down the scarred cheek of the young soldier and splashed on the signature. Then something happened that made him sit up very straight in his cot and stretch out a shaking hand for the night nurse. She was by his side in a moment.

“Look! Look! The ink is not dry yet. See where that tear dropped! Dry ink would not float off like that!” He turned the sheet over. It was a chart.

“But you – you – little Fairy Godmother! Who is he?”

“There is only one American in my ward.”

“But you said your name was Grubb!”

“That’s my official name. Mary Grubb was the girl whose place I got with the Red Cross. Do you know, you hurt my feelings terribly when you said my fist was rotten?”

And Stephen Scott, holding the little stained and roughened hand in his, wondered that he ever could have made such a break.

“Thank God, you are just one girl, after all!” he cried.

But the night nurse wished that there were two of her for a while at least: one to stay by the bedside of the convalescent American and one to make out the charts that must be got ready for the morning rounds of the surgeon in charge.

CHAPTER V

THE CRITICS

“Ahem!” said Billie, rapping for order as the girls began all at once to say what they thought of “Fairy Godmothers Wanted.” The one with the burning plot began rattling her paper in preparation of the turn she hoped for.

“First general impressions are in order! One at a time, please! You, Miss Oldham, you tell us how it strikes you.”

“Pleasing on the whole, but – ”

“We’ll come to the ‘buts’ later,” was the stern mandate of the chairman of the day.

“You, Lilian Swift, you next!”

“Too long!” from the blunt Lilian.

“The idea! I think it was just sweet,” from the gentle Alabamian.

“I got kind of mixed in the middle and couldn’t tell which was the nurse and which Polly Nelson,” declared one who had evidently gone off into a cataleptic fit, no doubt dreaming of a story she meant to write some day.

“I never, never could love a man who had deceived me,” sighed the sentimental one with big eyes and a little mouth.

“Personal predilections not valuable as criticism,” said Billie sternly.

Many and various were the opinions expressed. Molly diligently and meekly took notes, agreeing heartily with the ones who thought it was too long.

“Where must I cut it?” she asked eagerly.

“Cut out all the letters!” suggested Lilian.

“How could she? It is all letters,” asked Billie, whose chair was becoming a burden as she felt she must get into the discussion.

“Cut ‘em, anyhow. Letters in fiction are no good.”

“Humph! How about the early English novelists?” asked Molly.

“Dead! Dead! All of them dead!” stormed Lilian.

“Then how about Mary Roberts Rinehart and Booth Tarkington and lots of others? Daddy Longlegs is all letters.”

“All the samey, it is a poor stunt,” insisted the intrepid Lilian. “I call it a lazy way to get your idea over.”

“Perhaps you are right, but the point is: did I get my idea over?”

“We-ll, yes, – but they tell me editors don’t like letter form of fiction.”

“Certainly none of them have liked this,” sighed Molly, who had devoutly hoped her little story would sell. The money she made herself was very delightful to receive and more delightful to spend. A professor’s salary can as a rule stand a good deal of supplementing.

“How about the plot, now?” asked Billie, having finished with the general impression.

“Slight!”

“Strong!”

“Weak!”

“Impossible!”

“Plausible!”

“Original!”

“Bromidic!”

“Involved!” were the verdicts. The matter was thoroughly threshed out, Billie with difficulty keeping order. Nance was called on for the “but” that she had been left holding.

“The plot is slight but certainly original in its way. The letters are too long, longer than a Godmother would be apt to write, I think. The story could be cut to three thousand words, I believe, to its advantage.”

“I have already cut out about fifteen hundred words,” wailed Molly. “The first writing was lots longer.”

“Gee!” breathed the one eager for a hearing.

“Now for the characterization! Don’t all speak at once, but one at a time tell what you think of it.”

“Did you mean to make Polly so silly?” asked Lilian.

“I – I – perhaps!” faltered Molly.

“Of course if you meant to, why then your characterization is perfect.”

“Silly! Why, she is dear,” declared the girl from Alabama. “I don’t like her having to nurse that black man, though.”

“Too many points of view!” suddenly blurted out a member who had hitherto kept perfectly silent, but she had been eagerly scanning a paper whereon was written the requisites for a short story.

“But you see – ” meekly began Molly.

“The point of view must either be that of the author solely or one of the characters,” asserted the knowing one. “Why, you even let us know how the Bedouin feels.”

“Oh!” gasped the poor author. “I think you would limit the story teller too much if you eliminated such things as that.”

“Here’s what the correspondence course says – ”

“Spare us!” cried the club in a chorus.

“I hate all these cut and dried rules!” cried Billie. “It would take all the spice out of literature if we stuck to them.”

“That’s just it,” answered Lilian. “We are not making literature but trying to sell our stuff. Persons who have arrived can write any old way. They can start off with the climax and end up with an introduction and their things go, but I’ll bet you my hat that you will not find a single story by a new writer that does not have to toe the mark drawn by the teachers of short story writing.”

“Which hat?” teased Billie. “The one you put on for Great-aunt Gertrude? If it is that one, I won’t bet. I wouldn’t read a short story by a new writer for it.”

“To return to my story,” pleaded Molly, “do you think if I rewrite it, leave out the letters, strengthen the plot a bit and make Polly a little wiser that I might sell it?”

“Sure!” encouraged Lilian.

“Yes, indeed!” echoed Nance.

“And the black man – please cut him out! I can’t bear to think of him,” from the girl from Alabama.

“Dialogue, – how about it?” asked the chairman.

“Pretty good, but a little stilted,” was the verdict of several critics.

“I think you are all of you simply horrid!” exclaimed Mary Neil, who had been silent and sullen through the whole evening. “I think it is the best story that has been read all year and I believe you are just jealous to tear it to pieces this way.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Lilian.

“We do hope we haven’t hurt your feelings, Mrs. Green,” cried the girl who was taking the correspondence course.

“Hurt my feelings! The very idea! I read my story to get help from you and not praise. I am going to think over what you have said and do my best to correct the faults, if I come to the conclusion you are right.”

“You would have a hard time doing what everybody says,” laughed Nance, “as no two have agreed.”

“Well, I can pick and choose among so many opinions,” said Molly, putting her manuscript back in its big envelope. “I might do as my mother did when she got the opinion of two physicians on the diet she was to have: she simply took from each man the advice that best suited her taste and between the two managed to be very well fed, and, strange to say, got well of her malady under the composite treatment.”

“Ahem!” said the girl with the burning plot, rattling her manuscript audibly so that the hardhearted Billie must perforce recognize her and give her the floor.

CHAPTER VI

“I HAD A LITTLE HUSBAND NO BIGGER THAN MY THUMB”

“Aunt Nance, what’s the use you ain’t got no husband an’ baby children?” Mildred always said use instead of reason.

“Lots of reasons!” answered Nance, smiling at her little companion. Mildred had moved herself and all her belongings into the guest-chamber. Her mother had at first objected, but when she found it made Nance happy to have the child with her, she gave her consent.

“Ain’t no husbands come along wantin’ you?”

“That is one of the reasons.”

“I’m going to make Dodo marry you when he gets some teeth.”

“Thank you, darling! Dodo would make a dear little husband.”

“Dodo wouldn’t never say nothin’ mean to you. He’s got more disposition than any baby in the family.”

“I am sure he wouldn’t,” said Nance, trying to count the stitches as she neatly turned the heel of the grey sock she was knitting. Nance was always knitting in those days.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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