

Wells Carolyn

The Staying Guest



Carolyn Wells
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TO

DEAR DOROTHY ESTERBROOK

CHAPTER I

PRIMROSE HALL

Over the hills and far away there was once a quaint little old town which was safely beyond the reach of the long, grasping arms of any of the great cities.

The little town nestled up against the side of a big, kind hill, at the top of which was a beautiful old country-place, called Primrose Hall.

The house was a great white colonial affair that had belonged to the Flint family for generations; and at present was occupied only by two elderly maiden ladies who admirably fitted their names of Priscilla and Dorinda.

Now of course you know, without being told, what a lady named Priscilla Flint would look like. Tall, straight, thin, stiff, formal, prim, smug, demure, with a stately, old-fashioned dignity and refinement. And Miss Dorinda Flint was like unto her, except that she was a little taller, straighter, thinner, stiffer, and a trifle more stately and old-fashioned. And these ladies, whene'er they took their walks abroad, or drives either, for that matter, wore stiff, prim black silk dresses, and black lace mitts, and little point-lace collars pinned with big gold brooches; and they always carried tiny, black, ruffled parasols that tipped on their handles to any desired angle.

With such mistresses as these, it is easy to see why Primrose Hall was the stiffest, primmest place in the whole world.

Never a chair dared to move from its exact place against the wall; never a curtain dared to flutter with joy if a morning breeze came in to tell it the news. Even the clock ticked softly and very regularly; the well-bred fire never crackled or sputtered, but let its flame glide decorously up the chimney; and the cat looked as if she had never been a kitten.

Out of doors it was just the same. The carefully trimmed hedges wouldn't think of poking out a stray leaf or twig, and every blade of grass on the lawn measured itself against its neighbor that it might be exactly the same length and breadth.

One bright May morning the sun was shining all over the place, and, out of sheer curiosity, I suppose, was doing his best to poke himself into the house. But it was all shut up tighter than a drum, and he could get in only at one little window, and even that was a mistake, and ought not to have been left open, for it was the next window but one to where the ice-box stood. But the sun was in a mischievous mood, and he aimed his beams again and again at the parlor windows in hopes that he could squeeze himself in and fade a sofa or a bit of carpet. And finally he did get in through a tiny space at the side of a shade which was pulled down crooked, when, to his great disgust, he found newspapers spread all over that very blue satin sofa he was after. Miss Priscilla had looked out for just such a trick, and the sun concluded he would have to get up very early in the morning to get ahead of Miss Priscilla Flint.

Always during the summer months Primrose Hall had its doors and windows thrown open soon after daybreak, to "air" the house, and at eight o'clock precisely they were all closed again, and the shades drawn to preserve the carpets and furniture from any possible contamination of sun and dust. This caused a sort of artificial night during the middle of the day, but the Primrose ladies were used to it, and went about the darkened house like cats or bats or owls or moles, or any other creatures who can see in the dark.

Miss Priscilla Flint was the older of the sisters, and therefore was nominally mistress of Primrose Hall. But it was her habit in every household matter to express her opinion at length, and then to ask Miss Dorinda what she thought about it. And as Miss Dorinda's opinion always coincided with Miss Priscilla's it would be impossible to say what would have happened if it hadn't.

On this particular morning, then, when the sun was baffled in his attempt to fade even a streak on the blue satin sofa, and was so provoked about it that he went behind a cloud to sulk, and stayed there quite a little while, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda sat in the morning-room holding their after-breakfast conference.

“It seems to me,” Miss Priscilla was saying, “that spring has really come at last. I saw a fly in the library yesterday morning. I didn’t speak of it to you, for I thought I might have been mistaken, as I had on my near-glasses, but Martha says she saw it too, so there can be no doubt about it. And I think, Dorinda, that as we go to the sewing-society to-morrow, and it may rain the next day, I think that to-day we will clean the attic.”

“Yes, sister,” said Miss Dorinda, “it is quite time, and we will set about it at once.”

Cleaning the attic was a mere figure of speech, for how can any one clean what is already spick and span, and speckless?

But although frequent periodical sweepings and dustings kept every nook and cranny of Primrose Hall as bright as a new penny, yet a semi-annual housecleaning occurred as regularly as the spring and fall came; and, indeed, I daresay the Misses Flint thought that spring and fall were invented as comfortable seasons for the performance.

The morning-room at Primrose Hall had a wide bay-window in which were two great arm-chairs facing each other, and in these chairs the two ladies sat every morning while they systematically planned the day’s occupations.

Near Miss Priscilla’s hand was a bell, and after she had pressed it, Bridget, the cook, appeared – automatically, it seemed – in the doorway, which, by the way, she nearly filled.

Miss Priscilla gave her the kitchen orders for the day, then dismissed her and rang for Martha, the waitress.

Then Martha came and stood in the doorway. She was a pretty young German girl, and seemed to be attired principally in starched pieces.

“Martha,” said Miss Priscilla, pleasantly, “to-day we will clean the attic. Send Matthew after Mrs. Dolan and her granddaughter to assist us, and we will start at ten o’clock.”

Martha disappeared with a starchy rustle, and Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda went to make their toilettes for the great event.

Their housecleaning costumes had been renewed, but never varied, during many springs and falls; and when attired for the fray, each good lady wore a black stuff skirt, short and scant, a white muslin sacque with a bit of neat embroidery at throat and wrists, and a huge checked gingham apron. As Miss Priscilla observed, “No one can work if she is conscious of her clothes,” and this garb had been chosen as the best possible compromise between usefulness and comeliness. On their dignified heads the sisters wore ruffled sweeping-caps made of shiny muslin, and in the way of accoutrements, each carried a pair of scissors, a ball of string, a paper of pins, some sheets of paper, and a pencil.

Precisely at ten o’clock the procession formed and solemnly ascended the attic stairs. Miss Priscilla went first, then Miss Dorinda, then Martha, with dusters, hammer and tacks, camphor-balls and moth-powders. Then Mrs. Dolan, with big broom, little broom, and dust-pans. Then Mrs. Dolan’s granddaughter, with soap, pail, scrub-brush, and floor-cloths, and sedately following all walked Tabby, the cat.

Having arrived at the scene of action, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda set themselves to work, and at the same time gave orders to their assistants, which were vigorously carried out, and soon the attic seemed to be in the path of a well-trained cyclone. Quilts and feather beds were shaken and beaten; trunks and chests were emptied of contents which were unrolled, inspected, rolled up again, patted and punched, and returned to their places. Discarded garments were critically examined to see what should be given away and what should be packed in tar-balls for the summer.

“This gray barege always makes me think of chicken-pie,” said Miss Dorinda, unfolding an old-fashioned skirt.

“Why?” said Miss Priscilla, in muffled tones, by reason of her head and shoulders being deep in a huge trunk.

“Because I wore it the day Ann Haskell came to see us. Do you remember? She came in the morning to spend the day, and she stayed a full-fledged week. I thought she never would clear herself off. And she wanted chicken-pie made for her.”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla; “and then when she got it she wouldn’t eat it.”

“No; and we couldn’t eat it, because she *would* have onions in it. And the cats wouldn’t eat it: nothing would eat it, and at last we had to throw it away.”

“I suppose we’re not very hospitable,” said Miss Priscilla; “but I just hate to have company, they upset things so.”

“But sometimes it seems a duty,” said her sister.

“Not at all; that’s where you’re silly, Dorinda. I believe in charity, and giving of our worldly goods to help our less fortunate neighbors; but that doesn’t mean we’re to open our doors and let them all come in and make themselves at home. Do you remember when Ann Haskell came again, and rode up in a hack from the station, bringing a big bag with her?”

“Yes; and you told the driver to come for her again directly after dinner.”

“I did, or she would have stayed another week. My, but she was surprised!”

“I know it; *I* couldn’t do anything like that!”

“Then you’re a coward, Dorinda. It is certainly cowardly to have company because you’re afraid to tell them they can’t stay. Now here’s another matter. The Dorcas Circle wants to make up a box of clothing for those fire-sufferers; so what do you think of giving them some of Lavinia’s things?”

“Oh!” gasped Miss Dorinda, in a startled tone.

“I think we may as well,” went on Miss Priscilla. “It’s fourteen years now since Lavinia died. They say, keep a thing seven years, and you’ll have use for it again; but we’ve kept these things twice over seven years, and I don’t see how they can ever be of use to us, except to give away.”

“Well,” said Miss Dorinda, still dazed, “perhaps you are right.”

Lavinia Flint, the younger, very much younger sister of these two ladies, had run away from her home fifteen years ago to marry a dashing young soldier named Jack Lovell, and had sailed with him to India. A year or so later the Flint ladies heard from Mr. Lovell that his wife had died, leaving a tiny baby named Lavinia. He sent them no address, so they could not have answered his letter if they had wanted to. And they had no desire to answer it, for they looked upon their sister as lost to them from the day of her elopement, and they had no wish to see her husband or child.

The Flints were a hard-hearted, stiff-necked race, and if one of the family did wrong, the others felt no relenting mercy because of ties of blood.

And so when Lavinia went away, her pretty dresses and other girlish finery were packed away in the attic, and had lain there ever since.

She was so much younger than her sisters that they had petted her as a child, and had taken great pleasure in her girlish enjoyments. But when she left them, with only a note to say she had eloped with Jack Lovell, their hearts hardened, and they now rarely mentioned her, even to each other.

And so year after year the trunks of Lavinia’s clothing had been looked over and put in order, with no reference to their future disposition, until now Miss Priscilla concluded the time had come.

But when they shook out the old-fashioned gowns, the lovely taffetas and organdies and embroidered muslins did seem inappropriate to send to people who were suffering for plain, substantial clothing.

“Oh, my!” said Mrs. Dolan’s granddaughter, her eyes as big as saucers, as she looked at the beautiful show, “ain’t them just elegant! I wisht I was a fire-sufferer, or a freshet victim.”

“How well I remember Vinnie in that flowery frock,” said Miss Dorinda; “she looked like a spring blossom herself, she was so pretty and fresh.”

Miss Dorinda sighed; but Miss Priscilla shut her teeth together with a snap, and returned the dresses to their trunks and shut down the trunk-lids with a snap, and the cleaning of the attic went on again.

Except during an interval for luncheon, the workers worked all day, and at five o'clock the attic was cleaned, and the procession filed down-stairs again.

“Deary me,” said Miss Dorinda, as she reached her own room, “how tired I am! I believe I grow older every year. Are you tired, sister?”

“Yes; but I’m so thankful that the attic is done. When that’s over I always feel like singing the long-meter doxology.”

“Well, I’m too tired to sing; I’ll rest a bit before dinner.”

CHAPTER II

LADYBIRD

Dinner at Primrose Hall was rather an elaborate meal, and was always served promptly at six o'clock. Old Josiah Flint had been very particular about his household appointments and habits, and since his death his daughters had made no changes.

After dinner the ladies always went to the library and read the village newspaper, or dozed over their knitting-work until bedtime.

But one evening in early June this routine was interfered with, by the arrival of a letter bearing a foreign postmark. It was addressed in what was evidently a man's hand, and the two good ladies were greatly excited. Miss Dorinda felt a pleasant flutter of anticipation, but Miss Priscilla felt a foreboding that something disagreeable was in the letter, and she hesitated before she opened it.

"It's postmarked 'London,'" she said. "Do we know any one in London? Maria Peters went there once, but she came back, and anyway, she's dead."

"Open it, sister," implored Miss Dorinda. And after scrutinizing it thoroughly once more, Miss Priscilla did open it.

"It is signed 'Thomas J. Bond,'" she exclaimed, looking at the signature. "Now, can it be Tom Bond who was old Jonathan Bond's son? His mother was a Coriell."

"Read it, sister," said Miss Dorinda.

So Miss Priscilla read the letter aloud, and this is what it said:

Miss Priscilla Flint,

Dear Madam:

During a recent visit to India I learned that a friend of mine, Jack Lovell, was living at Bombay, and I went there to see him. But it was my sad experience to reach his home the day after he had died from a sudden attack of fever. He left a little child, who told me that her mother had been dead many years, and, indeed, the poor child seemed utterly alone in the world. I tried to find out from Lovell's papers something about his effects, but as he was of a roving and careless disposition, everything was left at sixes and sevens, and I am afraid there is no provision for the child. Therefore, since Jack's wife was your sister, I think the right thing to do is to send the little girl to you at once. And if I can find any money or property belonging to her I will advise you later.

My wife and I brought her from India to London with us, and I will send her to you on the next steamer.

Trusting that this letter will insure her a kindly reception, I am

Yours very respectfully,

Thomas J. Bond.

To say that after reading this remarkable letter Miss Priscilla appeared surprised, amazed, astounded, excited, irritated, angry, umbrageous, furious, or even to say that she was in a state of high dudgeon, would give but an inadequate idea of the indignation shown in her face and manner.

But she only said, "She cannot come!" and snapped her teeth shut in the way she always did when very decided.

"But she'll have to come, sister," said Miss Dorinda; "how will you prevent her?"

"Well, then, she cannot stay," said Miss Priscilla, with another snap; "I will send her back just as I did Ann Haskell. Why, think of it, Dorinda! Think of a child living in this house! She'd very likely leave doors open, and she'd be sure to chatter when we wished to be quiet, and she'd fairly worry us into our graves."

“Yes,” said Miss Dorinda, “I suppose she would. But I don’t see how you *can* send her away.”

“I don’t care whether I can or not, I’m going to do it. This Lawrence J. Bond, or whoever he is, discovered her without our consent; now he can attend to the rest; I shall simply get her a ticket back to his address in London and pack her off.”

“Of course that is the only thing to do – we *can’t* have her here. And yet – Priscilla – she is Lavinia’s daughter.”

“What of it? Lavinia didn’t consider our feelings when she deserted and disgraced us, so why should we concern ourselves about her child?”

“True enough; and yet I shall be glad to see the little girl. How old is she, Priscilla?”

“I suppose she must be about fourteen. Yes; it was fourteen years ago that Jack Lovell wrote, saying his wife had died, leaving a tiny baby. He said the little one had blue eyes and golden curls, so I daresay she has grown up to look like her mother. Lavinia *was* pretty.”

“Oh, she was. And how sweet she used to look dancing round the house in her bright, pretty frocks.”

“Well, what if she did? Lavinia’s daughter is not Lavinia, and I wash my hands of the little nuisance. If you choose to – ”

“Oh, no, no! I wouldn’t do anything that you would disapprove of. But I only thought – perhaps – if she is a sweet, docile child she might be a comfort to us.”

“Are you losing your mind, Dorinda? What comfort could come of a responsibility like that? Think of the worrying over her clothes and education and accomplishments. And then, after a while, probably she would treat us as her mother did, and run away with a good-for-nothing scamp.”

“Yes, yes, sister, you are quite right. What is the child’s name, do you know?”

“Lavinia; don’t you remember her father said so in that letter – the only letter he ever wrote us? If he had acted more kindly toward us, I might feel different toward the child; but as it is, I’ve no use for her.”

“Do you remember sister Lavinia at fourteen? She was a lovely child, chubby and rosy-cheeked, with eyes like the sky, and beautiful, soft golden curls. She didn’t look much like us, Priscilla.”

“No,” admitted the older sister; “but beauty is a doubtful good. I’d rather be plain and do my duty, than to be handsome and break the hearts of those who love me.”

“Well,” said Miss Dorinda, placidly, “we’d better not talk any more about it, or we’ll get so excited we won’t be able to sleep. Let’s go to bed, sister, and to-morrow morning, after breakfast, we’ll read the letter again and decide what we can do.”

So, taking their bedroom candles, the two old ladies went up-stairs. But as Miss Dorinda had feared, they could not get to sleep, and they lay awake thinking about their sister and their sister’s child.

And so it happened that they were both awake when at about eleven o’clock the great brass knocker on the front door sent clattering clangs all through the house. Such a thing had never before been known at Primrose Hall, and the sisters, terror-stricken, jumped from their beds and met at the door of their connecting rooms, where they faced each other with pale, startled faces.

“What can it be?” whispered Miss Dorinda.

“The house must be on fire,” said Miss Priscilla, decidedly; “let us get our fire-gowns.”

These were commodious robes of thick, dark flannel which hung on the sisters’ bed-posts, to be hurried on in case of fire. For years they had been hung there every night and put away every morning, but it seemed that at last their time had come.

While the sisters were tremblingly trying to get into them, Martha appeared in her fire-gown and asked what she should do.

“Answer the door,” said Miss Priscilla. “But stay: it may not be the firemen; I don’t smell any smoke. In that case it must be burglars. Let us call Matthew.”

By this time the great knocker sounded again, and Bridget and Matthew both appeared in the hall. Each wore a fire-gown, and as all of the party had on night-caps, they were an imposing-looking

crowd. The Flint ladies wore great be-ruffled caps, tied with wide white strings, suspiciously fresh and smooth; and, indeed, these caps had been for years awaiting this very occasion; for if the Misses Flint were to be heroically rescued from fiery flames, they wanted to look decent at the time.

Bridget and Martha wore neat, narrow-ruffled caps, as befitted their station; and Matthew was crowned with a queer-looking thing of knitted yarn with a long tassel hanging down behind.

With an old musket in his hands, Matthew led the procession to the front door.

Bridget and Martha followed, holding candles, and Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda, arm in arm, encouraged each other, and nerved themselves for whatever might be about to happen.

Then Matthew flung the great front door wide open, and there was no fire-engine outside, no burglars – only a tiny mite of a girl who fairly jumped into the hall as the door opened, and stood looking at the strange beings who surrounded her. Her face was small and very white, with large, dark eyes that seemed to be dancing with mirth. Her straight black hair hung round her ears like elf-locks, and she wore a long red cloak and a wide-brimmed red hat.

She looked inquiringly from one to the other, as if uncertain which to address, and then, with a smiling glance that seemed to include them all, she flung off her hat and cloak, and said, in a sweet, childish voice, “I’m Ladybird, and I’ve come to stay.”

CHAPTER III

A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT

As no one else seemed able to make any reply to this astounding announcement, old Matthew said:

“Well, if so be ’s you’ve come to stay, I might as well lock the door behind you.”

And he proceeded to do so, while the small visitor followed his movements with her laughing eyes.

Then she turned, still smiling, to the four women who stood watching her with various expressions of surprise, consternation, admiration, and dismay.

The mite gave a quick, comprehensive look at each one, and then, intuitively judging by the superior cap-ruffles rather than by any appearance of friendly welcome, she pointed a tiny forefinger at the two Flint ladies in turn, and said:

“I think you’re my aunts, and I hope you’re glad to see me.”

Then Miss Priscilla found her voice.

“Your aunts!” she almost screamed. “Who are you, child, and what are you doing here?”

“I’m Ladybird,” answered the mite – “Ladybird Lovell. My father is dead, and you’re my aunts, you know, so I’ve come to live with you. Mr. Bond says my mother used to be your sister,” she went on in an explanatory tone; “but she’s dead too: she died long ago, so I’m all alone, except Cloppy.”

In the hollow of her little bent arm was what seemed to be a gray muff with a blue bow on it, but as she shook it out and held it up it proved to be a dog.

“This is Cloppy,” she said; “he’s my dog, and he’s such a dear, though he’s a lot of trouble. Do you like dogs?”

Now Miss Priscilla Flint did *not* like dogs, but that was a matter of small importance compared with the dire calamity which threatened her quiet household. Her very cap-bows shook with the vehement decision of her tone as she answered:

“No, I do *not* like dogs, and still less do I like visitors. I cannot turn you from my door in the middle of the night, but nevertheless you must go away as soon as I can arrange it, for you cannot live here.”

Then Ladybird laughed again – such a gay, merry, mirthsome laugh.

“Why, aunty,” she said, “I’m not company; I’m one of the family. And I’m not visiting you; I’ve come to live here forever and ever. This is my home, and I haven’t any other. And you’ll learn to love Cloppy, too, he’s so soft and cuddly. Just hold him once.”

She put the blinking Skye terrier into Miss Priscilla’s arms, which promptly unfolded and let the dog drop to the floor.

Then Ladybird laughed again.

“Oh, you funny aunty,” she cried, and turning to Miss Dorinda said brightly, “Don’t you like dogs, either?”

“Not very much,” said Miss Dorinda, looking at her new-found relative with a sort of fascination.

“Well, never mind,” said Ladybird, cheerfully, as she took Cloppy up and threw him over her arm like a folded shawl, “I won’t let him bother you any. And now shall we go to bed?”

This suggestion, though timely, gave Miss Priscilla another shock. No preparations had been made for such hospitality, and at Primrose Hall nothing was ever done without preparation.

“Come on, then,” said the guest, interpreting the silence to mean consent; and taking the candle that Martha had set down, she darted up the wide, old-fashioned staircase. At the first turn she paused.

“Where is my room, aunty?” she inquired, looking back at her hostess.

As she stood there on the great square landing, with one foot on the stair above, and the candle held high above her head, she looked so white and eerie, so like a small wraith, that Miss Priscilla could scarcely believe she was real, and indulged in a vague hope that the vision would disappear as suddenly as it had come.

But Martha felt that it was her turn now, and she said:

“Shall I make up the spare-chamber bed, ma’am?”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla, catching gladly at a temporary solution of the problem; “take her there, and put her to bed. I’ll make no plans until morning.” And shutting her teeth together with a snap, Miss Priscilla went to her room and was seen no more that night.

Miss Dorinda did likewise, and Martha said:

“Now, if you’ll come with me, little miss, I’ll try to make you comfortable.”

Ladybird, still holding her dog, followed Martha to the great spare bed-chamber.

“Is this my room?” she said wonderingly, looking at the massive mahogany furniture and old-fashioned decorations.

“It is for to-night, miss, whatever happens to-morrow.”

“Oh, I like it,” said the child, contentedly; “only, it seems so big. But it’s very pleasant, and when my things come, I can stack them all away in these big bureaus and chests of drawers. But what a funny bed! It’s like a queen’s bed. I’ll play I’m a queen, and you be my lady in waiting, will you, Martha?”

“Yes, miss,” said the good-natured Martha, smiling at the strange little girl, who had already won her heart. “And where’s your bag, miss, with your night-clothes?”

“Why, do you know, I forgot it and left it on the train. I came alone from Boston, and when the man said ‘All out for Plainville,’ I just jumped out and forgot everything. But you can lend me a nightie, can’t you? and to-morrow I think my boxes will come.”

So Martha provided her new charge from her own wardrobe; and the child laughed gleefully when, in a night-dress far too long for her, and a ruffled night-cap tied under her chin, she found herself ready to climb into the four-poster bed.

There was a wide dimity ruffle all around the top, and a dimity valance below, and long dimity curtains all around. These were looped back at one side with huge rosettes, and with Martha’s assistance the little girl stepped on a chair, and so up on the high feather bed. As she sank down into it, and it nearly closed over her, she laughed merrily.

“It is like drowning in the sea,” she said; “the billows are high on both sides of me. Where’s Cloppy, Martha?”

“Here he is, miss. Shall I put him in the cellar?”

“Cellar? No, indeed; put him at the foot of the bed, please; and I hope he won’t smother. Oh, how good these sheets smell! Why do they?”

“That’s lavender, miss; we always keep it between the fresh linen.”

“Well, it’s just lovely. Good night, Martha.”

“Good night, miss,” and Martha took the candle and went away, and Ladybird was asleep in ten seconds.

CHAPTER IV

A FEW QUESTIONS

The next morning Ladybird woke early, with a strange feeling of suffocation. The day was warm, and the dimity curtains, the feather bed, and the night-cap all combined to stifle a little girl who was fond of fresh air.

She hopped out of bed and ran to the window, the extra length of Martha's long night-dress tripping her feet and flapping against her hands.

Throwing open the blinds, she saw that the window opened on a veranda roof, and swinging herself over the sill, she stood delightedly gazing at the spring beauty of Primrose Farm.

She was soon joined by Cloppy, who had scrambled out of the feather nest and followed in his young mistress's steps.

"Hello, Cloppy-Dog," she cried as she picked him up, "how do you like our new home? I think it is lovely. Let's look in at these windows."

There were several along the veranda, each with closed blinds. Ladybird tried them all, but could not open any until she reached the last one. There the blinds flew open at her touch and disclosed an open window with a pair of the ever-recurring dimity curtains tied back with blue ribbons.

Ladybird perched herself on the window-sill and surveyed the room.

Opposite the window was a curtained bed like the one she had slept in, and as she looked, a night-capped face appeared at the opening and stared at the intruder.

Except that the face between the window-curtains was young, and the face between the bed-curtains was old, it was almost like a reflection in a mirror.

Ladybird smiled most engagingly and chanted:

"Good morning, Aunt Dorinda; I'm sitting in your window."

And then, with the little dog still in her arms, she jumped down into the room.

"I'll just hop in beside you for a minute," said she, approaching the bed, "cause my feet are cold – though it's a lovely warm morning. What time do you have breakfast?"

As she spoke she snuggled herself, dog and all, into her aunt's bed, and softly patted the old lady's cheek.

Miss Dorinda knew she ought to be stern, but it was impossible, with the little childish face framed in its big cap-ruffle looking up into her own, and she said:

"About eight o'clock, dearie; are you hungry?"

"Yes, 'm; I'm 'most starved. The train was late last night, and I didn't get any supper."

"Why, you poor child! There, that's the rising-bell. Run right back to your room and dress; the breakfast-bell will ring in just thirty minutes. Can you be ready?"

"In thirty minutes? I should hope so!" said Ladybird, laughing.

Gathering up her dog, she stepped through the window and ran along the veranda roof to her own room.

Peeping in, she saw Martha staring in dismay at the empty bed.

"Hello, Martha," she cried gaily, "did you think I was lost? I've been calling on my aunt; it's such a lovely morning for visiting, you know. But I'm as hungry as a bear, and now I think I'll get dressed and go to breakfast."

She jumped into the room, and with Martha's assistance her toilette was soon made; then she seized her dog and went dancing down-stairs.

After wandering through several of the large rooms she came to the dining-room, where the breakfast-table was laid; seeing nothing to eat, she went on to the kitchen.

Bridget looked at her with no kindly eye, for she resented any intrusion on the quiet of Primrose Hall as much as Miss Priscilla did.

But when Ladybird said wistfully, “I’m very hungry,” the good-hearted old cook fell a victim at once to the irresistible charm of the strange child.

“Are ye that, miss? And what would ye like now?”

“Oh, anything! – I don’t care what; and if I go and sit at the table will you bring me something?”

“I will indeed, miss. Run along, thin, and set at the place forninst the side-board.”

And so that’s how it happened that when, a few minutes later, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda came into the dining-room they found their guest ensconced at their table and apparently enjoying herself very much.

“Good morning, aunties,” she said smilingly. “I ought to have waited for you, I know, but truly, I was so hungry I just couldn’t. And Bridget brought me such lovely things! I never had strawberries and cream before. Do you always use these beautiful blue-and-white dishes? For if you don’t, you needn’t get them out just because I’ve come.”

“We always use them,” said Miss Priscilla; “we have used them for forty years, and not a piece has ever been broken.”

“Is that so?” said Ladybird, with great interest, quite unconscious that the remark was intended for a warning to herself, as her quick motions and unexpected gestures seemed to threaten the safety of anything in her vicinity.

Having finished her strawberries, she sat back, and throwing her little thin arms above her head, grasped the carved knobs of the high, old-fashioned chair.

“Why, you’re just like me, aunty,” she said; “I think that’s the right way to do – to use your best things every day. It’s such a comfort to see them around; and you needn’t break china or glass just because you use it. Why, I’ll show you what can be done with them, and there’s not the slightest danger if you’re careful.”

As the child spoke, she pushed away her plate, and ranged her cup, saucer, and glass in a row in front of her, and seized a spoon in one hand and a fork in the other. Then in a sweet, crooning voice she began to sing:

“Should *auld* acquaintance *be* forgot,
And *never* brought to *mind*?”

striking her glass lightly with her spoon at the accented notes, and beating an accompaniment alternately on her cup and saucer.

Miss Priscilla’s eyes grew almost as big as her precious and endangered saucers, but the dear old tune, sung in the pretty, childish voice, with its tinkling accompaniment, held her spellbound, and she said not a word.

As Ladybird finished the refrain she said eagerly:

“Now we’ll do it again, and you both tap your glasses and sing with me.”

And would you believe it? Those two old ladies were so interested that they tapped on their glasses with their thin old silver spoons, and sang with their thin old voices for all they were worth.

“That was very pretty,” observed Ladybird, approvingly, when at last they all laid down their spoons. “And now if you’ve finished your breakfast, Aunt Priscilla, will you take me out and show me round the garden?”

But Miss Priscilla Flint had by no means lost her mind entirely, and she said:

“You have no time to go round the garden, – you are to start back to Boston this morning, and from there to London as soon as possible.”

“Oh, am I?” said Ladybird, with a wise smile, and an air as of one humoring a wayward child.

“You are indeed,” said her aunt, severely; “and now, if you will come into the morning-room with us, we will ask you a few questions before you go.”

“All right, come on,” said Ladybird; and she grasped Miss Priscilla’s hand in both her own, and danced along at the old lady’s side.

Miss Dorinda followed, and she and her sister took their accustomed seats in the bay-window.

Then Ladybird placed a low ottoman at Miss Priscilla’s side and sat down upon it, and laid her head against her aunt’s knee.

Although Miss Dorinda might seem to a casual observer to be a softer, kinder nature than her elder sister, yet for some unaccountable reason Ladybird felt more attracted toward Miss Priscilla; and, too, the child could already see that Miss Priscilla’s word was law at Primrose Hall, and that Miss Dorinda merely acquiesced in her sister’s decisions.

But it was no spirit of diplomacy that actuated Ladybird, and she caressed Miss Priscilla’s hand for the simple reason that she was beginning to love the stern old lady.

“Now,” said Miss Priscilla, glaring at her niece, “will you tell me what your name is?”

“Ladybird Lovell,” said the little girl, with a bewitching smile.

“I mean your real name, not that absurd nickname.”

“It *is* my real name. I never had any other.”

“Nonsense! Your real name is Lavinia Lovell.”

“It is? All right – Lavinia Lovell, then. I don’t mind.”

“And how old are you?”

“Twelve years old.”

“You are not! You are fourteen.”

“Yes, ’m. Fourteen.”

Ladybird began to treat her aunt as one would treat a harmless lunatic who must be humored, whatever she might say.

“And why have you black eyes and straight black hair? Your father wrote, when you were a baby, that you had blue eyes and golden curls.”

“Did he write that? Why, how I have changed, haven’t I? Did you ever know a baby to change as much as that before?”

“No, I never did. And I don’t say that I would have kept you here if you had had blue eyes and golden hair; but it might have influenced me if you had looked more like your mother, – and your father said you did. As it is, I cannot think of allowing you to stay here, and so when your trunks come this morning – and I suppose Mr. Marks will bring them pretty soon – I shall send them back, and you with them, to Boston. There my lawyer will meet you and start you back to London. Mr. Thomas J. Bond had no right to send you here uninvited, and he may burden some one else with you. I positively decline the honor.”

Ladybird had paid polite attention at first, but toward the end of her aunt’s speech her mind began to wander, and as Miss Priscilla finished the child said:

“Aunty, I can make poetry, can you?”

Now the one ambition of Priscilla Flint’s early life had been to become a poetess.

Her favorite day-dream was of a beautiful volume, bound in blue and gold, that should contain poems like those of Mrs. Hemans. But though she had written many, many verses, – and indeed, had a little hair-trunk in the attic packed quite full of them, – yet she had never been able to summon sufficient courage to offer them to any publisher; and lately she had begun to think she never would, for poetry had changed since Mrs. Hemans’s day, and she doubted if her efforts would stand the tests of modern editors or publishers.

But she said: “Yes, child, I have written poetry. It is a talent that runs in our family. Have you written any?”

“Oh, no, I don’t write it. I just say it. Like this, you know:

“I have a dear aunt named Priscilla,
Who lives in a beautiful villa;
She has lovely old cups,
But she can’t abide pups,
And she flavors her cake with vanilla.

“That’s the kind I make. Of course you have to use words that rhyme, whether the sense is very good or not. I made this one too:

“There once was a lady named Biddy,
Who cried because she was a widdy;
When her husband fell dead,
She thoughtfully said,
‘He didn’t live very long, did he?’

“Now tell me some of your poetry, aunty.”

“You wouldn’t appreciate mine, child, – you couldn’t understand it.”

“No, ’m; I s’pose not. But I’d love to hear it.”

“Tell her ‘The Sunset Star,’ sister,” said Miss Dorinda.

Miss Priscilla simpered a little; then, folding her hands, she recited:

“The sunset star is shining
Across the meadow green;
The woodbine vines are twining
The trellises between;

“And every pleasant evening
I watch it from afar,
Romantic fancies weaving
About that evening star.”

“Why, aunty, that’s lovely,” exclaimed Ladybird: “and I *do* understand it. I know the sunset star that comes out in the sky just as the sun goes down. Yours is more poetry than mine, but mine are funnier. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, child; but as you grow older you’ll see that poetry is more important than fun.”

“Yes; and then I’ll learn to make verses like yours. Can you make poetry too, Aunt Dorinda?”

“No,” said Miss Dorinda, simply; “my talent is for painting.”

“Oh, is it? And do you paint pictures? And will you teach me how? I’ve always wanted to learn to paint, and I’m very industrious. I can play on the piano like a house afire.”

“Sister Lavinia used to play the piano very prettily,” said Miss Dorinda; “doubtless you have inherited her talent.”

“Yes, I think I have. Shall I play for you now?”

“No!” said Miss Priscilla, decidedly; “the piano has never been touched since your mother left us, and it never shall be opened again with my consent.”

“Aunty, did my mamma look like you? It seems funny, doesn’t it? but I’ve never seen a picture of my mamma, and papa never told me anything about her. I didn’t know papa very well, either, – he was always going off on long journeys, and I stayed with nurse. What was my mamma like, aunty?”

“She was a beautiful blonde, with rosy, plump cheeks. You are not a bit like her.”

“No, I should say not,” – and Ladybird laughed merrily, – “with my straight black hair and thin white face. Papa used to call me a black-and-white ghost. But after I live here awhile, I expect I’ll get plump and rosy; though I don’t suppose anything will ever make my hair curl.”

“But you’re *not* going to live here; you’re going away this morning.”

“Now, Aunt Priscilla,” said Ladybird, with an air of being kind but firm, “this joke has gone far enough. I’m going to stay here because it’s my home, and I have no other. I belong to you and Aunt Dorinda, because I have no other relatives. I hope you’ll learn to like me; but if not, I have to stay here, all the same. People have to live where their homes are, and so we’ll consider the matter settled.”

“Indeed, miss, we’ll consider no such thing! What do you mean by defying me in my own house? I say you are to go, and go you shall. Here comes Mr. Marks up the road now, in his wagon. Get that worthless dog of yours, and prepare to go at once.”

Miss Priscilla looked at the little girl with flashing eyes, and Ladybird, who had risen from her stool, looked back at her aunt, smiling and unalarmed.

Then the child gave a quick glance round the room. The windows were high from the ground, and there was but one door, which led to the hall.

Like a flash, Ladybird flew out through the door, shut it behind her, and turned the key in the lock, making the Misses Flint her prisoners.

She went out on the front veranda just as Mr. Marks drove up with her trunks in his wagon.

“Good morning!” she said brightly. “Will you please set the boxes out on the porch? Oh, here is Matthew; he will help you. Now, if you please, will you carry them up-stairs? I’ll show you where to put them.”

She ran up the broad staircase; the men followed; and finally her three trunks were safely lodged in the room she had occupied the night before, and which she looked upon as her own.

“How much is it, Mr. Marks?” she said; and when he told she paid him from her little purse, and bade him good morning.

She watched until he was well out of sight, and then she went to unlock the door of the morning-room.

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER ATTEMPT

When the Misses Flint saw the door shut behind Ladybird, and heard the key click in the lock, they could believe neither their eyes nor their ears.

Miss Priscilla rose and walked majestically to the door and turned the knob, fully expecting the door would open. But it would not open, of course, being locked, and the good lady, almost stupefied with anger and amazement, uttered an explosive and exasperated “Well!” and dropped into the nearest chair.

Miss Dorinda responded with a terrified and apprehensive “Well!” and then the two sisters sat and stared blankly at each other.

Miss Dorinda spoke first, timidly.

“Priscilla, don’t you think perhaps it is our duty to give a home to Lavinia’s child?”

“Duty!” exclaimed the elder sister, in a tense, restrained voice. “Duty! To keep such a vixen as that in our house? No! I confess I had some such thought during the night; but now I have only one desire, and that is, to get rid of her.”

“Yes,” said Miss Dorinda, sighing; “of course she can’t stay after this; but she seems very affectionate and loving.”

“Affectionate! Loving! Dorinda Flint, what are you talking about? Do you call it affectionate to lock us helplessly in this room?”

“No; but that was impulsive, and because she wants to stay here. I don’t think she is really a vicious child.”

“Well, I don’t want to think anything about her!”

Miss Priscilla took up a newspaper and pretended to read, so desirous was she of not appearing defeated; and, indeed, she would have stayed quietly in that room all day rather than call for assistance, or in any way show that she was at the mercy of her erratic niece.

Miss Dorinda was as much perturbed as her sister, but she made no effort to hide it. She fluttered about the room, looked out of the window, tried the door-knob, and at last sat down in a big rocking-chair and began to rock violently.

Suddenly the door burst open and Ladybird came flying in.

“Aunties,” she cried, “the house is on fire! What do you want to save most?”

“Mercy on us!” cried Miss Priscilla, rushing from the room, “let me get my Lady Washington geranium. The buds are just ready to open.”

“Where is it? I’ll get it,” said Ladybird, dancing around in great excitement.

“Up-stairs, on a stand by the south-room window; but you can’t go up – you’ll be burned to death.”

“No, I won’t,” screamed Ladybird, already half-way up-stairs; “I’ll get it. What do *you* want, Aunt Dorinda?”

“I don’t know, – everything! Oh, my lace handkerchief,” called the distracted lady. “And get some of your own things; and bring our fire-gowns.”

Meantime volumes of smoke rolled into the hall through the dining-room door.

Suddenly Matthew’s face appeared in the midst of the smoke.

“Don’t be frightened, ma’am,” he said; “it’s all right now. The soot got afire in the chimbley; but we’ve put it out. But if the little lady hadn’t been afther runnin’ down an’ tellin’ me that the wall felt hot, I’m thinkin’ the house wud have been burned to the ground.”

“Oh, Matthew, are you sure the fire is all out?” asked Miss Dorinda.

“And are you sure my house would have burned up but for that child?” asked Miss Priscilla.

“Yis, ma’am, sure as sure! An’ I’ll jist open the windies till the shmoke disappears.”

Then Miss Priscilla called, “Come down, Ladybird; it’s all right now.” And in a moment the child came flying down-stairs.

“I put the geranium back in its place,” she said, “and I left your lace handkerchief on your bureau, Aunt Dorinda; but I brought both your smell-salts bottles, ’cause I thought you might be faint from the scare. Now sit down and rest, won’t you?”

She hovered about her aunts, ministering to each in turn, and her caressing touch was so gentle, and her sympathy so sincere, that Miss Priscilla, who was unaccustomed to such attentions, quite forgot she had called her niece a vixen, and that, too, with good and sufficient reasons.

But after a while, as her nerves became quieted and she felt more composed, Miss Priscilla Flint determined to attempt again the dismissal of her unwelcome guest.

“Lavinia,” she said in a tone of firm decision.

“Oh, aunty, don’t call me that; it makes me feel so old and grown up!”

“It is your name, and I have no desire to call you by any other. Lavinia, you are my niece, and the child of my dead sister; but I am in no way inclined to take you into my home for that reason. You have some kind and winning ways, but you appear to have an ungovernable temper, which would make you impossible to live with. How dared you lock the door on me in my own house?”

“Why, aunty,” said Ladybird, laughing at the memory of it, “that wasn’t temper, and I didn’t mean to be rude; but truly, there was nothing else to do. Why, if you had been out on the veranda when my trunks came, you would have sent them back to Boston, and I didn’t want them to go back; so I just left you by yourselves until the man took them up-stairs.”

“You think you have outwitted me, miss, but you will find that Priscilla Flint is not so easily set aside.”

“Oh, I’m not going to set you aside, aunty; that isn’t it. I’m just going to stay here and be your little girl – yours and Aunt Dorinda’s.”

“I think, sister, we might keep her a week on trial,” said Miss Dorinda, timidly.

Miss Dorinda always said everything timidly. In this respect she was not like her niece.

“I shall *not* keep her a week, nor a day; and no more hours than I can help. I am going now to write a note to Mr. Marks, and tell him to come back at once for her and her trunks. So, Miss Lavinia Lovell, you may as well get yourself ready, for this time you will have to go.”

“Do you know, it doesn’t seem to me as if I would go this time,” said Ladybird, thoughtfully; “it seems to me as if I would stay here years and years, until I get to be a dear old lady like you,” and she patted the top of Miss Priscilla’s head. Then she danced out of the room, and out to the garden, singing as she went:

“I am not going away to-day;
I’m going to stay and stay and stay.”

When the luncheon-bell rang, she danced back again, and seeing a letter on the hall-table addressed to Mr. Marks, she tore it into bits and threw it into the waste basket.

The gay good humor of their visitor was infectious, and the Flint ladies laughed and chatted over their luncheon, so that the meal was nearly over before Miss Priscilla said:

“Mr. Marks will call for you at three o’clock, Lavinia.”

“I don’t think he will,” replied the child, “because I tore up that letter you wrote to him and threw it away.”

“What!” gasped Miss Priscilla. “This is too much!”

“Well, you see, aunty, there was nothing else to do. If he’d got that letter he would have come, and I don’t want him to come, so I tore it up. Don’t write another.”

“I won’t,” said Miss Priscilla, in an ominous voice, and snapping her teeth together with a click.

But half an hour later the Primrose Hall carriage went down toward the village, and inside of it sat a very determined-looking old lady.

She went to Mr. Marks's office and asked him to get his wagon and follow her home at once, and bring back the young miss and her luggage.

"That firebrand as I saw at your house this morning?" exclaimed the old countryman. "Wal, I guess she won't be so easy brung."

He chuckled to himself as he drove along the road behind Miss Priscilla Flint; and when they reached the farm-house, he waited decorously for further orders.

Then the hunt began. For Ladybird was nowhere to be found. Miss Priscilla called in vain. Then Miss Dorinda called. Then they went up and looked in the room which Ladybird had appropriated as her own.

Her three trunks stood there wide open and empty. Their contents were all around: on the bed, on the bureaus, on the chairs, and many of them on the floor. But no trace of the missing child.

Then Miss Priscilla called the servants.

"The little girl is hiding somewhere," she explained, "and she must be found."

"Yes, 'm," Bridget said; and she began systematically to search the house from attic to cellar.

Matthew shook his old head doubtfully.

"I'm thinkin' yez'll niver find her," he said. "She was a spookish piece, an' the likes of her flies up chimbleys an' out of windies an' niver appears ag'in."

Martha, much mystified, stared helplessly around the room, and in doing so noticed a bit of paper pinned to the pin-cushion.

She handed it to Miss Priscilla, who read:

Aunty, Aunty, Do not look for me;
Until you send that man away, I'll stay just where I be.

"Oh," groaned Miss Priscilla, "what *can* I do? We *must* find her!"

Miss Dorinda felt pretty sure, in her secret heart, that they *wouldn't* find Ladybird until that strange being was ready to be found; but she continued looking about in her placid way, which did no good nor harm.

After an hour's search, the case did seem hopeless, and Mr. Marks declared he couldn't wait any longer; so Miss Priscilla reluctantly let him go away.

Two more hours passed; and then it was five o'clock, and still no sign from the missing child.

Although they hadn't confessed it to each other, the Flint ladies were both a little scared.

Finally Miss Dorinda said:

"You don't think she'd do anything rash, do you, sister?"

"From the little I've seen of her," replied Miss Priscilla, "I should say that what she does is never anything but rash. However, I don't think she has drowned herself in the brook, or jumped down the well, if that's what you mean."

That was what Miss Dorinda had meant, and somehow she was not very much reassured by her sister's word.

They sat silent for a while; then Miss Dorinda, with a sudden impulse of determination such as she had never known in all her life, and, indeed, never experienced again, said:

"Priscilla, I think you are doing wrong; and you needn't look at me like that. For once, I'm going to say what I think! This child has been sent to us, and in your secret heart you know it is our duty to keep her and do for her. The Bible says that those who neglect their own families are worse than infidels, and we have no right to turn away our kin. Your dislike of visitors has nothing to do with the matter. The child is not a visitor, as she says herself. And it makes no difference what kind of a child she is: she is our sister's daughter, and we are bound by every law of humanity and decency

to give her a home. If father were alive, do you suppose he would turn his orphan grandchild from his door? No; he would do his duty by his own: he would be just, if he could not be generous; and he would accept a responsibility that was rightly thrust upon him.”

Miss Priscilla looked at her sister in utter amazement. Dorinda had never spoken like this before, and it seemed as if the spirit of old Josiah Flint was manifesting itself in his daughter.

But if Miss Dorinda had acted in an unusual manner, Miss Priscilla proceeded to behave no less strangely.

At the close of her sister’s speech, she suddenly burst into tears; and the times in her life when Miss Priscilla Flint had cried were very few indeed.

Then the younger sister was frightened at what she had done, and tried to pacify the weeping lady.

“I know you’re right, Dorinda,” said Miss Priscilla, between her sobs; “I – I knew it all along, – and I suppose we shall have to keep her. Father would have wished it so, – and – and I wouldn’t mind it so much if she wouldn’t – wouldn’t leave the doors open.”

CHAPTER VI UP A TREE

While the aunts were deciding upon Ladybird's future, old Matthew was wandering down the garden path toward the orchard.

"She bates the Dutch, that child," he said to himself. "Now I'll wager me dinner that she's hidin' under a cabbage-leaf, or in some burrd's nest."

But if so, Ladybird made no sign, and old Matthew tramped up and down the orchard, peering anxiously about while the shadows deepened.

At last, as he stood beneath an old gnarled apple-tree, he heard what seemed to be a far-away crooning sort of song.

"Bird, bird,
Ladybird;
They called and called,
But she never stirred."

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