

BOYS AND GIRLS

The Unexpectedness of Polly.

(Minna Stanwood, in the 'Wellspring'.)

'There,' said Prue, throwing down her letter, 'isn't that precisely the way things always happen? Here's Cousin Polly writing that while we had her and her mother calmly sailing the Atlantic, and were breaking the commandment envying them, she isn't calmly sailing it at all, but is sitting up in a New York hotel. Her mother had to go back to Chicago because some one telegraphed the very morning they were to sail that Uncle Ed was suddenly taken ill. And Miss Polly announces that as soon as she hears particulars from her mother, she is coming down to make us a visit. She doesn't even say, by our leave, or if it's convenient, or if we want her, or anything of the sort. And of all the times—'

'I say,' observed Ned, renewing the suspended process of mastication, 'I say that's great! Remember the summer she was here?'

'Remember it?' Prue took up the words sternly. 'That was ten, no, eleven years ago. She was only eight years old then, and except that her gingham was prettier and cost more a yard, you really wouldn't know any difference between us. Little Polly, the Putnams' cousin, was quite a different matter from Miss Pauline Putnam, heiress of the cattle king, Paul Jonathan Jeffs.'

'Well,' remarked Ned, meekly, 'she was a jolly little girl, Polly was.'

'And now here we are, the five of us, just betwixt and between. Yes, six of us, for father's just as bad. It's neither summer nor winter. We can't wear our summer things without looking pinched, and we can't put on winter things without looking ridiculous. And, anyhow, we haven't any hats.'

'Ned and I have,' put in Arthur, with a chuckle.

'Don't be absurd, Art,' reproved Prue, witheringly. 'Maud has that white sailor, and Lil has a burnt straw, and I have a chiffon. And as for coats! And as for skirts!'

All this tragic enumeration seemed to be having some effect at last, for Maud dropped her knife and fork and demanded, earnestly, 'If our Cousin Polly's so awfully rich, why don't we ask her for some skirts and other things?'

This seemed a simple proposition enough, and Maud was not at all prepared for the sudden and complete collapse of her family.

'Hear the child!' gasped Prue. 'Wouldn't you expect something better from a twelve-year-old?'

'Listen, Maudie mine,' laughed Arthur. 'Thy father and her father were brothers and hoed in the same field, namely, Grandfather Putnam's back lot. But her father, otherwise Uncle Ed Putnam, went far West to seek his fortune. On the cattle ranch he found work and the daughter of his employer. The masculine Putnams always had an alluring way, you observe. Well, presently there was a demand for beef, perhaps on account of the large and increasing family of Mr. William Putnam, left back East on the farm in Pinefields, Massachusetts. Then we hear that Uncle Ed's father-in-law is growing rich, then that he is rich, then that he's wealthy, again that he would be obliged to anybody who would take the trouble to inform him how wealthy he really is. And Miss Pauline is the only child of his only child, dost understand, Innocent? And it would be a life sentence crime to ask Pauline, the heiress, for

hats and coats and skirts, or even to let her suspect that we wear such things as hats and coats and skirts!'

'Arthur Putnam, how you talk!' cried Prue. 'I guess, if you were—the housekeeper—'

Arthur was round the table in a minute. He caught the proud little golden head just as it was about to descend in tearful abandon upon two little, work-stained hands, and he placed it securely against his shoulder.

'There, there,' he soothed, stroking the little bright head with clumsy boyish hands, 'she's the dandiest old sister in the world. And we wouldn't bother her for anything, so we would not. If she'd only let her two little big brothers go to work instead of to college, she could have hats and coats and skirts enough, so she could!'

Prue's hands were down in a minute, and a few determined wriggles set her free of Arthur's embrace. 'What are you folks talking about?' she demanded, looking round indignantly. 'What does anybody care about hats and things? We've got enough to keep us comfortable, and who do you think's going to put on airs just because a rich cousin happens to be coming?'

There was a general laugh as the children left the table, and twenty-two-year-old Prue took herself off with her problem. Sometimes she did forget like that, and let the boys see what a time she was having. But she was always sorry, and she invariably set herself more resolutely to her task. She was going to do what mother had planned to do. They had talked it over so often, before mother went away. Only then Prue was to go to college, too. Oh, there was so much to give up and so much to learn, after mother went! If it were not for Lil, Prue often thought, she simply could not get along. But Lil was such a dear and a comfort. She always understood.

'I wish people could send word to all the rich relations in Christendom that they are not to go visiting their poor relations until they get engraved invitations,' sputtered Prue, out in the roomy old pantry that had served as confessional, lo, these many years.

'We needn't all go out with her,' suggested Lil, who stood with puckered brow trying to get inspiration from the long, black crack in Grandmother Putnam's big mixing bowl. 'That new shirt waist you made me fits you, and your skirt isn't so bad. You might wear Maud's light box coat. It will go with any color, you know. Polly needn't know it's Maud's. We've been groaning to think Maud is such a monster that she simply had to have a new coat, but the ill wind has blown us that much good. We have one decent coat among us. We can fix you up respectably, and you can take Polly round if she must go. But maybe she will not want to when she's going to Europe so soon. We might suggest that she rest up and feed up and save her shoe leather, the trip is so wearing.'

'Oh, but Lil, suppose she should come for over Sunday!' It was quite evident that Miss Prue was not willing to miss one awful possibility. 'Suppose she should walk in Saturday night, and find us eating beans! Just beans!'

'Well,' said Lil, thoughtfully, her cheerfulness beginning to get a trifle anxious, 'well, of course, we couldn't disguise the beans. We'd just have to face it out, and tell her that we have to conform to the law of New England.'

'But Sunday,' urged Prue, 'Sunday we could

not take her down to that little seven-by-nine church. Oh, I can just see her supercilious heiress eyes taking in old Mrs. Conn with her quilted hood, and those ridiculous Butters girls!'

'I know!' cried Lil, joyfully; 'father could take her on the electrics to Emhurst, and they could go to St. Mark's. St. Mark's is respectable, anyhow. And she would want to visit Ned's and Art's college town, you know.'

'Oh, but Lil, how would it look packing her up with just father when there are three girl cousins! It would look as if we didn't want her!'

'That's so,' agreed Lil, 'and we wouldn't have her think that for the world. But say,' she brightened with the new thought, 'we could explain that you play the organ, and that they have to depend on Maud for an alto and me for a soprano. And anyway, the running of that church is such a sort of Putnam affair, with father passing the plate and us five children in the choir, that it simply wouldn't be modest to take one of our relations there. It might look as if we were trying to show off. Isn't it lucky I thought of that?' finished Lil, triumphantly.

'Well,' declared Prue, with conviction, 'I suppose we may plan and plan how to impress her with our respectability, but like as not she'll descend upon us like a cloud-burst, when we least expect it. But here it is Friday, and she can't possibly get word from Chicago before Saturday, and she probably will not come until Monday. Then we can be jogging along in Monday things, and she'll never suspect that they're Sunday ones, too.'

Yes, Lil was a dear, as Prue told herself over and over, as she went about her Friday cleaning. She never made light of things, or poked fun at a person's worries, as the boys did, and she was always ready to talk things over. Still, there were other things besides clothes. Oh, yes, there was furniture! Why, Prue nearly turned giddy as she thought how delightful it would be to send an order right on to Boston that morning and have a furnisher step in and refurbish the shabby old house. But she contented herself with dragging her own bureau into Lil's room, which was larger and had fresher paper, and exchanging her own white enamelled bedstead for Lil's huge, black affair. Next she took down her muslin curtains and did up her white spread. As she dismantled that little southwest room, she had many a tear to wipe away thinking how mother had fixed up that pretty room for her first baby, her Prudence. Soon there were so many others that mother could not buy new furniture for all of them, but that little room remained to show what mother would have liked to do.

'We must try to keep all the other doors shut,' she cautioned herself, as she stood on Lil's threshold, taking a final approving survey.

But, alas! we have been reminded before that the 'best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley.' The Putnam family were seated at the Saturday night board, feeling altogether relieved and gay because the dreaded cousin was morally certain not to come until Monday, or perhaps not at all, which was better, when—the door bell rang! Every fork clattered down in dismay—that is, all but father's.

He said, looking up with a smile, 'Polly! To the door, Neddie boy.'

They sat with suspended breaths, waiting for the door to open. Then they heard a clear