



The Family Circle.

## A GIRL'S THEORY.

BY MARY TOWLE PALMER.

Lucy drew back and shook her curly head. Her mouth was tightly shut and expressed a determination worthy of Caesar.

"Lucy," said her aunt, with a pleading emphasis on the first syllable, "you will dust the parlor this morning, won't you?" And she held forth a duster, hoping that the young girl would relent, as she sometimes did. But anyone could see that this time she had no such intention. She did not look cross, however; she only showed a dimple and tossed her head.

"No, Aunt Jane, I couldn't," said she, and then she turned and ran up-stairs to her own room.

Miss Jane was an intelligent-looking young woman of perhaps thirty years. She expected company to-day, and she must bake the cake herself and straighten out the house from top to bottom, in order to be free afterwards to entertain her guest, for the one maid servant would have enough in attending to the plain cooking and the ironing. Well, well! But that was not the worst of it. Aunt Jane was troubled about Lucy's morals. A tall, active, rosy girl of fifteen, full of energy and capacity, and yet so selfish as to refuse to lift a finger for the good of others! It was melancholy enough. While Miss Jane whisked and dusted and made the parlor shine all over, Lucy, up in her room, cheerfully hummed a tune as she took from her writing-desk a sheet of paper, sharpened a pencil, and then sat herself down, determined to write a story. She felt, under an obligation to do something remarkable to pay for having been so disobliging. Lucy had a theory that useful people were always uninteresting, but that if she economized herself, as it were, and kept herself free from the toils and moils of the ordinary mass of mankind, she should become a remarkable person in the course of time. She had never confided this theory to her aunt; if she had it would have cleared away numerous mysteries which at present weighed heavily upon her mind. She supposed that each refusal came from momentary laziness, whereas no one liked activity better than Lucy, when the occasion seemed to her a worthy one.

The scenery out of doors was beautiful this morning and Lucy's desk faced the window. It was impossible to help looking out upon the sunny fields and the feathery elms before her, so that after two hours had gone by Lucy found that just half a page of manuscript lay on her desk, as the fruit of her morning's work, and this she had read over and over so many times that she could not possibly tell whether it had any meaning in it or not. A ring at the door gave her an excuse for jumping up joyfully from her seat, tossing away her tiresome paper, and running down stairs.

"I'll go to the door, Auntie!" she called.

Her aunt's expected guest had arrived, and a very bright and attractive vision she was. She seemed a young woman of about twenty-five, with a slim, stylish figure and a golden knot of hair, surmounted by a small mystery of a bonnet. She was complete. Lucy felt at once that this young lady knew and did everything that was brilliant and admirable. She gave in her allegiance then and there.

Perhaps, in her worldly little heart, she drew a contrast between this shining figure and that of her commonplace and merely useful aunt, who now came hurrying forward and threw her arms warmly around the new-comer.

"This does me good!" she exclaimed, looking into the fresh face she had just been kissing. "Come in here and let me look at you. Why, Angela, you look younger every year."

For a moment the two friends quite forgot Lucy's presence, and then her aunt drew her forward and introduced her as

"The niece of whom you have heard, who has been with me for the past month and is, I hope, to be my companion for a year, while her mamma is in Europe getting well."

Lucy did not relish this prospect in the least, still she greeted Miss Angela very prettily. Her thoughts, meanwhile, ran in this wise; "Miss Angela, you must see at once how uncongenial a companion my aunt is for a bright girl like me. I look forward to receiving great sympathy from you." Lucy was obliged to go and confess to herself, however, that just at present the guest seemed entirely absorbed with aunt Jane, and had a meagre amount of attention to bestow upon the most charming of nieces.

There were two things that made it somewhat difficult to produce an impression upon Miss Angela Lane. One was a little fact in philosophy which Lucy could not be expected to have yet discovered; namely, that an impression can be made more easily when the one making it is doing something else. The other fact was that Angela was so devoted to her friend Jane Brown that she seemed almost unconscious of the existence of Lucy Delaye.

Lucy had drawn around her a circle of friends of her own age, from the best material the village afforded—the doctor's daughter, the minister's two, and the lawyer's dignified grandchildren, who were glad to patronize a stylish girl from New York. To these she confided frankly how uninteresting she considered her aunt, how surprised she was that Miss Angela seemed to like that plain individual, and also how she, Lucy, found the visitor (who evidently knew "what was what") very congenial.

Miss Angela had been in Longdale for a week. It was another beautiful June morning and Lucy was ready to dance with the delight of living. She tripped lightly into the parlor to see what was going on, and there she encountered Angela, her print dress tucked up, and her cheeks glowing, while in her hand she wielded Lucy's dingy enemy, the duster.

"Oh, Lucy, I'm glad you have come. If you will finish dusting the parlor for me, I can go up and be making the beds and then we can all be through earlier."

Lucy caught her breath. "Dust the parlor for you?"—she began, and she was tempted not only to seize the duster, but to kiss the little white hand that handed it to her.

Angela continued rubbing the leg of a table as if she had no time for talking; that being finished she held her implement towards the hesitating girl. By this time Lucy's self-possession had returned.

"No, thank you, Miss Angela," she said, sweetly, "I'm not in the habit of doing such things." And for a moment she realized how inconvenient an article one's dignity may become; for Miss Angela's eyebrows went up with a slightly amused smile. Lucy darted to the kitchen in search of her aunt, and found there the odor of sponge drops just out of the oven.

"Oh, Lucy, dear," said her aunt, "my friend and I are going off for a day in the woods. You may have any two friends you please to take dinner with you and keep you company while we are gone."

But Lucy did not like to be "shed" in this matter-of-course way; besides, she could not bear to think that Miss Angela would be gone so many hours and give her no chance to explain why she had seemed disobliging; so she said, wistfully,

"I wish I could go with you, aunt Jane."

"Why, dear child, so you shall, if you wish. I thought it would be dull for you, with two elders like us."

"Not with her," murmured Lucy.

"How glad I am that you like her so much," said Miss Jane; and her niece went dancing to her room, full of anticipations for the day. Perhaps she would have a chance to tell Miss Angela about her desire to write a story, and perhaps Miss Angela would ask her to read what she had written, and in this way she would be able to show Miss Angela how inappropriate it was to expect her to do drudgery, as if she were a common girl!

Lucy's room was across the hall; on the other side were two large square chambers connecting, the guest room and her aunt's. Lucy left her door open as she went in, but happened herself to be just behind it in the closet, when she heard the two ladies come chatting up stairs. This may have been the

reason why Miss Angela, supposing no one to be within hearing, called out cheerily to Miss Jane, who was in her own apartment—each standing before her respective mirror in a dressing sacque.

"Jennie!"

"Yes?"

"Forgive me for being so frank, but what an uninteresting child your niece is!"

A great wave of crimson surged into Lucy's face as she heard this and she dropped weakly into a chair and became as still as a mouse.

"Oh, no, not uninteresting," called back Miss Jane's voice, with an anxious tone in it. "Not uninteresting, but—"

"I must be firm," answered Miss Angela's silvery tones. "For you know uninteresting and uninterested are synonymous terms, and—now, what is she interested in?"

There was a pause.

"Well," said Miss Jane, presently, "I don't quite know yet."

"She's old-fashioned," announced Miss Angela's voice, accompanied by the shutting of a bureau drawer, "behind the times, you know."

Lucy winced—the very things she was not!

"Angela," Lucy heard her aunt say, "haven't you noticed, though, that sometimes the dear little thing has the brightest look on her face?"

Lucy could bear no more. She slid into the closet, where she shut out the voices by burying her face in the skirt of a dress. Whether she was grateful to her aunt for defending her or whether she was angry with the whole world and every one in it, she did not know. At all events, she should never have courage to issue forth from that closet any more. Nevertheless she knew the time would come when she must show herself, for she heard the two ladies bustling down stairs and then she heard them seeking her from room to room below. She knew it was only a question of time before she should hear (what now floated up to her) her own name called. She mustered all her voice and answered as naturally as she could, "Oh, aunt Jane, I've decided to have the girls to dinner and stay at home, after all!"

"Very well, dear. Good-by."

The garden gate swung together and Lucy had the day before her. She gazed after the departing figures as they moved along the shady road, Miss Angela's hair catching the sunlight and glistening under her hat, and Miss Jane moving in an elastic fashion which spoke of a daily familiarity with exercise. She saw Miss Angela stop and gather a bunch of wild roses, which she pinned into her companions' dress with the air of one doing homage to a superior. Just after this they passed out of sight in the bend.

Lucy felt perhaps more uncomfortable than ever before in her life, it is so very unpleasant to hear one's self spoken of in uncomplimentary terms! She felt like an outcast, misunderstood and unappreciated. The day was spoiled. How should she employ it? Pleasure was quite out of the question with the words "uninteresting" and "old-fashioned" ringing in her ears. Had they really been applied to her? She felt enraged and then puzzled, and then hurt, and then wretched; and this succession of mental phases, ending in a long cry, occupied the morning. The afternoon brought into her mind a furious determination to write something perfectly wonderful, address it to Miss Angela, and deposit it on her bureau that she might find it on her return and be filled with remorse and shame. If Lucy's life had depended upon convincing Miss Angela of her mistaken judgment, her passionate determination to do it could not have been stronger. "Uninteresting and old-fashioned!"

After Lucy had written her rhyme she was more calm, and catching up her hat she started out for a walk. She had not gone far before she met a gentleman, one whose appearance announced him a stranger in the village. As Lucy approached, his pace slackened, and he accosted her with an apology, asking if she could tell him where Miss Brown lived?

"Which Miss Brown?" asked Lucy, glad to speak, after a day of silence.

"Miss Brown, the authoress," answered the gentleman, fluently. "The one who has written the novel of the year." He spoke as if she must of course know all about it. She was much puzzled.

"There are only two Miss Browns in this place," she said, presently. "One keeps a little baker's shop, and the other—is my aunt."

"May I ask the way to your aunt's?" he said, in a business-like tone.

"You must be in the wrong town," said Lucy, positively.

"I must see Miss Jane Brown, of Longdale, and I don't believe she is a baker," he remarked, with an amused smile, and Lucy obediently showed him where the only person whom she knew of that name lived; but she believed that the gentleman would be much disconcerted when her aunt returned and he discovered his mistake.

While he waited in the parlor he and Lucy gave each other some mutual information.

"Is the Miss Brown whom you are looking for really a great authoress?" asked Lucy.

"Oh, very successful indeed," he answered. "They've just brought out her tenth edition, and that, for an unknown writer, is something unusual."

"Well," said Lucy, meditatively. "My aunt is just a person, just a common, ordinary person, you know."

"She doesn't carry a pen behind her ear, or wear an ink spot on her thumb, eh?" said he, lightly.

Lucy meditated for some moments and ended in a positive tone, "She cannot be the lady you are looking for."

In a short time the lady in question walked in, and the gentleman greeted her with a very low bow, and seemed somewhat awestruck. Miss Jane was dignified and quiet, though her eyes betrayed a certain gleam in their serenity, as she heard the words which he used with regard to her writings. Lucy also heard, in a dazed way, mention of large sums of money. Evidently, this was, after all, the authoress. Angela drew the astonished young girl away to the piazza.

"Miss Angela," said Lucy, in a low voice, "I never knew till this moment that aunt Jane was—anything."

"That she wrote, you mean," said Miss Angela. "No, she has kept it very quiet, but people are gradually finding her out, in spite of all her shyness."

"Miss Angela," said Lucy, again.

"Well?"

"I heard what you said to aunt Jane about me this morning."

"Why, what did I say? I've forgotten." Lucy gasped a little, before she could bring out the dreadful words: "You said I was uninteresting and old-fashioned," she said, finally, with an effort.

"Oh, my dear, do forgive me," cried Miss Angela, putting her arms about the young girl, kindly, "but your aunt is so wonderful, of course no one can expect to be considered interesting when she is near. Truly, Lucy, I should not be at all annoyed if you said it of me. It is to be expected."

"But what did you mean by 'old-fashioned,' Miss Angela?"

"Well, Lucy, to tell the truth, I meant that you did not seem to be very useful. That used to be the old idea of a lady, you know, to be helpless, but I thought times had changed. But, dear child, it must have sounded very harsh, hearing it in that way. I am so sorry."

Lucy was so relieved! She had feared that the term "old-fashioned" referred to her manners, or her figure, or her taste, or something she could not help; whereas now she had the matter all in her own hands. It occurred to her that if her aunt could be at once useful and great, why, so could she! What a discovery! Her theory was broken to atoms, and Lucy, instead of going into mourning for the loss of it, felt as if a burden had been taken off her shoulders.

As soon as she had a chance she caught her aunt and threw her young arms impulsively and tightly around her.

"Oh, aunt Jane, do let me confess to you. It wasn't because I was disobliging, nor because I was lazy, nor even because I disliked it, that I wouldn't dust the parlor. It was because I had a theory!"

"And what was that?" asked her aunt, greatly delighted. "It takes a brain to have a theory, so I am proud of you."

"I thought," said Lucy, laughing, "that if I made myself useful I could never be great. Wasn't it funny?"