

BOYS AND GIRLS

A Diplomatic Mission.

(Sophie Swett, in 'The Interior.')

'If it doesn't beat all!' exclaimed Mrs. Tackaberry as her daughter Olive came along the trim garden path between the rows of dahlias. 'Your Aunt Caddy has written for the first time in six years, and she wants you to make them a visit!' Mrs. Tackaberry rocked so vigorously from excitement that the whole porch creaked beneath her ample person. 'She says she's afraid that she's coming down with nervous prostration and it will be so hard for her sister Robena. They can't either of them put up with hired help, she says. It sounds as if they wanted you instead of a hired girl. You shan't stir a step!' Mrs. Tackaberry rocked still more vigorously, and all the boards creaked.

Olive sat down upon the upper step and took the letter from her mother's hand.

'They were always hard to get along with, and I'll warrant you they haven't grown any less so—old maids living alone,' continued Mrs. Tackaberry, with the candor that was her characteristic. 'Curious—your father wa'n't a mite so. He could always get along with all folks. They used to send for him to settle disputes.'

'She seems to be in trouble, poor Aunt Caddy,' said Olive, slowly reading the cramped old-fashioned writing, while a sympathetic pucker appeared upon her smooth brow. 'She says she's being worried into nervous prostration, but nobody is to blame. "Robena is a Treat, and she can't help being a Treat,"' read Olive wonderingly. 'Do you suppose that she and Aunt Robena don't get along together?'

'I shouldn't wonder a mite, though they never said a word,' answered Mrs. Tackaberry reflectively. 'The Treats and the Tackaberrys both had their peculiarities, and such things are not apt to lessen as people get on into years.'

Olive meditated, using the letter to ward off a belated bee hovering about the hop vine.

'You've always said that I had father's knack at getting along with people,' she said at length. 'And they really seem to need help. There are still nearly two weeks before school begins,' (Olive taught in the Milford Academy, and it was now close upon September). 'Perhaps a little diplomacy would set things right. And, then, I can't help thinking how father would have felt about it, too.'

'I expect he would have wanted you to go,' said Mrs. Tackaberry, reflectively. 'He thought a good deal of his sisters—though he felt as if they ought to be more forgiving to poor little Leander, who ran away to sea.'

'Little Leander who is coming here with his wife and baby next month,' laughed Olive. 'Perhaps I can effect a reconciliation between them and Leander,' she added with sudden eagerness.

'I wouldn't expect any story-book happenings if I were you,' said Mrs. Tackaberry with the calm superiority of experience. 'Caddy and Robena are the kind that brood over all things till they see them all out of kilter. But I expect you'd better go, come to think of it. A change may do you good.' She looked anxiously at her daughter as she spoke, and Olive flushed suddenly.

'I'm perfectly well and am not in need of any change,' she said quickly, 'I'm going because I think a diplomatic mission is really in my line.'

It was vexatious that her mother would

constantly allude to the breaking of her engagement with Frank Thurston as if it were a trouble. Of course she wasn't going to marry Frank when he insisted upon living in that lonesome old homestead of his, a mile from the village, instead of buying Dr. Harsy's pretty new house on the main street. He wanted her to wait until they were better off; he let both his economical scruples and his attachment to the old place come before her feelings, and of course no girl of any real spirit would stand that.

She desired it to be perfectly understood that she wasn't going away because she needed a change on account of any lowness of spirits. But when she had made sure that there's wasn't a soul from Milford on the Hebron train she cried softly behind her veil, and did not really nerve herself for diplomatic duty until she walked between the geometrical, box-bordered flower-beds to her own aunts' door.

After she had thumped three times, with ever-increasing determination, at the brass knocker, Aunt Robena appeared, looking suspiciously out at the smallest possible aperture. She looked worn and worried and there were red rims around her near-sighted eyes.

'Did Caddy write?' she exclaimed as she drew Olive into the house and kissed her affectionately. 'I didn't think she could bring her mind to it; she hates anything upsetting, you know—poor Caddy!'

'Is she very ill?' asked Olive solicitously.

'Not a mite!' answered Miss Robena promptly. 'Only upset because I moved things 'round in the sitting room! Oh, if I haven't had a trial! Nobody knows! Of course I shouldn't speak right out if it wasn't to a relation.' Miss Robena had led the way to the sitting-room and she sank despairingly into a rocking chair.

'Now, doesn't this room look a sight better?' she demanded, sitting suddenly upright and taking in her surroundings with a sweeping glance. Olive had not seen the room since she was thirteen—six years before—and she was not prepared to commit herself to an opinion. 'The old secretary was between the windows. It had been there ever since I was a little girl, and I'm past fifty!' Miss Robena went on as when a long pent torrent bursts forth. 'Wouldn't you have got tired of seeing it in just that place? I thought I should die! And there was that discolored paper in the paper that it would cover, right there in the niche where it is now. That paper has been just so for twelve years. It—is, was Leander who left his window open—the chamber above, you know—in a terrible shower.' Miss Robena had not mentioned for ten years the name of the boy who had ran away to sea, but she was quite carried out of herself now. 'The wreath made of Aunt Lucy's hair hung there, and Caddy wouldn't have it changed. Of course it didn't cover that black and yellow and mouldy place at all! I've thought I should sink through the floor when people looked at it. And I'll own I always was one to like to change things 'round. You'd think it was a crime, to hear Caddy talk! She says, what a place for the parlor organ between the windows, where people can see us playing on it, when we never touch it except Sunday evenings when the shades are all drawn! And she says that having the light-stand moved away from that place under the hair wreath makes her feel just as if somebody was dead and gone! Isn't it ridiculous?' Miss Robena paused in the breathless recital of her woes and looked with anxious appeal at her niece.

'They seem small things to care so much about,' faltered Olive uncertainly.

'Up in our own room it's worse!' Miss Robena began again, reinforced by sympathy. 'She gets hysterical if I don't hang my best dress on the same nail just in the closet. I hung it on her nail just to see how it would seem. I broke loose all at once. I don't know why it was. We were going to have the Dorcas Club here, and although every woman in it has seen that place in the paper over and over again, I somehow felt as if I ought to assert myself and have things different. I felt as if it wasn't proper self-respect to give in any longer! So now she says she's got nervous prostration, and she's been and sent for you. And I feel as wicked as can be, and yet I'm not going to give in! I don't know as I could, now I've really broken loose! I feel wild and reckless. I've moved the dining-room clock from the mantelpiece over on to the corner bracket! That was since Caddy took to her bed.'

A faint smile, like wintry sunshine, struggled through the gloom of Miss Robena's face.

'What would you do?' she demanded piteously, scenting sympathy in Olive's unrestrained mirth.

'It—it's hard,' said Olive, instantly becoming serious as became a diplomat. 'I suppose that when people haven't—haven't large interests, and lead rather monotonous lives, they are apt to exaggerate trifles,' she said hesitatingly.

'Trifles! I don't see how you can call it a trifle!' said Miss Robena in an injured tone. 'But perhaps I might have gone on bearing with Caddy if it had not been for having the Dorcas Club here for afternoon tea. But there! you must go right up and see her. She will know you are here, her ears are so very sharp, and she'll suspect that I've been talking about her. It makes me ashamed, it do seem so disloyal. But, oh, dear, I have borne so long with Caddy!'

In the great front chamber Miss Caddy lay, a fragile heap upon the ample pillows. Miss Robena turned away with a little switch of her skirts and left Olive alone with her. Miss Caddy extended a worn blue-veined hand and pressed Olive affectionately.

'I had to send for you!' she said in a feeble voice. 'I've broken down, and it seemed as if there must be somebody that's a relation to look after Robena. She's so strange and flighty! It almost seems as if something had flown to her head! She's whisking things 'round out of their places—the places where her father and mother set them and where they've always stood!' Miss Caddy's voice trembled with emotion. She suddenly raised herself upon her elbow and spoke with shrill insistence. 'Do you think there is any need of moving things out of the places where they belong? Don't it appear to you to be kind of crazy?'

'I wouldn't think about it, now that you are ill, Aunt Caddy,' said Olive soothingly.

'I've had enough to make me sick!' There came a sudden gush of tears from her pathetic blue eyes. 'I've borne so long with Robena! I want you should tell her that it's killing me to have all the things whisked around so!'

Olive leaned back in the chintz armchair, and in spite of herself a little sigh escaped her lips. Diplomacy began to seem so difficult.

'You want a cup of tea!' exclaimed Miss Caddy. 'I ought to have waited till you had a cup of tea, but it's only in the family that you can speak of such a thing, and—and she