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RESIDENCE—ST. CLAIR STREET

A Change of Boarding Places

By S. B. HACKLEY

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"Let's go past Miss Cecil's house! O fawver, why not?"

Ned Duncan, strolling along quiet, palm-bordered Marvin street, in the cool dusk, made himself smile at the elf that dragged on his long fine hands, but he turned back before they reached the corner on which was the rented cottage of Cecilia Reeves, the woman he loved.

Cecilia, a young milliner who took four college-girl roomers to help out on her income, bent her yellow head lower over her heliotrope bed as she caught sight of his retreat. She had meant to give them some flowers when they passed. She knew he loved the heliotrope. Had she offended him? she wondered.

While she puzzled, with a hurt heart, Driscoll was saying to himself: "I must keep away—I must not see her any more. The woman I marry must love my child—she must love my little Babs!"

In the fourth year of Barbara's life with him, the baby with the roguish black eyes had come to them. Then the next year Barbara died, and the baby, an elfish, whimsical, lovable thing, had tumbled up somehow, under his widowed care, and three years of his old cousin's somewhat grumpy housekeeping and nursing.

Then the old cousin had remarried, and he had shut up the bungalow with its crown of purple blossom-covered bougainvillea, and he and the child had boarded since then, somewhat to Babs' disadvantage, he thought sometimes. Then he had fallen in love with Cecilia Reeves.

He had thought she was the "mother kind" of girl (Babs loved her) until lately. Since the evening before, he was certain she was not. Then he had decided he couldn't ask her to marry him. Not that he was certain she would marry him if he did ask her, but he couldn't, anyway.

His landlady of the last month had been Miss Reeves' friend until Driscoll and little Barbara came to her boarding house, and it occurred to her that her quiet boarder, who had something to do with the management of the city waterworks system, would be an ideal second husband. Then after the evening Cecilia came to take dinner with her and her "prize boarder" walked home with her, Mrs. Akers was no longer Cecil's friend.

Somehow in the last week she had made the impression on Driscoll that Cecil didn't like children. He had come home a little earlier than usual the evening before and started to the kitchen.

"I wonder Ned keeps that child since his wife died and he has no one to care for her," he heard Cecil's soft clear voice. "I am going to try to persuade him to let me find a place for her in a home!"

Driscoll felt as though something had struck him. He turned and went upstairs. She—she didn't want him to keep little Babs—she cared so little for his baby she would persuade him to send her to a home!

The child dropped the doll Mrs. Akers had bought her that day and sprang into his arms. He kissed the eager little face over and over.

"Oh, Cecil—girl—did you think that you could persuade me to do a conscienceless thing like that?" he thought as Babs ran downstairs to tell Mrs. Akers "fawver" had come.

Mrs. Akers was already aware of the fact. She had heard his step in the back hall; she knew he had heard Cecil's last remark.

"Was Miss Reeves here just now when I came in?" Driscoll asked at dinner. "I thought I heard her voice."

Mrs. Akers' red lips flashed a smile. "Oh, you eavesdropper! I hope we weren't saying anything bad. Oh, yes, we—Cecil was saying something about Babs, wasn't she?"

As Driscoll lifted the child to her chair Mrs. Akers, noting his set lips, felt that she had scored. Who was to tell him that Cecilia had been speaking of old Ned Mount, a destitute cripple who persisted in keeping his tiny orphaned grandchild in dirt and squalor? Not she!

That evening when the little girl slept Driscoll got out that other Barbara's picture, a thing he did not often do—much as he had loved her—since he had come to love Cecilia.

"The house of the heart has many chambers, Barbara, dear," he said to the picture, "and I wanted to put that other girl in the one alongside the one in which you stay, but oh, Barbara—Barbara—I love her! But she doesn't love the child—I daren't ask her to come, Barbara!"

The evening after she saw Driscoll

turn away from her gate, Cecilia went to the theater with Lucien Glover, a faithful admirer whom she particularly detested, and sat near Driscoll.

Driscoll, moody and unhappy, pretended interest in the play, but he had but one thought: Glover had no right to buy her her favorite Richmond roses—he himself had done that so long!

Two weeks later came the day of the annual rose carnival. Little Babs, wild with excitement, went to see the parade in the care of Mrs. Akers. That lady, engrossed in the conversation of a gossiping friend, gave the restless child but scant attention.

Seeing Cecil seated above her, the little girl climbed to her and leaned confidently against her. Cecil squeezed the plump little body to her, and kissed the witching little face.

"Fawver won't bring me to see you any more," she whispered; "he fink you don't like little girls!"

Cecil's head grew hot. Had Elsie Akers put that and other ideas in his head?

Little Babs danced away, but in less than five minutes Cecil heard her scream of terror. She sprang to her feet.

"My baby! My baby! Where are you?" Then she saw the child—her light dress blazing. Somebody had dropped a piece of burning paper. A mist swam before Cecil's eyes, but she shook it away and flung her tan woolen cape around the child.

"It's all out—the little girl isn't hurt!" she heard somebody saying. Then everything grew dark before her.

That evening Cecil, waited on like a queen by her four college girls, frowned a little when the doorbell rang.

"If it's that Lucien Glover," she told them, "tell him I'm asleep, anything—only send him away."

But it was Driscoll that came in. He started to take her hands, but seeing the bandages, turned very white.

Cecil smiled tremulously in his troubled face. "Don't feel bad," she told him, "my hands are only blistered a trifle. The doctor says they'll be healed in just a little while. How is my—how is Babs?"

"I left her asleep," he answered. "She isn't hurt at all. She begged me to bring her to you."

"I suppose," she held up her head, "you told her I didn't like little girls. What have you heard me say, Ned Driscoll, to make you think me that kind of woman?"

He colored hotly, but he told her, and of Mrs. Akers' subsequent remark. With flaming face Cecil explained.

"I'm ashamed," he said presently, standing before her, full of contrition. "Oh, Cecil, I'm ashamed to tell you what is in my heart! Forgive me. I need—"

Her eyes twinkled. "I think you need a change of boarding place!"

"No," he said, "I need to be in my own home with the girl of my heart; but when I think what you must have thought of me these unhappy two weeks, I'm afraid—"

"What's two weeks?" She leaned toward him. "Oh, Ned, what's two weeks out of a lifetime?"

Then, very carefully, so as not to hurt the blistered hands, he took her in his arms.

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