



"When It Rains Porridge"

Written for Farm and Home by H. Annetto Poole.



WHEN IT rains porridge my dish is always bottom up. I've heard my poor mother say it many a time, and it's just the same with me," and poor, weary, down-hearted Mrs. Gates sighed as she laid down the handbill she had been perusing with its accounts of wonderful bargains in dry goods.

"Then I wouldn't have my dish bottom up," stoutly averred Granny Gates from her rocking chair, her black eyes snapping with vigor not diminished by her white hair nor her years. "That wasn't the way my mother said the proverb. She always told us, 'When it rains porridge, hold up your dish.' The trouble is in not knowing when the sky looks like porridge."

"If ever a family needed porridge, this one does, but I don't see any way to get any unless it rains down," and Elsie Gates, the 17-years-old daughter of the house, gave the towel with which she had been wiping the supper dishes a vigorous snap before hanging it up to dry. The supper had been scanty and the children's appetites had been, as usual, keen. She sat down in the doorway. Johnnie, the youngest of the Gates family, precipitating himself upon her back with joyous shouts. She pulled him round in front of her and stood him up in the short grass.

"Mollie and Bennie," she called, "Johnnie is coming. Let's out for him." Johnnie toddled off to the other children, and Elsie leaned her chin upon her hands and gave herself over to discontented thoughts. It was precarious living at best. There was the house which belonged to granny, and there was granny's "interest money." And mother had a little money, too, from the Jessop side. And Grandfather Jessop's will had specified that my daughter Elvira is to have in addition to the interest from the aforesaid lands, the milk of a cow, and what fuel may be necessary from my woodlots, or if said woodlots shall be cleared during her lifetime, she is to have its equivalent in other fuel; and I leave a charge upon my son James that his sister Elvira shall never come to want as long as any of my property shall remain for her necessary support.

Uncle James's milk wagon on its daily way to the creamery duly left as much milk as the family required, and it formed a large portion of the children's diet. And every fall the big open woodshed attached to the old-fashioned house was piled to the eaves. Uncle James did his duty according to the letter of his father's will, and his wife certainly did hers in the way of good advice and injunctions to economy.

You ought to get along with one fire," she would say. "Of course it is different at our house, for Mabel is liable to have young company, now she is taking the music course at the boarding school. It costs awfully, but of course we must give her all the advantages we can." Elsie wondered where her advantages were coming from. "And, Elsie, I should think a girl as old as you are might get work somewhere. You might get chamber work up at the school or the summer hotel if you really tried." Elsie sighed heavily as she thought of all these things. If there was only something which she could do at home!

A group of girls of her own age, prettily dressed and chatting merrily, passed on the sidewalk. They were pupils in the boarding school which crowned the hill. Elsie knew some of them by sight and name. The one in the blue gown and with the long fair braid of hair was Marian Dorrance, and Elsie knew her home was in Maine. The one with such black eyes and hair and always a glint of red or yellow in her costume was Mildred Kent, and she lived in Missouri. Oh, to see what they had been able to do. To be able to travel, to study, to learn music and French and draw, to dress prettily and have one's things new and whole, all at once.

Elsie not only wanted more things for

the family, she wanted some for herself. She longed for something more than a bare subsistence, the least possible amount of food and raiment, but she would be glad to be assured of even comfort for the present. Her mother's voice wailed on behind her:

"I used to hear my mother say there was a glove shop where she lived and they used to put out gloves to be attached and the shoe shops put out shoes to be bound, before the sewing machines came in and spoiled it all. But a girl can't do anything now unless she lives where there are mills or shops."

"Oh, yes," said Granny Gates, "we used to braid palm-leaf hats and straw braid for the bonnet shops, and weave palm-leaf for Shaker hoods. But there's no use wallowing over those times. They are as far gone as the days when my mother used to go out weaving and spinning. But the question ain't what used to be, but what is now. There is no more use crying over bygone porridge than there is over spilt milk. I believe there is something somebody wants done, and that they'll pay for. Perhaps it ain't just what we want to do, but if it's what we can do and what other folks want done, why, that's our chance for porridge, and that's our time to hold up our dish."

Elsie rose from the doorstep and walked down to the front gate. On one side of it was a large, thickly-matted bed of lilies of the valley, full of just blossoming spires. She stooped to gather a few to carry in to her grandmother, and as she rose, was aware that a group of the boarding school girls were coming back from their walk.

The foremost trio passed on, glancing at her casually, but Marian Dorrance and Mildred Kent paused. "I wish you would allow us to buy some of your lilies of the valley," said Mildred. Elsie flushed hotly. We have never sold flowers," said she, a little haughtily.

"No," said Marian, "but we do so wish you would. I am sure you would if you knew how much we wanted them. We have walked by here three times this afternoon," said Mildred, "trying to screw our courage up to ask. We wanted to ask last year, but we were new girls then and we did not dare."

"And the other girls said you were an 'old family,'" said Marian, taking up the tale. "So we knew it would never do!" with such a merry twinkle in the blue eyes that Elsie could not help laughing in sympathy, and with the laugh came a sudden resolve. Her grandmother's adage came into her mind, and she determined to "hold up her dish" for whatever stray showers of porridge might fall in her direction. She began to gather the fragrant sprays with a generous hand.

"I do not know how much I ought to ask you for them," said she, a little doubtfully. "O, stop!" cried Mildred. "What you have already will make two generous 10-cent bunches, and we should want to come again, you know. There is no florist here, and we have to pay awful prices for everything we have from that man at the Falls who comes to take orders. Thank you so much for letting us have them at all!"

They passed on and joined the other girls, who had turned around to wait for them. After a moment's conference the others came back to where Elsie still stood by the flowers. "May we buy some, too?" asked the leader, a short, plump girl, all smiles and dimples. "And, oh, what are these pretty blue sprays? What lovely foliage they have!"

"That is Jacob's Ladder," said Elsie, giving the old-fashioned country name for the creeping polemonium. "There are not many of these yet; they are just coming into blossom." There were enough for two clusters, however, and the third girl spied and asked for some of the blue grape hyacinths, charmed with their tiny bells and delicate fragrance.

"My!" said Bennie, after the girls had gone. "Eighty cents, all in a little minute! I hope they will come again."

"If we have anything to sell them," said Elsie, glancing reflectively over the possibilities of the old-fashioned beds. "There won't be very much of any one thing. But the lilies of the valley will last for some time. There are a great many buds."

"There won't be anything at all," cried Mollie. "If we don't look out for Johnnie," dragging that shrieking cherub out of the bed with both hands full of leaves and flowers.

Elsie shouldered him and carried him into the house, where Bennie was al-

ready telling the news. "Dear me," sighed her mother. "To think of selling the very flowers out of the garden, and I was a Jessop!"

"And I was an Ames!" said granny, with a proud little movement of her head. "And what it is honorable for an Ames to do is honorable for anybody on earth! This garden was an Ames garden before it was a Gates garden, and if it never has brought in anything it is high time it went to work for its living—its owners always worked for theirs! Elsie, are there going to be any double narcissus blows?"

"Come on!" shouted Mollie, "let's go and see!" and she and Bennie raced out, to come back breathless and disputing whether there were 49 or 51 buds. "About 50," said Elsie. "If none of them blast," Bennie laughed. "I am glad I made a mistake and planted a whole cropful of sweet peas instead of the others."

"You might have known by the looks," said his mother. "Well, I didn't, and I'm glad now. You'll see, those girls will be glad to buy 'em." "I think," said Elsie, "I will plant more sweet alyssum and mignonette seeds. Delicate, fragrant blossoms ought to sell."

"There are lots of pansies," put in Mollie. "And there will be lots more," said Elsie. "The bed is shady and picking them will keep them blossoming, and those I planted in April will blossom later."

"And nasturtiums," suggested Mollie. "I used to see the girls carrying great handfuls of them last fall. And the valerian is sweet, and it has spread into a big bed. Only the cats won't keep out of it." "It is so late now the cats won't trouble it any more this season," said granny.

"There is one thing you haven't thought of," remarked Mrs. Gates. "Who will buy your flowers in July and August when the school is closed?"

Truly, Elsie had not thought of that, and her countenance fell, for the old garden was always a riot with beauty and fragrance during those two months.

"Perhaps the summer boarders will," suggested Mollie. Elsie flushed. To sell flowers to girls of her own age who came for them was one thing, but carrying them up to Elm Crest to the summer hotel was another matter.

"I'll ask Mr. Lane," said Bennie. "I'd just as soon as not and I can carry them up there, too. School won't keep them." "Thank you, Bennie," said Elsie. "I will ask him myself and you shall go with me, but I shall be very glad if you will carry them up there if we make a bargain."

The bargain was easily made. Mr. Lane was sure all the sweet peas would find ready buyers among his boarders. "And, by the way, Bennie," said he, "your best time for trade will be for the 9 o'clock breakfast, and I have no doubt there will be other things to do for the boarders. They frequently want a messenger."

Bennie's eyes sparkled, but all he said was, "Yes, sir!" Going down the hill with Elsie he laughed gleefully. "I didn't hold up my dish as granny says," said he, "for I didn't know the sky looked like porridge. But I guess it is a good plan to keep a fellow's dish right side up and then the porridge will hit it."

As long as the season lasted all the flowers sold readily. In fact, there were not nearly enough to supply the demand, and Elsie was devising plans to raise more another summer, seeking information about the raising of violets in cold frames, and wondering if Roman hyacinths and freesias could be grown in sufficient numbers in the house to make it pay. Bennie found business so good among the summer boarders that he not only began to see where his next winter's suit was coming from, but to indulge hopes of a new overcoat. The summer earnings had not been large, but they had been steady and every penny was welcome.

But by September Elsie began to see an end to the good fortune for that season. The garden would soon be over and summer boarders were already flitting. But a new path was to open. Her first friends, Marian and Mildred, came down one golden September afternoon to buy nasturtiums. Then they stood hesitating, as if there were something more to say.

"Do you—that is—" began Marian. She stopped and began again. Blushing prettily "I am in a quandary. Miss Gates," said she, "and I wonder if you can help me. I am doing so much in music this year that I am constantly busy, and I wish very much to find

someone who will do my mending regularly. I find I can get plain sewing or dressmaking done here, if I need, but no one seems willing to do stocking darning, sew on buttons and strings, repair torn bands or replace skirt-binding."

"And mine, too," said happy-go-lucky Mildred. "I am not doing any extra studying—far from it. In fact, the French teacher remarked yesterday that he thought I was doing even less than usual. I was properly taught, I assure you, and I am always started whole, but I hate mending, and only boggle when I do it, so I fall to pieces long before I get home for mamma's seamstress to put me in order again."

Elsie's thoughts ran rapidly, and by the time Mildred finished her resolve was formed. "I see no reason why we cannot do your mending," said she. "My brother can come for it every week if you will tell me what day your clothes come from the laundry."

"I am so glad," said Mildred, "more for Marian, though, than for myself," with a mischievous glance at her companion. "You see it really worries her, while I suppose I should go on contentedly falling to pieces if no one came to the rescue." "Indeed, you would," laughed Marian, "for I never saw such a faculty for getting rid of buttons, ripping seams and converting buttonholes into yawning gaps."

Elsie laid the matter before the family concave. "Well, I can sew with anyone," said her mother, "and do the nicest of fine darning, and my matches are always on straight and run the right way of the cloth. There's a good deal in that, and stocking darning is one thing, and cloth darning is another, and fine darning is another, but that is mostly on gentlemen's clothes. Oh, I can sew or make buttonholes with the best of them!" "Just as I told you," said granny, "all you have to do is to keep your dish right side up."

The mending proved constant and profitable. If their busy needles kept the girls at the school till, why not perform the same service for others, gentlemen as well as ladies? More than one young man, living in a boarding house, was glad to pay for his mending. The work was not uninteresting. There is always a feeling of satisfaction in surveying a job of neatly mended garments, with buttons and strings all in place, torn band-ends cut away, picked out and finished with new buttonholes, tiny breaks heedfully darned and worn socks made whole again. Mrs. Gates's pride in the results was unbounded, and when she had accomplished a particularly difficult bit she patted it and held it up in different lights as if it had been embroidery.

One other source of income was yet to open to Elsie. Going up to the school one morning, she found the housekeeper much perturbed. "I don't know what I am going to do, Elsie," exclaimed she. "This is to be a reception night the invitations are out, and the cook is sick. How I am ever going to get the cake baked is more than I can see. And a decent confectioner in town. Bakery stuff won't do at all."

"Can you trust me to make it at home and send the man down for it at 5 o'clock?" asked Elsie. "I know what our stove will do, but I don't know your range, and I shall be sure of success at home."

"Elsie, you are an angel!" exclaimed the perturbed matron. "Make sponge cake of course and unlimited chocolate cake, and any other light delicate kinds you can think of." Elsie laughed. "Granny says there are only three kinds of cake anyway, cup cake with both butter and milk, pound cake with butter but no milk, and sponge cake with neither. With one good rule for each variety, all the rest is a matter of brains and flavor and fruit. I will take your layer cake time, if you please, and then I must hurry."

"Thomas is just going down for the errands. Here, Thomas, take Miss Gates home and stop on the way wherever she wishes. Now Elsie you can get your materials and take them right along with you."

By the time Elsie reached home her plan was mapped out and she was ready for immediate action. As she had said, she knew just what her stove would do. With help from her grandmother in beating eggs, creaming butter and making icing, the work was accomplished, and it was a tempting array that Thomas carried up the hill at 5 o'clock.

"That is all very well for once," said [To Page 151.]