

AN EXILE

"Next week is Old Home week," Mrs. Phipps informed the waiting audience. "I'd got the date sort of mislaid; I'd got in my head that it was the week after. The folks is coming from the ends of the earth."

"I guess if 'twas Old Ladies' Homes they was comin' to, they wouldn't be in such a tearin' hurry," said old Mrs. Potter, darkly. She was suffering from "torment in her joints," and viewed the world aggressively in consequence. Mrs. Phipps turned upon her triumphantly.

"Wait till you hear all, Susan Potter! What do you say to Medford's havin' a special day and Senator Long bein' here to make a speech?" "I dunno's I consider that any g'tle—a passel o' folks losin' their heads over Simon Moses Long. Folks 'll go an' make a fine to do, but they don't never one of 'em give a thought to a poor old woman shet up in a Home." Mrs. Potter's complaints were never affected by so slight a consideration as change of base.

"It beats all," declared Mrs. Phipps "how some folks can set an' grumble; I believe they'd fault the Angel Gabriel himself. Mebbe if they'd wait till other folks have finished 'twould look better. There's goin' to be speakin' an' there's goin' to be a dinner and we're all goin'! They calculate to send the 'bus round an' take us all."

Susan Potter for once said nothing. Across her old worn face broke an incredulous delight infinitely pathetic, had there been any one to see. Lucy Holbrook was a slender little creature with slider hair folded meekly about her temples. Nobody noticed Lucy very much; she was "one of the fretful, quiet sort," the others said, and considered the poorest of any of them—not so much from poverty of actual possessions as because her imagination was not equal to the task of adorning her past. She had come from an old tumble-down house somewhere out in the country. A fall three years before had seriously injured her hip, and after that a cousin had paid the two hundred dollars that admitted her to the Home. She was real fortunate, she said, to have a beautiful place like this provided for her, and nobody had discovered the passionate homesickness that beat beneath her patient gratitude. So through three endless years she had lived an exile, yearning for the sight of one poor bit of earth. There had been no way before, but now the cars went out to Centerville.

For the next week all the talk was of Old Home Day, and great was the ransacking of trunks and boxes. Mrs. Potter's symptoms became more and more acute as the great day grew near, but that by no means argued her unequal to the festivities. Long before the rising bell rang Wednesday morning she was flying excitedly about her room. "I s'pose 'twas reskin' my life to go," she told Lucy, "but I dunno's I care. All I ask is that the misery will let me have one good day. Would you wear my visite or my crepe shawl? I s'pose I'd better put them pellets in my bag—they're what the doctor gave me to take if I had a turn. Oh, my land, I dunno's I will be able to go!"

She dropped into a chair, fanning herself. Suddenly she turned her keen glance upon her roommate. "Ain't you goin' to wear your de-laine?" she asked. Lucy's delicate face flushed guiltily. "I wasn't—I guess I ain't goin'," she stammered. Mrs. Potter dropped her fan in amazement. "Be ye sick?" she inquired, sharply. Lucy shook her head. "I thought I wouldn't. I can't get round in a crowd like other folks."

"But there's all the speakin' an' the seem' things, an' the dinner," Mrs. Potter's voice rose, incredulously. Lucy turned a glorified smile upon her. "I guess I don't care much about those," she said. Such a staggering announcement almost bereft Mrs. Potter of the power of speech. "My stars!" she ejaculated, faintly. When at last the 'bus vanished down the road a great peace seemed

to fall upon the August world. Lucy looked out upon it with radiant eyes. "Tis going to be a beautiful day," she said. "I do feel to be grateful."

There was half a mile to walk before she reached the trolley—a weary journey for her halting steps, but her eager spirit found everywhere symbols of her joy. When she was in the car, however, and the holiday commotion of Medford was left behind, a different mood fell upon her. Suppose she should find things changed? She never had dared ask. Some one might have bought the place and torn down the old house. A sickness seized her at the thought; then the car swung round a curve and a familiar homestead came into view.

"There's the old Norris place!" she cried, leaning forward eagerly. "I didn't know we passed that. It looks just as it did when I used to go over there on errands for ma, and old lady Norris gave me caraway cookies and seedcake. My sakes, how it all comes back!"

The trolley passed within a quarter of a mile of her home. She signalled the conductor, and when he had helped her down and the car had gone on she stood quite alone in her old world. She looked about her with solemn joy. There was an apple orchard on one side of the road and a cornfield on the other. The cornfield was all a-rustle in the light breeze, and its strong scent filled the air. She was thinking of the snowdrop bush that grew beside the front door. It ought to be in bloom if it hadn't died down. And there would be Canterbury bells—they come up every year—and the barnyard would be covered with gill-go-over-the-ground.

But when she reached the bend in the road where the old house itself came into view, she stood for a moment looking off across the quiet fields. Then, very slowly, she turned and lifted her eyes. Her face was full of awe over the miracle of her happiness. "Oh, Lord!" she breathed, passionately, "it ain't changed! It ain't changed a mite!" She hurried forward then, stumbling in her eagerness. Through the long grass shone purple gleams of Canterbury bells, and beside the door was a snowdrop bush covered with berries of delicate ivory. She dropped down on the doorstep and sat for a long time wrapped in content, her thoughts wandering back through the fragrant years. Finally she stirred and looked across to the well. It was really past noon, but it was thirst of soul, not of body, that she felt.

"If I could just taste that water once more," she said, restlessly. "There wasn't never any water like that. If there hasn't anybody taken the buckets—" She pushed her way through the tangled grass to the well. The buckets were still there, and far below she could see the brown gleam of water. By stiff, awkward hitches she drew up a dripping bucket and brought her face to it and drank—a long, thirsty draught.

There is food beyond the wisdom of the chemists. Lucy Holbrook, having taken that long draught of youth, felt suddenly eager and adventurous. It was not enough to see the body of the old house, she must get in—to the heart of it. She tried each of the doors in succession—they were all locked. Baffled, but undaunted, she made the rounds a second time; then she discovered a blind hanging loose from one of the kitchen windows, and in a flash of memory she knew that the lock on that window was broken. If she could only find anything to climb up by—

She hurried to the shed in anxious search, and finally came upon a box, hidden under a pile of chips and dust. She dragged it to the window and mounted it in triumph. Her hip made her wince, but she scorned the pain; with a mighty effort she threw herself over the sill and dropped, panting, into the dim twilight within. Suddenly the sound of a knocker rattled through the empty rooms. Lucy started, half discrediting her own senses, but when a second appeal came she hurried to answer it. The door sagged from long disuse, but it gave way at last, letting a sudden dazzling parallelogram of emerald and blue into its old framework; and against the vivid background a girl stood waiting. She was a pretty little thing, with slender shoulders and a delicate tinted face.

"I always wondered how this house looked inside," she said. "I didn't know 'twas open."

Lucy's blue eyes met hers with a laugh. "I don't s'pose 'twas what you'd call open," she asserted. "I found a blind off and I climbed in."

The girl repeated the words, "in!" Lucy nodded. "Yes I did, and I'm lame, too. I expect I'll be laid up a while after it, but that don't make no difference. There's 'hings you want so much you've got to have them, come what may."

The girl glanced at her with a startled expression, as if she suspected the words of some inner meaning, but Lucy's quiet gaze reassured her. "I'd like to look it over, if you don't mind," she said. "Certain, dear," Lucy replied, "I'd be pleased to show you—I lived here all my life till three years ago." She turned, leading the way back into the rooms. "I don't suppose it's anything to see—for you," she said, "just bare walls and rotting floors. But it's all so different to me. This was the sitting room that we're in now—wait a minute and I'll open it up." She threw open one of the blinds, and as she did so a tiger lily thrust its saffron torch in her face. She leaned down and touched it eagerly.

"How they have grown!" she cried. "Ma always said she was goin' to have them rooted out, but she never did. I mind how they bloomed her last summer. She used to set at this window all the time, and one day she got sort o' riled up and said she was sick of seein' the whole

world turned into yaller tiger lilies. And pa, he got up early the next morning to mow them down. He didn't say nuthin' to her—he was goin' to surprise her. I was sleepin' on the lounge in ma's room; 'twas just about five o'clock an' I thought she was asleep, but suddenly she sat right up an' called me. 'Lucy,' she said, speakin' up real clear, 'you tell pa not to touch one o' them lilies. They was here when I was married an' I want them to be here when I die,' she said. We never could tell how she knew—she couldn't herself; she said she felt it. Pa hadn't touched one when I ran out. And they was all in bloom when she died. Seems if the veil grows so thin sometimes! Ma allus wanted to know things; 'twas 'most like a promise to her that she was goin' to. I can jest think how eager an' happy she's been, learnin' things all these years."

"When I was little, I used to keep my rag babies in that closet," she said, returning to the present with apology in her voice, "and later, my patchwork and fine sewing. The dolls wasn't there very long—ma thought girls ought to learn useful things. I made a shirt for pa when I was ten."

"Oh, my!" the girl said, softly. "I don't like to sew," she added, "I hate it."

"I guess most young creatures do not," Lucy agreed. "I know most of my mates didn't. But I always liked it. It seems if I had such happy things to do all my life."

The girl walked across to the window and stood looking out. "I wish I was that way," she said in a muffled voice. "Mebbe I wasn't always," Lucy replied, wisely. "I guess all young things is made a good deal alike. But it's all sunshine as I look back—bright and quiet and peaceful like this day."

The girl's thin, sweet voice rose into a wail. "I don't want things like this day," she sobbed. "It's dreadful, and I hate it!"

Lucy's wrinkled hand touched the heaving shoulders softly. "There, there, dear," she said, "tell me if 'twill do any good, and don't tell me if it won't."

The girl turned with a sudden vehemence. "I'll tell you—I don't care what you think of me—I've got to tell somebody. All the others went in to the celebration, but I—couldn't. There's somebody that was going to take me and then we quarrelled—he's gone with Alma Davis, and—" She put her face down into her hands and sobbed again.

"We'd been going together almost a year now," the girl sobbed. "David Clark ought to have known I didn't mean it."

Lucy looked at her with startled eyes. "Who did you say 'twas, dear?" she asked. "David Clark," the girl repeated. "One of Lorenzo Clark's boys" she sobbed breathlessly. "Yes," the girl nodded. Into Lucy's eyes came a look of solemn exaltation.

"I guess I've got it all now," she said. "I dunno's I can tell you rightly, dearie—I guess mebbe you've got to live most of your life to understand some things. When I was a girl, something happened to me. I ain't goin' to tell you what 'twas, for that don't matter, but 'twas near enough so that I know the way you are feelin' to-day, an' it lasted for months—mebbe years. All was, that by an' by there came a time when it seemed to me I could be reconciled to it if only I could understand why it had to be. An' I guess I do to-day. Deary, let me tell you something. Men folks ain't like women folks an' never will be. There's things that you can't change any more than you can make a stream run up hill. It's different with diff'rent men—with the Clarks, it's that you've allus got to take the first step if things have gone wrong. Seems if there's something inside them that locks an' won't let the words come out, though they want to make up as much as you do. But if you go first, 'twill come right every time—an' there won't have to be many times, either."

"But I thought I'd got to have some pride. It was 'most killing me—I wanted to make up so, but I thought 'twas his fault, an' so—" "I never yet heard that pride was the greatest thing in the world," Lucy said.

The girl drew a long breath. "Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried. Suddenly she turned in consternation. "Why—haven't you had anything to eat?" she stammered.

"I never thought of it," Lucy replied, simply. "I guess I wasn't thinkin' of anything except seein' the old place once more."

The girl moved swiftly toward the doorway. "I'm goin' to bring you something," she said. "You stay—I won't be long," and before Lucy could reply she was gone.

For a few minutes Lucy waited doubtful—then as the girl did not reappear, she went on through the house. The old beautiful memories were not routed; it was rather as if she had come back to meet her own girlhood and give it its crown.

She was standing at the window of her old room, musing over it all, when

the girl's light step came to the door; her radiant face looked like a flower abloom in the dusk.

"If you'll come downstairs," she said, shyly—"I've fixed something. It's picnicky, but it's better than nothin'."

Lucy followed her down, accepting gratefully the chair the girl had brought for her. She had not realized her weariness before, but now she knew that she was both faint and tired. She looked happily across the little feast.

"Ain't it just beautiful?" she sighed. For years it had been her fashion of saying grace.

Yet, after all, it was of heart fare that they both partook—neither of them could eat much food; a bright restlessness was upon the girl and Lucy was always the slightest of eaters. In a little while she leaned back, her fragile meal complete.

The girl crumbled a cookie between her fingers; finally she looked up bravely. "Are you sure?" she asked, "about that that you said, you know?"

Lucy's eyes met hers with quiet joy. "Yes," she said, "I'm as sure as I am that I am in this house this minute. I dunno but I'm surer."

A few minutes after Lucy seached the Home the 'bus arrived with its load of irritable and disheveled old ladies. The day would gather a golden glow as it slipped back in memory, but the immediate result was the undesirable one of tired and jarring nerves. Susan Potter climbed to her room, groaning at every step. "Here I be, an' here I'll stay till I die!" was her greeting. "I've had my lesson. Such scrougin' an' grubbin'! Oh, my land, how tired I be!"—Mabel Nelson Thurston in The Interior.

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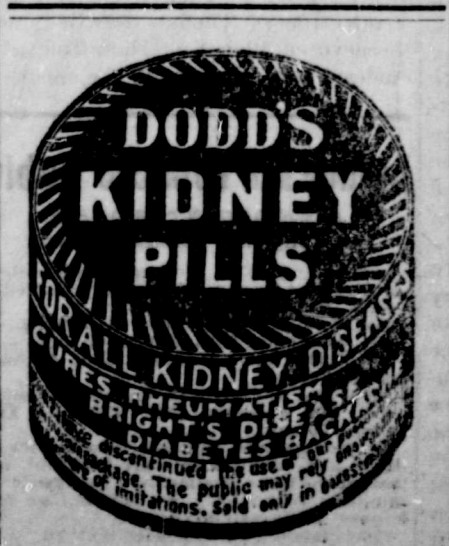
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