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The Wrath of Mrs. Barker

(Continued from page 15)

with the deliberate sagacity of an elephant, noiselessly entered the room. The Rabbit's back was toward the door. He worked in his shirt-sleeves, and the knickerbockers were on his lap. He was delightfully defenceless, but Mrs. Barker did not think of that. Her eye followed the needle. She noticed that the thread used was much too long, and that every time the worker brought the needle through the cloth, he had to stretch his arm to the full, and that, whenever this happened his shirt-sleeve fell back, revealing a sharp little elbow. For the moment she forgot George's wrongs and her own. She was angry, furiously angry, but it was the wrath all good women feel at seeing a male doing their work. The feeling mastered her. She ran forward and snatched up the knickerbockers.

"You limb!" she shrieked, "you let me catch you sewing again!"

Then she cut the stitches and pulled out the threads. The stolen piece of cloth fell upon the floor.

Bunny Ford made no resistance, but crossed his legs upon the bed and prepared for something interesting.

Mrs. Barker eyed the piece of cloth (George's cloth) rather ruefully and proceeded to patch it into the knickerbockers. She was not a very good needlewoman, as a rule, but now, nettled by an absurd male rivalry, she did her very best, the boy, for his own future guidance, taking note of her methods.

"You mend better than me," he said simply.

It was a long job, but Mrs. Barker did not weary. She was feeling too pleased. In one detail her errand had failed (the piece of cloth was lost irrevocably), but otherwise what could be better than the turn things taken? To the original vengeance had been added the heightening of surprise. The Rabbit played round her unsuspectingly. What a moment it would be when she threw off the mask!

And meanwhile the babe chattered and showed his treasures—some transfers taken off on the fly-leaves of school books, and a pound-of-tea presentation picture, the gift of a grocer's lady; his housekeeping did not include tea by the pound. The picture showed (in four bright colours) a beautiful girl in blue satin, at her prayers. He told Mrs. Barker that this was a picture of his mother (did any one ever hear a child tell such wicked stories?), and, laying it upon the bed, smoothed it out lovingly with dirty, dimpled hand.

At last the task was finished.

"There," said Mrs. Barker maternally (as maternal speech was understood in the neighbourhood), "you knock out that knee again, and I'll skin you! But I'll do that anyhow."

"I like you," said the Rabbit irrelevantly. It was noticeable throughout that he paid no attention to the woman's mere words.

Mrs. Barker flushed. The time had come to start the knocking about, and it was less amusing than it had seemed further off. For one thing, she did not know how to begin. This huge red woman had never struck a child in her life.

The Rabbit standing on the bed pulled on his knickerbockers, she weakly watching him. His tiny shirt (there are two garments that are pathetic, a woman's shawl and the shirt of a small boy) and his diminutive braces contrasted with his full grown self-reliance and caught at her heart-strings. She gave him an in-

dignant push. Afterwards she liked to think that, uninterrupted, she would have advanced from that to something very terrible. But at this moment there was a crashing upon the stairs, followed in a few seconds by the appearance of a red-headed Hooligan, with a murderous buckle belt. At sight of the imperturbable Rabbit he gaped in amazement.

"What's she doing here?" he asked threateningly.

"She's a brick!" said the Rabbit, patting the widow protectingly upon the back. "She's been mending my knickers."

The new comer threw his weapon into a corner and made what purported to be a military salute.

"Did you see anything of the other woman, mum?" he asked respectfully.

"What other woman?"

"They told me one had gone up to knock the Rabbit about. That's why I run home. 'Ave you seen her?"

"No!"

"I suppose she heard you was here, and was afraid to come. Now I am home I may as well have some tea. Rabbit, look alive!"

"Three?" asked the child.

"Of course."

Mrs. Barker accepted the implied invitation. If there was to be any revenge, she must outstay this champion. Besides, it would be interesting to see how these lost males fared. The Rabbit scampered about with a will. From a cupboard he fished out half a loaf and a gallipot

of dripping, two cups, and two cracked plates. These were supplemented from the cupboard of a neighbour on the next floor, the same friend allowing him to boil his kettle upon her fire.

"Three spoonfuls," said the Hooligan resolutely. No one should say that he could not "do it" upon occasion. Mrs. Barker found herself sitting down with the boys, feeling very much as if she were somebody else. Really, the meal was very enjoyable. The tea, by the taste of it, might have been made and poured out in a Christian manner.

The Hooligan did the honours, and with something of a flourish. Directly after tea he ran off to sell his papers, but not before he had commended his little chum to Mrs. Barker for protection against the other woman.

"Oh! I am not afraid of any woman, said the Rabbit cheerfully.

Again opportunity stared in the charwoman's eyes; but it was impossible to rise straight from a meal and assault one's host. There must be a decent interval. To occupy this (she hated idleness) Mrs. Barker scrubbed out the room.

"However you two dared to think of setting up by yourselves beats me!"

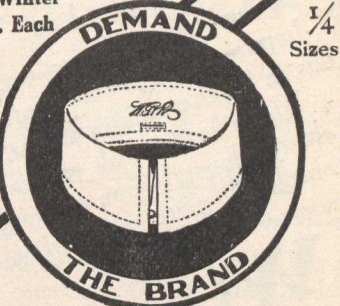
When she had finished and had dried her hands upon her dress, she knew that the moment had at last come. Without stultifying herself, she could not go back leaving the wrong-doer unchastised. A beating would do him good, and, after all, it was not essential that the operation should hurt. Even at that, however, there was a difficulty about starting in cold blood. It she could engage him in some half friendly tussle, it would be possible to work up from that. She recalled how George squirmed when she washed him, and resolved to work herself into the proper temper by forcibly scrubbing young Ford until he was as bright as a new pin. He really needed washing.

Having filled a basin with hot wa-

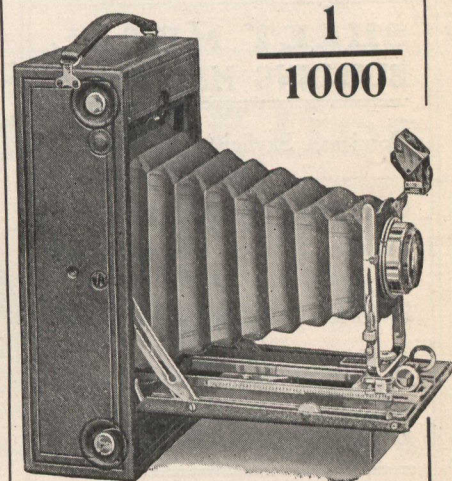
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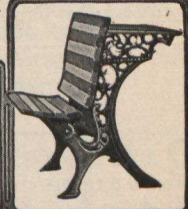
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