

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## The Spot Beautiful

(Harriet T. Comstock, in 'Christian Register.')

Gretchen stood and looked upon the scene, her beauty-loving soul and orderly spirit sinking with every passing moment. She folded her plump little hands under her neat gingham apron, and sighed and sighed.

It was not a pretty spot upon which she gazed. It was a back yard, surrounded by tall, ugly tenements. The place was strewn with papers and old tin cans. Still, the sun flooded in through a gap between two high buildings and seemed to say, 'Cheer up, Gretchen; where you and I can enter, there is hope.'

But the poor little German maid was too depressed to hear the message just then. She had come but the day before from the sweet, pure country where her father had been coachman on a fine estate. The owner of the country place had died, and the house was closed; and there was nothing for Gretchen's father to do but come into the city, take a position offered him, and make Gretchen, his twelve-year-old housekeeper, mistress of two small dim rooms on the ground floor of the dingy tenement. It was hard.

It had not taken the little maid long to clean the rooms and set in order the scant furniture. When that was done, she was free to seek other pastures; and the dismal back yard was the nearest approach to a pasture that she could find.

Slowly the tears rolled down the round, shiny cheeks. The prospect was dark indeed. Then the inner Gretchen spoke up. The outer Gretchen recognized her at once, dried her tears, and listened.

'Now, see here, my dear, it is not half as bad as you think. There might be a yard without any sun. I have heard of such things.'

Gretchen never had, and she shuddered.

'And you live on the ground floor of the house,' the inner voice went on. 'Just think! Practically you have control of this yard. No one uses it but cats, and you like cats.'

That was true. Gretchen caught sight of one just then, hiding behind some rubbish, and bent to smooth the thin, surprised back.

'Now it's quite out of the question for you to carry all these papers and cans out, but you can sweep them into one corner; and, when people see you so tidy, maybe they will help by not throwing out any more. If you are the sort of girl you ought to be, you will do what you can, and not take the starch out of your fresh apron by crying on it.'

Gretchen smiled broadly. That inner voice always gave such good advice! The sun fairly sparkled at the turn things were taking; and the forlorn cat came from behind the rubbish heap, and rubbed against Gretchen in the friendliest way.

The little girl set to work at once. Her father would not return until night; there was a long day before her. All the morning, with a shovel and broom, she worked with a will; and by noon that back yard, except for the huge heap in the corner, was as tidy as a kitchen floor.

Of course, some children from upper windows had called names and hurled ar-

ticles down at her, but at length they decided that she was deaf and dumb; and the patience with which she picked up the things they cast out seemed so dull that they at last gave up the teasing, and betook themselves to livelier sport in the street gutters.

At twelve o'clock, Mrs. Murphy, who lived just above Gretchen, opened her window to throw out a can. 'Whatever are yer doing off?' she asked, in amaze.

'Cleaning up,' Gretchen called up, with a bright smile.

'Well, I niver!' ejaculated Mrs. Murphy. And she certainly never had. But she did not throw out the can. Instead, she said: 'You look ready to drop, child. Just go in and fix yourself a bite. That back yard ain't a-goin' ter run away.'

The idea was so sensible that Gretchen acted upon it at once. Tired as she was, she prepared a little 'bite' and enjoyed it hugely, as she sat alone by the spotless table.

That afternoon Mrs. Murphy put a shawl over her head, and went out on a round of calls; and a great many people in the square heard of the queer little German girl who 'cleaned up' a back yard.

The next day Gretchen arose inspired. In some way she must cover up that ugly pile in the far corner; but how? She went out, sorrowfully picked up some things that had been thrown out in the night, then looked up and saw many faces peering out at her from the windows.

'Good morning!' she called up, sweetly. 'Please will you stop throwing things out into this yard? I'm going to try'—her own audacity stunned her—'I am going to try to make this spot beautiful.'

A shout of laughter greeted this; but the child went on, her upraised face shining in the sunlight which was just coming through the gap to see how things were getting on: 'And, when it is beautiful, we can all enjoy it, you know.' Another shout was imminent, but Mrs. Murphy seized her opportunity.

'It's against the health rules, anyway,' she called out, 'and yer all know it. If yer don't quit throwin', I'll write a line mesilf to headquarters.'

This threat had a marvellous effect. The listeners knew the health board of old, and they would do almost anything rather than attract its attention to themselves.

'An' you, there!'—Mrs. Murphy nodded to Gretchen,—'my Patsy is goin' to cart a load of sod to-day. He'll just take that load of rubbish along wid him and empty it out on the dump.' This was a solution indeed! Gretchen danced her thanks, and the inner voice said:

'Now you see what comes of trying!'

Oh, what busy days followed! The hard-working father was delighted at the way his little girl took the change. He had expected to see her droop and fade, but instead she was as merry as a cricket, and sang about her work. She kept her secret about the back yard. That was to be a great surprise.

All the neighbors 'took to' Gretchen at once, at least all the grown-up. The children could not place her. Joyous and sunny-tempered as she was, she never played with them, or sat gossiping on the curb of the gutter. They were half afraid of her, and after a week gave up teasing,

finding it but poor sport to call names at a little girl who apparently grew stone-deaf at the first rude salute.

The older folk fairly yearned over Gretchen. She called forth all their hidden tenderness and respect. Mr. Schoonhoven on the top floor actually came down and joined the child in the yard one day, and the two had an excited confab in German. That was a sight. The old man openly expressed his hatred of children, and had never been seen speaking to one before. The onlookers could not hear what he said; but they saw Gretchen beam up at him, and in the end kiss him! The whole square heard of that before an hour had passed. Then another astonishing thing occurred. Mr. Schoonhoven dug up the back yard in the deepest and most approved way; and in the afternoon Patsy Murphy brought a load of fertilizer in his cart, and he and Gretchen, after Mr. Schoonhoven went, raked and hoed all the afternoon.

The sun grew hot with excitement, and day by day tarried later and later, fearing to lose some of the sport that was going on. Then Dicky Martin came to the fore. He was a cripple boy, and lay all day upon his bed, which his mother had drawn to the window. She, poor soul! took in washing; and the small room was often so full of steam that Dick could not see his mother, and that was why he loved to gaze up at the bit of sky above the tall roofs, and wonder how it would seem if he could see more stars than there was room for in the small open space. Since Gretchen came, Dicky's eyes had fallen from the sky, and his days had ceased being lonely. He was very shy; but, when he saw the spot below raked even and smooth, Dicky grew courageous. Raising himself on his elbow, he peeped over the window ledge, and piped out:

'Say, there, girl!' Gretchen looked up. 'I've got a geranium up here. A lady wot visits sick folks gave it to me. It's perishing in a pot. Won't you please plant it in your yard?'

This long speech made Dicky weak, and he fell back among the pillows.

But up the long flights of stairs ran Gretchen, and, to the surprise of Dicky and his mother, she darted into the room, exclaiming:

'Why, it's your yard, too, little boy. Of course, I'll plant your flower. And oh, you just wait!' Dicky gave her the sickly-looking geranium, and, with a merry nod, Gretchen was gone.

'Well,' said the sun, as it looked down at the plant after it was freed from the pot, 'do stretch your roots! Look less peaked. There is nothing to turn pale about down here. This is a regular land of promise!'

'Dicky Martin has given his friendly-visitor flower to the Dutch girl!' whispered Ida Bridget Murphy to a cluster of cronies. 'An' my mother says it would be rale fun if us all each gave one. What does yer say?'

Six hoodlums rose to the occasion, and ruined themselves financially at the tail of a travelling florist's cart. The offerings they sheepishly presented to Gretchen were an outrage upon Nature; but the good old mother understood, and took them to her warm breast and forgave them. One by