

The Transformation of Cousin Rebecca

(Hope Daring, in the 'Presbyterian
Banner.')

Outside the north wind shook the giant maples by the gate and drove the sleet against the windows of the farmhouse. Within the pleasant sitting-room the Lees, father, mother and four children, were gathered round the big centre table. Clinton, the oldest son, had just brought the mail from the country post-office a mile distant, and they were all reading.

Mrs. Lee glanced up from an open letter, a grave look upon her serene face.

'Please, all listen to this letter.'

Mr. Lee dropped his paper. Huldah, the nineteen-year-old daughter, laid down her own letter. The boys, ranging in age from seventeen to thirteen, looked up from papers and magazines. Mrs. Lee read:

'Smithfield, Jan. 3, 1897.

'Dear Cousin:—I have been sick again, and the doctor says I must leave the factory or die. I am coming to stay with you. Will get there on the afternoon train of the ninth. I will be well enough to do work to pay for my board. Yours,

'Rebecca Davis.'

There was a moment's silence. Consternation was written on each face. Clinton was the first to speak.

'The ninth. That will be the day after to-morrow. Will there be time enough, mother, to write and tell Cousin Rebecca we don't want her?'

'My son!'

'We do not,' Clinton said, doggedly, 'and a person who invites herself should not mind being told so.'

The other boys nodded approval, and Clinton went on:

It's just this way, mother. Cousin Rebecca is the crossiest, crankiest old maid in existence. She scolds when she is here as no one else on earth would dare to. Our home life will be spoiled by her coming. You know winter is our best time, for then we do not have to have hired men or a hired girl, and we have a good time together.'

'Cousin Rebecca is forty-five, two years older than I am,' Mrs. Lee began gently. 'She has never married, because she cared for her infirm and crippled father all through the years of her girlhood and early womanhood. After uncle's death there was little property left and Rebecca went into the factory. She has been there ten years. I am afraid any of us would have grown unlovely in those lonely, dreary years. Now she is in poor health, Charles,' turning to her husband, 'what do you say?'

Mr. Lee was silent a moment. Generous hospitality was the law of that household. Still Clinton was right; their merry, happy home life would be spoiled by the coming of Miss Davis.

'I do not see how we can refuse to let her come,' he said, slowly. 'I know it will be unpleasant, but—'

'There'll be no more whistling, singing or laughing in the house,' Ralph cried.

'No popping corn or making taffy,' Hubert exclaimed. 'Huldah will not be allowed to read to us, and we might as well all go in mourning.'

'We have not heard a word from you, Huldah,' Mr. Lee said to his daughter. 'What do you say?'

Huldah had picked up her work, a fleecy white shawl she was crocheting for her mother. Her blue eyes were fixed on the needle which went flashing in and out of the mass of snowy wool while she said:

'I wish Cousin Rebecca was like Alice Raymor's Aunt Alice.'

There was a chorus of approval from the boys.

'But she isn't,' Ralph said, 'any more than she is like the little queen mother.'

'Let us imagine she is like Mrs. Raymor, gentle, refined and affectionate. Let us imagine it so intensely that she will believe it herself.'

'What do you man?' the boys demanded.

'Better put up your work and tell us all about it,' said Mr. Lee.

Huldah shook her head. 'I can tell it better if I do not see you looking at me. so I'll keep my eyes on my work. When mother was talking I thought of what a sad life Cousin Rebecca's had been. I read the other day that there was latent good in every one, only in some cases it had not been wakened into life. I am sure there is in Cousin Rebecca's nature something which might have grown up into a sweet, gracious womanhood. You know, boys, how easy it has always been for us to imagine things. There is our trip through England, for an example. Let us imagine Cousin Rebecca is the dearest kind of woman and treat her accordingly.'

'What for?' practical Ralph demanded.

The pink on Huldah's cheeks deepened. 'Hoping she will come to be what we imagine. Mother, I am sure you see what I mean.'

'Yes, dearest, and it is a beautiful thought. Poor Rebecca's life is narrow, her thoughts are all of self, and it is our thoughts that shape our outer life.'

When Huldah spoke her voice trembled a little.

'Let us try it, boys. Let us look for the good that is hidden in Cousin Rebecca's nature—look and believe that we see it.'

'It is beautiful, and like you,' Clinton said, slowly, 'but, sister, it is impracticable. Cousin Rebecca will not show the good.'

'We must see it, even through the cloak of her unpleasantness.'

'Have you any definite plan of action in mind?'

It was the mother who asked the question. Her tone was non-committal, but Huldah dropped the fleecy wool and smiled trustingly over at her mother.

'I've left that for you all to help me with. We'll make her room cozy and bright. We will study her tastes. When she does anything—even a little thing—that we can praise, we will do it. We will assume that she is interested in our pet projects. I will coax her to let me do her hair. Why, I can almost see the improvement there will be in her appearance.'

'We'll admire her taste when she says, "Boys are the plague of the earth,"' Ralph said, teasingly. 'When she scolds we—'

His mother laid one hand upon his arm. 'I like Huldah's way best—seeing the good. Her plan makes me think of the words of St. Paul, "Be ye transformed by

the renewing of your minds." I believe we will try to transform Cousin Rebecca.'

There was a faint murmur of assent.

'Let us plan over a pan of apples,' Clinton said, rising. 'I will bring them from the cellar. By the way, I remember how well Cousin Rebecca liked apples.'

All details were settled before the family separated for the night. The boys all went upstairs, but Huldah lingered for a moment.

'How did you chance to think if it, dear?' Mrs. Lee asked.

'It was the boys, mother. I could not bear to think of their winter being spoiled and their hearts hardened. Life must hold only the best things for our boys. I am sure Cousin Rebecca will justify our new-born faith in her.'

Mrs. Lee took her daughter's round face between her hands, and bent to kiss the scarlet lips. 'You are right, sweetheart. It will all come out for the best.'

Two busy days followed. The interest of all waxed stronger as the time for the guest's arrival drew nearer.

It was Clinton who met the train. His horse was groomed until his black coat glistened in the fitful sunlight, and the boy was dressed in his best. He advanced, one hand lifting his hat, while the other was cordially extended.

'Welcome to Maple Farm, Cousin Rebecca! I am glad to see you. Give me your check, and I will see to sending your trunk out.'

Rebecca Davis gasped. This was not the welcome she had expected, not from Clinton. She was proud, and only grim necessity had compelled her to intrude herself, uninvited upon the Lees. Toleration was all that she felt she had a right to expect.

Surprise silenced her for a few minutes. They were seated in the carriage, and Rollo had started on a brisk trot, when she exclaimed:

'What does all that horse? I don't see why your father didn't come; he knows I don't trust a boy's driving.'

'I wanted to come, because I was in a hurry for you to see Rollo. He is mine, Cousin Rebecca. Father gave him to me for a birthday gift. I knew you would think it fine.'

'Eh! How muddy it is! Why didn't you drive the farm waggon instead of splashing this carriage all up?'

'We don't meet a guest like you with a farm waggon. There are plenty of boys at Maple Farm, and washing buggies is good exercise for them. They are ready to do anything for you.'

Clinton had the most of the conversation to himself during the ride. He was conscious of a little thrill of pride at the ability with which he played his part.

The gray shadows of evening were gathering when they drove up to the farmhouse door. Miss Davis was hurried into the brightly-lighted sitting room by Mrs. Lee and her daughter.

'This chair,' Huldah said, gayly. 'I remember you do not like a rocker. Now you've ten minutes to chat with mother while I attend to supper. Chicken, Cousin Rebecca, and baked as you like it.'

She fitted away. Miss Davis looked at her hostess, a dull red flushing her fallow cheek.

'I don't know what you thought of my