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1506

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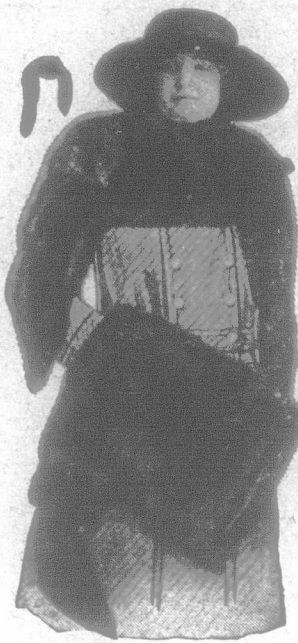
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ment. "I can do some things," she defended her position; "I can make tea; and I know how to make cake, if you would ever let me have the eggs and stuff."

Dorinda waved the flimsy boast aside. "Mrs. Loveday would not wish to live entirely upon cake and tea, to say nothing of the Squire. You don't know any more about the real work of a house than a cat does, so don't try to scratch up impossible schemes. You'd better set to work now, darning the stockings; that is one of your scarce accomplishments."

At two o'clock on a hot afternoon Mrs. Loveday sat in her big rocker beside the dining-room window, in that uncomfortable condition when one can neither fall asleep nor keep briskly awake. Her son was absent in town, and a drowsy atmosphere lay about the pleasant old house. Through it presently came a sound of lightly-falling feet in the path, and then a slim little person stood tapping at the screen door leading into the cool entry.

"Come right in, my dear," invited Mrs. Loveday, recognizing Aminta. "I can't get up, for I managed to sprain my ankle this morning going down cellar; I find I'm not as spry as a grasshopper nowadays. It isn't serious, though; sit down my dear, and take your hat off; you're all of a flush."

"Thank you," gasped Aminta, who was, indeed, red with embarrassment. "I—I'm sorry your ankle is hurt, Mrs. Loveday, but maybe you'll need some one now—I heard Hannah was gone, and I thought—maybe—you'd take me to help with the work for a while."

"Why, for the land-sakes!" Mrs. Loveday sent a sharp glance at Aminta, but instantly toned it down. "What's the trouble, my child—tell me," she urged kindly. "There must be something unusual afoot to send you out looking for housework."

"It's only—I want to help Dorinda some way," fluttered Aminta; "and it seems I can't do anything else. I could work for you to pay the interest we owe Squire Loveday on the mortgage note."

"Why, bless you, child," Mrs. Loveday looked amused, "Evan isn't worrying a smidge about that interest; there's no need of your fretting about it, or working to pay for it."

"But, indeed, you don't know how much I want to," pleaded Aminta. "Dorinda is forever telling me of all the trouble I've made by my failures; but I'm not lazy, and I want to prove it some way."

"Did Dorinda suggest your coming to work for me?"

"Oh, no, indeed; when I spoke of it she laughed at me, and said that such a good housekeeper as you wouldn't want me. She wouldn't have let me come at all, but I—I just took and came away when she was out, and left a note to tell her what I had done. She nags me so I don't have any comfort. Dear Mrs. Loveday, let me stay—please do; now, how could you get along with your sprained ankle and no help?"

"I'm afraid you're not very used to housework," Mrs. Loveday demurred, in secret dismay, recalling Aminta's reputation in domestic affairs.

"Dorinda doesn't think I'm any account," confessed Aminta, "but, indeed, I can do some things; I could do more if she would let me undertake them, but she thinks I only mess them up. I can dust and darn, and I can make tea—"

"Tea!" Mrs. Loveday caught hopefully at the word. "It's the thing I want most, and this very minute. Evan tried to make me some toast and tea for dinner—dear boy, he boiled the tea till it tasted like old shoes, and the toast was charred to a cinder. If you think you could make me a cup—"

"Oh, yes, indeed I can." Aminta was all of a sparkle as she sprang up, laid off her hat and untied the bundle she had brought. "See, I have a house gown along," she chirped, shaking out a pretty pink gingham dress, "for I was determined to stay if I could possibly get you to let me. Now I'll run out and light the alcohol stove and put on fresh water, and you see if I don't get you a cup of tea that'll taste like ambrosia."

Squire Evan was astonished, upon his return home, to find a little pink-clad person flying about with a dust-rag and chatting cheerfully to his mother, who, with a white-draped stand beside her, was just finishing her second cup of tea.

"She certainly can make tea," the old lady told Evan, explaining the situation while Aminta was whisking the tray of dishes to the kitchen. "A better cup than that I never tasted; and the toast was excellent. I don't suppose she could do a great deal at the work, but she picks up and dusts neatly, and she's going to do the darning, if she stays; she is so anxious to stay—"

"Let her stay a while, mother," counseled Evan. "She'll be company for you in the times I'm away, and she can wait on you."

A week later another consultation was

held. Mrs. Loveday was inclined to keep Aminta until Hannah's return. "It's very hard to get satisfactory help," she averred, "and any way, Minda's such a good little thing to coddle a body up, and so handy at making tea. I'd be willing to have her stay, if you could put up with the meals."

"Why, sure," agreed Evan heartily; "she suits me all right. Her coffee is first rate, and her flapjacks, too."

"She's a fine darning and sewer," admitted Mrs. Loveday. "She isn't over strong, and she's never learned to make light bread—"

"But her cookies are slap-up," finished Evan; "beat any I ever tasted, except yours, Mammy. Let's keep her; we can buy bread of Mrs. Benbow, and I'll help a bit with the work."

"Well," agreed Mrs. Loveday, "we will; she cheers a body up, somehow; I know I'd miss her."

When the full import of Aminta's mutinous act forced its way to Miss Dorinda Vine's brain, she set her lips in a severe line, which, however, took a slight curve of grim amusement. "If Mrs. Loveday lets her stay at all, I give Minda about two days to get things into a beautiful mess and come home in disgrace."

Several days passed on, however, and Miss Vine's prediction was not verified; and then one morning Squire Evan came over to explain matters. "We should not for a minute wish Aminta to work out that trifling bit of interest," he assured Dorinda, "but she is so anxious to stay a while, and mother finds it a convenience, since she is laid up, so if you can spare her a week or so—"

"Oh, spare her! You must know, Squire, I could manage the work of this house with one hand." Dorinda's tone held more tartness than she was aware. "Minda is very little use about the house, except to darn and mess with fancy work. I don't see how your mother puts up with her slipshod ways at all."

"Why, you see, mother likes her ways," smiled Squire Evan. "She is so willing and so good-tempered; and she's learning lots of kinks about cooking; she made an apple cobbler yesterday that was simply a wonder—two-story, Miss Dorinda, and lots of the cutest little frills on it!"

Miss Vine hooked her screen door with a sharp snap after the Squire's departure. "Likes her ways!" she recalled Evan's words with scorn. "I suppose she's sugary enough over there, but if Madam Loveday can be fooled by a babyish pretense of work and some giddy hopping around with a duster, she's an old goose—that's all."

It appeared that Mrs. Loveday was well content with Minda's ministrations, for, as several weeks went on and Hannah was detained by the illness of her mother, the younger Miss Vine remained on at the Squire's, until one unhappy morning near the close of summer, when Miss Dorinda descended upon Orchard Hill with disquieting news of a prospective school for Aminta. It was in an adjoining county, some miles away, she explained, and it would be necessary for Aminta to make her application without delay, and to that end, to journey at once to Pin Oak township, the home of the potent committee.

"But—but—I'd rather stay here and do housework, than try to teach any more schools," faltered Aminta, almost upsetting her pan of yellow peaches in her dismay.

"It isn't a matter of choice," Miss Dorinda reminded her, with determination. "You were educated—at great expense to me—for a teacher, and I do not propose to have it all go for nothing. You owe it to me, if not to yourself, to make good use of the money that was spent on your education, and you must make up your mind to it."

The cheery light faded from the small face bent above the yellow fruit, and a tear splashed upon the rim of the pan. Mrs. Loveday's kind heart moved her to intercede: "I hardly see how I can spare your sister, Dorinda; Hannah's mother is having a regular siege of low fever, so Hannah can't leave her, and my ankle is still weak—"

"I thought of that, Mrs. Loveday," Dorinda assured her, promptly. "I should not think of leaving you without help, and I have arranged things at home so that I can come, myself, and stay with you. Lucinda Greene is going to look after my house, as she lives so close to me. And I don't think you need the assurance that I can attend to your com-