

## The Rag Doll

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Mrs. Nestor Noel

**P**ERHAPS I ought to have known better than to intrude myself on Mrs. Everett on thrashing day. But I was new to the country, and I have seen thrashers, so I may, perhaps, be excused. I have learnt wisdom now, as the years have gone by, and never, never should I dream of paying a stray visit to a farm at thrashing time.

Mrs. Everett was a very busy woman at all times. I have known her now for seven years, and I have visited her frequently, yet never once have I found her idle.

In the mornings, when I called, she was either doing the laundry, milking the cows, straining the milk, making butter, feeding the pigs or the chickens, or preparing the noonday meal.

In the afternoons, she was generally ironing or making bread. In the evenings she sat beside a huge basket doing the family mending.

When I first knew Mrs. Everett she had only one child—a lovely, loving girl of about six years of age. The little girl—her name was Elsie—was always trim and tidy, never intruding or in the way.

I wondered how it was that I never saw the mother busy, fussing round her darling. I know I should have been, had I been lucky enough to possess such a child! But no! Mrs. Everett seemed to think that as long as she kept her little girl in clean pinafores and gave her plenty to eat, there her duty ended. She was, of all the people whom I have ever known, the most undemonstrative.

In those days I was a teacher, and boarded not very far from her farm. My pupil, Elsie, was really the brightest girl for her age whom I have ever met. Yet, old-fashioned as she was and exceptionally clever, she was not above playing many baby games. In these I encouraged her; for it seems a pity to me when the little ones grow up too quickly. But her mother thought it waste of money to spend it on toys, and so the only thing which Elsie possessed of her own was a rag doll. And how she did worship that doll! How she ended it, made clothes for it, dressed and undressed it. Why, that doll, Rose, went through every childish complaint of which its little mother, Elsie, knew the name. It suffered from teething, from colds and from coughs. It had the chicken-pox, the measles and the mumps; and through them all, Elsie, with untiring zeal, nursed it as only a mother can. Ah! there was more of motherhood in that little six-year-old than there is in many a woman who has borne children! I used to watch Elsie as she sat by her old rag doll and "pretended" to feel its pulse and to take its temperature! And when she spoke to me in a subdued, gentle voice, I knew that rag dollie was passing through one of her bad spells. I never laughed at Elsie's childish games of "pretence." Poor little mite! What else could she do? She had no brothers nor sisters, no companions of her own age; and her mother was always too busy to pay any attention to her. Did Mrs. Everett really love her child, I often asked myself? If so, she had a strange way of showing it.

"Miss Rhodes," said Elsie one day to me, when I had been unusually busy. "Can't you come and see us soon? You haven't been for a month. . . and Rose has a new dress. I made it all myself. Do come."

I kissed the eager little face. "All right, dearie," I answered. "I'll call one day next week."

I was from the city, and totally ignorant of country ways. Of course, I knew, from reading, that grain is sown in the spring, and reaped in the autumn; but I did not know anything much more about it than that. I could scarcely tell a mower from a plow, and as for that funny looking, shining thing they called a disc, I had never seen one before in my life! Many of my little pupils could have given me excellent lessons in farming! And so it was that, all unconscious of the tumult of work reigning in Mrs. Everett's house, I tidied myself up a bit and set out to pay my promised visit to my

pupil, Elsie. I chose a Saturday for my visit, as I had not to teach that day. It was a fine morning. The sun was shining brightly in the sky, and a gentle breeze was blowing over the fields, and I enjoyed my walk.

As I approached the farm, there seemed to be something unusual taking place there. What it was I could not imagine. There were wagons going backwards and forwards, from some part of the field to the house. As I came nearer, I saw a great object belching smoke from a chimney, and something near it seemed to be pouring out a stream of dust on to what looked, to my inexperienced eye, like a haystack. To me it was passing strange, and the noise it made was horrible! It reminded me of factories I had seen from train windows. Once, I paused and thought of retreating from this chaos of machinery and men; but Elsie had espied me and there was no escape.

"We've got the thrashers," she told me; but the words conveyed nothing to my mind.

I entered the kitchen, and there I paused again in wonder. Long benches lined the walls, in place of the wooden chairs I had expected; the tables were laid out as if for a wedding; there were steaming, hot biscuits, dainty pies and chocolate cakes; there were berries of various kinds and rich, dairy butter in tiny plates stood about the table in abundance.

"O excuse me talking to you, Miss Rhodes," said Mrs. Everett. "I'm busy to-day."

No need to tell me that. There was coffee boiling on the stove, there were nearly half a dozen other kettles, and Mrs. Everett, lifting first one lid and then another, stirred and stirred, and stirred.

"Can I do anything?" I asked in that helpless way which so soon answers its own question.

She was busy at the oven now; but she paused for a moment to look me up and down. Was it a look of scorn she cast on my immaculate waist and my tailor-made suit, especially donned to pay her this visit?

"I don't think you can do anything to help me," she answered in her iciest tones. "Elsie, take Miss Rhodes to the sitting-room."

"O no, thanks, Mrs. Everett," I exclaimed. "I'd rather stay here. As I see you're busy, I'll make my visit a short one."

I should have liked to have left at once; but I thought it more polite to remain at least half an hour, as I had come. But Mrs. Everett was not thinking of politeness. She would have preferred that I leave at once. I did not know that. I could not guess how very much I was in the way.

Elsie came to my side silently and placed the rag doll in my arms. She had dressed it herself in some old pieces of blue serge, and I admired her handiwork, just as much as she expected I should. And so the minutes flew by, and we two talked on in whispers. After all, was it not the child I had come to see more than the mother? But the sight of us two sitting there, doing absolutely nothing, seemed to work on Mrs. Everett's nerves. She could not imagine how anyone could sit, with folded hands at any time, least of all now.

There was anger in her voice as she turned to Elsie: "You'd better help me now," she ordered.

I took the hint and rose to go, wondering what use such a child could be. Mrs. Everett was again stirring over the



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