

* * The Story Page * *

Grandmother's Day.

BY ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL.

"I shan't love her."

"Poppet!"

The smooth brown head over the embroidery frame lifted in stern reproof,—Barbara could be very stern. The tousled yellow head wagged stubbornly.

"Well, I shan't."

"Poppet Dolliver,—your own grandmother!"

"No," rejoined Poppet calmly, "she can't be my real fleshy grandmother—"

"Oh, Poppet!"

"Well, my bloody one, then,—'cause I've never seen her. You wouldn't be lib'le never to've seen your real flesh-an'-bloody grandmother, would you? Huh? She's only a step-one,—I'm going to ask father to-night if she isn't. You don't have to love step-grandmothers, so I shan't. I've made up my mind."

"Poor grandmother!" Murray laughed. He was whittling on the doorstep and making things mussy. One of the long white slivers aimed deftly at the yellow head hit it and lodged in the thick tangle.

"Yes, 'poor grandmother,' indeed," echoed the older sister, over her embroidery. "I ought to be here to take her part. It's a pity college can't postpone its opening a couple of weeks. Between you both, grandma has a hard hoe to hoe—"

Poppet giggled enjoyingly. "Hoe to row—hoe to row!" she mimicked. Poppet was still at the age when wit is a mere matter of tongue-slipping. Barbara ignored the taunt. "But it seems funny, doesn't it?" she went on musingly. "I can't understand it."

"I can't either!" said Murray.

"Why, we aren't all of us crazy to have grandmother come, I mean. I thought grandchildren always were. It doesn't seem natural."

"Well, if she'll wear lavender bows on her cap and say 'yes, dearie,' to every single thing you want to do, like Jessie Trent's grandmother, and call out 'You poor little dear, you needn't practice another minute!' then I'll love her," Poppet said, "but she won't."

"How do you know she won't, you ridiculous child?" But the child's face was quite serious now. She got up and struck a dramatic little attitude, facing the other two.

"You want to know, do you? Well, once I asked father and he said he never had a birthday when he was little. That's why she won't. He never hung his stocking up,—that's why. If she was that kind of a mother, that's the kind of a grandmother she'll be! I feel it in my ribs,—bones, I mean. I wish I was going to college." Suddenly the yellow head descended into the field of embroidered lilies, rampant, and Poppet was crying.

"I want a mother—I don't want a grand!" she sobbed. "I wish my mother hadn't died!"

Poor little Poppet, the wound was a fresh one. Enos Dolliver's three children had been motherless but four short months. Things in the pretty home had gone from bad to worse without the gentle care that had arranged and steadied them, until, disheartened and desperate, the bereaved man had written his old mother to come to his assistance. He had hesitated to do it, for well he knew how tenaciously her heartstrings clung to her own home in the fair little New England town. It was so different here in this big, bustling town, out in the swirl and hurry of things,—how would she bear the change? But who else could come? What else was there to do? So he had written and grandmother was coming. If she had shrunk from it inwardly, she had given no outward sign.—Enos Dolliver's mother came of stern old New England stock, and duty was duty. No drops of hesitation or selfishness sullied the blood that flowed in her veins. "I will come as soon as I can get the house set to rights," she had written, as her son had known she would. But the contrast between "setting to rights" that little home, spotless already and speckless, and righting this big, disordered house appalled him.

"Poor mother!" Enos sighed.

Grandmother came in less than a week after Barbara went to college. In less than an hour after her arrival she had begun the "righting" process. Poppet stole away to the stable to find Murray and make her first report.

"Gracious, Murray Dolliver, she's sweeping!"

"You don't say so, Pop! why, she's only been here forty-nine—fifty—fifty-seven minutes!" Murray had out his silver watch regarding it closely. "She hasn't been here an hour!"

"Well, she's sweeping. She's changed her dress an' got on a sunbonnet,—I think it's a sunbonnet—and she's got through the parlor a'ready! I waited till she'd begun on the library. Well, why don't you say something?"

"Gracious!" said Murray. Poppet looked scornful.

"I said that. Say something 'riginal, why don't you? Murray Dolliver, I've just remembered you haven't been in to see her! Your own grandmother—father says she isn't a 'step.' Aren't you ashamed!"

"Yes," muttered Murray, "but I'd rather be ashamed twice, than go in there. Pop, I say, what will she do to a fellow? I want to be prepared."

"Oh, you needn't worry—she won't hug you. She isn't the hugging kind. Jessie Trent's grandmother is, but she isn't. I s'pose you can stand a little mite of a nippy kiss, can't you? "You needn't nip."

"Didn't she hug you,—hary?"

"Nary. Oh, Murray,"—Poppet's voice broke suddenly—"O, then she isn't a grandmother—she isn't! she isn't! You needn't tell me. She's a—nimpostor!"

Enos Dolliver had had a twin sister who had died before she was out of tight braids and neat little print aprons. He had always cherished with peculiar tenderness the dim memory of the well-behaved, demure little girl, and when his second little daughter came to him, he had given her his twin sister's name. It had not fitted very well. The laughing, wilful little thing had been "Poppet" as far back as she could remember. Mary Ellen was only her "naughty name."

Grandmother had brought up one little Mary Ellen to the borderland of her teens. Now duty had called her to bring up another, and she went to the work with resolute courage. It was fortunate she knew just how. In her simple old code of child upbringing there had been no changes. There were no "modern improvements" in grandmother's code-book.

"Enos," grandmother called one day, as Enos Dolliver was starting away for his day's work in the city. "Enos I wish you'd wait a minute. There's something I want to say to you."

"Yes, mother."

"Well, it's this. Mary Ellen has rebelled. I thought you'd ought to know."

Enos Dolliver's grave face took on bewilderment. Mary Ellen,—his mind went back to the small, prim sister of his childhood, and the old faint picture of her repainted itself in its quiet colors on his mind. But "rebelled,"—Mary Ellen!

No, no, Mary Ellen had never rebelled!

"I don't understand, mother," he began. He looked at the plain old face a little anxiously, as if he feared he might read tokens of mental weakening there. Then in a flash he remembered the other Mary Ellen.

"Oh, Poppet!" he said, and he smiled. It was not so hard to reconcile rebellion with Poppet.

"Mary Ellen," corrected grandmother, "you can call her that heathen name if you want to, I suppose, but I'm not going to. I called her Mary Ellen to-day and that's when she rebelled. She would not answer."

"Perhaps she did not realize—she has never been called—"

"She knew well enough I was talking to her. Enos, if I am to bring that child up, I've got to be minded. I thought it better be understood in the beginning. She's a nice, bright child, but she needs bringing up. What I want to know is, am I to have my way or is she to have hers? That's all."

The calm appeal of grandmother's steady old voice made a crisis of the moment. Enos Dolliver realized it with sudden dismay. He had been the boy. Enos, freckled and timid and unsatisfied. He knew what it meant to be "brought up," poor little Poppet! But the occasion demanded decision, one way or the other, and how could he make it any other way but grandmother's way? Had he not called her away from her own beloved, peaceful little home? His eyes sought the strong, lined old face and suddenly it was the dear face of his mother, and he was her son.

"You shall have your way, mother," he said gently, "but drive the little colt with a loose rein,—she isn't broken to harness." Then he raised his voice and called over little grandmother's head:

"Poppet!"

"Enos," grandmother chided. Then grandmother called:

"Mary Ellen!"

Poppet came staidly down the hall, her bright eyes on her father, ignoring grandmother.

"Yes, papa. You called me, didn't you?"

"Grandmother called, too, Pop—er—I should say—"

"You should say Poppet, if you mean me," the child rejoined calmly. "That's me. Nothing else is. What do you want o' Poppet, papa?"

He put out his hand and drew her little golden head against his side. Infinite sadness was in the man's eyes for he remembered the little one's mother who was dead. He had pitied himself so much. Now he pitied Poppet.

"Little girl," he began unsteadily, "what is this I hear about your not minding grandmother? That is not right—oh, no, that is not right!" He blundered on like any man, while the little figure under his arm stiffened slowly. "Listen to me, Pop—Mary Ellen. You must remember grandmother is at the head of the house now, and you are to do exactly as she says." He tried to end lightly. "We must all of us mind grandmother now!" he said. "You will remember, Pop—Poppet?" for the child's

clear eyes on his compelled him. Poppet had edged away and stood facing him.

"Oh, yes, I'll remember, papa. If you say I must, I'll mind her," and the small figure wheeled and tramped away down the hall. Part way, it stopped. "Did you call Mary Ellen, grandmother, 'cause here she is," Poppet said, coldly. And in spite of herself grandmother smiled. The tragedy at eight years was comedy to seventy."

"Come here, you funny little piece," grandmother answered, gently enough. "No, I didn't call you then, but I will now. Come here, Mary Ellen. There, that is right. You're too sensible to wait to be called foolish pet names. My little Mary Ellen was called Mary Ellen."

"An' she died. It'll kill me, too," thought Poppet drearily.

"And she had nice smooth hair," went on grandmother, the gentleness in her tone unconsciously oozing into mild severity. "My little Mary Ellen combed her hair."

Poppet's hands flew up to the mop of curls on her crown.

"Gracious, did you think mine hadn't been combed to-day? You can't make it smooth if you comb it a week a-runnin'; no, sir! Seems as if the Lord must have had it rolled up in curl papers a thousand years before I came down."

"We must make it smooth. I shall wet it and braid it nice and tight," grandmother said, decisively. "And another thing, Mary Ellen, don't you know little girls ought not to wear their best dresses every day? I am surprised at your father for allowing it."

Poppet gazed down at her dainty, frilled little dress.

"This isn't more'n my fourth-best one," she said, with slow scorn.

"Mercy, child, with all those furbelows on it! Then it's got to be protected. In my day, children took care of their dresses. My little Mary Ellen wore nice, neat tiers, and I shall go right to work and make you some. I'm thankful I brought that new print. I was going to line a quilt with it, but the quilt can wait better than you can." And grandmother bustled away after the roll of print as if the delay of an instant were not to be thought of.

That was the beginning. For three slow, tortuous months grandmother "brought up" little Mary Ellen II, with the calm consciousness of doing her duty. No one interfered. If Murray came to miss his rollicking, joyous little chum,—if Enos Dolliver missed the child's noisy glee and the clatter of her dancing little feet,—still no one interfered. It was grandmother's day.

The child is getting to remind me of your little sister, Enos," grandmother said placidly. "It shows what the right kind of bringing up can do. Mary Ellen is a teachable, enough child,—you gave me the idea that she was a wild little colt."

"I thought she was," Poppet's father said bewilderingly. In his sad preoccupation and mourning for his dead wife, he had closeted himself with his own sorrow. As long as the wheels of the little domestic circle turned quietly and smoothly, he had been satisfied. That they were grinding the tender heart of a little child he did not notice.

Grandmother made the little print aprons and Poppet wore them. She plaited the child's soft, rebellious yellow hair into tight braids that hung dejectedly down over the aprons and scarcely wagged with the little figure's slow motions. She taught Poppet to knit,—to darn,—to hem, and all in the short space of the three tortuous months, as if there were need of hurry. Three strips of gay patchwork, pathetically red-dotted here and there, bore witness to the terrible "patchwork times" Poppet had lived through.

And then came the waking up. Grandmother met Enos Dolliver at the door one night.

"Enos, oh, Enos, she's gone!" quavered the excited old voice.

"Mother, what are you talking about? Quick!"

"Mary Ellen—she's gone."

"Mary El—Poppet! Gone?"

"Yes, oh, yes. We can't find her anywhere—not since noon. Murray is hunting now. He hasn't eaten a bit of dinner." Grandmother did not say that she had not either. "He's looked everywhere, and, oh, Enos, so have I! She had on a new tier and I'd just braided her hair, it was getting so nice and smooth!" sobbed the old voice in sudden fresh woe. "She was working on her third strip o' quilt. I told her she could finish it to-day. 'Mary Ellen,' I says, 'if you're good and smart you can get it all done,' and she says, 'Yes, grandmother,' as nice as a little lady. And I haven't seen her since."

If there was humor in the situation, nobody perceived it. In a frenzy the whole family hunted on. The father's heart was filled with terror, of what, he scarcely knew, but something desperate that stood for the culmination of the child's misery. For now he understood. Poor little tortured Poppet! Poor grandmother! Blind, selfish father! It had all been a tragedy of errors.

"Do you think she has been—has been kidnapped?" whispered grandmother, following in the