

BOYS AND GIRLS

The Alice Barber Scholarship (Mabel Nelson Thurston, in 'Wellspring.')

The principal of Bradford Academy looked steadily at her niece. The niece, her forehead pressed against the window pane, stared with unseeing eyes down the road. The silence deepened and deepened. The girl at the window could bear it no longer. At last she turned, desperately:

'I—I can't, Aunt Mary! Oh, don't you see? It's telling tales, and I can't.'

The principal sighed a little. Of course she saw—had not her life for thirty years been given to understanding girls? Then she set herself again to patient explanation.

'I am not asking you to tell tales, Grace. You know that there is nothing that I place above honor. But this is different—I am trying to learn why the girls avoid Lenora Rice now, when they all liked her at first. Girls do not change so for a whim. Unless I know, I cannot help her, and I must help her. I cannot let any one of my girls miss the road to highest womanhood if any care of mine can show her the way. And Lenora, you know, has no mother.'

The plea of the last words did not escape the girl. Her delicate brows drew together, and the eyes beneath them were full of trouble. She knew that her aunt was right, but the old tradition of honor, which clung so fiercely to the letter that sometimes the fine spirit of it was missed entirely, yet held her fast.

'Lenora does even better class work than she did at first.' The principal spoke slowly—she was feeling her way.

The girl's eyes brightened. 'Oh, yes,' she cried, eagerly; 'she's the best student of us all—everybody acknowledges that.'

Miss Bradfield's face cleared; the thing that she had dreaded could be banished from her thought, entirely. Little Grace would never have answered that way if there had been any dishonesty in question. She went on, with slow thoughtfulness.

'If my girls were not such dear, fine-spirited girls, I should have been anxious for Lenora's happiness here. Her uncle and aunt are very plain people. They have been good to her as they understood the word. She has been as well cared for as their own children so far as food and clothing were concerned, but they could not conceal their anxiety to have her earn her own living. They had no sympathy with her longing for an education—they wanted her to go into a store. We cannot blame them; there were six children to provide for; but it would have been hard for Lenora if she had not won the scholarship here. As it is, she is shut away from so much that most girls have—all of the happiness of a home where she could invite her friends, and all sympathy with any success that she may win. But I was sure that all this would make the girls kinder to her.'

The girl at the window spoke at last. 'O Aunt Mary! the girls have been nice—they were ready to do anything. We knew a little—just that she was an orphan and that her uncle's people were,—well, not like our people, you know. And we all were eager to make up to her anything that we could. At first it was all right. She was quiet and shy, but that was no-

thing. And then—I don't know just when it commenced—she began to change. She—I can't tell you how; it wasn't really in words, you know,—it was in impressions—tried to make us think things were different from what they were. It sounded as if her uncle was the head of some big firm, and she began to avoid some of us, and to try to go with the richest girls, and to—to—put on airs, you know. I'm afraid I'm not making it clear, Aunt Mary. It isn't anything that you can fasten down into words. But the girls all felt it, and that is what makes the difference.'

The principal's fine face was tender with pity.

'Poor child!' she said. 'She is trying so hard to grasp the best. She doesn't understand, yet, that she is touching only the husks of it. We must be gentle with her, Grace. Don't let the girls turn away from her.'

Grace's gray eyes met her aunt's, earnestly.

'Aunt Mary,' she cried, 'we wouldn't care if her uncle were a peddler; we would love her for herself and nothing else in the world! But when she tries to cover up things and pretends that they are different; when she tries to make us care, not for her, but for things that never were, it isn't true, Aunt Mary!'

Her aunt smiled down to her. She was thinking how quick the sense of justice was in all young creatures, and how slow that of mercy.

'We must be patient,' dear,' she repeated. 'It isn't true, I know, but none the less she may be seeking for truth. I believe that she is, and we dare not fail her.'

Five minutes later, Grace closed the door and ran light-heartedly down the corridor. There was never a day that some girl did not do that; sometimes there were half a dozen in one afternoon, and no one of them, through all the years, had gone away uncomforted. But sometimes the principal's light burned late, and her eyes looked tired in the morning. This time it was a full hour, and the dusk had gathered thickly in the room, before she moved; then at last she rose and lighted the gas.

The next morning, a girl knocked hesitatingly at the principal's door. She had a dark, serious face, and the nervous manner of one not yet sure of herself. Her name was Lenora Rice. She stammered when the principal herself opened the door.

'You—you sent for me,' she said. She was angry at herself for coloring, before the principal, too, whom she admired above all women that she had ever seen. But Miss Bradfield apparently did not notice her confusion.

'Good morning, Miss Rice,' she said, cordially. 'It was good of you to come so early. I sent for you to ask if you could do an errand for me. I have a note that I want to send to a friend in Middleton, and I prefer to send it by hand. How do your lessons come to-day? Can you miss your classes without losing anything that you could not make up?'

The girl flushed again, but this time it was from pleasure.

'I'd love to go!' she cried. 'I shouldn't

miss anything. It is all written work, and I have it done for the day.'

'That is just right, then,' the principal replied. 'Do you think you can catch the ten o'clock train? I will see that you are excused from your classes. You will reach Middleton in half an hour, and the station agent there will direct you to Mr. Eli Barber's. It is very easy to find; you couldn't miss the way. Then all you have to do is to give Mr. Barber this note. You would better stay to dinner; they will want you to, and the train does not return until two o'clock. Mr. and Mrs. Barber are very plain people, but I think that you will like them, and I know that the little visit will give them untold pleasure. I count them among the dearest friends I have. Now, have I told you everything, I wonder—or is there anything I've forgotten?' The principal waited, smiling down at her, but the girl hesitated, with a return of her old awkwardness.

'If you are sure my staying to dinner wouldn't bother them,'—she said. 'I could wait till I got back, easily. I shouldn't mind it at all.'

'But I should mind,' the principal replied, laughing. 'That is no way to treat yourself. Besides, it would be depriving my friends of a great pleasure. So it is settled, then? Here is the note, and you will bring me an answer. I am very much obliged to you, Miss Rice.'

An hour later, Lenora Rice stood on the platform at Middleton staring, bewildered, down the sunny country road. 'The first house on the right,' the station agent had told her, but she was sure that there must be some mistake. The first house was a tiny, square, yellow farmhouse—as bare and plain as any she had ever seen. Miss Bradfield had spoken of her friends as plain people, but they couldn't live in a little shanty like that! However, she could go there and inquire. She started slowly down the road. The yellow house did not improve upon approach; it was neat, indeed, but absolutely ugly; to the girl, it seemed as if its ugliness fell like a blight upon the little trim flower bed, full of May-time blossoms, and the nodding lilacs at the gate. There was a small vegetable garden at one side, and an old man was working them. He had a wooden leg, and was weeding slowly and painfully from a chair that he hitched along the row. But the girl was conscious of no pity—only a sense of resentment. She stopped at the fence and called across, reluctantly, 'Can you tell me where Mr. Eli Barber lives?'

The old man straightened himself with difficulty, and raised his hot, moist face:

'Reckon I can,' he replied. 'You jest walk right in that gate and come round to the potato patch. You'll excuse my not getting up. It's one of the days when the rheumatiz has a grip on me, and I don't move no more than I have to.'

Lenora walked slowly down the path and across the grass. The old man waited, mopping his face and watching her with a broadening smile.

'Don't need any of them second-sight people to tell where you hail from,' he said, his shrewd gray eyes full of pleasure. 'I'll warrant now you are one of Miss Bradfield's young ladies, ain't ye? I