

THE INFANT TENDERNESS

By ELOISE ROBINSON



"Not just spiritual gifts, you know," I told her. "I've been taken in that way before. I've no use for spiritual gifts. It's the real things I want, like clothes and—and—lovers."

MY father has just left the room, closing the door firmly behind him. His parting words to me were these:

"Barbara, I have reared three daughters into fine, self-respecting women who are a comfort and pleasure to your mother and to me. But it seems as though you are constantly making trouble for us all. Why is it, my child? Why is it?"

I did not answer. What was the use?

I cannot understand my father's attitude towards life. And if he knew all—but he is still ignorant of the fact that I have just finished cutting into small pieces a dress belonging to my sister Elizabeth that cost \$59.50, reduced from \$60.00. When this is discovered—words are too feeble to describe what will happen. But I am not sorry I did it. It may cause me suffering, but I am willing to sacrifice myself because, after all is over, it will teach Elizabeth that she cannot treat me like a child any longer.

I realize that I am now passing through the darkest hour of my existence. If I were a poet, I should enrich the world by pouring out sad and beautiful thoughts about death. Instead I shall write down a true and ferocious account of all the events that have brought me here, so that when I am gone my family may weep bitter tears to think how they have misjudged me. I hope my ghost will be able to see them.

I am an unbeliever. Before I became an unbeliever I believed in Thought Control, and in my childhood I was a Presbyterian. To explain why I am an unbeliever I shall have to tell how I became a believer in Thought Control. Sarah Delle Sherwin and I were walking home from school. I might say that we were not walking of our own free will. A week or so before this a Polish sufferer had been in the city. She was one of these fashionable sufferers who speak at teas. Not being there, I do not know all that she said, but I have been one of the chief victims of her remarks ever since, for the principal, and I might say the only, thought that Mother gathered from her talk was that, considering the fact that many millions of people in Poland were going around without anything but knitted mufflers some kind people had sent them, it was absolutely wicked for pampered children of America to drive in limousines. According to Mother she did not say anything against women riding, although your limbs get just as tired when you are sixteen as when you are forty or fifty. But ever since then, rain or shine, Sarah Delle and I have been expected to walk to school. Our mothers did not know that this foolish cruelty of theirs was forcing us to use the obnoxious street car, where we ran the risk of all kinds of catching diseases. The only reason we were not riding that day was because neither of us had a nickel.

"Good Grief!" Sarah Delle exclaimed, with an air of intense disgust. "Why is it that nothing exciting ever happens?"

I shook my head. It was a question which I had never been able to solve myself.

"I wish," Sarah Delle went on, "that we could go back to the Dark Ages. Then, instead of eking out a meagre existence as we do now, we should ride around on palfreys, and marvelous knights would fight for our sakes and hew and hack one another. Life would be worth living."

"I would be satisfied if only I had a few of the clothes I want and was allowed to go to dances," I replied. Sarah Delle's ideas are interesting but sometimes impractical.

This was the general trend of our conversation as we passed the new Thought Control Temple. I remember perfectly, because we decided to go in from sheer ennui. Little did I think, as I set my foot on the step, that I should come out of that building a changed woman.

There was a lecture going on by a woman whom the bulletin board called Lilla de Villbiss. The name fitted her so well that I doubt whether it was her own. She was the most flowing person I have ever seen. She had on a peacock and gold brocaded robe without any belt, and her voice was like a caramel sundae—thick and sweet. I must confess it took me a good while to catch the drift of her remarks. She seemed to have some peculiar expressions that got into the way of what she was trying to say, and every once in a while she would interrupt herself to clasp her hands on her chest-bone, and close her eyes and stand as though in great agony. After awhile this became monotonous.

"For Pete's sake, Barbie," Sarah Delle whispered, "let's go."

I was about to agree with her when my ear caught something Miss de Villbiss was saying and I poked Sarah Delle to keep quiet.

"And you who have starved souls! Stunted and dwarfed with cramped, narrow prisons for your ardent spirits! What is the message of the Infant Tenderness to you? Listen!"

SHE made a long pause, holding up one lily-white hand. I listened, because if ever there was a person with a stunted and dwarfed life and an ardent spirit confined in a narrow and cramped prison, it was I.

"Listen!" she repeated. "Whatsoever you desire is yours! Whatsoever you desire! 'Ask and ye shall receive,' is it not said? Lay hold upon the promises of the Infant Tenderness now, claim them for your own." And she went on diluting this thought at great length. I got the impression that what she meant to say was this: If you wanted anything, no matter how impossible it seemed, all you had to do was to go into a kind of trench and ask for it. But as none of our family had ever had the habit of going into trenches, I decided to wait until the meeting was over and find out more about the thing. If there was anything in the idea you may just believe I wanted to take advantage of it.

Sarah Delle was skeptical, but I dragged her up with me. "Miss de Villbiss," I said, "is that the honest truth, 'cross your heart and hope to die,' what you were saying about getting anything you want free, just by asking for it?"

Miss de Villbiss turned her large clear eye on us. I could see her taking us all in, and no doubt observing how our spirits were cramped. "As true as that the sun rises," she answered. "The Infant Tenderness is as ready to give us good gifts as our parents are."

"Huh!" Sarah Delle's tone was not very trustful. She had had some experience with earthly parents and she did not think much of Miss de Villbiss' comparison. "Not just spiritual gifts. I have been taken in that way before. Barbie and I have no use for spiritual gifts. It's real things we want, like clothes—and lovers."

"The Infant Tenderness has given me these garments," Miss de Villbiss returned, stretching out her arms.

SARAH DELLE and I looked her over. Neither of us had ever seen a dress made as hers was—in fact, you could hardly say it was made at all—but it was stunning gold-brocaded velvet. It couldn't have cost the Infant Tenderness less than ten dollars a yard.

"Well," Sarah Delle decided, "it can't do any harm to try, I suppose."

"I'm in favour of it," I announced, "and I'll become a follower right now if you'll show us how to work it."

Miss de Villbiss sat down with a happy light in her eye and proceeded to tell us how to constrain the Infant

Tenderness. You did it by folding your hands on your chest and looking at the crack where the ceiling meets the wall and trying to sink yourself in the Infant Tenderness. After you were sunk you were to suggest to It that you needed a new hat, or whatever it was, and then you had to have faith to believe that the Infant Tenderness had given whatever you had asked for, whether It had or not. And you were to keep your mind calm and free from annoyances. If any one injured you, you were just to sit down and go into a trench and pray for her. She was only a gnat that buzzes, but cannot sing. (I say "she" because, although I am a woman myself, I must admit that it is women who do cause most of the annoyances of life. Take your own family, for instance.) After it was all over Sarah Delle and I went home and spent the rest of the afternoon sinking ourselves in the Infant Tenderness—at least I did.

Thinking the matter over carefully I had decided to ask for three things. One was some gorgeous clothes and another was a social career and the third was to be engaged. I am sorry now that I asked for the third. If I had not I might still be happy. It was not absolutely necessary to my scheme of life, but I had noticed that since my sister Elizabeth has been in this state she has been looked up to in a manner which must be a pleasant experience, and a great deal of consideration has been paid to her feelings. If my family could be put in the same attitude toward me it would make things a great deal easier for me. However, to prove the injustice of the world, there was anything but consideration shown me when I announced my engagement. But of that anon.

Delphine called me to dinner before I came out of my trench. While I was about it I wanted to make it very clear to the Infant Tenderness just what it was I wanted. I meant to give It no chance to fool me. So I told Delphine I wanted no dinner, which was true, and went right on with my meditations.

WHY is it your family will never leave you alone in peace?

It wasn't three minutes before Delphine was back again saying that every one was at the table and I was to come at once. I did not answer her at all. I simply concentrated on the Infant Tenderness. After addressing me in tones that were not ladylike, and even shaking my shoulder, Delphine went away. But not for long was I left to myself. The next time it was Elizabeth.

"Barbara," she pecked out, "Mother says you are to come down to dinner at once."

I gazed at the crack in the ceiling with a rapt smile on my features, and said nothing.

"Barbara, do you hear?"

No reply.

"Barbara! What is the matter with you?"

I reminded myself that Elizabeth was only a gnat, and kept calm.

"If you don't answer, I'll have to tell Mother. What are you sitting here for?"

At last I looked at her. "I am praying," I said. I knew that would make her go away, and it did. After she had gone I went to the head of the stairs to hear what she would say in the dining-room.

"She says," Elizabeth repeated with relish, "that she is praying."

"That she is what?" gasped Mother in a shocked voice.

"Praying," Elizabeth told her again. I heard Kit giggle, but Mother's voice was solemn.

"Kelsey," she said to my father, "you had better go up and see what the trouble is. She may be ill."

"She ate most of a third of a (Continued on page 29.)



"I am sixteen," I reminded Aunt Barbara, "and a woman of the world, and I know that if it were my last earthly word, I should say that I want that dress."