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Bab and Babette

(Continued from page 43)

and when in a month the Superintendent visited the home of her adoption, the matter was officially consummated. Miss Parks was well received, shown only the best side of things, and went away with a strong sense of pleasure at this placing of another orphan turning out better than she had dared hope for in such a district. When she said to the child, attired for the occasion in a dress of the daughter of the house: "I'm glad you're so happy here!"—Babette was speechless with amazement, and equally dumb with terror at the look in her adopted parents' eyes.

An intense longing came to see Bab, to bury her face in Bab's shoulder and sob out her troubles. She did manage to speak of this general desire—making no mention of the troubles—to Miss Parks, in the presence of the others. It was worth the risk, and, best of all, it worked.

"Bab is very happy," declared Miss Parks, after the manner of spiritualistic mediums. "I'll send Jim down and let him take you up to see her. Next Saturday afternoon, if convenient? Ah, yes, quite so. Thank you, Mrs. Ferguson."

Babette spent Friday night sleeplessly, in blissful anticipation of the reunion. They allowed her to wear a second-best dress of the daughter of the house. It did not fit very well. "Miss Bab"—a gorgeous vision, simply but expensively rigged out—received her with open arms. She showed Babette the house, her clothes, her presents; raved over plans for going away to a boarding-school of the select. Babette—wide-eyed and open-mouthed—saw and heard, but spoke little. She was hardly given opportunity, and, for the moment, forgetfulness was upon her. "You haven't shown me the garden," said Babette. Her whole being yearned for greenery and flowers. Her own little plant had perished at the hand of her adopted mother in a fit of anger over the time spent in tending it.

"There are some friends of mine waiting out there," said Bab, uneasily. "Oh, no hurry, Babette dear, they can wait!"

"Would they mind, Bab, if I just looked around a little, just a tiny peek, it looked so nice from the front?"

"Why, no," said Bab, "but—" Her eyes were travelling over the figure of Babette in its unsuitable trappings. Somehow, because the beauty of her face seemed eclipsed, she looked the product of her district.

It took Babette just a moment to understand.

"All right, Bab, I'll not go."

"Yes, you will, Babette, dear." Sudden contrition came to Miss Bab.

"No," said Babette decisively. "I don't care to see it now!"

They stood facing each other for a moment, seeming to sense the gulf that had opened between them.

"I guess Jim will be waiting," said Babette, "I'll just go—home—now."

When, on the way back, Jim insisted on treating her to ice cream, and stocking her up with chocolates, Babette managed to accept gracefully so that his feelings might not be hurt.

But that night she cried herself to sleep.

V

AT sixteen, Babette was sent into a factory. All day she stood in a crowded, hot loft, doing mechanically some operation which made her a cog in the wheel that turned out upon a waiting public a "cure-all"—of which the wrapper, carton, and label were not the least attractive parts. It seemed to Babette at first, however, that to look any more upon the highly-colored representation of a woman, who, by the use of the compound, had retained all the essentials of youth into middle life, would nauseate her. Even in such fitful dreams as came to trouble her exhausted sleep after the hours at the factory and the burden of work awaiting her at home, the perpetual smile and flash of white teeth of this obnoxiously cheerful and

healthful woman haunted her. By-and-by Babette's hands became nimble enough to do without her eyes, and perhaps because this gave her opportunity to look around, Babette began to take an interest in her workmates, and through them in—liberty.

Gradually Babette won a new place in the home. Because she was now earning well, she was a valuable enough asset to be handled more carefully.

Later on she took a better opening in a varnish factory. She was seventeen then; had learned the art of dressing well on little; and had attained a ravishing beauty that brought rivals to hate her even while they loved her spirit, and young men to press their attentions upon her.

IT was here she met Gilbert Crewe.

He was an elegant person, foppish, manicured, old enough to be Babette's father. He held the position of factory manager, and during the hours he gave to his employers, immured himself in a private office at the far end of the first floor of the workshop. Twice a day he made a casual round of the factory and had eyes, it was said, more for the girls than for the machines and output. In Babette he found the equivalent of an orchid in a field of daisies.

"Who is she?" he asked his Employment Superintendent.

"Babette Ferguson, sir. Just taken on yesterday."

Crewe went back to his desk, and sat long in thought.

"Babette!" he murmured. "Babette! She isn't like her—and yet now I know that's her name it seems to me there's a likeness somewhere. Ridiculous, of course, but I suppose it's just the name makes me fancy it."

He instituted inquiries, however, his curiosity persisting.

"So far as I can find out, sir," reported the foreman, "an' of course I didn't like to ask her plump an' plain, so went as it were behind her back, she's an orphan adopted by these Ferguson people from a foundling home or something."

In the end, Crewe, triumphant, hung up the 'phone after a conversation with the Institute that had sheltered Babette. A young lad, occupying the place that once Barry Campbell had held, consulted a card index and supplied information.

"There was a Babette Stockley here who went to the Fergusons five years ago. I expect that's the one," mean, sir. You're welcome, sir."

The card issued five years before by Miss Parks, and incorrectly executed by Miss Jarnley, still bore its erring information with all the apparent authenticity of an historical archive. The alteration had been made on other records but not on this.

Gilbert Crewe was satisfied.

"I knew she put the child in an asylum after she got past looking after her," he mused. "Poor Babette, what an independent, stand-offish, hardworking little soul she was. Better she should have accepted my terms, than kill herself trying to keep herself and the child going. She wasn't built for a fight like that."

After that Crewe assiduously cultivated the society of Babette Ferguson.

AT first Babette was charmed. Young, inexperienced in life, and a lovable little soul for all her crushing experiences, her starved nature responded to this new and unusual friendship. Mrs. Ferguson gave no motherly counsel when the affair came to her ears, unless it was to smile upon the situation. Crewe looked like money, and money is very, very useful.

It was characteristic of Babette that she had retained through all the same childlike, innocent nature. Environment is a great and sometimes a terrible thing, but unto the pure all things are pure, and for the crudities of life against which she necessarily brushed, Babette had pity and sympathetic horror rather than repulsion or fear.

Her own workmates first put her on