

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## Claudia's Place

(By A. R. Buckland, in 'Sunday at Home.')

'What I feel,' said Claudia Haberton, sitting up with a movement of indignation, 'is the miserable lack of purpose in one's life.'

'Nothing to do?' said Mary Windsor.

'To do! Yes, of a kind; common, insignificant work, about which it is impossible to feel any enthusiasm.'

'The trivial round?'

'Trivial enough. A thousand could do it as well or better than I can. I want more—to feel that I am in my place and doing the very thing for which I am fitted.'

'Sure your liver is all right?'

'There you go, just like the others. One can't express a wish to be of more use in the world without people muttering about discontent, and telling you you are out of sorts.'

'Well, I had better go before I say worse'; and Mary went.

Perhaps it was as well; for Claudia's aspirations were so often expressed in terms like these that she began to bore her friends. One, in a moment of exasperation, had advised her to go out as a nursery governess. 'You would,' she said, 'have a wonderful opportunity of showing what is in you, and if you really succeed, you might make at least one mother happy.' But Claudia put the idea aside with scorn. Another said that it all came of being surrounded with comfort, and that if Claudia had been poorer, she would have been troubled with no such yearnings; the actual anxieties of life would have filled the vacuum. That, too, brought a cloud over their friendship. And the problem remained unsolved.

Mr. Haberton, immersed in affairs, had little time to consider his daughter's whims. Mrs. Haberton, long an invalid, was too much occupied in battling with her own ailments, and bearing the pain which was her daily lot, to feel acute sympathy with Claudia's woes.

'My dear,' she said one day, when her daughter had been more than usually eloquent upon the want of purpose in her life, 'why don't you think of some occupation?'

'But what occupation?' said Claudia, 'Here I am at home, with everything around me, and no wants to supply—'

'That is something,' put in Mrs. Haberton.

'Oh, yes, people always tell you that; but after all, wouldn't it be better to have a life to face, and to—'

'Poor dear!' said Mrs. Haberton, stroking her daughter's cheek with a thin hand.

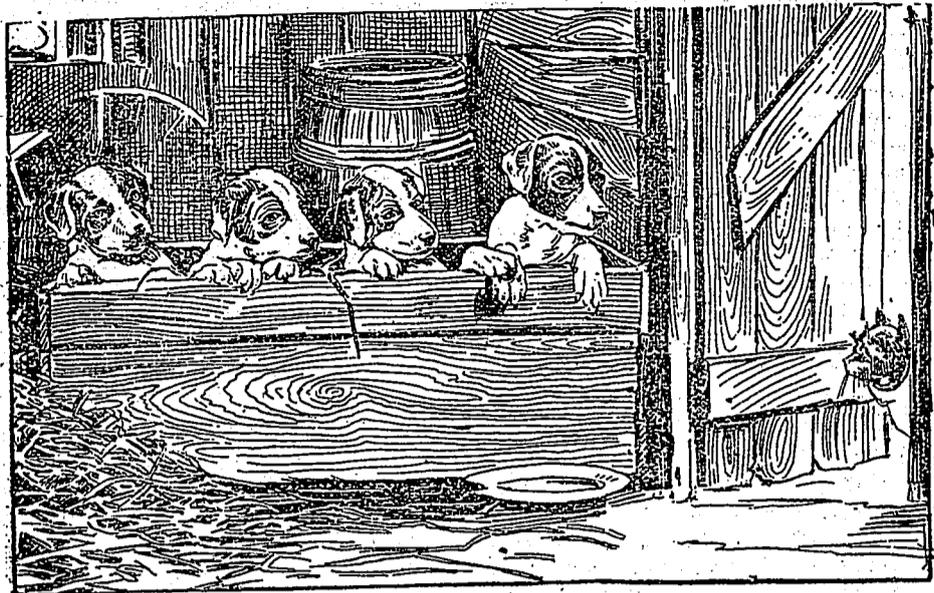
'Please don't, mamma,' said Claudia; 'you know how I dislike to be petted like a child.'

'My dear,' said Mrs. Haberton, 'I feel my pain again; do give me my medicine.'

She had asked for it a quarter of an hour before, but Claudia had forgotten so trivial a matter in the statement of her own woes. Now she looked keenly at her mother to see if this request was but an attempt to create a diversion. But the drawn look was sufficient. She hastily measured out the medicine, and as hastily left the room, saying, 'I will send Pinsett to you at once.'

Pinsett was Mrs. Haberton's maid, who was speedily upon the spot to deal with the invalid.

But Claudia had withdrawn to her own room where she was soon deep in a pamphlet upon the social position of Woman, her true Rights in the world, and the noble opportunities for serving Mankind outside the home.



A MORNING CALL.

—'Our Dumb Animals.'

'Ah,' said Claudia to herself, if I could only find some occupation which would give a purpose to existence—something which would make me really useful!

After all, was there any reason why she should not? There was Eroica Baldwin who had become a hospital nurse, and wore the neatest possible costume with quite inimitable grace. It might be worth while asking her a few questions. It was true she had never much cared for Eroica; she was so tall and strong, so absurdly healthy, and so intolerant of one's aspirations. Still her experience might be of use.

There was Babette Irving—a foolish name, but it was her parents' fault; they had apparently thought she would always remain an infant in arms. Her father had married again, and Babette was keeping house with another woman of talent. Babette wrote stories for children and for the 'young person,' conducting a 'children's column' in a weekly paper, supplied 'answers to correspondents' upon a startling variety of absurd questions, and contrived to live thereby. Babette's friend had been reared in the lap of luxury until a woeful year in the City made her father a bankrupt, and sent her to earn a living as a teacher of singing. They ought to have some advice to give.

Then there was Sarah Griffin—'plain Sarah,' as some of the unkind had chosen to call her at school. She was one of nine girls, and when her father died suddenly, and was found to have made but poor provision for his family, she had been thankful to find a place in a shop where an association of ladies endeavored to get a sale for the work of 'distressed gentlewomen.'

She also ought to know something of the world. Perhaps she, too, could offer some suggestion as to how the life of a poor aimless thing like Claudia Haberton might be animated by a purpose.

But they all lived in London, the very place, as Claudia felt, where women of spirit and of 'views' should be. If she could but have a few hours' chat with each! And, after all, no doubt, this could be arranged. It was but a little time since Aunt Jane and Aunt Ruth had asked when she was going to cheer them with another visit. Might not their invitation give her just the opportunity she sought?

Claudia reflected. She had not in the past cared much for her aunts' household. The elderly maiden ladies were 'the dearest crea-

tures,' she told herself; but they were not interesting. Aunt Jane was always engaged in knitting with red wool, any fragments of attention which could be given from that work being devoted to Molossus, the toy terrier who almost dwelt in her lap. Aunt Ruth was equally devoted in the matter of embroidery, and in the watchful eye she kept on Scipio, a Persian cat of lofty lineage and austere mien.

Their other interests were few, and were mainly centred upon their pensioners among the poor. Their friends were of their own generation. Thus in the past Claudia had not felt any eager yearning for the house in St. John's Wood, where the sisters dwelt at peace. But it was otherwise now, because Claudia had new designs upon London.

She confided to her mother her readiness to accept the recent invitation.

'Go, my dear, by all means,' said the invalid; 'I am sure you must want a change, especially after so many weeks of looking after me.'

'Pinsett,' said Claudia, salving her own conscience, 'is so very careful and efficient.'

'And so good,' added Mrs. Haberton, 'you may be sure that I shall be safe in her hands.'

For the moment Claudia was sensible of a little pang. Ought she to be so readily dispensed with? Were her services a quantity which could be neglected?

But, after all, this was nothing. She did not neglect her mother; that was out of the question.

So it was agreed that Claudia should go. Aunt Jane wrote a letter expressing her joy at the prospect, and Aunt Ruth added a postscript which was as long as the letter, confirming all that her sister had said.

So Claudia went up to town, and was received with open arms by her aunts.

The placid household at St. John's Wood was all the brighter for Claudia's presence; but she could not suffer herself to remain for more than a day or two in the light of an ordinary visitor.

'I came this time, you know,' she early explained to Aunt Jane, 'on a voyage of exploration.'

'Of what, my dear?' said Aunt Jane, to whom great London was still a fearsome place, full of grievous peril.

'Of exploration, you know. I am going to look up a few old friends, and see how they live. They are working women, who—'