Home Circle.: Ann and the Temperance Reform.
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Home Circle.

Ann and the Temperance Reform.

BY HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.

A little printed sign in the window of the settlement house had caught Ann's eyes on her way home from school: "Cooking Class Tuesdays and Fridays." There was nothing especial about it to attract attention, while the towering billboards on the other side of the street presented a number of thrilling scenes in all the colors of the rainbow. Yet it was the sign in the window which brought Ann to a standstill.

Perhaps the explanation was that she had been thinking of this very matter. In the physiology class the teacher had remarked casually that poor cooking was one reason for the saloons' generous patronage. The men who left home far from satisfied by their poor fare, were very likely to fall back on beer or cheap whiskey to satisfy their craving.

The recitation in physiology came to an end, but Ann kept up her thinking. Poor cooking! Ann had never had much chance to compare the cooking in her own home with that in other homes, but she shrewdly suspected that there was little to be said in its favor. Ann's mother worked out by the day, and reached home at night about the same time that her husband came from his work, both of them tired after a long, hard day. Generally Ann had the fire started, and the coffee pot was on the stove. There was often a pan on the table, half-filled with pieces of dry bread, where the children helped themselves if they did not feel like waiting. Sometimes Ann's father or mother brought in a piece of meat which was hurriedly cooked, and after supper Ann's father usually took his hat from the nail and went out. As a rule, when he came back he climbed the stairs with difficulty, stumbling at every step, and they were rickety, sagging stairs, too, where one needed to keep one's eyes open.

The remark of Ann's teacher had set Ann to wondering whether there was any connection between the ill cooked, hastily prepared meals, and her father's visits to Murphy's saloon. When she saw the sign in the window of the settlement house, it started her thoughts in another direction. After standing quite still for several moments, thinking as hard as possible, she opened the door and walked in.

The settlement house was a new one, and struggling. Because of lack of funds and lack of workers, it had not as yet been able to make much more than a start. The cooking school was one of the few things under way, and even that had not been received with great enthusiasm by the people in the neighborhood. Miss Knowles looked doubtfully at the girl who seemed so interested in the subject.

"You're rather young for the class, I think," she said. "We intended it more for mothers and the older girls who will soon have homes of their own." But when Ann had explained, she seemed to think that her case might be made an exception. And so Ann joined the cooking class.

A very fascinating class Ann found it, too. There were potatoes, for instance. Ann had eaten cold potatoes all her life without knowing how appetizing they might become when sliced and browned, with just enough of salt and pepper; and the transformation which turned a soup-bone into an appetizing broth, and made the scraps of meat left from dinner into a savory hash for the next day's meal, were to Ann as remarkable as anything that could happen in a fairy story. She learned to change the unpalatable dry bread into toast of an even, golden-brown color, and to make coffee that turned clear, instead of being a muddy concoction as thick with grounds as a pudding with plums. There was no fancy cooking taught at the Oak Street Settlement. The aim of the instructor was to show the girls and women how to make the most of their meager materials, and how the same food which came to their tables unappetizing and unsatisfying could be made palatable and nutritious. Many a time Miss Knowles congratulated herself on the impulse which had led her to admit Ann into the class, for the girl's enthusiasm was contagious. "Ain't it wonderful!" she would cry admiringly when some new dish was evolved from unpromising materials; and her sparkling eyes showed that she meant every word.

It was a great day for Ann when first she put in practice in her own home the lessons she had learned at the Settlement House. There was no tablecloth, but she made up for that lack by scrubbing the table into a condition of whiteness which compared very favorably with that of damask. She set the table with as much care as if the china had not been the nicked, cracked remnants of several sets, and as if there had been forks enough to go around. But it was on the supper itself that she lavished her especial care. A large beef bone from the butcher's had been converted into a stew. Plenty of time had been given it to cook slowly over the low fire, and potatoes had been added to it for substance, and onion to give flavor. As a rule, the coffee-pot and the tea-pot stood on the stove day after day, a little tea or coffee and a little water being added from time to time. But on this occasion, the coffee-pot was emptied and scoured, and not put back on the stove till six o'clock. For three cents Ann had purchased a new toaster, and the bread was sliced, to be browned at the last minute and brought to the table piping hot.

Ann's father and mother came in wearily as usual, looked about with lack-luster eyes, and took their seats at the familiar table which they duly recognized had an unfamiliar look. But the supper woke them up a little. Ann's father had his plate filled three times. "Guess this supper cost a pretty penny," he said gruffly at last.

"No, it didn't cost any more than any supper. The soup bone was fifteen cents, and the onion one, and the man gave me two loaves of bread for a nickel, because they was stale," Ann replied triumphantly.

Her father looked hard at his coffee. It was a cheap grade of coffee lacking the aroma dear to epicures, but it was as clear as if it had been made at Delmonico's. "What's this here?" he said suspiciously.

"Why, that's coffee, pa, the way they make it at the settlement house. Don't you like it?"

Ann's father tasted it cautiously. "'Tain't bad," he said. Then he emptied his cup at a gulp and passed it over for Ann to refill.

It was quite a disappointment to Ann when her father took his hat from the nail after supper and went out. The supper was such a good one that she had counted on his being ready to stay at home. She comforted herself, as she washed the dishes, by reflecting that perhaps it took a little time for the cure to work. And her mother helped to keep up her spirits by saying, "That was an awful tasty meal, Ann. When I came in I was that tired I didn't know how I was going to eat a mouthful, but now I feel made over."

The days and weeks went by. Ann tried faithfully all the arts she learned at cooking school. She even made a custard for Sunday dinner, and evolved pans of hot biscuit which created considerable excitement among the people on the third floor and across the hall. But still Ann's father continued his nightly visits to Murphy's saloon, and Ann lost some of the hopefulness with which she had started. She did not regret her experience in the cooking school. Her efforts had not been thrown away as far as her mother and the younger children were concerned, and she, herself, found a certain satisfaction in her struggle toward a higher standard of living. But it was disappointing to feel that her father could eat a good breakfast every morning and a good supper every night, and still spend so large a share of his weekly wages in Murphy's saloon.

He came in unexpectedly early one night, and found her crying over the mashed potatoes. Ann's mashed potatoes would have done credit to an older cook. They were not a sodden mass, but light and creamy. The bacon was sizzling in the pan, and the odor of coffee filled the room. But Ann's father thought less of his supper than of his daughter's tears.

"What ails you?" he demanded. The tone of his question was a little rough, but back of it was a kindly concern he had not always showed when things went wrong.

Ann lifted her blue-gray eyes. The thought came to her that this was the time for frankness.

"Pa," she said, "do you s'pose the reason that men go to saloons is sometimes 'cause the cooking at home is so bad that they just have to make up for it?"

Her father stroked his chin. "What put such a notion into your head?"

"Why, my school teacher said so. And then I started in to learn to cook down at the settlement house. Miss Knowles says I do pretty well, too, but I can't see," added Ann in tones of discouragement, "that it makes any difference with you."

"Then that was the reason!" her father exclaimed. He looked at the mashed potatoes Ann was beating with a fork, and at the bacon sizzling on the stove. He had been perfectly aware of the changes that had been going on in his home during the past three months. He had appreciated the innovation which had meant so much to his comfort. And now he realized the cause of it all, and whatever was manly in him was stirred at the sight of Ann's tears. If a girl was ready to do so much to help her father, it was a pity for the father not to do something.

"Tell you what, Ann," he said over his shoulder, "there's some cures that do the work quick, and others take a long time about it. I wouldn't give up if I was you."

Ann did not give up, and the cure worked. It was about a month later that her father signed the pledge, and he has kept it. The family have moved out of the neighborhood of Murphy's saloon, and Ann's mother no longer goes out by the day.

That is what one girl did for the temperance reform and for herself. And if every girl and woman could do as much, the temperance question would be settled out of hand.—The Girl's Companion.