THE FIRST CHILDREN'S DAY

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

"The little girl has brought the sewing, Miss Durand," said the maid.

Miss Durand slowly lowered her book. Her expression was that of a sleep-walker, suddenly aroused. It seemed to take her a moment to realize her surroundings.

"Well, Eliza, you paid her, I suppose?"

"Yes, mis. Was there anything you wanted to see her about?"

Miss Durand's forehead contracted slightly. She did not enjoy these unnecessary questions. "Certainly not, Eliza, if the work is satisfactory."

"I thought as much, miss," Eliza's tone was apologetic. "But the child was so bound that she wanted to see you, and that nobody else would do, that I thought it best to speak to you."

Miss Durand reflected. Vaguely the face of the woman she had engaged to do plain sewing came before her. "A very respectable sort of person," Miss Durand had decided. And, yes there had been a little girl. She tried to remember whether anything she had said had given the child an excuse for asking to see her personally.

"Tell her to come upstairs, Eliza," said Miss Durand, at last, and the maid withdrew. Miss Durand closed the big volume with evident reluctance. The books ranged against the wall and climbing almost to the ceiling were her only intimates. "You must be lonely," some well-meaning friend had once said, sympathizing with her over the absence of congenial social life in the little town, but the rather superior amusement in Miss Durand's smile had silenced her. 'Lonely? Oh, no!" said Miss Durand. "I have my books." It seemed to her almost absurd that one should miss people, when these other unobtrusive friends were always at one's service.

The child's feet sounded on the stairs. It had been long since such small feet had climbed the winding staircase. The soft, clumsy tread woke a strange vibration in the heart of the lonely woman who listened. She found herself smiling and waiting the advent of this unexpected caller with something like interest. She almost forgot to regret the interruption of her tete-a-tete with the old English essayist, whose quaint comments on men and things she so thoroughly enjoyed. Then a face showed at the door, and for the time being Miss Durand forgot the essayist altogether.

It was a plain little face, judged from an artist's standpoint. Round as the full moon, and with a sprinkling of freckles on the bridge of the uptilted nose, it was so brimming over with joyousness that it held the glance irresistibly. Miss Durand found herself wondering if any human being could possibly be as glad as this child looked.

"Good morning, little girl," she said, kindly, "did you wish to speak to me?"

The child advanced, and then Miss Durand saw that the small brown fingers clutched a bunch of dandelions. She laid the yellow, rather wilted blossom on the broad arm of Miss Durand's chair and drew back. "They're for you," she said. And now the ecstasy of doing a kindness made her face fairly dazzling. It came to Miss Durand that the child herself was not unlike a dandelion, not a sheltered, tender garden plant, but a wayside flower beaming in its humble place like a miniature sun.

Then she felt the doubt which is the inevitable penalty of wealth, the looking for an interested motive back of every kindness. "I don't understand," she said. "Why did you bring them to me?"

"'Cause you like flowers. The way I know," explained the visitor, "is that you've got such a big garden, and a house for 'em to grow in in the winter time."

"It was very kind of you," said Miss Durand, still doubtful. "What is your name, please?"

"Patty."

"Well, Patty, it is true that I like flowers, and I thank you for bringing me such bright, cheerful ones. Good-by."

Patty was moving toward the door, her beaming face radiating satisfaction. All that she had wanted was the joy of giving. Miss Durand mentally acknowledged her mistake, with a feeling that was akin to self-reproach.

"Wait a minute, Patty. Perhaps you are fond of flowers, too."

"Yes'm."

"Then we will take a little walk through the garden. You can show me what you like best of all."

Patty's rapture in the garden was worth seeing, even though it found its chief expression in hopping about on one foot. Miss Durand watched her with puzzled interest. Wise in books, she was quite unread in the volume of human nature. But when Patty threw herself on her knees by the pansy bed and kissed the uplifted flower faces, the solitary observer felt a strange thrill in her well-regulated pulses. "Do you like the pansies best, Patty?"

"No'm, I guess not. But it seems as if they was putting up their mouths to be kissed."

It took some time to decide on Patty's favorite. When at last that honor fell to a big white carnation, Miss Durand leaned forward to break it from its stem. "I'm going to give you this, Patty, to carry home. It will keep fresh some days if you change the water every morning."

But Patty had caught her sleeve. "Wait! Oh, just a minute! Would you mind," she stammered, too excited for smooth sentences, "giving it to me by and by, instead of now?"

Miss Durand paused. "You would rather have it later? Very well, Patty."

"I'd rather have it for Children's Day," explained the breathless Patty, 'an' dec'rate the church with it. I've got a geranium at home, growing in a tomato can, and I'm going to dec'rate with that, too. Don't you love Children's Day?"

Miss Durand hesitated. "Why, I'm not sure I know just what you mean."

Patty could only gasp at such a revelation of ignorance. "Why, don't you know, they have flowers in the church, and a canary bird hanging up, and he sings when the organ plays. And the minister talks to us. It's our day, but grown folks like it, too. Didn't you ever go to Children's Day?"

Miss Durand shook her head.

"Oh, I'm sorry! But never mind; I'll take you next Children's Day. It's only two weeks off," added Patty, as if she were comforting an impatient child. Miss Durand realized all at once that Patty was sorry for her. The idea was amusing, of course; and yet—

She thought of the child very often in the days that followed. Sometimes that winsome face came unaccountably between her and the pages of some favorite author. There were times when the stillness of the house seemed almost oppressive. Miss Durand decided that her nerves were a little out of order, and that she would be the better for a sea voyage.

One Saturday Eliza came into the library wearing an expression of annoyance. "Miss Durand, the sewing woman's little girl is here again, and she says—"

Miss Durand did not wait to hear what the little girl had said. She dropped her volume of poems with a haste that was almost discourteous. Then she hurried down the stairs. Eliza followed more slowly, her face showing her perplexity.

Patty stood in the hall, the tomato can in which the red geranium was growing hugged to her breast. She broke into a smile at the sight of Miss Durand. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked, proudly. "And I've come for the other one. To-morrow's Children's Day."

Miss Durand accompanied her to the garden, and cut a white carnation from its stalk. Meanwhile Patty's tongue was flying. She was on her way to the church to help the minister's wife in decorating. "All the other girls are going to help, too!" Patty exclaimed. "Don't you want to come and see how lovely it's going to look?"

Strange to say, Miss Durand was willing. Eliza could only stare when she came into the house for her hat and gloves. She stood peering through the screen as the two went down the walk together. But when she saw Patty lift a confiding little hand, and realized that Miss Durand had taken it in her own, the bewildered Eliza for a moment doubted the evidence of her senses. "My!" gasped that sorely-puzzled woman. "Whatever's come over her?"

The minister's wife was already at the church—a pale, tired little woman, whose face seemed illumined by some inner light. She met Miss Durand with the simple cordiality she would have showed Patty's mother. That was the minister's wife's way. Some of her husband's parishioners found it irritating that she never seemed to make any distinction between the man who could pay off the church debt and never know the difference and another who was always behind with his pew rent.

"You have a great many helpers," said Miss Durand. "I wonder that you are able to accomplish anything with so much assistance." The age of the helpers ranged from three years to twelve. They were all talking at once and every face was shining. Miss Durand noticed that most of them carried anaemic plants which seemed to be slowly

recovering from the withering effect of a hard winter.

Miss Durand cast a discreet glance about her. Such a shabby little church! One of the children caught her foot in a hole in the carpet and fell flat. If it had not been so close to Children's Day, the chances are that she would have cried. A discolored spot on the ceiling told that the roof needed attention. Poor, dingy little church! Poor, tired little minister's wife! Almost for the first time since she could remember, Miss Durand did an impulsive thing.

"Perhaps I could help you," she said. "My garden has done so well this spring, and I understand the season is backward generally. Patty, do you want to go to the house with me while we find the gardener and tell him we want some more flowers?"

It would have been an easy way out of it to have sent Michael over with his fragrant burden and to have gone back to her books. But she was not in the mood to enjoy them. She wanted the children. As she sat in their midst that bright June day, listening to their chatter, she found herself growing humble. She was no longer sorry for the minister's wife, for all her look of weariness and the circles under her eyes. Her own past life, given up to the selfish culture, shutting out the needs and the joys of the great world, was the pitiful thing, not the life of this woman whose every moment overflowed with ministration. Miss Durand watched her moving about among the little ones, and was sorry for herself. When the work of preparation was completed, and she turned homeward, she felt for the first time in many years the pang of loneliness, the beneficent loneliness which tells how closely humanity is akin.

The Children's Day audience was a large one. Rumors of something unusual had spread abroad. People whispered behind their hymn-books and looked from the wealth of flowers to the pew where Miss Durand sat, a smiling little girl beside her. The minister's prayer overflowed with the spirit of thanksgiving. How it had come about he did not know, but it was plain that the wealthy woman of the town, who so long had been indifferent to her opportunities for helping others, was awake at last. The minister's voice faltered as he thanked God.

Miss Durand, sitting with Patty beside her, did not notice the appreciative glances leveled in her direction. She had no idea that she was responsible for the unsteadiness of the minister's voice. She only realized that she had been making a life-long mistake. She had shut herself away from her kind. She had tried to find in books and music and travel that which humanity alone could give her. She had wasted her resources on herself, when she might have known the blessedness of sparing, helping, comforting. She faced the truth bravely. The only thing left was for her to begin again, and perhaps it would not be so hard, with Patty to help her.

And so on the first Children's Day in which she had ever shared, Miss Durand, the woman of whose wide culture the townspeople stood almost in awe, began to learn how to live, with a little child as a teacher.—*Ex.*