CHAPTER VIII

CYNTHIA LEARNS HOW TO BE FASHIONABLE

An attempt will be made in these pages to set down such incidents which alone may be vital to this chronicle, now so swiftly running on. The reasons why Mr. Merrill was willing to take Cynthia into his house must certainly be clear to the reader. In the first place, he was under very heavy obligations to Jethro Bass for many favors; in the second place, Mr. Merrill had a real affection for Jethro, which, strange as it may seem to some, was quite possible; and in the third place, Mr. Merrill had taken a fancy to Cynthia, and he had never forgotten the unintentional wrong he had done William Wetherell. Mr. Merrill was a man of impulses, and generally of good impulses. Had he not himself urged upon Jethro the arrangement, it would never have come about. Lastly, he had invited Cynthia to his house that his wife might inspect her, and Mrs. Merrill's verdict had been instant and favorable — a verdict not given in words. A single glance was sufficient, for these good people so understood each other that Mrs. Merrill had only to raise her eyes to her husband's, and this she did shortly after the supper party began; while she was pouring the coffee, to be exact. Thus the compact that Cynthia was to spend the winter in their house was ratified.

There was, first of all, the parting with Jethro and the messages with which he and Ephraim were laden for the whole village and town of Coniston. It was very hard, that parting, and need not be dwelt upon. Ephraim waved his blue handkerchief as the train pulled out, but Jethro stood on the platform, silent and motionless: more

eloquent in his sorrow — so Mr. Merrill thought — than any human being he had ever known. Mr. Merrill wondered if Jethro's sorrow were caused by this parting alone; he believed it was not, and suddenly guessed at the true note of it. Having come by chance upon the answer to the riddle, Mr. Merrill stood still with his hand on the carriage door and marvelled that he had not seen it all sooner. He was a man to take to heart the troubles of his friends. A subtle change had indeed come over Jethro, and he was not the same man Mr. Merrill had known for many years. Would others, the men with whom Jethro contended and the men he commanded, mark this change? And what effect would it have on the conflict for the mastery of a state which was to be waged from now on?

"Father," said his daughter Susan, "if you don't get in and close the door, we'll drive off and leave you standing on the sidewalk."

Thus Cynthia went to her new friends in their own carriage. Mrs. Merrill was goodness itself, and loved the girl for what she was. How, indeed, was she to help loving her? Cynthia was scrupulous in her efforts to give no trouble, and yet she never had the air of a dependent or a beneficiary; but held her head high, and when called upon gave an opinion as though she had a right to it. The very first morning Susan, who was prone to be late to breakfast, came down in a great state of excitement and laughter.

"What do you think Cynthia's done, Mother?" she cried. "I went into her room a while ago, and it was all swept and aired, and she was making up the bed."

"That's an excellent plan," said Mrs. Merrill, "to-morrow morning you three girls will have a race to see who makes up her room first."

It is needless to say that the race at bed-making never came off, Susan and Jane having pushed Cynthia into a corner as soon as breakfast was over, and made certain forcible representations which she felt bound to respect, and a treaty was drawn up and faithfully carried out

between the three, that she was to do her own room if necessary to her happiness. The chief gainer by the arrangement was the chambermaid.

Odd as it may seem, the Misses Merrill lived amicably enough with Cynthia. It is a difficult matter to force an account of the relationship of five people living in one house into a few pages, but the fact that the Merrills had large hearts makes this simpler. There are few families who can accept with ease the introduction of a stranger into their midst, even for a time, and there are fewer strangers who can with impunity be introduced. The sisters quarrelled among themselves as all sisters will, and sometimes quarrelled with Cynthia. But oftener they made her the arbiter of their disputes, and asked her advice on certain matters. Especially was this true of Susan, whom certain young gentlemen from Harvard College called upon more or less frequently, and Cynthia had all of Susan's love affairs — including the current one — by heart in a very short time.

As for Cynthia, there were many subjects on which she had to take the advice of the sisters. They did not criticise the joint creations of herself and Miss Sukey Kittredge as frankly as Janet Duncan had done; but Jethro had left in Mrs. Merrill's hands a certain sufficient sum for new dresses for Cynthia, and in due time the dresses were got and worn. To do them justice, the sisters were really sincere in their rejoicings over the very wonderful transformation which they had been chiefly instrumental in effecting.

It is not a difficult task to praise a heroine, and one that should be indulged in but charily. But let some little indulgence be accorded this particular heroine by reason of the life she had led, and the situation in which she now found herself: a poor Coniston girl, dependent on one who was not her father, though she loved him as a father; beholden to these good people who dwelt in a world into which she had no reasonable expectations of entering, and which, to tell the truth, she now feared.

It was inevitable that Cynthia should be brought into

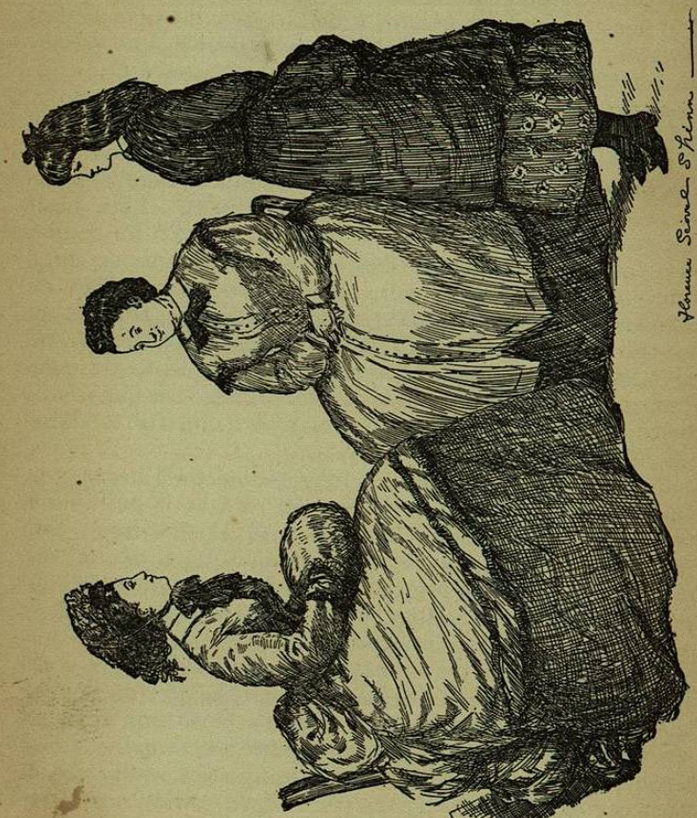
contact with many friends and relations of the family. Some of these noticed and admired her; others did neither; others gossiped about Mrs. Merrill behind her back at her own dinners and sewing circles and wondered what folly could have induced her to bring the girl into her house. But Mrs. Merrill, like many generous people who do not stop to calculate a kindness, was always severely criticised.

And then there were Jane's and Susan's friends, in and out of Miss Sadler's school. For Mrs. Merrill's influence had been sufficient to induce Miss Sadler to take Cynthia as a day scholar with her own daughters. This, be it known, was a great concession on the part of Miss Sadler, who regarded Cynthia's credentials as dubious enough; and her young ladies were inclined to regard them so, likewise. Some of these young ladies came from other cities, — New York and Philadelphia and elsewhere, — and their fathers and mothers were usually people to be mentioned as a matter of course — were, indeed, frequently so mentioned by Miss Sadler, especially when a visitor called at the school.

"Isabel, I saw that your mother sailed for Europe yesterday," or, "Sally, your father tells me he is building a gallery for his collection." Then to the visitor, "You know the Broke house in Washington Square, of course."

Of course the visitor did. But Sally or Isabel would often imitate Miss Sadler behind her back, showing how well they understood her snobbishness.

Miss Sadler was by no means the type which we have come to recognize in the cartoons as the Boston school-ma'am. She was a little, round person with thin lips and a sharp nose all out of character with her roundness, and bright eyes like a bird's. To do her justice, so far as instruction went, her scholars were equally well cared for, whether they hailed from Washington Square or Washington Court House. There were, indeed, none from such rural sorts of places — except Cynthia. But Miss Sadler did not take her hand on the opening day — or afterward — and ask her about Uncle Jethro. Oh, no. Miss Sadler



"'You know the Broke house in Washington Square, of course.'"

had no interest for great men who did not sail for Europe or add picture galleries on to their houses. Cynthia laughed, a little bitterly, perhaps, at the thought of a picture gallery being added to the tannery house. And she told herself stoutly that Uncle Jethro was a greater man than any of the others, even if Miss Sadler did not see fit to mention him. So she had her first taste of a kind of wormwood that is very common in the world, though it did not grow in Coniston.

For a while after Cynthia's introduction to the school she was calmly ignored by many of the young ladies there, and once openly — snubbed, to use the word in its most disagreeable sense. Not that she gave any of them any real cause to snub her. She did not intrude her own affairs upon them, but she was used to conversing kindly with the people about her as equals, and for this offence, on the third day, Miss Sally Broke snubbed her. It is hard not to make a heroine of Cynthia, not to be able to relate that she instantly put Miss Sally's nose out of joint. Susan Merrill tried to do that, and failed signally, for Miss Sally's nose was not easily dislodged. Susan fought more than one of Cynthia's battles. As a matter of fact, Cynthia did not know that she had been affronted until that evening. She did not tell her friends how she spent the night yearning fiercely for Coniston and Uncle Jethro, at times weeping for them, if the truth be told; how she had risen before the dawn to write a letter, and to lay some things in the rawhide trunk. The letter was never sent, and the packing never finished. Uncle Jethro wished her to stay and to learn to be a lady, and stay she would, in spite of Miss Broke and the rest of them. She went to school the next day, and for many days and weeks thereafter, and held communion with the few alone who chose to treat her pleasantly. Unquestionably this is making a heroine of Cynthia.

If young men are cruel in their schools, what shall be written of young women? It would be better to say that both are thoughtless. Miss Sally Broke, strange as it may seem, had a heart, and many of the other young

ladies whose fathers sailed for Europe and owned picture galleries; but these young ladies were absorbed, especially after vacation, in affairs of which a girl from Coniston had no part. Their friends were not her friends, their amusements not her amusements, and their talk not her talk. But Cynthia watched them, as was her duty, and gradually absorbed many things which are useful if not essential — outward observances of which the world takes cognizance, and which she had been sent there by Uncle Jethro to learn. Young people of Cynthia's type and nationality are the most adaptable in the world.

Before the December snows set in Cynthia had made one firm friend, at least, in Boston, outside of the Merrill family. That friend was Miss Lucretia Penniman, editress of the *Woman's Hour*. Miss Lucretia lived in the queerest and quaintest of the little houses tucked away under the hill, with the back door a story higher than the front, an arrangement which in summer enabled the mistress to walk out of her sitting-room windows into a little walled garden. In winter that sitting room was the sunniest, cosiest room in the city, and Cynthia spent many hours there, reading or listening to the wisdom that fell from the lips of Miss Lucretia or her guests. The sitting room had uneven, yellow-white panelling that fairly shone with enamel, mahogany bookcases filled with authors who had chosen to comply with Miss Lucretia's somewhat rigorous censorship; there was a table laden with such magazines as had to do with the uplifting of a sex, a delightful wavy floor covered with a rose carpet; and, needless to add, not a pin or a pair of scissors out of place in the whole apartment.

There is no intention of enriching these pages with Miss Lucretia's homilies. Their subject-matter may be found in the files of the *Woman's Hour*. She did not always preach, although many people will not believe this statement. Miss Lucretia, too, had a heart, though she kept it hidden away, only to be brought out on occasions when she was sure of its appreciation, and she grew strangely interested in this self-contained girl from Coniston whose mother she had known. Miss Lucretia understood Cynthia, who also was the kind who kept her heart hidden, the kind who conceal their troubles and sufferings because they find it difficult to give them out. So Miss Lucretia had Cynthia to take supper with her at least once in the week, and watched her quietly, and let her speak of as much of her life as she chose — which was not much, at first. But Miss Lucretia was content to wait, and guessed at many things which Cynthia did not tell her, and made some personal effort, unknown to Cynthia, to find out other things. It will be said that she had designs on the girl. If so, they were generous designs; and perhaps it was inevitable that Miss Lucretia should recognize in every young woman of spirit and brains a possible recruit for the cause.

It has now been shown in some manner and as briefly as possible how Cynthia's life had changed, and what it had become. We have got her partly through the winter, and find her still dreaming of the sparkling snow on Coniston and of the wind whirling it on clear, cold days like smoke among the spruces; of Uncle Jethro sitting by his stove through the long evenings all alone; of Rias in his store and Moses Hatch and Lem Hallowell, and Cousin Ephraim in his new post-office. Uncle Jethro wrote for the first time in his life — letters: short letters, but in his own handwriting, and deserving of being read for curiosity's sake if there were time. The wording was queer enough and guarded enough, but they were charged with a great affection which clung to them like lavender. And Cynthia kept them every one, and read them over on such occasions when she felt that she could not live another minute out of sight of her mountain.

Such was the state of affairs one gray afternoon in December when Cynthia, who was sitting in Mrs. Merrill's parlor, suddenly looked up from her book to discover that two young men were in the room. The young men were apparently quite as much surprised as she, and the parlor maid stood grinning behind them.

"Tell Miss Susan and Miss Jane, Ellen," said Cynthia,