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Anne managed to make it clear that she would like very much to find some means of filling out her own hollow cheeks, and the widow Wall offered to fetch her a nice white turnip. But the confidential talk was now rudely interrupted by old Mrs. Crabtree's calling to ask what they were talking about anyway, demanding to know what they were doing so long, and imperiously ordering them to come in at once and amuse her—if they could. But the widow Wall—wise through experience—made her escape by declaring that she must go straight down to the squire's house and see what had become of Mandy Pottle.

## XIV

### ARABELLA'S INSPIRATION

FOR the squire's lady had learned, as we all learn sooner or later, that time does not help us undo our mistakes. She had hardly spoken the hasty words before she was sorry. The first day after the estrangement seemed very long, and the second dragged as if it would never end. Through the third she felt sure that Phoebe would come—forgetting there had been any trouble—in the sweet old way. But she had no means of knowing that only an accident had prevented her coming. And so when nearly a week had crept by she grew gravely uneasy, wondering how she was ever to make friends without a fatal loss of dignity.

Yet nothing had been lost for lack of effort on her part. To use a country phrase she had not allowed grass to grow under her feet. She had gone every morning and almost every

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evening to consult Arabella. It seemed safer to hold these consultations in Arabella's house rather than in her own, where there were always so many servants standing at elbow, ready to listen and gossip. For it was necessary that everything about this unfortunate matter should be kept perfectly quiet, out of regard for her own high position which must not even seem to be in danger. Then the squire — seeing Arabella coming and going so often — would have been certain to make some of those ironical comments which were always a great trial. And she could not endure to be laughed at and bantered now. Her perplexity was too great and her distress too real. Indeed it was nothing less than a tragedy, to find herself unexpectedly and wholly outside the social life of the community after being so long its sole dictator. It was bitter to see groups of people passing up and down the big road and crossing from one side to the other, and not have a word to say about their movements, or even know where they were going or what they were saying or doing. And none of us may belittle what she felt. For after all it is our own estimate that gives everything its value so far as we are

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concerned. Others may have smiled at the little things that we have set our own hearts upon. And to this simple, honest, earnest, unselfish woman the social supremacy over that remote little corner of the green earth, was the most important and highly desirable thing in the whole world.

Then too she had held it for years without question from any one. It had ever been a source of great pride but it had never seemed quite so precious a privilege as it did now when in danger — if not already lost. Most of us can understand and sympathize with this feeling out of our deepest experience. And we also know that the fact that she had lost it through her own fault did not make the loss less hard to bear. That bitter knowledge has never lessened the hardness of anything that any of us have had to endure.

At all events it only made poor Mrs. Pottle more miserable and took away the last of the self-confidence which had carried her through many trials. Of a sudden she doubted her right to lay down the social law, even to Phoebe whom everybody dictated to out of pure tenderness. Then in remembering the sweetness

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with which Phœbe had always submitted, her heart began to ache even more keenly than her pride. For she loved her—indeed she had never realized how dearly—till this vague coolness had risen between them like a chilling fog. Why, she actually did not know how to sit down to her sewing without knowing what Phœbe was doing and meant to do the whole day through. Restlessly she wandered about her own house—scolding the maids and dissatisfied with everything—until she suddenly determined that something must be done and at once.

Her first impulse was to go straight to Phœbe in the direct, simple manner natural to her and own—bluntly—that she was to blame. With a throb of affection she thought how Phœbe would come flying to meet the first tender word with open arms. She could hardly wait to put on her leghorn bonnet and she intended to stop at Arabella's, only long enough to say that nobody could persuade her to put off going one moment longer. For there was a slight but growing suspicion in her mind that Arabella's advice might not be entirely disinterested. Accordingly she eyed her

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sharply when she stopped at the gate to announce what she meant to do. There was even a hint of defiance in her tone.

Arabella was taken quite by surprise and much upset. This step was not at all in accord with her own plans. She had enjoyed the importance which these frequent consultations gave her. The jealousy of the widow Wall and the envy of the other neighbors had not lessened her satisfaction. None of us value our honors any the less for seeing that others would like to have them. And then Mrs. Pottle's frequent visits were not merely empty honors, for she had never once gone to consult Arabella without taking her something good to eat, or something nice to wear which she liked still better. Naturally then Arabella was in no haste to alter the situation, though her sympathy was just as sincere as it could reasonably have been expected to be. But she was human and her first feeling now was blank dismay. Yet she did not dare let this appear or say a word in opposition, knowing that her friend was not easy to turn once she had decided upon a course. And so—being at a loss what else to do—Arabella instinctively

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took one of the sudden rhetorical flights that in other emergencies had wafted her beyond the reach of her friend's steady-going common sense.

"Mandy! *Mandy!* My dear friend," she implored almost in tears and with the greatest agitation. "What in the world are you thinking of! Can it be possible that you mean to commit social suicide—that you really desire to lay down the social sceptre and abdicate at once and forever?"

Mrs. Pottle looked at her—just as she expected—much as a plodding turtle might look at a gyrating bird. This bewildered expression told Arabella that she had flitted far enough. It also gave her courage to go on with perfect confidence, for she never bamboozled anybody quite so completely as she always did herself. She spoke in the most beautiful way of Phœbe, saying that there could be no doubt of her warm-hearted response to the first offer of forgiveness. It would indeed be a simple matter and one very easy to settle if Phœbe alone had to be considered. But—unfortunately—there were others, Arabella said shaking her head—the

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widow Wall for example and worst of all—there was old Mrs. Crabtree. At the mention of this dreaded name Mrs. Pottle's face changed as much as Arabella anticipated. Its expression of determination was not nearly so set as it had been a moment before. And in truth the little shiver that Arabella herself gave was genuine enough. When it had had its full effect she went on:

"For you, with all your intelligence and knowledge of human nature, must know what the result will be, if you insist upon taking so rash a step. But maybe you haven't taken quite time enough to think. Or possibly you are too broad-minded and large-souled to see really little things. That makes it all the more my duty—in affection and gratitude—to watch them for you. I'm bound to warn you of your danger. Take a little more time to see just how great it is. If you should make a public confession of being in the wrong what could you ever expect to do with Jane Wall? Remember how she broke out that night at Phœbe's. In my opinion her behavior caused most of this trouble that you are in now."

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"Well, then what *am* I to do?" demanded Mrs. Pottle crossly, all the natural shrewdness coming back to her gaze.

Seeing it Arabella flew off again high above her friend's practical head: "That is not for me to say, my dear Mandy. I dare only point to the deep pit yawning at your unwary feet and implore you to look well before you leap. It is my humble duty to cling to your skirts and hold you back as long as my strength lasts. I can never stand still and see my lifelong benefactor commit social suicide —"

"What under the shining sun *are* you driving at!" cried Mrs. Pottle, a good deal frightened and angry because she was. "I never know a bit more than the man in the moon what you mean when you go on like that. And you do it every chance you get."

Then Arabella saw that she had flown a little too far, and began crying without the slightest effort.

"Yes, you do," persisted Mrs. Pottle hardily. "Every time I try to pin you down — you fly off like that. Now do for once say what you mean, real plain and sensible. Then we can tell what we are about," she said in a softer tone.

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"Now — don't go on like that either. You know perfectly well that I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Yes," sighed Arabella in gentle reproach. "Nobody ever had a better heart than you've got, Mandy — but you've got a mighty sharp way too sometimes. And I do think you might remember that I mustn't be upset like this, so that I can't help crying and spoiling my looks — when the captain may come in the stage this very hour. Just wait a moment till I bathe my eyes and put on a little powder — so that I won't look like a fright — if he should."

There was no heart hard enough to resist that. Mrs. Pottle's melted at once for hers was not at all hard. She apologized and soon after went home as meek as a lamb, relying implicitly upon her friend's ability to "affect a reconciliation without humiliation," which was Arabella's lofty promise as they parted at the gate. On the next morning Mrs. Pottle's faith was so strong that she had to take two black boys along to carry her grateful offerings to faithful friendship. The baskets were carefully covered from curious eyes, especially the widow

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Wall's. But jealousy does not need to see and that watching lady waylaid the squire's wife one afternoon and asked rather cruelly if she had noticed all that was going on up at Phœbe's house since the strangers had come. Mrs. Pottle scorned to make any retort, but she burst in on Arabella declaring that she would not wait another day, vehemently vowing that if Arabella did not do something to make up the quarrel that very day, she would take the matter in her own hands. She repeated that this was what she should have done in the first place as she had wished to do. She owned that Phœbe was like her own daughter, declaring it was nothing but foolishness to let an outsider come between them and persuade her to dilly-dally — with everything getting worse every minute.

The suddenness of the attack overwhelmed Arabella so that she could not gather her wits immediately. But it was not long before she saw that the end of her tether was reached and as soon as she could think she brought out her plan. It was really an inspiration and Mrs. Pottle instantly recognized it as such. Indeed there was nothing singular in its being both

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brilliant and practical, since — poor thing — her whole life had been spent in devising ways and means to make people do what they had no intention of doing. The scheme was to give a tea-party, at her own house as that was neutral ground, and invite everybody. Thus brought together on a purely social occasion there would be no need of apologies from anybody, and after meeting in this friendly manner, there could be no more coolness, the whole difficulty thus being silently and politely done with forever.

"Well, I declare — you do beat all, Arabella — when you've a mind to," declared Mrs. Pottle positively radiant with delight. "Now, why couldn't I have thought of that? And I wonder why you didn't think of it before. But better late than never. And it certainly is a nice plan. Of course you'll let me send some of the things for the tea — since it is really given for me."

"Anything that you like — dearest Mandy. My sole aim is to please and serve you. And just for your own sake — if you don't mind — it really seems advisable after all to invite old Mrs. Crabtree with the rest."

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The squire's lady sat up straight and bristling, but she did not have time to say anything.

"For if we don't invite her she will spoil the tea-party—just as sure as we live. I don't know *how* she'd do it. Nobody ever can tell what she'll do, but spoil it she will, unless we have her here where we can watch and smooth things over."

After some further argument Mrs. Pottle agreed that the enemy might be invited, deciding that her own feelings should not stand in the way of general harmony. Moreover she wrote the name at the very head of the list when Arabella brought out a pencil and piece of paper. The list of guests was not long enough to make it likely that any one would be left out, but the writing of the names pleased Arabella and impressed Mrs. Pottle.

"There! We've got the new minister's name of course and even got down Father Rowan's though we have only seen him—poor old gentleman—through the window. But they say he is getting better and can walk now by holding on to something. Yet—don't you really think, Mandy, that the tea-party would be a little more exclusive, and the reconcilia-

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tion rather more complete, if there were no gentlemen at all?" said Arabella.

It had suddenly occurred to her that it might be a bit awkward to smooth things over, and maybe try to hold old Mrs. Crabtree in order, under the squire's quizzical gaze. She remembered how often it had made her feel as if she were a very small piece of very thin glass. Yet she could not help hesitating. It must be either all or none of the gentlemen and she would have liked to invite the new minister.

"For after all there is a certain stimulus in the company of gentlemen. It somehow helps you to look your prettiest and be your brightest," she said rather absently and somewhat rashly.

"Do you mean Samuel Pottle? For if you do I can just tell you that—" Mrs. Pottle began.

"I meant the captain," said Arabella with unusual spirit, a toss of her head telling her opinion of all other men. "Sometimes I hardly know what to make of you, Mandy. To think of your saying a thing like that to me—*me* married to the captain! Well, when he comes—and maybe he'll be here before that sun goes

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down—I can tell him that I have had a chance while he was gone to find out my real, true friends.”

Under the critical circumstances Mrs. Pottle could not afford to quarrel. She agreed rather hastily that the gentlemen should not be invited. Then to tell the whole truth she, herself, was not particularly eager to have the squire in a position to observe what transpired. The one thing that she really desired was to have Phœbe there close to her side. And she said as much so promptly and plainly that this little tiff blew over. Then they both bent every energy to arranging the tea-party. The next thing to be decided was where the lady guests were to sit round the table. For a tea-party down in that country of leisurely good-living was a very different matter from the hasty, meagre function which goes by the same name elsewhere nowadays. Everybody sat down to enjoy an ample meal of rich viands, and it was some little time before Arabella could assign places to the guests in the strict order of their importance, and yet avoid bringing certain ladies too close together.

“You might put Phœbe’s stepmother-in-

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law at your end of the table, suggested Mrs. Pottle. “Jane Wall will fit in anywhere. Of course Phœbe will sit by me.”

Arabella cried out in dismay: “That won’t do at all! Why, there’s old Mrs. Crabtree on my right hand—I’d never dare put her anywhere else. And you’ve heard about her going up to Phœbe’s already and badgering the stranger. Howsoever—I understand it was nip and tuck—for the newcomer’s a tartar too. And now that I come to think of it, maybe with me between them, they couldn’t get at each other and I could watch them both.”

Then ensued a lengthy and interesting discussion as to all that Arabella would need for the supper, and what the squire’s lady might have the privilege of contributing. This of course would be a great deal since it was really a large social enterprise that Arabella had so gravely undertaken. To make sure that nothing might be forgotten or overlooked, she wrote down everything that she now could think of on large sheets of paper. This first list was a long one yet before the great occasion was over it was nearly as long again. For Arabella



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could not sleep at all on the following night, because her head fairly whirled with charming ideas as she continually thought of something more still nicer and prettier. However the first list did to start with and Mrs. Pottle hid it in her capacious pocket without a word or thought of protest. She merely urged that the invitation — especially Phœbe's — should be given at once. Accordingly Arabella put on her bonnet in such haste and agitation that its gauzy pink ribbons fluttered as she tied the dainty strings under her quivering chin. She promised faithfully that she would go to invite Phœbe the first one, and just as soon as she had been to the post-office to get the letter that she felt sure the captain must have written, in the event of his being delayed.

“Is my bonnet on straight, Mandy?” she asked anxiously as they paused outside the gate for a last word before going their different ways. “I wouldn't like to look untidy because I'm hurried, if he should come to-day in the stage. It seems as if I heard it rumbling down the hill at this very minute,” she said in sudden happy excitement. “Sometimes I wish there weren't so many trees and

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the leaves were not so thick. I can't see who is in the stage till it comes real near. Well, I must hurry — in case he is coming.”

And so with a gay, smiling nod she tripped airily off on her high heels with her frivolous ribbons fluttering.