

CARYL'S PLUM

MARGARET SIDNEY.

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"He put in his thumb
And pulled out a plum."

So sang Caryl over the stairs.

"Now if HE pulled out a plum, why shouldn't SHE?" she said to herself, halting a bit by the landing window. "And a good big plum too—nice and juicy. O Aunt Sylvia, Aunt Sylvia!"

She fairly hugged herself in glee, then drew one long breath and dashed on to her own poor little room.

"Oh, you here, Viny?" she exclaimed in surprise as she flung open the door.

A small figure rose to a perpendicular position in front of the old bureau, while a shoving—to of the under drawer proclaimed some attention having been paid to the pretty laces, ribbons, and various other adornments packed away for safe keeping.

Caryl remembered leaving the key in the drawer after taking out a bit of lavender ribbon the night before for Aunt Sylvia's cap.

"What have you been doing?" she asked sharply; and taking hold of the small wiry shoulder, she looked down into a little black face whose eyes were staring solemnly into the farthest corner of the room.

"Ben doin'?" repeated Viny, scared almost to death inwardly, but preserving a cool exterior. "Nothin', only shettin' the draw'; plaguey thing wouldn't stay put. Tore my dress," she added mumblingly to fill out the pause.

"Where?" said Caryl, looking sharply at her.

"Dar," said Viny, with a violent twist, so that she could compass the back breadths of her blue gingham frock, and she pointed abruptly to a cat—a-cornered rent.

"Oh, no, you didn't," contradicted Caryl, looking her through and through, and giving her a small shake, "tear that either; I heard Maum Patty scold you yesterday for letting Jip bite it and snip out a piece."

"Well, somefin tore," said Viny. "I donno whar 'tis, but it's somewhars. A mighty smart tare, too, Miss Ca."

"I'll lock, and lock, and lock," declared the young girl, now down on her knees before her precious drawer, "before I run the chance of your rummaging fingers getting here again. Now then, Viny!"

"Yes'm," said the little black girl obsequiously, and rolling her eyes to all quarters; "Oh, yes'm!"

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"We are going to move, Viny," said her young mistress, taking the key out of its lock, and turning her back on drawers and contents, to sit on the floor with hands folded in her lap while she watched the effect of her words.

"MOVE?" echoed Viny with a start; "Oh, lawks! whatever's dat, Miss?"

"Why, go to a new place," said Caryl, laughing in spite of herself. "For mercy's sake, child, do take your eyes in! It'll be very fine, Viny, oh, so fine!" she cried enthusiastically.

"An' lib here nebber no mo'?" cried the little black figure in a shrill scream; "wot, an' hev no leaky sink dat keps me a-swashin' and a-swashin', an' no old ruf dat lets in hull buckets full o' water onter de bed, an'—"

"No," said Caryl, interrupting the steady stream of invective against the old heuse, "everything's to be as new and nice and neat as a pin, Viny—sinks and everything else; you can't begin to think how splendid it's to be!"

"I'm goin' to tell gramma," cried Viny, wholly off her balance, "dis berry same minnit. Lawks! but won't she be tickled to leave the ole shell! Den I'll git my bunnet an' go wid yer, Miss Ca, in tree shakes of a lobster's whisker!"

She scampered in the greatest excitement to the door, when a detaining pull on the end of her long apron, brought her to a full stop.

"You are crazy, child!" exclaimed Caryl, bursting into a laugh and holding her fast. "We can't go this moment, no matter how bad the old house is. Listen, Viny!"

But the small figure flung itself into a heap on the floor so suddenly that she nearly pulled her young mistress with her, while the little black hands clapped themselves over the bead like eyes, wail after wail of disappointment making the room to ring.

"Will you STOP!" cried Caryl in perfect despair. "Aunt Sylvia's head will snap with your noise! If you don't stop crying, Viny, you sha'n't go when the rest of us are ready to move, so there, now."

Threats had the power to do what nothing else could. Viny wiped off all the tears with the backs of her grimy little paws, gave two or three concluding sniffs, sat up straight, and was immediately all right for further developments.

"Now then"—Caryl pointed off her sentences briskly on the tips of her rosy fingers—"you must try to help—well, an awful great deal, Viny, yourself, or else it can't be a moving for any single one of us."

Viny's eyes widened fearfully, but she didn't stir.

"If you will take care—mind! **SPLENDID** care of Aunt Sylvia every morning," said Caryl slowly and with extreme empresentation—"watch and get her everything she wants, not wait for her to ask for anything, then I can go off down street and make lots and lots of money, Viny. Think of that, lots and lots! Then we can move, and Aunt Sylvia will maybe get well."

Caryl's gray eyes were only a thought less big than those of her small black audience, who presently caught the infectious enthusiasm and emitted several lusty crows.

"Jiminy—oh, I DIDN'T say it—I didn't—I didn't! O Jiminy, I didn't—I didn't—O Jimmy, I—"

"Stop saying it, then," exclaimed her young mistress decidedly, and enforcing her words by a vigorous shake.

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"Oh, I didn't—I will—O Jiminy! yes, I will!" cried the little black delinquent, the full tide of original sin taking an unfair advantage of her excitement to engulf her. "Oh—er— oh—er—r—"

Caryl came to her rescue by giving her a new idea.

"See how splendid you can be, Viny dear," she said kindly. "You can be such a good little helper, so that part of the new home will be of your getting; for I never could have the chance to earn anything if you didn't take my place and be Aunt Sylvia's nurse."

"I know how," said Viny, perfectly overcome with the greatness thrust upon her; "it's to slip crickets under her feet to put her toes onter. I'll slip 'em all day. An' it's to wipe her specs, an' to say yes, no, an' to—"

"To be good," finished Caryl solemnly; "that comprehends the whole business."

"To be good," repeated the small nurse yet more solemnly, "an' to compren' the whole bus'ness; I will."

"You are a ridiculous child," cried Caryl impatiently; "I don't really suppose you are fit to be trusted, but then, it's the only thing to try."

Viny, having been duly elected to office, considered her honors settled, so she was little disturbed by any opinions that might be held concerning her. Therefore she squatted and wriggled in great delight, grinning at every word that fell from her young mistress' lips.

"You see, Viny," Caryl was saying, beginning on her confidence, "I've got an order to teach the little Grant girls how to paint, and if I can run down there two hours every morning, I'm to have twenty-five dollars, and Madam Grant is going to give it to me in advance; that is, after the first quarter. Think, Viny, TWENTY-FIVE dollars! That's what we want to move with into Heart's Delight!"

This was the upstairs southwest corner of a little cottage that for a year or more had been the desideratum of the young girl's highest hopes that had to wear themselves out in empty longings, the invalid's scanty exchequer only sufficing for doctor's bills and similar twelvemonth, along with several other broken-down lodgers whose slender means compelled them to call this place "home"—this place where never a bit of sunshine seemed to come; where even the birds hated to stop for a song as they flew merrily over the tree-tops. And no wonder. The trees were scraggy, lippy old things hanging down in dismal sweep over the leaky roof and damp walls. They had to stay—the lodgers, but the birds and the sunshine tossed off the whole responsibility of life in such a gloomy old home, and flitted to gayer quarters. But now, what if Heart's Delight could really be theirs!

"Yer goin' ter tell 'em how to paint dem tings yer daub?" broke in Viny, and snapping off this delightful thought.

"You shouldn't speak so, child," said Caryl with the greatest dignity; "it's very fine work, and you couldn't possibly understand it. It's art, Viny."

"Ho, ho!" laughed the small black figure, nowise impressed and cramming her stumpy fingers up to her mouth to keep the laugh in as she saw her young mistress' displeasure. "It's an awful old dirty muss, an' I wish I could do it," she added under her breath.

"And I shall begin tomorrow," declared Caryl with still greater dignity, and drawing herself to her full height. "Aunt Sylvia says she'll try you. Now you'll be good, won't you?" she added anxiously. "It's only for two hours a day, Viny."

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"I'll be good," declared Viny, "'strue's I live an' breeve." Meanwhile the darkest of plans ran riot in her little black head.

"Heart's Delight—Heart's Delight!" sang Caryl's happy voice all that day; and like St. Patrick's poor imprisoned snake, she began to feel that to-morrow would never come.

But hours come and go, and Caryl awoke the next morning, the brightest, cheeriest morning that ever called a happy girl out of bed.

"Aunt Sylvia won't have many more days in that dark little room of hers," she cried to herself, throwing on her clothes rapidly. "Oh, dear, where ARE the pins? I can't bear to wait a minute any more than Viny, when I think of that dear lovely nest, and the bay-window, and all that sunshine. I'll always have it full of flowers, and the bird shall sing all the time, and—and— and—"

The rest was lost in a dash of cold water over the rosy face, and Caryl soon presented herself at her aunt's bedside.

"I'll do well enough while you are gone," said her aunt, smiling up from the pillows into the bright face above hers. "Now you're not to worry about me in the least, for you cannot do justice to yourself if your mind is troubled. Remember, Caryl, and be thorough in your efforts to teach your little pupils."

"And Madam Grant is going to buy some of my panels and little plaques, I almost know," cried Caryl, bustling around for her aunt's long woolen wrapper and her day slippers, "for she told me she should want to see them some time. Then, Auntie— oh, then!"

The young girl in her eagerness climbed upon the old bed to lay her fresh young cheek against the pale thin one. How she longed to put brightness into the poor invalid's life!

"Remember," said Aunt Sylvia lightly, to hide the tears in her voice, "your fortune's to be made. Only be prompt and thorough, and put your whole mind to your work. That is the secret of success."

"I will, Auntie, oh, I WILL!" cried Caryl happily, "and Viny will do well, I guess," she added, the gleeful tones dropping down with an anxious note.

"Viny will prove a capital little nurse, I expect," said Miss Sylvia cheerfully; "now the day won't wait, Caryl, so get your old auntie up."

"My old auntie is just LOVELY," cried the girl, hopping off from the bed, and flying around merrily, well pleased at last when the invalid was in her chair, to see a little faint, pink color stealing up the wan cheek.

"The best cap, Aunt Sylvia—the best cap!" she cried, running for the one with the fresh lavender ribbons.

"What an extravagant puss!" exclaimed Aunt Sylvia, willing to humor the gay little heart, and tapping her cheek as the young girl settled the cap on the lovely gray hair.

"Everything must be best to-day," cried Caryl recklessly. "It's all fresh and new and fine! All the world is made just for us."

Maum Patty saw Caryl run down the dirty little brick path that served for all the lodgers in the old house as a walk to the broken-down gate, with her color-box under her arm, and her little roll of pictures in her hand, and heaved a sigh from her ample bosom.

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"Dat chile can't make no fortin' like she's a-tinkin' of, but laws! let her try. Here, yer Viny, yer, be off up to de Missis' room. Scat now! De pore lettle lamb," she mourned, as her hopeful grandchild unwillingly dragged her recreant feet off to her duties, leaving her grandmother to pursue her reflections in peace, "it mos' busts my heart to see her a-workin' an' de Missis keepin' up an' pretendin' she's as fine as a queen. 'Twarn't so in ole Patty's day. Den dar was plenty-pies and turkeys. Lors, what stumpers! An' hull bar'ls o' flour, an' sugar, an' a creation sight of eberyting in de beyeautiful house, an' now look at dis ole shell!"

Maum Patty tossed her turban in intense scorn at each of the dark soot-begrimed walls of the place called kitchen.

"Missis ud feel more like folks," she said at each disdainful scrutiny, "an' like as not git well, ef we cud cut sticks inter anudder home. Ef de chile only CUD do it!"

She peered anxiously down the dirty little brick walk again, then fetched a still longer sigh.

"I don't darst to!" she declared in a mighty burst at last. "I don't, cos wot ud keep us all from the pore-'us den. It's every speck I kin do ter keep along of de Miss an' Car'l an' take keer of 'em wi'dout a cent o' pay; I don't darst tech my stockin' bag in de bank."

Maum Patty always spoke of her scanty savings deposited in the neighboring bank, in this way, fondly supposing them in the original condition in which ten years ago, she had taken them there for future shield against sickness and old age.

Meantime the little black nurse had begun her work.

Peering around Miss Sylvia's half-closed door, Viny exclaimed to herself, "Umph! she don't want me; guess she's a-readin' now. I'll git into Miss Ca's room an' try on all her clo'es an' pertend I'm makin' calls, an' peek inter ebery single place whar I kin, an' I'll be a lady, an' dar sha'n't no one scold Viny."

"Viny," called Miss Sylvia's soft voice, hearing a rustle at the door.

"Dat's Jip she's a-talkin' ter, I reckon," said Viny, stealing off on her tiptoes down the hall, and sticking her fingers in her ears that she might hear no more troublesome conscience calls; "I seen him on de rug when I peeked in de crack. Now den— Whoop, says I, WHOOP!"

She was safe now in Caryl's room, where the first thing she did was to indulge in a series of somersaults over the floor, and also, for variety, over the neat little white bed. These afforded her intense comfort. When she came up bright and shining after this celebration of her independence, she drew herself up with a serious face and proceeded at once to stern business.

"Two hours ain't long," she observed wisely, "an' I mus' be back some of de time. Jiminy! she's forgot de key again!" In truth, Caryl in her great excitement of hunting for some pictures packed away in her precious drawer, had forgotten to pocket the key that protected her few treasures.

Ruthlessly, then, they were pulled out and overhauled, while Viny reveled in each new discovery, chattering softly to herself in glee. She tied on all the bright bits of ribbons she could lay her hands on, to the little tiny tails adorning her head. She twisted with great difficulty into a delicate white spenser that Caryl's mother had worn when a girl, saved for its tender reminiscence, and for the soft, fine old lace that would be of use to the young daughter by and by. Viny was nowise disturbed in her enjoyment at certain ominous crackings and creakings that proclaimed the giving way of the delicate material. Arrayed at last to her satisfaction, although the lace did hang down in some shreds where her impatient fingers had clutched it, she whirled and whirled in front of the old-fashioned glass with many grimaces, trying the effect of her new costume.

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"I want sumfin to shine," she said at last, tired of this; "jew—EL—lery an' stuns. Le's see ef she's got any."

Now in one corner of Caryl's drawer was a small black box; unfortunately, the lock was broken in childhood, and there had been no money to spare for repairs of anything of that sort, so she had tied it securely with the strongest of twine, and written on the cover in big schoolgirl hand the words, "DON'T ANY ONE DARE TO TOUCH!" Although Viny was unable to decipher the writing in the least, it was fun enough to attack the string, which presently succumbed to the violent onslaught of tooth and nail, and the precious, precious bits of brightness were soon at the mercy of the little black fingers.

Maum Patty was droning away in the kitchen some old Methodist hymns. Viny was dimly conscious of a faint call from the invalid's room, as she drew out in the utmost delight an old-fashioned brooch with a green centre around which were some little sparkling things.

She couldn't even say "Jiminy!" but simply held the pretty thing which seemed glad of its freedom from solitary confinement, and thus delighted to sparkle more than ever in its resting-place in the little black hand. With trembling fingers she fastened it into the centre of the lace spenser, above her naughty little bosom, hurrying to the glass to do so, and had just taken one look, when a low cry of distress struck upon her ear.

It filled her whole soul with dismay, rooting her like a little frozen thing to the spot. It was Miss Sylvia, she knew.

With one mighty effort she tore herself from the spot, and rushed headlong into the hall. "Oh—oh—OH!" came from the invalid's room.

At that Viny wrung her hands and writhed in dire distress.

"She's a-dyin'!" she gasped, her knees knocking together in a lively manner; "I don't darst to look—I don't!—I've killed her!" And the whole flood of remorse sweeping her very soul, she turned and scuttled down the crooked little stairs and into the street.

"A doctor!" was all her thought. She remembered hearing Caryl say he lived in a big brown house that had lots of flowers in the windows. But where upon the face of the earth the house was situated, Viny knew no more than a bird. However, she must get him, so she dashed blindly on, turning the first corner to run headlong into the arms of a portly old lady who was placidly enjoying the fresh air and sunshine at the same time that she displayed her rich street attire.

"Oh, my goodness!" cried the old lady, startled out of all fine speeches by the collision, and jumping in fright to the extreme edge of the curbstone. Then seeing the cause, she cried in anger, "You miserable, dirty little thing you, you ve nearly killed me!"

At the word "killed," Viny began to dance in terror on the sidewalk. "I know it," she cried, "oh, dear, I know it! she's dead, an' grandma 'll beat me."

"And if you don't know any better," cried the old lady, vainly trying to settle her gray puffs as they were before, "than to run into people in this way, I'll have you arrested, I will!"

At this Viny was completely overcome. Her guilty conscience pictured all sorts of punishments; worse, far worse, than "grandma's" judgments, and, falling on her knees, she grasped the old lady's black satin gown and implored for mercy.

The old lady, now her attention was drawn off from her own annoyance, settled her eyes on the brooch half concealed by a fold of the little lace spenser.

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"You wicked, bad child!" she exclaimed, seizing her arm and pouncing one stiffly gloved hand on the sparkling brooch; "you've stolen that! It's bad enough to be run into by a dirty little thing fresh from Bedlam, without being wicked into the bargain. That's TOO much!"

The little black figure being too wretched to hear this tirade, could only mumble and wail and wriggle closer and closer into the folds of the rich gown.

"Get out of my dress!" cried the old lady excitedly. "Here, I'll call the police; if you don't let go of me this instant! Stop, I say! Po-o-lice!"

Viny gave one violent jerk that brought her up to her feet, and with eyes distended in terror, started in wild despair across the street. A pair of handsome bays were coming in their best step down from the Square, drawing a carriage full of people who seemed in the very best of spirits.

"WHOA—A!" A click, a rapid pull-up with all Thomas's best strength, and the horses fell back on their haunches just in time for the little lithe figure to dart under their pawing hoofs and be saved! Everybody leaned out of the carriage for a glimpse of the child.

"Why—why"—A young girl's face paled, while the gray eyes flashed, and with one spring she was out and rushing after the small flying figure who in her fright had turned to flee the other way.

"Look out, Caryl!" called the others in the carriage after her.

"Oh, she'll be killed," moaned a little girl leaning out as far as she dared over the wheels.

"And then she can't ever get into the pretty new house," wailed another. "Oh, what shall we do! Come back, Bessie!" she cried, tugging at her sister's skirts. "Grandmamma, make her come into the carriage, I can't hold her!"

But a crowd of people surging up around them at this moment, took off all attention from Bessie and everybody else but the little fugitive and her kind pursuer. Caryl made her way through the crowd with flushed face, her little brown hat hanging by its strings around her neck, pantingly dragging after her the little black girl.

"It's our Viny," she said, "and something is the matter with Aunt Sylvia! Oh, Madam Grant!"

"My poor child," said a sweet-faced woman, reaching out a kind arm, while the children seized hold of Caryl at every available point, between them dragging her and her charge into shelter, "don't be troubled. Drive just as fast as you can, Thomas, to No. 27, you know," she commanded hurriedly.

Then the first thing Caryl did was to turn upon Viny and unhook the precious brooch as a low sob came from her white lips. "If it had been lost!"

A soft hand stole under the little brown cloak to clasp her own; but Madam Grant said never a word. She knew what the young girl's heart was too full for speech; that the mother's brooch would speak more tenderly than ever she could, of forgiveness to the little ignorant black girl.

The children were all eyes at Viny and her costume, but they said never a word while she howled on steadily, only ejaculating in an occasional gust, "O Miss Sylvy—Miss Sylvy!"

Caryl, white as a sheet, rushed out of the carriage and into the old lodging house the instant the horses paused by the broken gate. Maum Patty was singing in the little kitchen the refrain she never indulged in except in her most complacent moods. Flinging wide the door, Caryl panted out, "Oh, what is it! Tell me at once!"

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"Lawks!" exclaimed Maum Patty, startled from her peaceful enjoyment, and turning so suddenly in the old calico-covered chair that she sent her spectacles spinning into the middle of the floor. "Massy, how yer look! Tain't wurth it—don't! He hain't spile't it; I stopped him," she added exultingly.

"Stopped what?" echoed Caryl in bewildered distress. "Oh, do tell me! Is'nt Aunt Sylvia sick? Tell me, Maum Patty," she pleaded. And she grasped the old woman's arm in an agony of suspense.

"Massy, no!" declared Maum Patty in her most cheery tones, "she's ben a-laughin' fit to kill herself, an' I don't wonder, for the little rascal looked as cunnin' as an imp. But I stopped him I stopped him!" she added triumphantly.

Caryl had no strength to ask further, nor to stir. The reaction was too great, and she leaned up against the door for support.

"He shuck it, an' shuck it," said the old woman, laughing immoderately. "Laws, how he shuck it—dat Jip did—yer aunt's beyeutiful cap with the new puppel ribbons! Ye see it tumbled off; I dunno wedder she sneezed, or wot she did, but anyway, it tumbled off on de flo', and dat little pison scamp jumped up from his rug an' cotched it, an' she a-callin' an'a-callin, fit ver die—I'll snake dat Viny w'en I gets her.—Lawks, but I couldn't help it! I laughed till I cried to see dat dog carry on. Luckily I run up just when I did to pay my 'specs to de Missis, for—I stopped him, I stopped him," she brought herself up to declare, wiping her eyes.

"Viny," said Caryl, in her little room, an hour after, when everything had been confessed and forgiven; when the delightful story had all come out, how they were really and truly to move that very afternoon; how Madam Grant had paid the rent in advance for the sunny rooms in the little cottage, and they were just driving around to surprise Aunt Sylvia when they witnessed Viny's escapade; how the carriage was to come before very long to take dear Aunt Sylvia to her longed-for refuge; how the price of the lessons was to go for new furniture; how everything for the rest of their lives was to be cheery, winsome, and bright to the very last degree—when it was all finished, Caryl looked kindly down into the sorry little black face—"Yes, Viny," she said with the happiest little laugh, "I shall have to forgive you, for it's the last naughty thing that you will ever do in the old home."