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#8 in our series by Carolyn Wells

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PTOMAINE STREET ***

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PTOMAINE STREET

THE TALE OF WARBLE PETTICOAT

THIRD IMPRESSION PTOMAIN STREET

THE TALE OF WARBLE PETTICOAT

BY

CAROLYN WELLS [BLANK PAGE] TO ROBERTA WOLF BUEHLER MY BELOVED FRIEND
FOREWORD TO A FOOLISH BOOK

A certain Poet once opined
That life is earnest, life is real;
But some are of a different mind,
And turn to hear the Cap-bells peal.
Oft in this Vale of Smiles I've found
Foolishness makes the world go round.

Ecclesiastes, Solomon,
And lots of those who've passed before us,
Denounced all foolishness and fun,
Not so the gay and blithesome Horace;
And Shakespeare's Jaques, somewhat hotly,
Declared the only wear is Motley!

We mortals, fools are said to be;
And doesn't this seem rather nice?
I learn, on good authority,
That Fools inhabit Paradise!
Honored by kings they've always been;
And--you know where Fools may rush in.

And so, with confidence unshaken,
In Cap and Bells, I strike the trail.
I know just how, because I've taken
A Correspondence Course by mail.
I find the Foolish life's less trouble
Than Higher, Strenuous or Double.
Dear Reader, small the boon I ask,--
Your gentle smile, to egg my wit on;
Lest people deem my earnest task
Not worth the paper it is writ on.
Well, at white paper's present worth,
That would be rather high-priced mirth!

I hope you think my lines are bright,
I hope you trow my jests are clever;
If you approve of what I write
Then you and I are friends forever.
But if you say my stuff is rotten,
You are forgiven and forgotten.

Though, as the old hymn runs, I may not
Sing like the angels, speak like Paul;

Though on a golden lyre I play not,
As David played before King Saul;
Yet I consider this production
A gem of verbalesque construction.

So, what your calling, or your bent,
If clergy or if laity,
Fall into line. I'll be content
And plume me on my gayety,
If of the human file and rank
I can make nine-tenths smile,--and thank.

[Blank Page] PTOMAIN STREET

CHAPTER I

On a Pittsburgh block, where three generations ago might have been heard
Indian war-whoops--yes, and the next generation wore hoops, too--a girl
child stood, in evident relief, far below the murky gray of the Pittsburgh
sky.

She couldn't see an Indian, not even a cigar store one, and she wouldn't
have noticed him anyway, for she was shaking with laughter.

A breeze, which had hurried across from New York for the purpose, blew her
hat off, but she reeked not, and only tautened her hair ribbon with an
involuntary jerk just in time to prevent that going too.

A girl on a Pittsburgh block; bibulous, plastic, young; drinking the air in
great gulps, as she would later drink life.

It is Warble Mildew, expelled from Public School, and carolling with
laughter.

She had only attended for four weeks and they had been altogether wasted.
In her class there were several better girls, many brighter, one prettier,
but none fatter. The schoolgirls marveled at the fatness of her legs when,
skirts well tucked up, they all waded in the brook. Every cell of her body
was plump and she had dimples in her wrists.

And cheeks, like:

A satin pincushion pink,
Before rude pins have touched it.

Her eyes were of the lagoon blue found in picture postcards of Venice and
her hair was a curly yellow brush-heap. Sunning over with curls--you know,
sort of ringolets.

In fact, Warble was not unlike one of those Kewpie things, only she was
more dressed.

* * * * *

Expelled!

That's the way things were to come to Warble all her life. Fate laid on in broad strokes--in great splashes--in slathers.

Expelled! And she had scarce dared hope for such a thing.

* * * * *

To sound the humor of Warble.

She hated school. Books, restraint, routine, scratching slate pencils, gum under desks, smells--all the set up palette of the schoolroom was not to her a happy vehicle of self-expression.

Often, in hope of being sent home, she had let a rosy tongue-tip protrude from screwed up red lips at teacher, but it had gone unpunished.

And now--

Now, rocking in triumphant, glorious mirth, her plump shoulders hunched in very ecstasy, the child was on the peak!

Expelled! Oh, gee!

And all because she had put a caterpillar down Pearl Jane Tuttle's back. One little, measly caterpillar.

Pearl Jane had sat right in front of her.

A loose neckband round a scrawny neck.

And when Pearl Jane wiggled, a space of neck between two thin, tight black pigtailed--a consequent safe-deposit that was fairly crying out to have something dropped down it.

A caterpillar mooching along the schoolroom aisle--clearly sent by Providence.

Helpless in the grip of an irresistible subconscious complex, Warble scoops up the caterpillar and in an instant has fed him into the gaping maw at the back of that loose gingham neckband.

Gr-r-r-rh!

* * * * *

That, then, is why Warble stood in such evident relief on the Pittsburgh block.

Expelled! The world was hers!

It had always been hers, to be sure, but it was now getting bigger and more hers every minute.

The very first day she went to school, a little boy said to her:

"Do you like me?"

"No," said Warble.

The little boy gave her all his candy and his red balloon.

So you see, she had a way--and got away with it.

* * * * *

Warble was an orphan. She had a paprika-seasoned sister, married to a chiroprapist, in Oshkosh. But for all that, she planned to earn her own living.

And she had an ambition. At present beyond her grasp, yet so sure was she of its ultimate attainment, that she shaped her entire cosmic consciousness toward that end. Her ambition was not unique, perhaps not unattainable. It had been achieved by others with seemingly little effort and less skill; and though as yet, merely a radiant hope, Warble was determined that some day she would gain her goal.

Her ambition was to get married. Her sister had; her mother had; she politely assumed her grandmother had.

She would.

Often she imagined herself the heroine of delightful scenes she watched at the cinema. She loved the slow unwinding of the story on the screen, but when engaged with her imagination she hurried it on in haste to reach the final close-up.

* * * * *

It was at no one's advice, but because of her own inner yearnings that Warble took a job as waitress in a Bairns' Restaurant.

She reveled in the white tiles, the white gloss paint, the eternal clearing-up and the clatter of flatware. She loved the flatware--it always made her think of a wedding--sometimes of her own.

She adored the white-capped King Alfred baking his cakes in the window, but merely as a fixture, as she adored the mute stacks of clean plates and the piles of pathetic little serviettes.

In a more intimate and personal way she adored the pork and beans, the ham and eggs, the corned beef and cabbage, and--importantly--the gentle,

easy-going puddings and cup custards. These things delighted her soul and dimpled her body.

She was proud of her fellow-waitresses, proud of their aspirations (the same as her own).

Having exceptional opportunity, Warble learned much of culinary art and architecture, at least she became grounded in elementary alimentary science.

She had little notebooks filled with rules for Parisian pastry, Hindu recipes for curry; foreign dishes with modern American improvements.

Joyously she learned to make custard pie. This, as the tumultous future proved, was indicative.

Only the little smiling gods of circumstance, wickedly winking at one another, knew that when Warble whipped cream and beat eggs, she laid the corner stone of a waiting Destiny, known as yet but to the blinking stars above the murky Pittsburgh sky.

She was extravagant as to shoes and diet; and, on the whole, she felt that she was living.

She was not mistaken.

She went to dances, but though sometimes she toddled a bit, mostly she sat out or tucked in.

During her three years as a waitress several customers looked at her with interest though without much principle.

The president of a well-known bank, the proprietor of a folding-bed concern, a retired plumber, a Divinity student and a ticket-chopper.

None of these made her bat an eyelash.

For months no male came up for air. Then, the restaurant door swung back on its noiseless check and spring, and in walked Big Bill Petticoat.

CHAPTER II

The Petticoats were one of the oldest and pride-fullest of New England families. So that settles the status of the Petticoats. A couple of them came over in the Mayflower, with the highboys and cradles and things, and they founded the branch of Connecticut Petticoats--than which, of course, there is nothing more so.

Of course, the Petticoats were not in the very upper circles of society, not in the Dress Circle, so to speak, but they formed a very necessary

foundation, they stood for propriety and decency, and the Petticoats were stiff enough to stand alone.

Another fine old New England family, the Cottons.

Intermarriage linked the two, and the Cotton-Petticoats crowded all other ancient and honorable names off the map of Connecticut and nodded condescendingly to the Saltonwells and Hallistalls. Abbotts and Cabots tried to patronize them, but the plain unruffled Cotton-Petticoats held their peace and their position.

The present scion, Dr. Petticoat, was called Big Bill, not because of his name or stature, but because of the size of his bills. He presented them quarterly, and though his medicine was optional--the patient could take it or leave it--the bills had to be paid.

Wherefore Dr. Petticoat was at the head of his profession financially. Also by reputation and achievement, for he had the big idea.

He was a specialist, and, better yet, a specialist in Ptomaine Poisoning.

Rigidly did he adhere to his chosen line, never swerving to right or left. People might die on one side of him from water on the brain and on the other side from water on the palate, not a prescription could they get out of Big Bill Petticoat unless they could put up unmistakable symptoms of ptomaine poisoning.

And he was famous. People brought their ptomaines to him from the far places, his patients included the idlest rich, the bloatedest aristocrats, the most profitable of the profiteers. His Big Bill system worked well, and he was rich beyond the most Freudian dreams of avarice.

As to appearance, Petticoat was very pretty, with that fresh rosy beauty that is so attractive. His walnut hair was fine and silky, but a permanent wave made it fuzz forth in a bushy crinkle that was distractingly lovely. His tweezed eyebrows were arched to a perfect span and his finger nails showed a piano polish.

His features were cold-chiseled and his coloring was exquisite. In fact, his coloring was too good to be true, and no wonder, for it came out of a very modern and up-to-date six-cylinder makeup box.

His lips looked as if they were used to giving orders in restaurants, and he wore clothes which you could never quite forget.

Warble edged toward the stranger, and murmured nothing in particular, but somehow he drifted into the last and only vacant seat at her table.

She whisked him a 2 x 2 napkin, dumped a clatter of flatware at him, and stood, awaiting his order.

The pause becoming lengthy, she murmured with her engaging smile, "Whatcha want to eat?"

"Pleased to eat you," he responded, looking at her as though she was an agreeable discovery.

Small wonder, for Warble was so peachy and creamy, so sweet and delectable that she was a far more appetizing sight than most viands are. She smiled again--engagingly this time, too.

Thus in the Painted Vale of Huneker, Vamp and Victim beguiled the hours. Thus, and not in treacled cadences, intrigued Mariar and Sir Thomas in the back alley.

"Do you like it here?" asked the doctor.

"Yop. But sometimes I feel wasted--"

"You don't look wasted--" "No--" after a hasty glance in the wall mirror.

"Don't you get sick of the sight of food?"

"Here, oh, no! I don't know any lovelier sight than our kitchens--yes, yes, sir, I'll get your pied frotatoes at oneth."

When Warble was a bit frustrated or embarrassed, she often inverted her initials and lisped. It was one of her ways.

The other clients at her table had no intention of being neglected while their Pickfordian waitress smiled engagingly on a newcomer.

It was the iceman who had hollered. He seemed to be merely a red-faced inanimate object, that worked by strange and compound levers.

Next him was a hat-check girl, a queenly person who communed with something set in the lid of her vanity case, and fed on chicken a la king.

Then there was a newsboy, whose all-observant eyes darted about everywhere, the while he absorbed baked beans and ketchup.

An old maid shopper. She merely brooded over her worn and pencil-scored memorandum, and muttered of fringe and buttons as she spilled tea on her samples of Navy blue foulard.

A blind man. Of no interest save that he had a calm and gentle demeanor and was the only one who didn't spill things. His face wore a grieved but resigned look, as if something had died in his scrambled eggs. The iceman, who had the hard, set jaw of a prize fighter was successfully eating steak, and he welcomed the incoming fried potatoes, as one greets a new instalment of a serial.

It was a fat and pink and lovely Warble who at last trotted back with Petticoat's order.

The great specialist had an unbridled passion for pie, and throwing

restraint to the winds he had ordered three kinds. The wedges Warble brought were the very widest she could wheedle from the head pie-cutter--and Warble was some wheedler, especially when she coaxed prettily for a big pieth of cuthtard.

Petticoat looked at her again as she came, pie-laden.

Her cap was a bit askew, but her eyes weren't. In her white linen dress and apron and white cap, her little pink face looked to Petticoat's appraising glance like a postage stamp on an expanse of white linen envelope.

Little did he think, as he took his custard pie that he was about to put his foot in it. Yet he did.

"May I see you again sometime?" he said, ignoring the hat-check girl's ogling and the iceman's cold stare.

Warble made a face at him. It was one of her ways.

"What's your address?" he asked. "You can ask the Boss--if you really want to know."

"Want to know! Say, you waitress!"

Of the love-making of Warble and Big Bill Petticoat there is nothing to be reported which may not be read in any Satevepost serial, which may not be heard at any summer resort, in any winter garden. They were zoology and history. Their speech was free silver and their silence was golden.

It was a non-stop courtship. All the plump beauty of youth and all the assured complacency of a well-to-do married man kept them up in the air.

Petticoat wasn't a married man, but he had their technique.

They took a walk, and followed a roundabout way. Then they sat on a bank, and his arm followed a roundabout way.

She seemed more young and tender than ever, in a simple white muslin frock and blue sash. Her broad-leafed hat was decked with a few pink roses, and roll-top white socks added a good deal to the picture.

Petticoat was charmed.

"Golly, but I love you, Warble!" he cried.

She did not answer, but she touched the upper edge of the wallet in his breast pocket with an exploring gesture.

"You think I'm too darn aesthetic! Well, you're not, and so we ought to mate. We're complementary to one another, like air and sunshine or light and shade."

"Or pork and beans, or pie and cheese."

"Yes, or like stout and porter--I'll be the porter, oh--what's the use of talking? Let my lips talk to you!"

He kissed her cheek, imprinting thereon a Cupid's bow, by reason of his own addiction to the lipstick.

Warble rubbed it off with the back of her hand, and said, "Oh, pleathe--pleathe."

She wondered if she ought to have said thank you, but it was only a drifting thought and she turned the other cheek. Then she smiled her engaging smile and they were engaged.

Later in the game, she said, with pretty diffidence, "I would like to thee Butterfly Thenter." And she blushed like the inside of those pink meat melons.

"I knew it!" and Petticoat produced a pile of Sunday Picture Supplements.

Her cheek nested in his permanent wave, Warble studied the pictures.

They were the last word in artistic architecture. Truly, Butterfly Center, where Petticoat lived, was a veritable Utopia, Arcadia, Spotless Town and Happy Valley all rolled into one. Broad streets, arching trees, sublimated houses, glorified shops--it seemed to Warble like a flitter-work Christmas card from the drug-store.

"How'd you like to scoot up there with me in a fast aeroplane?" he jollied her.

"It might be--a lark--" she dubioused.

"But here's the picture!" and proudly he exhibited a full length view of his own home.

"Ptomaine Haul," he exploited, proudly. "Built every inch of it from the busy little ptomaines. Coral insects nothing on that, eh? And here's the sort of people I practice on. Old Leathersham, now--he has a corking chateau--French Renaissance. And Mrs. Charity Givens--she has a Georgian shack. And, oh, yes, here's Iva Payne. She's one of my most profitable patients--sick all the time."

Warble studied the pictures.

"What expensive people," she said, "dear--so dear."

"Yes, great people. You'd love 'em. They're just layin' for you. Come on, Warble, will you?"

"Yop," she murmured, from his coat pocket, "Sweet, so sweet."

CHAPTER III

Among the rolling stock of a great railroad, a moving mass of steel. A soft sludge as it came noiselessly to rest beneath the glazed chintz awnings of the Butterfly Center station.

A faint scent of chypre from Petticoat's cigarette as he alit.

From his private train, which had slithered across the intervening spaces and slid into its moorings as butter slides from a hot plate.

It is September, cool, green and well-sprinkled.

The obviously important man was followed by a yellow-topped, rose-cheeked girl, whose eyes were all blue and a yard wide as she looked about.

About what?

About eighteen.

They were Dr. Big Bill Petticoat and his bride, Warble.

They had been married and had spent their honeymoon in riotous loving.

It had been transforming. Warble had been frightened to discover how hungry she could be even on a wedding trip.

Bill had mused to himself; what's the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? One honeymoon. And now they had reached their home town. People were not altogether new to Warble. She had seen them before. But these were her own people, to bathe and encourage and adorn--and, they didn't seem to need it.

They distressed her. They were so smart. She had always held that there is no style in America, no chic effects out of Paris.

But here on the terrace of the simple little hewn stone station were hordes of men and women who seemed to be, mentally, morally and physically, literally butterflies.

"Isn't there any way of waking them up?" she begged of Petticoat, grabbing his arm and shaking him.

"These guys? Wake 'em up? What for? They're happy."

"But they're so smug--no, that isn't what I mean. They're so stick-in-the-mud."

"Look here, Warble, you want to get over your fool idea that because a woman is slender she isn't adorable. These folks are up to date, snuff and mischief."

"I know, that's what's biting me. Life seems so hard for them."

"Oh, they don't mind it. Now you must meet the bunch. They're all down here to meet their husbands or something just as good. Now you behave yourself."

"Yop."

She had a grip on herself. She was ready to kiss and be friends with them all. But she was scared at the rackety pack who ballyhooed like Coney Island and surged down upon her like a Niagara Falls.

She had the impression that all the men had soft voices, large, embracing arms, gimlet eyes and bored, impersonal smiles. She knew they were taking her in. Their pleasant hoots and yells of greeting overcame her.

"Oh, pleathe--pleathe," she lisped.

In her fresh frilled dimity and soft sash of baby-blue Surah, her rolled white socks disclosing but a few tantalizing inches of seashell-pink calf, Warble stood, eyes cast down, a pretty, foolish thing,

As soft as young,
As gay as soft,

and, to a man, the male population of Butterfly Center fell for her.

Not so the remainder of the citizens.

One of the men was yelling at Petticoat:

"Hop into my car, Bill, Don't see yours--I'll tote the bride-person you've got there--with joy and gladness." Warble looked at the yeller.

"Can't quite place me, chick, can you?" he grinned at her. "Well I'm only old Goldwin Leathersham--no use for me in the world but to spend money. Want me to spend some on you? Here's my old thing--step up here, Marigold, and be introduced. She's really nicer than she looks, Mrs. Petticoat."

"Indeed I'm not," Marigold Leathersham cried gaily, "I couldn't be--nobody could be!"

She came running--a beautiful, slim young woman, with a wealth of expensive looking gold hair, white and gold teeth that broke into a lavish smile. Her voice was rich and though she looked above, away from and through Warble, yet she saw her.

"So glad to welcome you, you pretty baby," she chirruped. "You're going to love us all, aren't you?"

"Yop," said Warble, and smiled her engaging smile.

"You bet she'll love us," declared Leathersham, "she'll make the world go

round! Hello, Little One," he turned to pat the cheek of a white-haired, red-faced old lady, who hawk-eyed and hawk-nosed, stood by, listening in. This, Mrs. Petticoat, is our Lady Bountiful, Mrs. Charity Givens--noted for her generosity. She ostentatiously heads all Donation Lists, and she's going to start a rest cure where your husband's unsuccessful cases may die in peace. And here's one of the cases. Hello, Iva Payne!"

"Hello," languidly responded a girl like a long pale lily--a Burne-Jones type, who sometimes carried around a small stained-glass window to rest her head against.

"Are you really Bill's wife?" she asked, a little disinterestedly, of Warble.

"Yop," said Warble, and made a face at her.

"How quaint," said Iva.

"Whoopee, Baby! Here we are," and Petticoat rescued his bride from the middle of a crowd and yanked her toward his car.

The car was a museum piece, and as Warble caromed into its cushions she felt that her lines had fallen in pleasant places.

That was the way Fate came to Warble. In big fat chunks, in slathers. Unexpected, sudden, inescapable--that's Fate all over.

"I shall like Mr. Leathersham--I shall call him Goldie. They're all nice and friendly--the men. But this town! Oh, my Heavens! This Jewel Casket--this Treasure Table! I can't live through it! This Floating Island of a Topsy Charlotte!" Her husband nudged her. "You look like you had a pain," he said; "Scared? I don't expect you to fit in at first. You have to get eased into things. It's different from Pittsburgh. But you'll come to like it--love is so free here, and the smartest people on earth."

She winked at him. "I love you for your misunderstanding. I'm just dog-tired. And too many chocolates. Give me a rest, dear. I'm all in from wear sheeriness."

She laid her feet in his lap and snuggled into the corner of the pearl-colored upholstery.

She was ready for her new home, beautiful, celebrated Ptomaine Haul. Petticoat told her that his mother had been living with him, but had fled incontinently on hearing a description of Warble.

The bride chuckled and smiled engagingly as the car slithered round a corner and stopped under the _porte cochere_ of a great house set in the midst of a landscape.

Neo-Colonial, of a purity unsurpassed by the Colonists themselves.

A park stretching in front; gardens at the back; steps up to a great porch,

and a front door copied from the Frary house in Old Deerfield.

A great hall--at its back twin halves of a perfect staircase. To the right, a charming morning room, where Petticoat led his bride.

"You like it? It's not inharmonious. I left it as it is--in case you care to rebuild or redecorate."

"It's a sweet home--" she was touched by his indifference. "So artistic."

Petticoat winced, but he was a polite chap, and he only said, carelessly, "Yes, home is where the art is," and let it go at that.

In the hall and the great library she was conscious of vastness and magnificent distances, but, she thought, if necessary, I can use roller skates.

As she followed Petticoat and the current shift of servants upstairs, she quavered to herself like the fat little gods of the hearth.

She took her husband into her arms, and felt that at last she had realized her one time dreams of the moving pictures, ay, even to the final close-up.

What mattered, so long as she could paw at the satin back of his shirt, and admire his rich and expensive clothing.

"Dear--so dear--" she murmured.

CHAPTER IV

"The Leathershams are giving a ball for us to-night," Petticoat said, casually, as he powdered his nose in the recesses of his triplicate mirror.

"A ball?"

"Oh, I don't mean a dance--I mean--er--well, what you'd call a sociable, I suppose."

"Oh, ain't we got fun!"

"And, I say, Warble, I've got to chase a patient now; can you hike about a bit by yourself?"

"Course I can. Who's your patient?"

"Avery Goodman--the rector of St. Judas' church. He will eat terrapin made out of--you know what. And so, he's all tied up in knots with ptomaine poisoning and I've got to straighten him out. It means a lot to us, you know."

"I know; skittle."

Left alone, Warble proceeded systematically to examine the interior of Ptomaine Haul. She gazed about her own bedroom and a small part of its exquisite beauty dawned upon her. It was an exact copy of Marie Antoinette's and the delicately carved furniture and pale blue upholstery and hangings harmonized with the painted domed ceiling and paneled walls.

The dressing table bore beautiful appointments of ivory, as solid as Warble's own dome and from the Cupid-held canopy over the bed to the embroidered satin foot-cushions, it was top hole.

The scent was of French powders, perfumes and essences and sachets, such as Warble had not smelled since before the war.

"Can you beat it," she groaned. "How can I live with doodads like this?" She saw the furniture as a circle of hungry restaurant customers ready to eat her up. She kicked the dozen lace pillows off the head of the bed.

"No utility anywhere," she cried. "Everything futile, inutile, brutal! I hate it! I hate it! Why did I ever--"

And then she remembered she was a Petticoat now, a lace, frilled Petticoat--not one of those that Oliver Herford so pathetically dubbed "the short and simple flannels of the poor."

Yes, she was now a Petticoat--one of the aristocratic Cotton-Petticoats, washable, to be sure, but a dressy Frenchy Petticoat, and as such she must take her place on the family clothesline.

She drifted from oriel window to casement, and on to a great becurtained and becushioned bay, and looked out on the outlook.

She saw gardens like the Tuileries and Tuilerums, soft, shining pools, little skittering fountains, marble Cupids and gay-tinted flowers. This was the scene for her to look down upon and live up to.

"I mustn't! I mustn't! I'm nervous this afternoon! Am I sick?..... Good Lord, I hope it isn't that! Not now! I'd hate it--I'd be scared to death! Some day--but, please, kind Fate, not now! I don't want to go down now with ptomaine poisoning! Not till after I've had my dinner! I'm going out for a walk."

When Warble had plodded along for six hours, she had pretty well done up the town.

Ptomaine Street, which took its name from her husband's own residence, was a wide, leafy avenue with a double row of fine old trees on each side. They were Lebbek trees, and the whole arrangement was patterned after the avenue which Josephine built for Napoleon, out to the Mena House.

She passed the homes of the most respectable citizens. Often they were set back from the road, and the box hedges or tall iron fences prevented

her from seeing the houses. But she saw enough and sped on to the more interesting business and shopping section of Butterfly Center.

She passed Ariel Inn, the hotel being like a Swiss Chalet, perched on some convenient rocks that rose to a height above street level. A few fairly nimble chamois were leaping over these rocks and Warble heard a fairy-like chime of bells as afternoon tea was announced.

A man in an artist's smock sauntered across the street. A palette on one thumb, he scratched his chin with the other. A hearse, its long box filled with somebody, crawled down the block. A dainty Sedan with a woman's idle face at its window wafted by. From a Greek Temple came the sound of Interpretative Dancing, and the applause of perfunctory hands.

She wanted to elope. Her own ideas of utility, efficiency, and economy were being shattered--broken in pieces like a potter's vessel. Her sense of proportion, her instinct for relative values, her abhorrence of waste motion, her inborn system and method, all were swept away as a thief in the night. Could she reform this giddy whirl? Could she bring chaos out of cosmos? Was her own ego sufficient to egg her on in her chosen work?

She haed her doots.

She maundered down the street on one side--back on the other.

Dudie's Drug-store was like unto a Turkish Mosque. Minaret and pinnaret, battlement and shuttle-door, it was a perfect drug-store, nobly planned. The long flight of steps leading up to its ptortal was a masterpiece in the step line.

Inside, the Soda Pagoda was a joy of temple bells and soft, sweet drinks, while at the prescription counter, the line formed on the right, to get Dr. Petticoat's prescriptions filled for their ptomaines.

A Moldavian Incense Shop was the barber's; a half-timbered house sold English-built clothes; a brick affair of Georgian influences and splendid lines, housed the hardware needed by the Butterflies, and the milliner's was a replica of the pyramid of Cestus.

The bank was the Vatican, with Swiss guards in the doorway.

Perpetual waste motion! In all the town not one building that connoted to Warble the apotheosis of efficiency shown by the King Alfred tossing cakes in the window of Bairns' Restaurant. Not a dozen buildings that even suggested use in addition to their beauty.

And the street was cluttered with trees in tubs, window boxes, sudden little fountains or statues; gilded wicker birdcages on tall poles--songs issuing therefrom.

Arbors, covered with pink Dorothy Perkinses, here and there by the curbside. And, worst of all, people sitting idle in the arbors. Idle!

She wouldn't have cared so much, if the people had been busy--even one of them. She fought herself. "I must be wrong. It can't be as silly as it looks! It can't!"

She went home and found Petticoat waiting for her.

"Like the burg, eh? Great stuff, what? Not an eyesore inside the city wall. Good work, I'll megaphone."

Warble sat down in an easy-going chair--so easy, it slid across the room with her, and collided with a life-sized Chinese lady of yellow stone.

"Yes," Warble responded, "it's very uninteresting."

CHAPTER V

Goldwin Leathersham was a great Captain of Industry. In fact, he put the dust in industry, or, at least, he took it out of it. He got it, anyway.

His home was an Aladdin's Palace, with a slight influence of Solomon's Temple. Gold was his keynote, and he was never off the key.

When our Petticoats arrived at the party, they were met by gold-laced footmen, who whisked them into shape and passed them along.

Warble found herself in a white and gold salon, so vast, that she felt like a goldfish out of water. The place looked as if Joseph Urban had designed it after he had died and gone to Golconda. Whatever wasn't white was gold, and the other way round. The gold piano had only white keys, and the draperies were cloth of gold with bullion fringe. All real, too--no rolled or plated stuff.

A huge coat-of-arms in a gold frame announced that Mr. Leathersham was descended from the Gold Digger Indians, a noble ancestry indeed; and it was no secret that his wife had played in "The Gold-diggers," during its second decade run.

Marigold Leathersham was a charming hostess, and greeted Warble with a shriek of welcome. "You duck," she cried; "how heavenly of you to dress so well."

Warble was simply attired in a white pussy-willow silk underslip. In her haste and excitement she had forgotten to add the gown meant to go over it, and as she wore no jewels save the chased gold lingerie clasps at her shoulders, the result was a simplicity as charming as it was unintentional.

And so she made a hit.

That was the way things came to Warble; a hit--a social success--and all because she forgot to put on her frock.

She mingled with the glittering throng of gilded youth, of golden lads and girls, of gilt-edged married people, and found herself in the arms of Goldwin Leathersham, her host.

"Here comes the bride," he shouted, as he piloted her about and introduced everybody to her.

"This demure little beauty," he said, "is Daisy Snow. Note her sweet, pure face and wide-eyed, innocent gaze."

"It is all so new--so wonderful--" Miss Snow breathed, "I'm a debutante, you know, and I have scarcely butterflied out of my chrysalis yet. How splendid the Leathersshams are. He has a heart of gold. Oh, he is such a good man, he says his life motto is the Golden Rule." "And Mrs. Leathersham?" asked Warble.

"Marigold? Oh, yes, she's as good as gold, too. We're firm friends."

Warble was agog to mingle, so she moved on.

Le Grand Paynter, a celebrated Cubic artist, fascinated her with his flowing locks, flowing tie and marvelous flow of conversation. He asked to paint her as a Semi-nude Descending a Ladder, but she only said she must refer him to her Petticoat.

Freeman Scattergood, the well-known philanthropist was chatting with Mrs. Charity Givens, who was the champion Subscription List Header. Many had tried to oust her from this enviable position but without success. Near them stood Avery Goodman, the rector, and he was deeply engaged in a flirtation with Miss May Young, one of his choir girls.

Manley Knight, a returned soldier, was resplendent with a Croix de Guerre, a Hot Cross Bun and many other Noughts and Crosses.

Warble fingered them in her light way.

"Isn't he splendid!" babbled Daisy Snow the _ingenue_; "Oh, how wonderful to offer one's life for glory! You can fairly see the heroism bubble out of his eyes!"

"How you admire him!" said Warble.

"Yes, but he doesn't care for me."

"Not specially," admitted Manley Knight. "Yes," Daisy said. "He thinks me too ignorant and unsophisticated--and I am. Now, there's Lotta Munn, the heiress--she's more in his line. But Ernest Swayne is devoted to Lotta. I think it will be a real love match--like the Trues."

"The Trues?" asked Warble, politely.

"Yes," and she glanced toward a very devoted looking pair sitting apart

from the rest, on a small divan. "They're wonderful! Herman True is the most marvelous husband you ever saw. He never speaks to anyone but his wife. And she's just the same. She was Faith Loveman, you know. And they've been married two years and are still honeymoon lovers! Ah, what a fate!"

Daisy sighed, a sweet little-girly sigh, and blushed like a slice of cold boiled ham.

But this Who's Whosing was interrupted by a footman with a tray of cocktails.

Daisy Snow refused, of course, as became a debutante so did Judge Drinkwater, who stood near by, frowning upon the scene, he being a Prohibitionist.

A sickly looking lady next to him achieved several, and Warble asked Daisy who she might be.

"Oh, that's Iva Payne--you met her, you know. She's very delicate, a semi-invalid, under the care of specialists all the time. I don't exactly know what her malady is, but it's something very interesting to the doctors. There's scarcely anything she can eat--I believe she brings her own specially prepared food to parties.

"She seems to relish the cock-a-whoops all right," Warble commented.

"I understand the doctors prescribe stimulants for her--she is not at all strong. They give her artificial strength, she says."

"Yes, she seems to be strong for 'em. Don't you take any?"

"Oh no! I'm a debutante. And mother says she wants to be with me when I take my first cocktail and smoke my first cigarette."

"Dear girl, Daisy, so fresh and unspoiled! Her mother is one of a thousand."

This from Manley Knight, who constituted himself Daisy's proxy in the matter of cocktails and drank all that would have been Daisy's had her mother permitted.

Goldwin Leathersham seemed to be acting as proxy for some debutante also, for he seemed to feel pretty bobbish, but Warble was only slightly interested in the whole matter.

She rolled her Wedgwooden eyes about, hoping the horde would be herded toward the dining-room. But no such luck.

Instead they drifted in the opposite direction and, swept along with the crowd, Warble found herself in one of a serried series of gilt chairs, facing a platform as large as a theater stage.

An erudite looking man who appeared on the platform received tumultous

applause.

"Who is he?" Warble whispered to her neighbor, who chanced to be Avery Goodman, "an impersonator?"

"Lord, no; it's Wunstone, the great scientist--rants on Fourth Avenue dimensions, or something like that."

In a tone of forceful mildness the speaker began: "It must be conceded that, other things being equal, and granting the investiture of all insensate communication, that a psychic moment may or may not, in accordance with what under no circumstances could be termed irrelevancy, become warily regarded as a coherent symbol by one obviously of a trenchant humor. But, however, in proof of a smouldering discretion, no feature is entitled to less exorbitant honor than the unquenchable demand of endurance.

"Though, of course, other things being equal, and granting the investiture of all insensate communication, no feature is entitled, in accordance with what under no circumstances could be termed irrelevancy, to become warily regarded as a coherent symbol. And doubtless in proof of a smouldering discretion, and in accordance with one obviously of a trenchant humor, it may or may not be warily regarded.

"Though it cannot be denied that the true relevancy of thought to psychic action is largely dependent on the ever increasing forces of disregarded symbolisms. And this again proves the pantheistic power of doubt, considered for the moment and for the subtle purposes of our argument as faith. For, granting that two and two are six, the corollary reasoning must be that no premise is or may be capable of such conclusion as will render it sublunary to its agreed parallel.

"But this view is ultra and should be adopted with caution.

"We are therefore forced to the conclusion that pure altruism is impossible in connection with neo-psychology."

There was more, but it was at that point that Warble went to sleep.

She was awakened later by the high notes of a celebrated Metropolitan soprano, who had consented to exchange a few of her liquid notes for Goldwin Leathersham's yellow-backed ones.

Tired, hungry and sleepy, Warble fidgeted in her little gilt chair, but the music went inexorably on.

It was followed by the appearance of a Neo Poet.

This man wore eccentric dress of some sort, and as he waited for the applause to melt away, he stood, absent-mindedly picking crumbs out of his beard.

By subtle hint of auto-suggestion this made Warble hungrier than ever and

she looked around for Petticoat. But he was busy flirting with Daisy Snow, and it was not Warble's way to cut in.

In hollow tones the performer read extracts, excerpts and exceptions from the works of Amy Lynn, Carl Sandpiper and Padriac, the Colyumist, and Warble went back to sleep.

There was more, but no merrier, and when at last the platform was cleared for the last time, the guests were refreshed by the passing of a small glass of punch and a wafer to each.

Then they went, with a flutter of silk stockings and twinkling slipper buckles, and a medley of shrieked goodbys.

Warble and Petticoat reached home.

"Howja like 'em?" he asked.

"I'm so hungry," she wailed.

"Oh, Warble, you ought to be more careful about eating in public. It isn't done. Watch Iva Payne--she doesn't."

"Oh, Bill--" Warble began to cry. "I want to go back to the restaurant--"

"No, no--now, Cream Puff, I didn't mean to lambaste you. But they're a smart crowd--"

Warble let two tears rest, glistening, in her lower eyelashes, rolled up her eyes, pulled down the corners of her hibiscus flower mouth, and waited to be kissed.

She was.

* * * * *

Up in Bill's bedroom. Gray silken walls, smoked pearl furniture, a built-in English bed, with gray draperies.

Through a cloth of silver portiere, a bathroom done in gray rough stone. Oxidized silver plumbing exposure.

No pictures on the walls, save one--a barbaric Russian panel by Larrovitch.

At the windows, layers of gauze, chiffon, silk--all gray.

A great circular divan was somewhere about, and as he sank down upon it and drew her with him into its engulfing down, he patched up the quarrel.

"They took to you," he said, "you went like hot cakes!"

It was an unfortunate allusion, and Warble, smiling with an engaging

smile, wheedled, "Pleathe, pleathe--"

"No," Petticoat said, inexorably, "if you eat all the time you'll get to look like that soprano. Howja like that?"

"Do you care if I'm fat, Bill?"

"Me? Why, I wouldn't care if you were as big as a house. You're my--well, you're my soulmate."

"Oh, I'm so had and glappy! It's sweet to be yours. You must excuse my appetite--you're the only husband I have. My own Pill Betticoat!"

He kissed her in his eccentric fashion, and with her plump arms about his neck, she forgot all about Ptomaine Street.

CHAPTER VI

Warble's own maid was named Beer.

A French thing--so slim she seemed nothing but a spine, but supplied with slender, talkative arms and a pair of delicate silk legs that displayed more or less of themselves as the daily hint from Paris reported skirts going up or down as the case might be.

A scant black costume and a touch of white apron completed the picture, and Warble played with her as a child with a new doll.

Beer wanted to patronize Warble, tried to do so, but found it impossible. Her patronage rolled off of Mrs. Bill Petticoat like hard sauce off a hot apple dumpling.

"Do you get enough to eat, Beer?" her mistress asked her.

"Wee, maddum," the maid replied, in her pretty War French. "I eat but a small."

"Well, don't drop to pieces, that's all," warned Warble. As to personal care and adornment the hitherto neglected education of Warble Petticoat was in Beer's hands. And she handed it out with unstinted lavishness.

That was the way things came to Warble; in slathers--in big fat chunks. In avalanches and rushing torrents.

Beer engineered all her new wardrobe, and received sealed proposals for its construction.

Beer taught her the mysteries of the toilette table, and once initiated into this entrancing art, Warble let herself go in the matter of cosmetics and make-ups, and could scarce wait for Beer's afternoon out, to dabble about by herself.

Beer taught her how to wear jewelry, and directed what pieces she should ask Petticoat for next.

Altogether, Warble was trying out things--but carefully, as a good housewife tries out lard.

And she was not yet certain as to the results. Environment has to reckon, now and then with heredity.

Warble, at soul, all for utility, economy, diligence and efficiency, transplated to Butterfly Center, with its keynote of careless idleness, waste motion and extravagance.

One must win out. Had she a Dempsey of a heredity against a Carpentier of an environment? Or was it the other way round?

She planned to reform Butterfly Center, to do away with the street statues, the useless patches of flowers; tear down and rebuild the ridiculous classic architecture of many of the shops and substitute good solid livable houses for the castles and chateaux, the barracks and bungalows that adorned the residence section.

These reforms she meant to bring about shortly, but first, she must begin with her home.

In her pride of being a Petticoat she loved every detail of Ptomaine Haul. Yet she knew it did not express herself, it was not the keynote of her own Warbling personality.

What to do.

She sat in her boudoir, its mauve walls and gold Japanese screens backgrounding her plump prettiness, as she lolled on a gold brocade _chaise longue_.

She glanced out at the peacocks strutting in the Italian garden and listened to the rooks cawing in the cypresses between the marble urns on the terrace steps.

It was a big proposition to change all that. To turn the bird sticks into pruning hooks and the bird baths into plowshares.

Could she do it?

Doubtful.

She went out into the hall and looked over the rail of the great rotunda. Rugs hung from the rail, as it might be a Turkish Monday.

Below, she could see the lake in the front hall, also she could glimpse the armored bronze Petticoats guarding the entrance that led to the corridor that led to the hall leading into the dining-room.

It was well nigh hopeless.

Warble sighed. Then she rang for Beer and ordered some French pastry and a cup of chocolate.

Revived and revived, Warble decided on a mad dash for reform.

Ordering Beer to dress her quickly, she did all she could to help, and soon, in a daring combination of canary, black and coral, she was on her way to the shops.

She achieved what is known as a utility box, and which is compounded of matting and a few bamboo strips.

This she caused to be set up in her boudoir.

Came Petticoat.

No oral observations, but the next day an antique Florentine chest, carved by Dante, replaced the box.

"Just as utile," Bill remarked, "and a lot more expensive. Kiss me."

That is the way the Petticoats of this world decree, and that is the way the Warbles submit.

That Thursday afternoon she was in love with her husband. She toddled into his room to talk to him. She was in pastel chiffon boudoir jambieres picked out with rosebuds. She sat, cross-legged, on one of his gray satin floor pillows and looked up at him.

Petticoat was just going out and he sat before the mirror, earnestly adjusting a hair net over his permanent.

"Hello, _Fruit Mousse_," he said, half absent-mindedly, as he went on adjusting.

Big Bill Petticoat was far from being effeminate. He was found of aesthetics and anaesthetics, and his chief interests in life were beauty and his big bills.

"What's the use of beauty, if a thing isn't useful?" Warble would ask, and Petticoat would reply, "What's the use of use, anyway? There's no use in having anything that isn't beautiful."

And as the house was under Petticoat rule, Big Bill won out.

"You must have a party, Warble," Petticoat said, as he fitted a long, slim cigarette into a long, slim holder.

"I'd rather have a baby," and she looked up at him inquiringly.

"Honest, Warbie, I can't afford it. I've lots of money, but we take a lot of keeping ourselves, and to keep a baby means almost a whole extra establishment. Let's wait till I've saved up a bit, or we have a windfall. Leathersham owes me a small fortune for his cook's ptomaine cases--she's always getting poisoned with her imported canned things--but Goldie's slow pay, and too, I want to make a few improvements on the place. I'm thinking of bringing over a Moorish Courtyard intact--nice, eh?"

"What's it good for?" demanded Warble. "We've done our courting, and anyway--look here, Bill, there's only three things I can do. Have a baby--"

"Cut it out, Warb; I haven't the means just now. And it might be twins."

"That's so. Well, the second thing is to reform this town. It's going to the dogs--to little, silly Pokes and Poms. I can save it, and correct its ways and put it on a sound utilitarian basis."

"Don't believe you could do that."

"Can do. But the third trick is to flop over to their side and be like the town people myself."

Petticoat laughed outright.

"Nixy on that, Warble, my duck. You'd have to reduce."

"I speck I should. Well, then the reform act for mine. I've got to do something, Pet, to keep amused and interested."

"That's what I said. Have a party."

"I will. And it will be part of the reform. These people are too highbrow. Too soulful. Too artistic--" "Warble! How many times have I told you never to use that word! Now, look here, if you want to play at reforming, go ahead, nobody will interfere with you. But where'll you get time? You spend most of your waking hours in slumber, and the rest, eating. You're a sweet, lovely, cuddly thing, but if you keep on, some day you'll find you can't get your kimono together."

"Then I'll wear two. But, Bill, I'm not so big, you know."

Warble up, and parading the room with a martial air.

"You're a perfect Bellona!" Petticoat said, smiling at her.

"A Bologna! Oh, you horrid thing! But that reminds me I haven't had sausage lately. I must speak to cook. Now, about my party."

"Have a good one while you're about it. I might import a Spanish Ballet--"

"You might do nothing of the sort! This is to be my party, and I shall run it to suit myself."

"All right, Tutti Frutti; you have no subtlety or poetry in your soul-- indeed, I doubt if you have a soul--but you're a dear and a sweet--"

"Bill, I've an idea! Build bureaus right down to the floor and then collar buttons can't roll under them!" "Fine idea! Better patent it. Must go. Goodby."

"Wait a minute. Mrs. Holm Boddy is coming to see me to-day. What's she like?"

"Oh, she's a hen-minded Hetty with cabriole legs. Don't bother with her much. They're lower case people--tin pergola and pebble garden sort. And early Victorian bathrooms. You won't like her--freeze her out."

"All righty. Say--Billy dear--has you any choclums?"

"Not for little gourmands," he took her in his arms. "I say, Warbie, you promised to cut out sweets. Look here."

He led her to the picture gallery where his simpering or frowning ancestors looked down in painted disapproval.

They were all slender--wasp-waisted ladies, long lean men. Not a fatty in the bunch.

Big Bill said nothing, his painted morals adorned their own tale.

"I don't care!" Warble exploded, angrily. "If you don't give me enough to eat, I'll leave your bed and board and put a notice in the paper. And you needn't flaunt your Petticoats in my face! I don't care that for them!"

She snapped a dimpled pink thumb and forefinger at the whole exhibit, made a face at the skinniest one of all, and then sneaked casually into Bill's arms.

"Nice, nice," she cooed, patting his mastoid process. "Run along now, and I'll plan my party."

* * * * *

"That Boddy woman," remarked Beer, as she dressed Warble; "she is a pest-- a pill! Wait, Maddum, I beg you! I've only rouged one of your cheeks!"

"That's enough," said Warble, inattentively, and she danced down stairs to freeze out her caller.

"I've been meaning to come for some time," Mrs. Holm Boddy said, "but I thought I'd give you a chance to get a little used to your new grandeur. Quite a change for you, isn't it?"

"No," said Warble, "it's rather a come down. I've always been very grand. Tell me about yourself."

"Oh, I'm the old-fashioned wife and mother. Devoted to my home, and my family. I deplore the modern tendency to neglect one's own fireside."

"Yes, I should think you'd be happier there than anywhere else."

Warble gazed at her guest. She was a tall, angular woman, so gaunt that her bones rattled. Warble wondered if Bill would really like her to be like that.

"Oh, I am. My dear husband, my darling children--you ought to have a lot of children, Mrs. Petticoat."

"Yes, I shall, when we can afford it. My husband isn't very well off just now, you see."

"You live very extravagantly. Look at those rugs, now. Rugs cost fearfully."

"Don't you have any?"

"Oh, no. We don't waste money that way."

"Bare floors?"

"No, carpets. More homey, you know. Nice Brussels in the parlor--real Body Brussels--Bigelow--and in the bedrooms, Ingrain. Oh, the hominess of a new-laid Ingrain carpet, with lots of fresh straw under it! You acquainted with Avery Goodman, the Rector?"

"I've met him."

"Splendid man--spiritual-minded and all that. Fine preacher, too. Very soulful. I often sob right through his sermons. Better go hear him."

"My husband is a busy man--we haven't time for church."

"No, spouse not. Doctors are kept on the jump. Specially specialists. And I know your husband is busy. Say, is there any truth in the report that he pays the grocers and delicatessen men to get--you know--doubtful canned goods, and not too fresh sea foods and all that--so there'll be more ptomaine cases?" "What a good idea!" Warble cried. "I had not heard of it, but if Bill does that he's more efficient than I thought him!"

"I spose he's terribly in love with you?"

"Bill? Oh, yes. We adore each other."

"I didn't know. The Petticoats are all so thin--"

"Yes, a change is always pleasant." Warble gave her engaging smile.

"Maybe. That Daisy Snow now--she's so pretty _and_ slender. Dr. Petticoat seems mighty fond of her."

"Well, you know what doctors are. Nice to everybody, of course. There's no telling who'll have ptomaine poisoning next."

"Oh, yes, you can always tell that. It's sure to be Iva Payne. She's awful attractive, too. You must be worried about your man, Mrs. Petticoat."

"I do worry a lot. It keeps my flesh down. Tell me more to worry about."

"Well, there's Lotta Munn, of course. I suppose you haven't a fortune of your own?"

"Oh, yes; I'm enormously rich in my own right."

"You are! Why, where did your husband get you?"

"He got me out of a mail catalogue." Warble made a face at her. "Must you go, Mrs. Boddy?" she rose. "I won't ask you to come again, as I know how you love your own home and fireside. Goodby."

Though Mrs. Holm Boddy put up a strong resistance, Warble pushed her out of the front door and slammed it after her.

"That woman has left finger marks on my nice clean soul," she said, as she went down to see the cook about the sausage.

CHAPTER VII

She had reached the peak of excitement in a confident decision that her party should be a success.

In the morning she interviewed the cook.

"You can spread yourself on the feast, Francois," she said, "have any old menu you like so long as it's edible and enough of it. But especially I want you to make for me one hundred custard pies."

The French chef looked puzzled. He was an expensive chef and part of his duty was to look puzzled at any plain-named dish.

"But, Madame, I do not know ze custard pie. Is it a creme pate?"

"No, it isn't a krame puttay, nor creamed potatoes, but cus-tard pie--see? _Pie_! Oh, don't stand there looking like a whitewashed clown! Get out of my way, I'll make them myself!"

Flinging on one of the chef's jackets and aprons, Warble flew at the job and with a battalion of helpers breaking eggs and skimming cream, she herself tossed the flour and shortening together for the crust.

Efficiency scored and in an incredibly short space of time eight dozen custard pies were cooling their heels in the pantry windows.

"Not to be served with the supper," Warble warned the butler, "when I want them brought in I'll tell you."

Beer dressed Warble for the party, Petticoat standing by and advising.

The gown was a few wisps of henna-colored chiffon which fitfully blew, half concealed, half disclosed a scant slip of jade green satin.

Flesh-colored stockings, Petticoat decreed, and henna slippers with carved jade buckles.

"Now, her hair--" he mused, leaning on his folded arms over the back of a chair.

He walked slowly round Warble.

"Oh, wpose it up anyway," he said, "and tangle some jade beads in it. She'll stand that."

His orders were carried out and Beer clasped her hands in silent ecstasy at the result of the combined efforts of herself and her master.

"Some day, Warble," Bill said, "I'll teach you how to dress becomingly."

"And I'll teach you how to undress becomingly," said Beer, not wanting to be outclassed in her own game.

Warble waved Petticoat out of the room, dismissed Beer with a simple "Get out!" and then quickly flung off the clothes she wore and hopped into a little frock of white organdie and cherries.

She wadded some hair over each ear, piled up the rest in a moppy coil and crowned it with a wreath of cherries.

The party came.

"Good Heavens!" Warble thought, as she looked at the smart, bored crowd, "have I got to bring these hifalutin creatures down to earth? I don't know that I can make them laugh, but I'll give them a jolt!"

She did.

Her cherries bobbing, two long-stemmed ones held between her teeth, she flew around like a hen with its head off.

"You see," she explained, "it's a Mack Sennett party, everybody puts things down everybody's back. Like this--and here are the things."

From a tray brought by a footman, Warble selected a fuzzy caterpillar and turning quickly dropped it down inside the soft collar of Trymie

Icanspoon, a poet, who would dress as he pleased.

He went into amusing spasms and everybody took something from the tray. There were cold raw oysters, bits of ice, thistles, cooked spaghetti and plain granulated sugar. They had to put them down the backs of the men only, because the fashionably dressed ladies hadn't any backs to put them down. You can't put an oyster down two crossed strings of pearls.

It caused great hilarity to see the Reverend Goodman standing on his head, trying to lose a red-hot silver dollar; and Daisy Snow, whose debutante frock was available for the purpose, wriggled beneath the tickling crawling of a large but harmless spider.

Warble was almost in hysterics over the funny antics of Goldwin Leathersham down whose loose and ample collar she had herself poured a glass of water on two seidlitz powders.

"Next," she cried, clapping her hands, "we'll have an artistic game. Here it comes."

Lackeys and minions brought in pails of kalsomine, of various tints, some of pale pastel shades, others of deep rich hues. One was given to each guest, and each was provided with a beautiful new whitewash brush.

"Now," Warble explained, her blue eyes dimpling with delight, "you each make a splash on the wall--a big, hit-or-miss splash. Then we each try to evolve a lovely picture by few bold strokes."

This was great fun.

Manley Knight, with a mighty splash of color that landed on a Fragonard panel, had quite a good start for a "Storm at Sea." He worked it up with fine technique and you would have been surprised at the result.

Iva Payne took a splash from several different pails thereby achieving a Cubist landscape. It was entitled "High Tide off the Three-mile Limit," and was a startling success.

Daisy Snow, timid little dear, made but a tiny daub and worked it up carefully.

"That," she said, "is a miniature of Big Bill."

All in all, it was gay sport, and even Mrs. Charity Givens took part, though she protested she was no artist and couldn't even draw a straight line.

The next performance was a contest between Adam Goodsport and Avery Goodman.

Bets were made on the two contestants before the betters knew what the scrap was to be.

"It's a character sketch," Warble explained. "Mr. Goodsport tries to blacken Mr. Goodman's character, while the Rector tries to whiten Mr. Goodsport's character."

Avery Goodman was then presented with a bag of flour and Adam Goodsport was handed a bag of soot.

They went at it hand over fist, and in a few moments the blacking and whiting process was so complete that both were pronounced perfect transformations and all bets were off.

Faces, hands and clothes were alike befloured and besooted, until Goodman was a veritable Blackamoor while Adam Goodsport looked like a Marcelline.

A few eyebrows indicated a suspicion that Big Bill Petticoat's bride was a Little Mischief, but nobody said anything about it.

"If I can only reform them," Warble thought to herself, "if I can only make them like and enjoy this innocent fun instead of wearing their poor brains out over capitalised Art and Literature."

"Now," she said, briskly, "we're going to play a game I learned in Shanghai. All take off your shoes and stockings. No one excused--come on--off with them."

Beer and a few other maids came in to assist the ladies, the men were properly valeted, and the barefooted crowd sat waiting further orders.

Daisy Snow made a remark about being a maiden with reluctant feet, but nobody noticed it.

Several seemed rather relieved than otherwise at the condition imposed upon them.

"Now," said Warble, but before she could go further, Adam Goodsport butted in with:

"Oh, please, Mrs. Petticoat--oh, please! Such an opportunity! May never occur again! Oh, can't I--may I not--oh, dear lady, do say yes--"

"Lordy, what do you want to do? Speak out, man!"

"Why, you see, I am a solist--like a palmist you know--but as to feet. I studied solistry in Asia Minor and I know it from the ground up. Oh, please, Mrs. Petticoat, let me read your sole!"

"Do," cried Warble, "love to have you."

She plumped herself into a pillowed divan, and held her little pink feet straight out in front of her.

Goodsport, sitting on a cushion at her feet, took one and scrutinized the sole.

"The Solar system," he began, "is interesting in the extreme. It was invented by Solon, though Platoe also theorized on the immortality of the sole. His ideas, however have been discarded by modern footmen.

"Locke, in his treatise On the Human Understanding, discusses the subject fully and with many footnotes, and old Samuel Foote himself cast footlights on the subject."

"Now, looky here," Warble objected, "I won't have a lecture in my house! I object to anything of an intellectual nature."

"This has nothing to do with the intellect," Adam assured her. "Quite the reverse, now, you listen. It's really interesting. The palmist may claim to read the true character from the lines of the hand, but it is only by solistry that the real sole is laid bare and the character of a subject in any walk of life is exposed. The lines of the sole are greatly indicative of character, for all traits must draw the line somewhere. Now, Mrs. Petticoat, this line extending from the Mount of Trilby to the outer side of the sole is the life line. If that appears to be broken it indicates future death. If more pronounced on one sole than the other, it implies that the subject has one foot in the grave. You haven't, don't be alarmed. Here is the headline, straight and continuous, showing a long and level head."

"Ouch," remarked Warble, "you tickle. Try somebody else," and she drew her feet under her.

"Me," exclaimed Daisy Snow, coming over and holding out her dainty right foot.

"H'm," said Goodsport. "This line running from the Mount of Cinderella to the heel is the clothes line and denotes love of dress. This line crossing it is the fish line and shows you are incapable of telling the truth."

Daisy flounced away, mad, and Mrs. Charity Givens, with some trepidation, offered her ample and generous foot for dissection.

"A thorough, broad understanding and a friendly footing toward all," declared the solist, "and no danger of misunderstanding. However, your broken headline indicates pugnacity."

"Nothing of the sort!" she snapped at him, and waddled away.

Goldwin Leathersham, greatly interested, insisted on having his pedal interpreted.

"Mount of Atalanta highly prominent," said Goodsport, "that means you are a runner, either for office or for pleasure. Here is a line meeting--that indicates a railroad man. H'm. A well-developed football shows you have been to college. You seem to be inclined to solemates--"

But Leathersham had taken to his heels.

"Please," said Iva Payne, gracefully offering her long psychic foot for perusal.

"Ah, the poetic foot!" the soloist exclaimed. "There are two kinds of poetic feet--the Iambic and the Trochaic. You have one of each. In poetic feet the heels are often found in French forms. But poets are a footloose class and are often found with lame and halting feet. You don't seem to be a poet."

"Never said I was," retorted Iva, shortly, and Warble said, "Stop this nonsense, it makes too much kicking. Now we're going to play the game I learned in Buda Pesth."

She led them to the picture gallery which had been prepared for the game by having many sheets of fly-paper placed on the floor, sticky side up.

"It's Fly-paper Tag," she said.

It _was_ Fly-paper Tag--she was quite right.

"You're it!" screamed Mrs. Givens as she pushed the minister over onto a sheet of fly-paper.

"It yourself," shrieked Leathersham adroitly shoving a sheet where he saw Mrs. Givens would light next.

* * * * *

Warble was certain she was a great reformer.

Yet would these reformed people stay reformed?

True, they were now in the spirit of her party, Mack Sennett himself couldn't have asked a better interpretation of his own vital principles. But had they come to realize that this after all was the real thing, the true ideal?

Warble feared.

* * * * *

They were a stuck-up lot. The fly-paper had intrigued them all. Not only were they all half-soled with it but the merry wags had decorated the ladies' bare backs and the men's coated backs, until all looked like sandwich men or peripatetic ragpickers.

Trymie Ican Spoon crowned Mrs. Charity Givens with a fresh sheet of tanglefoot and Warble hilariously made a foolscap of another for the Rector's bald head. Judge Drinkwater folded Daisy Snow's two little hands together, then wrapped them tightly in fly-paper, and shook with laughter to see her futile attempts to get free.

"Naughty man!" she cried, "to make poor little me so helpless!" With a spring she flung her entangled hands over the Judge's head, and hung round his neck like a pretty little millstone.

Warble relaxed, and found that she was shockingly tired and very hungry.

But she was the stuff of which true reformers are made and Martin Luther had nothing on her.

Then Beer came tripping in with a pile of varicolored garments which she held up to view.

"These," Warble announced, "are the real Mack Sennett costumes. They are one-piece bathing suits, I got them from an importer of contraband goods. You are to put them on in place of your clothes. And please forget that you are Butterflies and turn into bathing beauties and champion swimmers."

While they were shyly getting into the suits, she donned her own, a little scalloped apron effect, with cross-strapped sandals, and a silk bandanna knotted round her head.

She glanced about and saw Big Bill Petticoat beaming with proud glee at his wife's social success, and looking lovely himself in a black satin one-piece, with jet shoulder straps.

For a second Warble could see only Petticoat's pink cheeks and perfected eyebrows. Then she shook off the spell and keyed up.

"We're going to have an obstacle race," she announced, "all over the house. You must follow me, wherever I go. I shall lead you a dance! And then I shall come last to the lake in the front hall, and whoever is nearest me there, will be rewarded."

Yet even as she spoke, she overheard Trymie whispering to Iva Payne, "Yes, I believe that the new art era into which we are now slipping, will worship beauty for itself alone, and that art, sublimated by--"

She turned away, sick at heart.

Why bother, her tortured soul cried out. Yet the irrepressible impulse of reform egged her on and it was a perfectly good egg.

She flew past Petticoat, only pausing to shout, "Like it all, my tramp? Yes, it is an expensive party."

Then she led her followers a mad race. Sliding down banisters, squeezing into dumb waiters; crawling under beds and out the other side; jumping in and out again of bathtubs full of perfumed water. Out of windows, in at scuttles. Through booby-traps of half-open doors, on the lintel of which were perched pans full of live crabs or little boxes of mice.

On rushed the horde, Mrs. Givens panting from over exertion, Goldie Leathersham limping because of a crab hanging to his great toe.

On they went, and at last, as Warble drew up at the lake in the hall, she was closely followed by Trymie Icanspoon, and true to her promise she rewarded him by pushing him into the lake. It was but a shallow pool, he couldn't drown, but the fun of it was, Warble had caused the water to be drained off and the tank filled with mayonnaise.

Wherefore Trymie's soft plop into the oily depths was of a ludicrous nature.

Then the guests were allowed to resume their own clothes and supper was announced.

Conversation turned to art matters, and Leathersham who was a collector of many various rarities asked Petticoat how his new collection was progressing. The collection was one of early American Pieplates.

"Doing well," Big Bill answered. "I have just achieved a yellow earthen John Adams, that is authentic and very rare. Except for my Barbara Frietchie tin one, it is perhaps the gem of my collection."

"Good!" Leathersham exclaimed, interestedly, "may I see it?" Petticoat summoned a lackey and two minions and sent them to his curio room to fetch the plates. But they returned with the startling announcement that all the pieplate collection had disappeared!

"Heavens and earth!" Petticoat cried. "Lock the doors, search the pockets! Why, that collection is worth millions!"

"What's the matter?" Warble inquired, seeing the hullabaloo. "Oh," as she was told, "I used those plates, dear. I was making a lot of pies and our pieplates gave out."

"Making a lot of pies?" Petticoat repeated, wonderingly, while Marigold Leathersham murmured, "How quaint!" in a supercilious way.

"Yes," went on Warble, unperturbed. "Want to see 'em?"

They did, and all went to look at the eight dozen custard pies in the pantry windows.

"Whoopee!" shouted Petticoat, "here's where I take the helm! Cut out the rest of the formal supper, and let's have a pie eating contest."

It warmed the cockles of Warble's heart to see how they all fell in with this suggestion. Could it be? Was she really having some effect on their terrible aestheticism at last?

Absorbed in her thoughts, she ate her pies and when the contest was over the prize was awarded to Warble Petticoat. "Oh," she cried, astounded. "I wasn't in the game at all! The hostess never should be. I was just eating what I wanted."

"You're a dear," Marigold Leathersham said to her. "I'm going to love you. How your husband must adore you, you pretty thing."

"Yes, he does." Warble stated. "At least, he says so."

"He's a truthful man," Marigold declared, "you'd know that just to look at him. There's something in his face just now--"

"It's pie," said Warble, "he's very fond of it."

To Warble's great delight there were enough pies left for her final entertainment.

"Folks," she said, "this is a Mack Sennett party, and it wouldn't be complete without throwing custard pies. So we will choose sides."

Judge Drinkwater and Goldwin Leathersham were made captains and they chose sides.

The party being thus divided, they bombarded each other with custard pies after the manner of certain comedians, till there wasn't a round of ammunition left.

Then Iva Payne said she felt sick and wanted to go home and of course just for that they all had to go.

"The nicest party ever!" they chorused at parting. "So novel and _naive_-- so quite entirely out of the ordinary."

As the last pied guest disappeared she turned wearily to her Petticoat.

"I tell you, Warb," he said, "you are sure one corker! You put 'em to sleep all right! Now you've shown 'em how, you bet they won't go on having their stupid highbrow intellectual old gatherings. Hop along to bed, little tired Lollipop."

His long lithe arms gathered her forcefully to him, and her irritation at his strength was lost in her admiration of his grace and skill in imparting affection.

* * * * *

From The Butterfly Centerpiece:

The Mack Sennett party at the home of Dr. Bill Petticoat was a hundred per cent success. Little Lady Petticoat is nobody's fool. She knows that a lucky punch is her only chance. A short, swift hook, straight from the shoulder. The pretty Warble is a perpetual promise of joy, yet she shows symptoms of curvature of the soul--and it is, so far, a toss-up whether she will have her passport vised or be given the gate.

* * * * *

The week after, the Leathershams gave a party. The gilt-chaired audience listened to Sable Caviaro the new Russian violinist and Slubber D. Gullion, who discoursed on the Current Trend of Current Bolshe Vikings.

The refreshing episode consisted of champagne and Saratoga chips.

CHAPTER VIII

The Restless Sixteen was the record altitude of Butterfly Center. It was the elect and select of the intellect; it was the whole show--the very Wholly of Whollies. To belong to it was canonization. Though some of its members also belonged to the Toddletopsis Club, it meant their leading a double life.

The Restless Sixteen were mostly young married women with their husbands as nonresident members.

They studied higher psychology and broader psychopathy. They wrestled with and threw Einstein and let themselves dream again with Freud. Psychoanalysis was their washpot, and over the fourth dimension did they cast their shoes.

Their afternoon digest was held at Faith Loveman's and Warble went.

The Loveman home was an abstract bungalow, which showed rather plainly the iron hand in the velvet glove influence of the Japanese.

The large light hall had a built-in abstract table, and on this was an enormous bronze plaque which held a thin layer of water on which rested one pansy.

Faith's devotion to the Doctrine of Elimination allowed nothing else in the hall, but in the living room there were three whole pieces of furniture besides, of course, the caterer's gilt chairs brought in to hold the restless sex as they tried to rest from their restlessness.

Faith Loveman looked curiously at Warble.

"You can't be very restless," she observed, "you'd be thinner."

Warble smiled engagingly.

"I do want to be thinner," she conciliated, "how can I?"

And, somehow, that started them all off. They restlessly gave advice, recommended certain exercises, uncertain drugs and most unattractive diets.

They told their own experiences, extolled or berated their masseuses, scribbled addresses of corsetieres for one another, and in their interest

and restless excitement they forgot all about Warble and she wanted to go home.

But she had her mission to perform, and she waited until they restlessly changed the subject.

They discussed current plays and seemed to get out of them far more than the author ever put in. They talked of a picture exhibit at the Gauguin Galleries, but this was as Choctaw to Warble; not a word could she understand.

"Are you of the cognoscenti?" asked Faith Loveman of Warble. "I know all about art but I don't know what I like," she returned, blushing prettily.

"Oh, we'll teach you that. That's what this club is for, to help us to find ourselves, to give our restlessness an outlet to express the ego in our cosmos and illumine the dark patches of our souls. We're riding the pace that kills, living at the tension that snaps, blowing the bubble that breaks. We need an outlet--a vent--you understand?"

"Yop," said Warble, "your soul pressure is too high."

"But we want it high--we love it high--we're restless--we're keyed up, taut-strung, and hungry for soul food."

"I s'pose that's the only kind you have at these meetings."

Faith Loveman stared so hard that Warble made a face at her and went home.

* * * * *

She reflected.

"It was my fault. I might have known restless people wouldn't eat. And I knew I couldn't bite on their restless sex problems. A big one seems to be how to get thin and how to stay so. They were all ready to drop the high sign babble for that! But all women are. They took it up again.

"Can I reform them? Or shall I be sucked in, like Italians eat spaghetti, and my personality absorbed by the Butterflies, till I forswear all I stand for--all my utilitarian ideals shattered, all my prosaic hopes dashed, all my common sense wrenched from me, and my poor little brain-pan filled with the soul-mash of these high-strung sexaphones?"

She ignored Beer's offer to undress her, she ran upstairs to an unfrequented bathroom, and flinging off her clothes, she got into the tub and wept in terror, her body a round pink blob in the briny water.

But, thought the poor child, it's the most sensible place to cry.

When Petticoat came home she said:

"Honeybunch, let me in on your professional secrets. Tell me more about

your most interesting cases. It might make me restless."

"Nothing much to tell. Life just one ptomaine after another. Cases all alike except for the primal cause."

"Well, tell me something. Where've you been just now?"

"Over to Iva's. She had 'em again. Ripe olives. Getting better. Where you been?"

"To the Restless Sixteen Club."

"Like it?"

"I don't get it. They talk about things that aren't there. But I think I could make them see--"

"Oh, cut it out, Warble. You'd dust books so hard, you'd dust off the gilt edges. They're deep-sea thinkers, that bunch--let 'em alone. What'd they talk about?"

"About a book called 'Painted Shawls' or something, and about Thyco-Serapy, and about a play called 'The Housebroke Heart.' Take me to see it, will you, Bill?"

"You wouldn't like it. You'd prefer the movies."

* * * * *

Four days later, Daisy Snow called and gave Warble a jolt or two.

"Huh, sizing me up, are they?" Warble sniffed. "Looking at me through the footle, distorted little microscope of their own silly scrubby little souls! Pooh, they couldn't, one of them, make a decent puff paste!"

"But we can get cooks to do that. The Intelligentsia seek for the rare essence of thought, for colored words and perfumed cadences--"

"There, there, Daisy, don't try me too far! What did Lotta Munn say about me?"

"Oh, she didn't say much. Just that you're too stout and you haven't any ideals and you don't know a picture from a hole in the wall, and she thinks a man like Dr. Petticoat is wasted on you."

"Huh, she used to like Bill herself, didn't she?" "Does yet. She's poisoned nearly as often as Iva Payne is."

"H'm; anybody else after Bill?"

"Only May Young."

"And you."

"Oh, me! I'm just a debutante. I'm not after anybody yet."

"Well, you keep off my Petticoat preserves! That Big Bill person is mine-- and I won't stand for any nonsense about that."

"My goodness, Warble, I didn't know you had so much spunk. Lotta says you haven't any."

"She'll find out! Go on, what else did the cats say?"

"They made fun of your party--"

"Oh, my party! That I tried to make so nice and gay and festive!"

"They thought those bathing suits were--er--rather bizarre--"

"I _didn't_ get them out of the Bazar! I thought it all up myself. And they made fun of it! Go home, Daisy Snow, I've got to reflect."

* * * * *

Like a very small, very spanked child, she crawled upstairs on her hands and knees.

It was not her father she wanted now, but an old Petticoat ancestor, dead these two hundred years. Petticoat was dawdling on a _chaise longue_, absorbed in a small mirror, and wondering whether one more hair out of each eyebrow would strengthen the arch from a purely architectural viewpoint.

"What's the trouble?" Warble asked, "broken down arches?"

"Nope, guess they're all right."

"Say, Bill," and she crept into the hollow of his chest, "are folks talking about me?"

"They sure are."

"What do they say?"

"Well, I hate to stir up trouble, but since you began it, I may as well own up they think you're just about as lowbrow as they come. And I s'pose you are."

"Oh, well. And what about the girls? Are they jealous of me?"

"Sort of. Lotta says if you cut her out with Trymie Icanspoon, she'll elope with me."

"And will she?"

"Not if I reach the ticket office first. Besides, I like Iva better."

"Oh, Bill, don't you love me any more?"

"Course I do, Little Fudge Sundae. But a popular doctor has responsibilities."

"I know. I don't mean to be unreasonable. But let's keep peace in the family as long as it's convenient--see what I mean?" "I see. Do you think I'd like my new pajims better trimmed with frilled malines, or just decorated with a conventional pattern of gold soutache braid?"

Warble, sitting on the other end of the now separated _chaise longue_ made no reply, except to scratch her leg a little.

Petticoat yawned, took a stroll round the room, tried on a new dressing gown, mixed himself a highball, smoked three cigarettes, glanced through "What the Swell-dressed Man can Spare," wound his watch, put out his Angora cat, yawned again, sneezed twice, stomped out in the hall and back, and then went and stood in front of the fireplace, teetering on his heels.

But until he bawled, "Aren't you ever going to clear out?" she sat, unmoving.

CHAPTER IX

Lotta Munn ran in occasionally. She was of the anecdotal type. The stories she told made one gasp. They were always prefaced by an "Oh, my dear, I can't tell you _that_ one--it's _too_ awful!"

Warble didn't care much for these tales, indeed, frequently missed the point, and laughed purely from a sense of duty.

As she observed to Petticoat, one day, in exasperation, "There are only two classes of women in this world--women who tell naughty stories, and women I have never met!"

Also Lotta Munn was by way of being complimentary. She told Warble that old Leathersham thought her a peach, and that Trymie Ican Spoon declared he was going to make love to her.

That Mrs. Charity Givens had heard she was a great heiress, and meant to stick her for a new hospital. That Le Grand Paynter wanted to do her portrait, life size and full width, and that the Reverend Avery Goodman said she was very light on her feet for a fat woman.

The last made Warble mad and she made a face at Lotta and sent her home.

* * * * *

A rose-colored June day. Meringues of cloud floating on a sky of cerulean custard.

She crawled out for a walk. It was ninety-eight in the shade, too hot to run much.

She walked down Ptomaine Street, her nose shining, and pearly drops chasing each other down her back like rain on a car window pane.

In her tucked white dimity and ankle-ties, her pink sunbonnet and her tiny, frilled parasol, she was as much out of place in the aesthetic town as whipped cream on a grapefruit.

She circled the outskirts of the town, and noted the massive and imposing gateways to the great estates. She knew the grandeur inside, she had been there. Cubist landscapes, some of them, others were Russian steppes, and in one instance a magnate was having the ruins of an Egyptian temple excavated on his grounds, which he had previously with difficulty and at great expense had buried there.

She did not know what to do about it.

She felt, intuitively, that these men would resent her criticism of their homes. Yet she couldn't let it go on--this gigantic inutility, this mammoth lack of practical, efficient management.

Why, the ground sunk in a sunken garden would raise crops enough to feed an army--and Lord knew how soon they might be needed.

And then she happened to think that reform, like charity should begin at home, and she decided to start in on Petticoat.

She did.

* * * * *

They were sitting in their home-like Tower of Jewels, and, a bit timidly, Warble said, "Let's pote quoetry to each other."

Poor child, nervousness or emotion always made her reverse her initial letters.

"All right," Petticoat returned, good naturedly, "you begin."

Just what Warble wanted! Fate was always good to her.

"I will, because I hope to reform your tastes, dear, and teach you to see the beauty of simple beautiful poetry. Listen to this:

"Weep and the world weeps with you,
Laugh and you laugh alone--"

"That'll do, Warb. Don't go too far. Now it's my turn. But, you know, dear,

quoting isn't everything. You must learn to dissect, to interpret, and above all to trace the influences that swayed the poet.

"Now I'll read you a poem picked at random, and then I'll trace the influences for you."

Petticoat reached out a languid arm, picked up a current magazine and read:"FULFILMENT

'Here, at your delicate bosom, let death
Come to me
Where night has made a warm Elysium,
Lulled by a soft, invisible sea.

'Now in the porches of your soul I stand
Where once I stood;
Fed and forgiven by a liberal hand,
My broken boyhood is renewed.

'You are my bread and honey, set among
A grove of spice;
An ever brimming cup; a lyric sung
After the thundering battle-cries.

'You are my well-loved earth, forever fresh,
Forever prodigal, forever fond,
As, from the sweet fulfilment of the flesh,
I reach beyond."

Noting that Warble was still awake, Petticoat discoursed:

"In the first line, we note the influence of Swinburne. There could be no better start out. The Swinburne collocation of delicate bosom and death is both arrestive and interesting. The third and fourth lines denote the influence of Poe. To be sure, 'a warm Elysium' sounds like a new and appetizing soft drink, but that is not what is meant; and the sea is indubitably the one that sounded around the tomb of Miss Annabel Lee.

"The second stanza opens under pure Tennysonian influences. This may not be clear at first to the beginner in influence tracing, but it is unmistakably so to the expert. The recurring sibilants, the sound without sense, the fine architectural imagery, all point to the great Lady Alfred. The latter half of this stanza is due entirely to the strong influence of D. W. Griffith. The poem was, without doubt, written after the poet had been to see 'Broken Blossoms,' and the liberal hand from which that production was flung to a waiting world left its ineffaceable finger-prints on his polished mind.

"Now we come to stanza three. The first line shows the influence of Mother Goose; the second is an unconscious echo of Solomon's Song; the ever-brimming cup owes itself to Omar; and the rest of the stanza to Rupert Brooke.

"Thus we see the importance of widespread reading, and a catholicity of influences.

"Influence is wonderful! To invent a new simile, it is like a pebble dropped into a placid lake; the ripples form ever-widening circles, and the influence of an influence is never wholly lost.

"Perhaps--and this is quite as it should be--the final stanza is the finest of all. It starts out under the influences of Walt Whitman. Had Walt been omitted, the whole structure would have tumbled to the ground! No self-respecting poet now-a-days writes without being influenced by Whitman. It isn't done. It would be as indiscreet as to appear in one's shirt-sleeves. The influence of the good, gray Poet _must_ be felt, must be _shown_, or the budding bard is out of the running. Only a dash of Whitman is needed--'my well-loved earth' and 'prodigal' are quite sufficient.

"The sweet fulfilment of the flesh' is a final roundup that gracefully blends Whitman's and Ella Wheeler Wilcox's influential powers--and, incidentally, justifies the magnificent title of the poem.

"Then, as a crowning triumph, note the splendid last line, a masterpiece brought about by the influence of Sir Oliver Lodge and his spiritistic ilk! Could anything be finer? What imagery for a last line! What a break-off, leaving the gasping reader in a state of choking suspense, of avid, ungratified curiosity! A great poem indeed, and influenced by a noble army of writers.

"Nor is the manner of the thing all that matters. The theme--the great idea of the whole affair--is a marvelous example of influence. The New York State Legislature recently passed a bill making attempted suicide no longer a punishable offense. If successful, it is, like virtue, its own reward. Indeed, it has to be, for as the Penal Code distinctly states, owing to the impossibility of reaching the successful perpetrator no forfeiture is imposed. But the new law lifts the ban from futile efforts in the matter of self-destruction, and one need not pay the hitherto exacted fine of a thousand dollars by way of a luxury tax on such diversion.

"Can it be doubted, then, that our Poet read of this new law, and--it may be unconsciously--was so influenced by it that he devoted sixteen lines of his precious verse to the expression of his willingness to let death come to him?"

"I don't blame him for being willing, and I wouldn't put a straw in Death's way," said Warble, earnestly. "I'm glad you read me that, Bill, for that is just the sort of thing I mean to eradicate from your system. It's like a disease, this aestheticism of yours--it's the Culture Ptomaine."

"Now, hold on, Dumpling Dear, do you know a culture from a ptomaine?"

"Oh, I don't mean the cultures you take, I mean Culture with a big C. It's a poison, and as you cure ptomaine poisoning, I'm going to cure this town of its deadly art poisoning. I'm in revolt."

"That's right, everybody who is anybody is in revolt against something nowadays, because our knowledge of the truth is too great for our existing conditions, and it bursts--"

"Like poor Betsy Binn, who was so very pure within,
She burst this outer shell of sin,
And hatched herself a cherubim!"

Warble interrupted.

"Yes, or as Gertrude Stein puts it: 'It is a gnarled division, that which is not any obstruction, and the forgotten swelling is certainly attracting. It is attracting the whiter division, it is not sinking to be growing, it is not darkening to be disappearing, it is not aged to be annoying. There cannot be sighing. This, is bliss.' There you see how art is greater than life--how--"

"Do you think I'm too fat?" Warble again interrupted him.

"I do, my dear. You weren't, I think you are, I know you will be."

"Would you love me more if I were--didn't weigh so much?"

"Yes, in exact inverse ratio."

Warble made an awful face at him, and then she went quietly around behind him, and dropped down his back a little fuzzy caterpillar, which she had tied in her handkerchief for that very purpose.

* * * * *

It was her last effort to cure her husband of culture poisoning, but she was not yet ready to give up her big idea of reforming Butterfly Center.

Warble was a determined little person, and, too, fate often gave her a good boost, and she thought one was about due.

* * * * *

She went to the Toddletopsis Club, at Lotta Munn's.

Lotta had inherited eight or ten town and country houses, and for the moment was perched like a bird of passage, on her Roman villa, called Seven Hills.

Warble's little electric Palanquin rolled through the arch of Constantine and she ascended the dazzling flight of marble steps to the entrance patio.

"Hello, Pot Pie," screamed Lotta, by way of greeting, "come on in, the firewater's fine."

It was, and there was lots of it, and a group of long silk-legged Butterflies were sprawled on the Roman couches, smoking and chatting as

they spun the Toddletops.

Warble was unfamiliar with the teetotum-like things, but the others kindly instructed her. Moreover, there was a roulette wheel and some other devices of which our little heroine didn't even know the name.

Also, there were tables, where those who chose played high-staked bridge, poker or rum.

Warble wasn't a born gambler. Games of chance had no appeal for her. She wanted to make faces at everybody and run away. But she scolded herself for being too superior and forced herself to stay with the bunch.

In a way, she was rewarded, for she won all the money from the others. Her luck was monumental. Every different game she tried she took all the stakes, and at last having broken the bank, she was forced to go home for lack of occupation.

* * * * *

She was a proud and stuck-up chit all the evening.

Trymie Icanspoon called and flirted something fierce. But it didn't mean a thing to Warble, for the man was so saturated with art that it oozed forth in his conversation and she had no idea what he was driving at.

He went home thinking she was the most deliciously tempting morsel he had ever seen and the biggest fool.

* * * * *

"No, I couldn't fall in love with him. I like him, as a gift-book, but he's no man. Could I kiss him? Not with a real movie kiss.

"They say marriage is a lottery. I haven't drawn much. I mean in the matter of love. I wish I had a Prince Charming. Bill would do, all right, but he thinks I'm too fat. I wish I could get thinner--all of them are. Lotta's like a golf club and Daisy's like a breadstick.

"I s'pose they were born that way.

"I wasn't.

"I wonder when we'll begin to keep a family.

"I'm crazy about Bill--I am--I am--

"Am I?

"All the girls are, too.

"Does he care for them? For any of them? For all of them?

"For that detestable Daisy? That disgusting Iva? That rotten Lotta!

"Oh, I may as well admit it--I just adore Bill!

"This frock is too tight--I must have it stretched.

"Yes, I'm mad over my husband--but--"

* * * * *

She sought Petticoat in his rooms.

She tumbled into his lap, and he pushed her out until he could set aside the Angora cat and the Airedale and his pet guinea pig, then he said politely, "Is this your seat?" and she perched on his knee.

"Do you love me, dear?" she asked, her voice full of a dumb pathos.

"Ooooooooooooooooooooo! I'm sleepy," he said, with a cavernous yawn and a Herculean stretch that threw her out on the floor. "Want any money?" She looked at him. He was not unlike John Barrymore in *The Jest*, and Warble fell for him afresh.

"You are so beautiful--" she wailed. "I wish you loved me--"

"I wish I did," he returned, honestly, "but you are such a butter-ball."

"Oh, Butterfly Thenter calls anybody Butter-ball who weights over ninety-five! If you're so cut up about it I won't live under this roof another minute! I can earn my own living, and all I want, too! You can get a divorce and marry some thread of a woman who has ptomaines all the time!"

"Pish, tush, Warb, don't be a damfool! Lay off the melodrama. I do love you--at least, I love ninety-five pounds of you. Now, will you be good?"

"Yeth."

"And will you try to think of me as a devoted and loving husband, even if I'm not one?"

"Oh, my dear, I am unjust to you! I will take what you give me--what you can spare from the little dog and the cat and the guinea pig. And I will be your own little Petty Warblecoat. And I won't give you over to Iva Payne--I hate her!"

CHAPTER X

The mail.

The Petticoats rarely received mail. It wasn't done much in Butterfly

Center. So unaesthetic.

On a tray, a lacquered lackey brought a letter to Warble.

A white letter. Large and square--ominously square.

Warble took tray and all and went with it to Petticoat's rooms--the letter was addressed to him.

She tapped but there was no answer. Listening at the door, she could hear him splashing in his rock-hewn bath and leaping, chamois-like, from crag to crag of his quarried bathroom.

She sat down on the floor and waited. Petticoat's toilets were like linked sweetness, long drawn out.

It was late afternoon, before he emerged, fresh, roseate and smiling, and imprinted a kiss on Warble's cheek that left the red stamp of a lip-sticked mouth. Warble sometimes thought if it could be arranged as a dating stamp, she could keep a record of when he had last kissed her.

Poor little Warble--she loved her Big Bill so fondly, and he only looked on her as something fatter than his dog, a little bigger than his cat. Timidly she proffered the trayed letter.

"Oh, my Heavens!" and Petticoat smote himself, hip and thigh. "Where did you get this? Why was I not told sooner of its arrival? To me! And postmarked Lake Skoodoow-abskooosis! Home of my ancestors! Woman! Why this delay? _Why_?"

"It came this morning," said Warble, apologetically, "but you were in your bath, and the door was locked."

"But this is a most important letter. Why didn't you slip it under the door?"

"I couldn't," said Warble, simply, "it was on a tray."

"As I hoped--I mean, feared--" exclaimed Petticoat, tearing the envelope from the sheet, "he is dead!"

It made Warble writhe to see the devastated envelope--she always slit them neatly with a paper-knife--but she was thrilled by Petticoat's excitement.

"A fortune!" he exclaimed. "My revered ancestor, the oldest of the Cotton-Petticoats, has died and left all his wealth to me! A windfall! Now we can afford to have a baby and get over the Moorish Courtyard, too! Oh, Warble, ain't we got fun!"

He danced about the room, in his blue burnous and red tarbush, looking more like a howling dervish than a tempestuous Petticoat.

Warble thought a minute. A baby would be nice--and perhaps she could reform

that more easily than she could older people.

"All right," she said, "and I'll have beautiful maternity mowns of shuffy fliffon--I mean, fliffy shuffon, no--shiffy fluffon--oh, pleathe--pleathe--"

Warble's tongue always misbehaved when she was excited or embarrassed, but Petticoat didn't notice her.

"I can send Roscoe Rococo after that Courtyard," he mused, "he'll know. The last man I sent to Spain for a casemented facade, brought home a temple! But Roscie knows, and he'll do it proper. I don't want to run over just now--"

* * * * *

The baby was coming.

Warble reveled in infant layettes and her own layouts for lying in. She sank deeper and deeper in a sea of baby-clothes, down pillows and orris powder. Nursery quarters were added to the house, influenced by Lucca Delia Robbia and Fra Angelico.

Also a few influential Madonnas.

* * * * *

The Butterflies came in with advice. Marigold Leathersham was dubious about the wisdom of the plan, but brought a pillow of antique rose point, filled with ostrich plumes.

Mrs. Holm Boddy rushed over with a copy of Poems Every Expectant Mother Ought to Know, and Lotta Munn sent a card of diamond safety pins.

Iva Payne, the hateful thing, sent a Cubist picture of an infant falling downstairs, but Warble couldn't make it out so its pre-natal influence didn't amount to much.

Daisy Snow, innocent child, sent a beautiful edition of How to Tell Your Young, a treatise of the bird-and-bee-seed-and-pollen school, and Faith Loveman sent her own marked copy of Cooks that Have Helped Me.

But Warble made a face at them all, and gave their books to the Salvation Army and read the Diary of Maggot Somebody.

* * * * *

Another fate slather.

The baby was twins.

That was the way things came to Warble--fate in big chunks--destiny in cloudbursts.

Two little red Petticoats all at once to hang on the ancestral tree.

But Warble was not caught napping. In her efficient way, she had provided two bassinets, two nurseries--in fact, she had really provided three of everything, but the third wasn't needed, and she thriftily ordered it put aside for the present and for the future.

Dr. Petticoat was enchanted.

He saw the children first, asleep in their downy nests, tucked in by the skilled hands of the staff of trained nurses, and as he gazed on his offspring, his little tucked and quilted Petticoats, he named them Guelph and Ghibelline, after two of his illustrious ancestors and ran off at once to put up their names at various select and inaccessible clubs.

CHAPTER XI

Petticoat had five hobbies. Ptomaines, his collection of pieplates, Warble, his personal appearance and his Aunt Dressie.

The last was one of the old Cotton-Petticoats, and in her younger days had been a flibbertigibbet. Was still, for that matter, but she flibbered differently now.

She appeared unannounced, took up her favorite quarters in the N.N.W. wing, and permeated the household.

Tall. Slender. Smart. Sport suits. Bobbed hair. Smoked cigars.

About fifty-five, looked forty, acted thirty.

Fond of boxing and immediately on her arrival hunted up the butler to spar with him, being a bit off condition.

"I've no use for Bill," she would say, "with his custard pie ideals, his soft-bosomed rooms and his purple and fine _lingerie_."

Then she'd embrace her nephew wildly, and promise to make him her heir.

She looked at Warble appraisingly.

"You're a tuppenny, ha'penny chit, with eyes like two holes burnt in a blanket, and a nose Mr. Micawber might have waited for, but you'll do. You get everything you want, without effort, and that's a rare trait. What do you think of me?"

Warble made a face at her. "Corking!" screamed Aunt Dressie, "you come straight from heaven and you've slid into my soul. Does Bill love you?"

"Not adequately."

"H'm. You love him?"

"Oh, yeth!"

"All right--love and grow thin, and then he'll come round. Or get a case of ptomaine poisoning--that'd help. But don't take the matter too lightly. If you want your husband, get him, if you don't, then let him go.

"I've just let mine go. You see we had a place--a sort of Vegetarian and Free Love Community proposition, but it didn't work out so we sold it."

"And your husband?"

"Oh, he's on his own for a while. I'm deciding what to fly at next. I always ask nephew Bill's advice so as to know what not to do."

"Forgot to mention it," said Petticoat, strolling in, "but a few people are coming to-night to help me plan for my new Color Organ."

"What's that?" asked Warble, gazing at Petticoat in azure-eyed adoration.

"Oh, Lord, don't you know _anything_? Tell her, Aunt Dressie!" and turning on his French heel, Petticoat walked delicately out of the room.

"Treat him rough, Warble, you're an awful fool," commented the older woman.

"Why, a Color Organ is that marvelous new invention that plays color instead of sound."

"Color--instead of--sound--"

"Yes--now don't try to understand, for you can't possibly. Go and play with the children."

"I won't. Tell me more about this thing."

"I won't. You can hear it to-night, when they all talk about it."

"What use is it?"

Aunt Dressie stared at her. "What use are you?" she said.

Warble's brain stopped beating.

Bump.

* * * * *

What use was she--she, the utilitarian, the efficient, the practical! What use? Grrrhhh!

She'd show 'em! The silly bunch! Not one of them could put together the

dissected beef picture in the cook-book if the cuts were separated!

"I don't care! I won't endure it!

"What's Aunt Dressie anyhow? A military blonde, with glazed chintz undies!
What's Marigold Leathersham? A smart party who wears a hat!

"What's Iva Payne? Nothing but a backbone--a shad! She's about the shape of
a single rose vase! Damn her! Damn Lotta Munn and Daisy Snow, yes and May
Young! They think they can charm my Bill off his perch with their revolting
artistic propaganda, and their schools and non-schools and neo-schools!
Rubbish!"

* * * * *

And when they came--came and talked wise and technical jargon about
being endlessly enveloped in a toneless sound, about being drowned in an
overwhelming sea of blue, pure and singing, and a moment later dropped into
pale amethyst which in turn deepens to a threatening purple then plunges
you into a turmoil of passionate red, always and constantly swirling and
whirling and twisting and untwisting, gliding, approaching and retreating
in that haunted and inexplicable color space--

There was more--much more--but at this point Warble rose, made a
comprehensive, all-embracing and very outspoken face at them and went down
to the pantry.

"It's no use--" she groaned, "perpetual waste motion--and now waste color!
What to do--what to do!

"Yet I must reform them somehow. That Iva Payne! Like a pure, pale
lily--but I bet her soul has got its rubbers on! Lotta Munn--spinster in
name only--with her foolish pleasures and palaces--Daisy Snow, little
innocent-making saucer eyes at my husband--oh, Bill, dear, I love you so--
I wish I was pale and peaked and wise and--yes, and artistic! So there now!

"Well, there's only two alternatives. I must reform this toy town, or be
dragged down to their terrible depths myself!

"Aunt Dressie says, love and grow thin. I surely love Bill enough, but if
he doesn't love me--maybe I'd better try somebody else. It's done here.

"But not Trymie Icanspoon! No, he makes me sick. I guess I'll eat pickles."

* * * * *

In the pantry she found the under scullery maid screaming with an earache.

"You poor child," she said, sympathetically, "I'll run and get my husband
and he'll cure it."

She flew back to the room where the eager group had their heads together
over the blue prints and wash drawing of the new color organ. Pushing

in between Iva and Lotta she seized Bill by the arm and said, "hurry up now--matter of life or death--Polly, the maid--dying--urgent case--"

By that time they were down in the servant's pantry where Polly was moaning and groaning and wailing like a banshee.

"What is it, my dear?" Big Bill asked, gently, for Polly was a very pretty girl. "Oh, my ear! It aches and stings and burns and smarts and--"

"That'll do for a beginning," Dr. Petticoat said, rolling up his sleeves and calling for basins of sterilized water and various antiseptics and disinfectants.

"Can you do anything, Bill?" Warble asked anxiously, "it isn't ptomaines, you know."

"That's the devil of it! Why couldn't the silly thing have had a decent bit of ptomaine poisoning instead of this foolish earache. But, it's more than an earache! The bally ear has been stung--or something--anything bite you, Polly?"

"Yes, sir, a wasp."

"She says a wathp!" exclaimed Warble. "Oh, Bill, it may mean blood poisoning!"

"Yes, that's true--it is--the ear will have to come off. Guess I'd better call in old Grandberry to operate--he's an ear specialist--"

"Oh, no, there won't be time! She may die!"

Warble was dancing about in her excitement. "You can do it, Bill."

"All right. Get her up on the pastry table--there--that's all right. Now we'll take her blood pressure--here, Warb, you be taking her temperature, and send somebody for my stethoscope, and my case of instruments--and my X-ray apparatus. Now, my girl, don't cry. We'll fix you up." Petticoat lighted a cigarette and sat down to take Polly's pulse.

"That's right," he said to the men who brought the things he had sent for, "scuttle back for my rubber gloves, and the chloroform outfit. Tell my man and his helpers to come down--I may need them--and bring me a clean handkerchief."

"Now for an X-ray," he said, a little later, as he adjusted his portable X-razor.

"Oh, it's all done," said Warble, "While you were taking her blood pressure, I cut off her ear--"

"What with?"

"Oh, I had a boning knife and the sardine scissors. It's all right. And

I've fixed her hair lovely--in a big curly earmuff, so it will never show at all. Be quiet for a day or so, Polly, and then you'll be all right. The only trouble is, after this, orders will probably go in one ear and out the other--"

"You're a hummer, Warble," Petticoat said, as they went back up stairs.

"Yes, it had to be done quickly, you see. And it was out of your line, so I duffed in. But one thing bothered me a little. You see, the fire was out, and the cook lighted it with kerosene, and she used such a lot--something might of blew up."

"And you knew that! You knew that two Petticoats might have been blown up--"

"Sure. Didn't you? Don't faint, pleathe!"

CHAPTER XII

Porgie Sproggins.

Cave man. Brute.

Hulking, enormous, shaggy-haired, prognathous jawed, a veritable Cro-magnard type. Bluely unshaven and scowling.

Warble saw him first across the room at a picture exhibition in Manley Knight's gallery.

His nose startled her. It was like an alligator pear--and his complexion was like those cactus fruits that likewise infest fancy grocers' shops. A visitor from the South Sea Islands? No, he wasn't that sort. He was a Fossil. Vikings were in his face, and Beef Eaters and Tarzan.

Warble flew at him.

"Do you like me?" she whispered.

"No," he growled, and she kissed his hand which was like a hand by Rodin.

Thus does the law of compensation get in its fine work. Warble remembered the little boy at the public school, and she wished she could give Sproggins a red balloon.

"What is he?" she asked of Trymie.

"A miniature painter," Icanspoon replied, "and a wonder! He does portraits that fairly make the eyes pop out of your head! He's got the world agog."

Warble drifted back to the attraction.

"_Do_ like me," she said, and shot him a glance that was a bolt from the blue.

Warble was of the appealing sex, and hardly a man was yet alive who could resist her.

Sproggins turned on her fiercely. He grasped her by the shoulders, pressing them back as if he would tear her apart.

"Let me see your soul!" he demanded, and his great face came near to peer down through her eyes.

"Ugh, merely blocked in," and he flung her from him.

"It isn't block tin!" she retorted, angrily, "it's pure gold--as you will find out!"

He gave her another glance and two more grunts and turned away to devote himself to Daisy Snow.

Bing! That was the way things came to Warble.

Fate, Kismet, Predestination--whatever it was, it came zip! boom! hell-for-leather!

"It's not only his strength but his crudeness--like petroleum or Egyptian art.

"He can control--

"Amazingly impertinent!

"He wasn't--

"But I wish he had been--

"He will be!"

* * * * *

She went to see him--in his studio.

A bijou studio, fitted for a painter of miniatures. French gilt gimcracks. Garlands of fresh pink roses, tied with blue ribbons.

"Get out," he said, staring at her a second and then returning to his niggling at a miniature.

Warble made a face at him.

"Do that again," he commanded, reaching for a clean slice of ivory.

A few tiny brushmarks.

A wonder picture of Warble--made face, and all.

"Pleathe--Pleathe--" she held out her hand, and he dropped the miniature into it.

"Why don't you hit it off better with your husband?" he demanded.

"Don't ask me things when you know everything yourself."

"I do. I paint a miniature of a face, and I get a soul laid bare."

"Your name? Your silly first name--"

"It's a nickname."

"For what?"

"Areopagitica." "Sweet--sweet--" cooed Warble, dimpling.

"Oh, you popinjay! I wish you and I were ragpickers--"

"What!"

"It's my ambition. I don't want to be a miniature painter all my life. But to be a ragpicker--ah, there's something to strive for! A rattlebanging cart, with jangling bells on a string across the back, a galled jade of a horse, broken traces, mismated lines--whoa!--giddap, there! oh--Warble, come with me!"

He swooped her up in one gigantic arm, but she slipped through and running around, faced him impishly.

"Would you really like me to go ridy-by in your wagon, and curl up in the rags and watch the stars shoot around overhead?"

"No, better stay here--" he patted her shoulder gently, leaving a deep purple bruise.

"Why?"

"Better not stay here--better go home."

"Why?"

"Goodby."

He took her up--it seemed to her between his thumb and forefinger--and set her outside his door, promptly closing and locking it.

* * * * *

She heard him return to his work. She trotted home. Her husband, as she paused to look in at his door, greeted her:

"Had a good time?"

She could not answer.

He yawned, delicately. He was seated at his mirror, arranging his wringing wet permanent in serried rows by means of tiny combs.

"Gooooo--oooo--oo--d night," he said.

That was all. Yet she was kinda mad.

* * * * *

A footle, twaddly love affair! No art. A silly little dumpling smattering with a brute beast.

"No, he is not! He has noble impulses--ragpicking--inspired! His eyes were misty when he spoke of it--

"A way out of Butterfly Thenter!

"A ragpicker's cart--

"A way out--"

Petticoat held her up.

"You seem a bit gone on that tin-type fellow, Sproggins."

"Yop. Maybe I'd better go to Atlantic Thity for a while."

"Oh, no, you stay here. A lady's place is in the home."

* * * * *

So she was fairly thrown at Porgie.

Another downpour of fate. And Warble, caught without an umbrella or rubbers.

The night came unheralded.

Petticoat had gone to Iva Payne's on an urgent summons--over-ripe sardines--and Warble had wandered out into the moonlight.

Petticoat, out of his new wealth, had, like Kubla Khan in Xanadu, a stately pleasure dome decreed, and in this new architectural triumph, where water lilies and swans floated on the surface of a deep black pool, Warble restlessly tossed in a welter of golden cushions, changing her position every ten seconds.

A giant lumbered in.

"Porgie!"

"Saw your husband speeding away--couldn't stand it, dropped in. Take me upstairs--I want to see your shoe cabinet."

"Oh, don't spoil everything. Be my gentleman friend. Tell me about your dreams and ideals--your rags--"

"Ah--rags--you do love me!"

"I don't know--but I love rags--sweet--so sweet--"

"You're a misfit here--as who isn't. All misfits, frauds--fakes--liars--"

"All?" Warble looked interested.

"Yes, you little simpleton. I know!" He growled angrily. "Shall I tell you--tell you the truth about the Butterflies?"

"Pleathe--pleathe--"

"I will! You ought to know--you gullible little fool. Well, to start with, Avery Goodman--in his true nature, he's a worldly, carnal man. His religion is a cloak, a raincoat, a mere disguise. Mrs. Charity Givens, now, she's no more truly charitable than I am! She's shrewd and stingy, her lavish gifts to the poor are merely made for the sake of the praise and eulogy heaped upon her by her admiring friends. Manley Knight, renowned for his bravery in the war, is an arrant coward. His soul is a thing of whining terror, his heroism but a mask. Oh, I know--I read these people truly, when they sit to me--off guard and unconsciously betraying themselves.

"Mrs. Holm Boddy! Pah! She's far from domestic! She yearns for the halls of dazzling light, for gayety and even debauchery. Her devotion to home and children is the blackest of lies! And Iva Payne! She's no invalid! It's a pose to seem interesting and delicately fragile. You should see her stuff when no one's looking!

"Judge Drinkwater is a secret drunkard. Lotta Munn is a pauper--an adventuress, pretending to wealth she doesn't possess. Herman True and his wife! Zounds, if you could hear those two quarrel! Yet they pose as lovers yet, and folks fall for it!"

"May Young?" Warble asked, breathlessly.

"An old maid. Well preserved, but no chicken. And Daisy Snow! Angel-faced debutante! Huh, she knows more than her mother ever dreamed of! You should see her in my studio, at her sittings! Cocktails, cigarettes, snatches of wild cabaret songs and dances--oh, Daisy Snow is a caution!"

"The Leathershams?"

"He's a profiteer--she--well, she was a cook--"

"Marigold! No!"

"Marigold, yes! You are a little numskull, you know. You can't see through these people's masks."

"Can I reform them?"

"No, Baby Doll, you can't do that. They're dyed in the wool hypocrites--joined to their idols--let 'em alone. And as to that husband of yours--"

"Stop! Stop! I can't stand any more! Pleathe go--pleathe--"

* * * * *

"What're you going to do about that Tertium Quid you've annexed?" Aunt Dressie inquired, casually.

"I don't know," Warble uncertained. "He has wonderful ambitions and aspirations. He wants to be a ragpicker--a real one."

"Ambitions are queer things," Aunt Dressie thoughtfuled. "Now, you mightn't think it, but I want to be a steeple climber."

"You take Porgie off my hands, and he'll help you--"

"Oh, no, child, every lassie has her laddie--and you saw him first."

* * * * *

Warble sighed. Thus was she always thrown at Porgie's head.

Fate, like a sluicing torrent carried her ever on. Beware, beware, the rapids are below you!

Thus Conscience, Prudence, Wisdom, Policy, Safety First--all the deadly virtues called her.

Did she heed?

As the sea's self should heed a pebble-cast.

* * * * *

On a June evening, when Petticoat was called to Iva Payne's, Porgie came.

Bowed in by a thin red line of footmen, he found Warble in the moon-parlor. She wore a picture frock of _point d'esprit_ and tiny pink rosebuds, and little pink socks and sandals.

"Come out on the Carp Pond," he muttered, picking her up and stuffing her in his pocket. "Nobody will see us."

He seated her in the stern of a shallop and took the golden oars. Three of his long sweeping strokes took them a mile up stream and they drifted back. Porgie talked steadily and uninterruptedly. He told her in detail of his ragpicking plans and how perfectly she would fit in.

"Think of it!" he boomed. "No fetters of fashion, no gyves of convention. Free--free as air--free verse, free love, free lunch--ah, goroo--goroo!"

"Goroo--" agreed Warble, "sweet--sweet--"

"Sweet yourself!" roared Porgie, and grabbed her all up in his gorilla-like arms just as a ringing, musical, "Ship ahoy!" sounded on their ears.

"Hello there, Warbie!"

She knew then it was Petticoat.

"Having a walk?" he inquired, casually.

"Yop," she casualed back.

He pulled his skiff up alongside, threw Porgie into the deep pool and snatched Warble in beside himself.

"Time to go home," he said, cheerfully. "Good night, Sproggins."

He took her into the house through the conservatory, paused to pluck and twine a wreath of tiny pink rosebuds for her, adjusted it on her rather touseled curls, and took her out to the Moorish Courtyard.

"Now, Warb, what about the baboon?" "I want to go ragpick with him and be pag-rickers together. Can I? Pleathe--"

"Nixy. Now, you hark at me. I'm the real thing--a good old Cotton-Petticoat--birth, breeding and boodle. Your Porgie person has none of these--"

"But he loves me!" Warble wailed.

"Yes, 'cause he can't get you. Go along with him, and then see where you'll be! No, my Soufflee, you hear me! Can the Porgie and stick to your own Big Bill--your own legit."

"But you don't love me--"

"Oh, I do--in my quaint married-man fashion. And--ahem--I hate to mention it--but--"

"I know--and I am banting--and exercising, and rolling downstairs and all that."

"Well, we're married, and divorces are not the novelty they once were--so let's stay put."

"Kiss me, then--"

He brushed a butterfly kiss across her left eyebrow, and together they strolled back into the house, and as he went up to bed, Warble went down to the pantry to see about something.

CHAPTER XIII

"I d-don't belong to Butterfly Thenter," Warble sobbed, "I don't b-belong--and I-m g-going away--"

"All right," Petticoat said, cheerfully, "how long'll you be gone?"

"It may be four yearth and it may be eleven--"

"Oh, come, now, not all that time! It isn't done."

"You d-don't underhtand--I'm going to find my plathe in the world--I don't belong here."

"All right. Can I go 'long?"

"No; you stay here. I'm--oh, don't you thee--I'm leaving you!"

"Oh, that's it?"

"You'll have the girls to amuse you--"

"What girls?"

"Iva and Lotta and Daisy and May Young--"

"They're not girls--they're married women--"

"What!"

"Sure they are. They don't live with their husbands all the time--they're pretty modern, you know. They have separate establishments, but they're friendly, pally, and even a heap in love with each other."

"I don't believe it--" "Fact, all the same. Where you going Warble--that is, if you care to tell."

"I'm going where I can live a busy, useful life--not a Butterfly existence, with nothing to occupy my mind but art and hifalutin lingo! I can't express myself with long candles and Oriental junk! I'm going--oh, I don't know

where I'm going, but I'm taking the next train out of Butterfly Thenter!"

"Warble--haven't I treated you right? Haven't you had enough to eat? The Cotton-Petticoats have always been called good providers--"

"It isn't that, Bill, dear--it's that--you don't love me very much--"

Petticoat looked at her. His eyes traveled up and down from her golden curls to her golden slippers, and then crossways, from one plump shoulder to the other.

"Goodby, Warble," he said.

* * * * *

That's the way things came to Warble. Freedom! All at once, in unlimited measure--freedom!

Baffled in her attempts to reform Butterfly Center, having fallen down on the job of replacing Art by Utility, she went, undaunted and indomitable, on her way.

* * * * *

Hoboken.

Work in a pickle foundry. Cucumbers, small onions, green tomatoes, cauliflower, tiny string beans, red peppers, mustard, vinegar, cauldrons, boiling, seething fumes, spicy mists, pungent odors, bottles, jars, labels, chow-chow, picalilli, smarting tongue, burning palate, inflamed oesophagus, disordered stomach, enteritis.

That was the way things came to Warble. And she made good. Her position was that of a pickle taster.

At first, only of the little gherkins, then promoted through medium cucumbers, to the glory of full-fledged Dills.

A conscientious taster--faithful, diligent, she reached the amazing speed of forty pickles a minute, and all done well.

Of course it told on her. Also, her heartaches told on her.

Lonely. Homesick for Bill, for Ptomaine Haul, for the gallery of Petticoats.

* * * * *

Yet: A glorious soft summer afternoon.

Warble alone in a room with a big, forceful looking man.

The door is closed, and the gentle breeze scarce stirs the opaque white

curtains.

In the depths of a great arm-chair, Warble, her lovely head upturned sees the eager, earnest face of the man. Closer he draws and a faint pink flush dyes Warble's cheek. His arm is round her soft neck, his hand holds her dimpled chin.

With a little sigh, Warble's blue eyes close, her scarlet lips part and though she wants to struggle she dare not,

For he is a determined man, and a dentist will have his fill.

Petticoat came to see her in Hoboken after she had been there a year. Unexpected and unannounced, he strode in to the pickle foundry and grasped the fat arm of the girl who worked next to Warble.

"Come along," he said, not unkindly, but the girl screamed.

"Beg pardon," Petticoat said, nonchalantly, "sorry. Thought you were my wife. Know where I can find her?"

A slim, fairy-like Warble turned to greet him.

Petticoat couldn't believe his eyes. That sylph, that thread, that wisp--his Warble--his one time plump wife!"

"Gee, you're great!" he cried, "I'm for you!"

She got leave from the factory for a couple of years, with privilege of extension.

"I don't want to impose on your kindness," he said, "but I'd like to chase around Hoboken and take in the sights, I've never been here before."

"There's a Bairns' Restaurant," said Warble, shyly, "we might go there."

* * * * *

They did. In a taxicab. He held her in his lap and told her the news.

He had had his own rooms done over. Mediaeval setting. Romanesque arches. Stained-glass windows. Sculptured cloisters. Good work.

"How are the twins?" she asked, timidly. "Pleathe."

"Fine. Miss you terribly--we all do. Butterfly Center mourns your loss. Spring a come-back, won't you, Warble?"

"You want me?"

"More than anything in the world! I'm mad about you! You beauty! You raving beauty! You'll be the talk of the world this winter. Gee, Warble, how I can dress you, now you're thin! Won't Beer be astounded!"

* * * * *

That's the way things came to Warble.

The only thing she wanted, her husband's love, now flung at her feet in unstinted measure, pressed down and running over--love, slathers of it--all for her! It was sweet--a pleasant change from pickles.

"How's everybody?"

"Here and there. Iva's gone."

"Thank Heaven! Where'd she go?"

"Dunno. Her husband took her off. Jealous of me." "H'm. And Daisy Snow?"

"Gone into the movies. She grew too heavy for society. May Young's in the Old Ladies' Home."

"And Lotta Munn?"

"Murdered by her husband. He had to kill her--she wouldn't support him. The Leathershams are in the poorhouse, and Mrs. Charity Givens has bought their place. Want to go on a second honeymoon? Round the world?"

"Yop."

* * * * *

They went. One night, sitting on top of the Taj Mahal, 'neath the Blue Moon of Persia, Warble cried,

"Shall I go back to Butterfly Thenter--or shall I not?"

"Spin a toddletop," said Petticoat, taking one from his pocket.

She spun it and it came up pickle foundry.

So Warble said, "All right, dear, I'll go home with you whenever you're ready," and she kissed him slenderly.

* * * * *

Ptomaine Haul.

Two Petticoats arriving. A happy Warble sprang from the car and seemed fairly to skim up the steps. She passed, unnoticed, the pantry door, and flew up to her own rooms which had been done over to suit her new slenderness.

"Beer," she cried, "look at me!"

"Maddum!" cried the astounded Beer. "What done it?"

"Unrequited love and pickles. I can wear sport clothes now!"

"Maddum can wear anything or nothing!" declared Beer triumphantly.

That night, Warble, her hands behind her, wafted into Petticoat's room.

He sat on the edge of his bed, running lingerie ribbons in his underwear.

"I'll stay, always," Warble said, sidling up to him. "And I'm happy.
But..."

"Look out! Don't let the cat get that bolt of ribbon to play with!"

She smoothed his pillows and patted his sheets, while Petticoat glanced at her a little suspiciously, from under his gabled eyebrows.

"But I don't say that Butterfly Center is worth the ground it's built on. I don't admit that Ptomaine Street is as useful as a Hoboken alley. I don't admit that Art is any good at all. I've fought like a tiger and I didn't make a dent on the Butterflies--but, I have grown thin!" "Sure, you bet you have!" said Petticoat, threading ribbon into his gold bodkin. "Well, kiss me good night--here you--I see you! Don't you put those caterpillars in my bed!"

THE END

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