

THE LITTLE TEACHER

BY MABEL G. JACKSON

I CLIMBED the long stair, and came into the small room, so filled with the associations of a lifetime—associations of which the combination formed a kind of key to the character of the little inmate, who welcomed me with such bright eyes and such a kindly smile.

I glanced around the tiny place with its few bright flowers, its snowy curtains, its memories of the "long ago," its betrayal of the pangs and throbs of a human heart; the tiny place so familiar to me through the years, and yet so strangely unfamiliar, since my little friend, in my absence, had been forced to relinquish one of her two rooms, owing to the exigency of the housing conditions and the strict laws in connection with their amelioration.

There stood the beautifully polished old furniture, of which almost every piece had come to her over the long and stately road of inheritance; there hung the various pictures, numbering several gems among them, for she had been acquainted with many an artist, and herself possessed a refined and discriminating taste. Two stood forth pre-eminently, on account of their character and merit. One, the portrait of an old, old lady, whose age had never broken her dominating spirit or caused her personality to fade. *Her* mother! I had known her, too—but more of her anon. The other picture was a landscape, so radiant in color, so delicate of execution, so true to nature, that it brought into the little room the warmth of sunshine, the stirring of trees, the breath of flower-laden meadows. Every stroke was one of genius, and it was painted by her nephew, *the* nephew, to whom she had been so long like a mother, and who was now dead.

Only once had I met him, but in the brief moments of our acquaintance I had seen far down into the character in the moulding of which she had so delighted. I remember having searched that

day in many a shop to find an old-fashioned slate for my invalid son and, hopelessly baffled, had mentioned the disappointment my failure would mean to one in whose narrow life even trifles seemed things of vast importance. A moment later the grave, serene-faced man, who had listened in silence while my little friend and I were talking, rose and left the room so quietly, so unobtrusively, that neither of us paid any great heed to his going. It was not long before he again stood there, a smile illumining his eyes, transforming his entire face, as he showed us one of the coveted slates. With simple directness he explained his acquisition, almost apologizing for having succeeded where I had failed. In a tiny shop in a back street he had found that which was too old-fashioned for the shelves of the modern stationer.

"I could not bear," he gently said, and a look of almost divine sympathy and sorrow accompanied the words, "that the little one should ask in vain."

I sighed as I turned from contemplation of the picture to my old friend, who was seated in an arm-chair, but who, as usual, spurned its snugness and sat erect, for all her eighty years and broken hip. She was talking volubly, as was her wont. Some loquacious people weary one, but how should she, whose every word betrayed the glint of gold. The politics of the day as gleaned from the morning papers had saddened her, the politics of which one asks, "are they consciously wicked, or hopelessly incapable?"

"My poor country!" she said, "has it not suffered enough, must it be dragged to the very depths?"

Then she suddenly asked: "Tell me, are we despised out there, in the wideworld? Do those of other nations look down upon us?"

I told her the entire truth as gently as I could. Perhaps it was not right or kind, but how could one lie to her of the fearless eyes and honest, intrepid spirit?

For a moment she sat very still, a pained look shadowing her features, before she answered slowly and musingly: "But they will come to know the truth. I shall not live until that day, but it must come, the time when they shall understand. And you," she continued, "*you* know it *now*, you understand!"

Her bright, unflinching eyes gazed into mine as though in challenge.

"I know," I said warmly. "And I know that you are wonderful!"

"No better, no worse, than hundreds of others," she answered. "But I and those like me are of the old Germany. What are we

today? Crushed and broken, our resources gone, melted away in a fire not of our faggoting. Of what power now, of what use, are our energy, our thrift, our honesty? Sometimes I wonder if those who have accumulated where we have lost will nurse the true seed of German character, will tend it, cherish it, improve it, till it comes to fruition, till there is as great and staunch a Germany as that which is no more. And then again, I feel sure it cannot really be lost, all that we did, all that we were, all that we had—”

“All that you had,” I repeated tentatively.

“Yes, all that we had. In my case it was the savings of nearly fifty years of teaching. Do not think I am complaining, do not think me bitter or resentful. Whatever comes, I can still say that I have had a beautiful life and that I know humanity is good. Ah, yes, the War!” she exclaimed in answer to my involuntary question—“the War!”

She shook her head, and tears slowly gathered in the eyes that suddenly seemed to search in vain.

“The greatest grief the war brought me was for my country, for my people as a nation, on account of the defamation of character, the loss of respect, the hatred, the lies, and, she sighed deeply, “for the destruction of friendships, the breaking off of affection’s ties. The long years of teaching meant many separations—those were inevitable—but until the war came there was always the correspondence. I was in touch with so many countries. Some of my pupils wrote only once a year, usually at Christmas time, some every month. When those letters ceased to come I knew what they had been to me, how I had ever looked forward to their coming, how I had clung to the old associations. At the close of the war, after the sadness, the perplexity, the terror, of the political changes and unrest, I remember that one day I suddenly thought with a little throb of joy, the first I had had in a long time, ‘now they will write, now they will recall their old teacher, they will not blame an old woman, seventy years and more. Just because they must feel that I am sad and humiliated they will send a line. But none came. Day after day I sat alone and waited. Day after day I stole quietly out after the postman’s coming to look within the box. I remember that I used to linger before opening it, just to prolong the anticipation that already began to seem futile.

And then one afternoon your letter came, when I had almost given up all hope. Oh, the joy of it, and the feeling that a little bit of the barrier had been removed, that more letters would follow,

that the others, too, would think of me! Oh, I don't believe you others, out there in the world, ever realized what it meant to be shut in—*penned in*—for all those years, to have one thing after another intercepted, stopped. Physical food! The lack of that was bad enough. To see the little children! Oh!—”

She broke off, her eyes closed, and a perceptible shudder seized her usually erect, but now bowed, form. “I remember that a tiny boy, the youngest of a wealthy family, exclaimed one day in piteous wonderment, ‘Grandfather, tell me, is it quite true that when you were little you sometimes had enough to eat?’ The hunger, yes, the hunger, we all knew it. But the spiritual hunger! The snapping of the bonds of affection, the intercepting of messages of love and friendship, how cruel, and unnecessary it all seemed. But one was made to believe anything, everything, possible. I had taken care of a little grave out there in the cemetery, the grave of the child of a former pupil, an Englishwoman. For twenty-five years I had tended that tiny scrap of earth, had watered, weeded, planted it, always with care, always with love, until I had come to feel that beneath it lay something that belonged to me. Then came the war, and during all the years of it I had no line or word from the mother of the child. But afterwards I thought, ‘She will write now, if only because her baby lies here.’ Finally a letter came, weeks and months after yours,—and it said—it said, ‘No use to ask about the condition of the grave. Of course you have allowed it to fall into neglect. She took it for granted. Neglect! I! How should I? Was the little child that slept within my enemy? Was the love for my former pupil killed by the first bullet that passed from trench to trench? Oh, the pity of it, the torment of the belief in perfidy! But that is all past,” she said, with a pathetic attempt at a smile. “They could not help it, they were not responsible. It was all in the plan for our defeat. One must not dwell upon the thoughtlessness of those who forget, one must think only of the kindness of those who remember.”

“But your savings,” I ventured, “you said—” I stopped uncertainly, well knowing the pride and independence of my little friend.

“There is no reason why you should not hear the details,” she said simply. “I have nothing to hide, least of all from you who have known me so long and who realize how I have striven. My life has been a very full one, no one can say that I have been idle or extravagant. I worked from early morn till late at night. I saved every pfennig I could lay aside after the simplest of needs

had been filled. And at the close of my career as a teacher, after fifty years of close application to duty, I had collected the sum of ———, invested in government bonds. And now, after all the work, all the sacrifice, all the hope, the paper for which I gave my earnings is not worth ten pfennigs to the collector of rubbish."

I gasped. Knowing how modest had been the demands of the little woman for the instruction imparted so ably, so ungrudgingly, the sum mentioned seemed almost an incredible one; but she was an exact soul, and not for one instant did I doubt the truth of her assertion. I only marvelled at the self-sacrifice, the strict adherence to duty, the thrift and stoicism, that needs must have been exercised in those long years of toil; in the years when, as a young and assuredly good-looking woman, she must have longed, often and often, for some bright bit of adornment, some gay amusement appealing to her youth, a box of sweets, a scented nosegay; in the years when, as an older woman, tired oftentimes, sadly discouraged, or physically unfit, she must have yearned for the comforts possessed by others, for the leisure time, the opportunity for rest, for the occasional carriage, the summer outing, the service of others.

Instinctively she read my inmost thoughts, perhaps from some message of sympathy written across my features, perhaps just through her own keen intuition.

"Oh, it was not I," she said, with a musing smile and a careless wave of her thin hand, "not I, but my mother. You knew her, and—look at her picture," she went on, indicating the portrait in its shrine-like position in a corner of the room. "Does it not show what a dominating energetic spirit she had? A wonderful woman was my mother. To her I brought my earnings, every pfennig, and to her I owed the fortitude necessary to their saving. My father's temperament was quite different. He was the artist, the musician, absorbed in his profession, living in a world of his own, regardless of practical details, gentle, dependent really upon her. He died when still a young man, and she was strong, unflinching, taking the place of two parents in her little family. For her the path of duty had no branching road. It was straight and inevitable, if narrow. I remember that once we were asked on a sleighing party, my mother, my brother, and I. If there had been a passion in my life for any lighter thing, for any pleasure, it had been that for sleighing. Very seldom had I been able to gratify my desire, and now the chance had come. I was to fly over the frozen ground, to hear the crunch of the snow, to see it struck by the shining hoofs and scattered in glittering frag-

ments all around, to listen to the tinkle of the little bells. I clasped my hands, breathless in expectation. But no! My mother's quiet, decisive tones recalled me instantly. 'Helene? Helene cannot go, she is promised to the Gjiditzkys.' What a tragedy, and how I wept! Very bitter tears mine were—but I let no one see them," she added, with the pride that I felt quite sure was a portion of the heritage left her by the indomitable mother. "And my mother was right, I knew it then, I know it now. I am grateful to her for so much of that which I am, and for all that I have."

"The Gjiditzkys?" I suggested.

"That is another tale," she answered. "They were the people to whom I sold my Sundays."

Noting my puzzled and probably startled look she smiled. "I remember putting it in that way when I told my mother of the arrangement made with them. They were Russians, cultured, charming, kind, and there were three daughters. The English governess had said she could not accompany the young ladies to the Russian church, she could not walk with them of a Sunday afternoon, for that would be work, and no conscientious, righteous Englishwoman worked on a Sunday. So I went to the Gjiditzkys. I went to the Russian church. I dined with the family. I walked with the daughters. They were nice girls, and their parents were clever, kindly people. I am quite sure Sundays spent in such an atmosphere could do no one any harm, I even think they may have been both helpful and instructive."

"But it took some of your leisure hours," I objected.

"*All* my leisure hours," she corrected. "You must remember that of a week day I started lessons in summer at seven A. M., in winter at eight A. M., and returned at ten P.M. My mother was uncompromising in regard to late hours. Never for any reason whatsoever must her daughter be out alone after ten o'clock in the evening; so punctually at 9:45 P. M., after a cosy tea with the quiet chat that invariably accompanied it, I left the school, and hurried through the dark and narrow streets to the little home where she was waiting. Oh, it was a beautiful life," she exclaimed, with almost youthful rapture, "it brought me into contact with so many wonderful people, people of so many nations, of such varied upbringing, position, standards. And through them I had so much pleasure. Sometimes in the summer vacation a former pupil would suddenly recall her old teacher in faraway D—, and then came a holiday, a trip to some distant land, life for a brief spell in a palace, or on a big estate, inter-

course with scholars, famous men, charming women of the great society world. It was like a fairy tale. So I went to England, and came to know the quiet and dignified English country life; so I crossed the ocean and learned to appreciate the difference between life in Boston and that in New York; so I traveled to Switzerland and lived for unforgettable weeks beside the blue waters of Lake Lemman. Oh, the beauty of it!"

"But your trip to the North Cape, and that one down the Danube, when you met the Prince?" I reminded her, eager to have continued the reminiscences that were not only interesting in themselves, but a distraction and happiness to her.

"Those journeys came after my mother had left me, they were the outcome of my own endeavors. I earned the money for them, every pfennig. The Prince? Oh, yes, Prince Eitel Friedrich. He was so nice to me. I spoke to him as we happened to stand near each other at the ship's rail, never suspecting that the big, young man, who was so courteous and so thoughtful of an old woman, was actually the son of our Kaiser. I never had so much attention paid me, so even if the journey had been a less beautiful one I should have enjoyed it. But the river itself, the varied sights along its banks, the high, forbidding fortresses and castles, the coloring, the quaint towns and villages, were all wonderful. And Budapest, what a splendid place! So lively, so gay, and stirring! So beautiful, too, with its great palace stretching out above the river, its statues, and its gardens, its atmosphere tinged with something strange and Eastern! Yes, it seems as if all the trips I made, especially those I earned, were wonderful. I never had enough of travel, I longed to see the whole, wide world. But my ambitions outran my earnings." She laughed a gay little laugh. "I had always longed to see the Dolomites, those splendid mountains in South Tyrol. You know them, do you not?"

I nodded silently, hoping for further saunterings in the magic countries of her recollection.

"Then you also know how much it costs to take that long, long drive, three days by carriage from Toblach to Bozen, though now-a-days with the whizzing speed of a modern invention one can rush along in one, losing two-thirds of the pleasure, and much of the grandeur."

I laughed, assuring her in apologetic tones that the slower, and more respected carriage had been my mode of conveyance.

"But I walked," she said, as if proud of some great achievement.

And indeed it had been that, for at sixty-nine years of age, with a knapsack on her shoulders, she had trudged many weary miles for the sake of beauty and culture. A rich life had been hers! Yes, but the deepest mines of wealth had lain within herself, in her sterling character, her intrepid courage, her eager desire for knowledge, her keen, well-nourished intellect, and in her affection for others.

"I have had so much that was wonderful. A beautiful life has been mine, and people have been so kind, so good."

It was her constant thought, the ever-ready tribute of a great soul, a contented spirit.

"Sometimes of late I have grieved, thinking of the money that I saved to no purpose. The remembrance of the little things that my mother went without has hurt me many times. She might have had many a flower, many a pleasant outing, many a little, unexpected treat, she might have been surrounded by more comforts, by little luxuries, but everything in the nature of an extra was steadfastly refused—and why? Her ideal principle, often voiced by herself, was always this: that one should so live, so labor, so earn and save, that an income should be forthcoming in one's old age to preclude the acceptance of charity. And now! Oh!" she cried, glancing at me appealingly.

I was startled by the passionate outburst, and noted that her hands were so tightly clasped that the sinews stood forth as though they would break through the delicate skin.

"Oh," she cried again, "surely you know it is not my fault that I am forced to accept from others. You know I did my best, you know I worked, you know I saved, you know I did all that I could!"

I was silent, my heart being too full for the utterance of words that must seem banal in comparison with the feelings that possessed me.

"All that she could!" Yes, in truth! It was not the effusion of pride, that I knew, but only the cry of justification for seeming untrue to the principles of two generations.

The sun strayed in through the little window, across the lone blossom nodding in the casement, and touched the silvered hair as with a benediction.

"Forced to accept from others," and an apology!

Oh, my little teacher, if you could but realize how much the others are in debt to you—the pupils to whom you gave your affection, your energy, your strength, your culture! How eager you were, how unflinching in your admiration for any power or ability in others! If

you could but realize that a life such as yours, the constant maintenance of self-control, the sacrifice for others, the nurturing of intellect and talents, the keeping of a character blameless and spotless, constitute an example by which all your pupils, your friends, your country, and your world, have profited, and for which they will ever be in debt! For who may absolve a debt for spiritual influence and guidance?