

A BRIGHT IDEA

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

"No answer to my advertisement, mamma, and I must sit with idle hands for another day," said Clara with a despondent sigh, as the postman passed the door.

"You needn't do that, child, when I'm suffering for a new cap, and no one can suit me so well as you, if you have the spirits to do it," answered her mother from the sofa, where she spent most of her time bewailing her hard lot.

"Plenty of spirits, mamma, and what is still more necessary, plenty of materials; so I'll toss you up 'a love of a cap' before you know it."

And putting her own disappointment out of sight, pretty Clara fell to work with such goodwill that even poor, fretful Mrs. Barlow cheered up in spite of herself.

"What a mercy it is that when everything else is swept away in this dreadful failure I still have you, dear, and no dishonest banker can rob me of my best treasure," she said fondly, as she watched her daughter with tearful eyes.

"No one shall part us, mamma; and if I can only get something to do we can be independent and happy in spite of our losses; for now the first shock and worry is over, I find a curious sort of excitement in being poor and having to work for my living. I was so tired of pleasure and idleness I really quite long to work at something, if I could only find it."

But though Clara spoke cheerfully, she had a heavy heart; for during the month which had followed the discovery that they were nearly penniless, she had been through a great deal for a tenderly nurtured girl of three-and-twenty. Leaving a luxurious home for two plainly furnished rooms, and trying to sustain her mother with hopeful plans, had kept her busy

for a time; but now she had nothing to do but wait for replies to her modest advertisements as governess, copyist, or reader.

"I do wish I'd been taught a trade, mamma, or some useful art by which I could earn our bread now. Rich people ought to remember that money takes to itself wings, and so prepare their children to face poverty bravely. If half the sums spent on my music and dress had been used in giving me a single handicraft, what a blessing it would be to us now!" she said, thoughtfully, as she sewed with rapid fingers, unconsciously displaying the delicate skill of one to whom dress was an art and a pleasure.

"If you were not so proud we might accept Cousin John's offer and be quite comfortable," returned her mother, in a reproachful tone.

"No; we should soon feel that we were a burden, and that would be worse than living on bread and water. Let us try to help ourselves first, and then, if we fail, we cannot be accused of indolence. I know papa would wish it, so please let me try."

"As you like; I shall not be a burden to any one long." And Mrs. Barlow looked about for her handkerchief.

But Clara prevented the impending shower by skilfully turning the poor lady's thoughts to the new cap which was ready to try on.

"Isn't it pretty? Just the soft effect that is so becoming to your dear, pale face. Take a good look at it, and tell me whether you'll have pale pink bows or lavender."

"It is very nice, child; you always suit me, you've such charming taste. I'll have lavender, for though it's not so becoming as pink, it is more appropriate to our fallen fortunes," answered her mother, smiling in spite of herself, as she studied effects in the mirror.

"No, let us have it pink, for I want my pretty mother to look her best, though no one sees her but me, and I'm so glad to know that I can make caps well if I can't do anything else," said Clara, rummaging in a box for the desired shade.

"No one ever suited me so well, and if you were not a lady, you might make a fortune as a milliner, for you have the taste of a Frenchwoman," said Mrs. Barlow, adding, as she took her cap off, "Don't you remember how offended Madame Pigat was when she found out that you altered all her caps before I wore them, and how she took some of your hints and got all the credit of them?"

"Yes, mamma," was all Clara answered, and then sat working so silently that it was evident her thoughts were as busy as her hands. Presently she said, "I must go down to our big box for the ribbon, there is none here that I like," and, taking a bunch of keys, she went slowly away.

In the large parlor below stood several trunks and cases belonging to Mrs. Barlow, and left there for her convenience, as the room was unlet.

Clara opened several of these, and rapidly turned over their contents, as if looking for something beside pale pink ribbon. Whatever it was she appeared to find it, for, dropping the last lid with a decided bang, she stood a moment looking about the large drawing-room with such brightening eyes it was evident that they saw some invisible beauty there; then a smile broke over her face, and she ran up stairs to waken her mother from a brief doze, by crying joyfully, as she waved a curl of gay ribbon over her head,--

"I've got it, mamma, I've got it!"

"Bless the child! what have you got,--a letter?" cried Mrs. Barlow, starting up.

"No; but something better still,--a new way to get a living. I'll be a milliner, and you shall have as many caps as you like. Now don't laugh, but listen; for it is a splendid idea, and you shall have all the credit of it, because you suggested it."

"I've materials enough," she continued, "to begin with; for when all else went, they left us our finery, you know, and now we can live on it instead of wearing it. Yes, I'll make caps and sell them, and that will be both easier and pleasanter than to go out teaching and leave you here alone."

"But how can you sell them?" asked her mother, half bewildered by the eagerness with which the new plan was unfolded.

"That's the best of all, and I only thought of it when I was among the boxes. Why not take the room below and lay out all our fine things temptingly, instead of selling them one by one as if we were ashamed of it?"

"As I stood there just now, I saw it all. Mrs. Smith would be glad to let the room, and I could take it for a month, just to try how my plan works; and if it does go well, why can I not make a living as well as Madame?"

"But, child, what will people say?"

"That I'm an honest girl, and lend me a hand, if they are friends worth having."

Mrs. Barlow was not convinced, and declared she would hide herself if any one came; but after much discussion consented to let the trial be made, though predicting utter failure, as she retired to her sofa to bewail the sad necessity for such a step.

Clara worked busily for several days to carry into execution her plan; then she sent some notes to a dozen friends, modestly informing them that her "opening" would take place on a certain day.

"Curiosity will bring them, if nothing else," she said, trying to seem quite cool and gay, though her heart fluttered with anxiety as she arranged her little stock in the front parlor.

In the bay-window was her flower-stand, where the white azaleas, red geraniums, and gay nasturtiums seemed to have bloomed their loveliest to help the gentle mistress who had tended them so faithfully, even when misfortune's frost had nipped her own bright roses. Overhead swung a pair of canaries in their garlanded cage, singing with all their might, as if, like the London 'prentice-boys in old times, they cried, "What do you lack? Come buy, come buy!"

On a long table in the middle of the room, a dozen delicate caps and head-dresses were set forth. On another lay garlands of French flowers bought for pretty Clara's own adornment. Several dainty ball-dresses, imported for the gay winter she had expected to pass, hung over chairs and couch, also a velvet mantle Mrs. Barlow wished to sell, while some old lace, well-chosen ribbons, and various elegant trifles gave color and grace to the room.

Clara's first customer was Mrs. Tower,--a stout florid lady, full of the good-will and the real kindness which is so sweet in times of trouble.

"My dear girl, how are you, and how is mamma? Now this is charming. Such a capital idea, and just what is needed; a quiet place, where one can come and be made pretty without all the world's knowing how we do it." And greeting Clara even more cordially than of old, the good lady trotted about, admiring everything, just as she used to do when she visited the girl in her former home to see and exclaim over any fresh arrival of Paris finery.

"I'll take this mantle off your hands with pleasure, for I intended to import one, and this saves me so much trouble. Put it up for me, dear, at the price mamma paid for it, not a cent less, because it has never been worn, and I've no duties to pay on it, so it is a good bargain for me."

Then, before Clara could thank her, she turned to the head-gear, and fell into raptures over a delicate affair, all blonde and forget-me-nots.

"Such a sweet thing! I must have it before any one else snaps it up. Try it on, love, and give it a touch if it doesn't fit."

Clara knew it would be vain to remonstrate, for Mrs. Tower had not a particle of taste, and insisted on wearing blue, with the complexion of a lobster. On it went, and even the wearer could not fail to see that something was amiss.

"It's not the fault of the cap, dear. I always was a fright, and my dreadful color spoils whatever I put on, so I have things handsome, and give up any attempt at beauty," she said, shaking her head at herself in the glass.

"You need not do that, and I'll show you what I mean, if you will give me leave; for, with your fine figure and eyes, you can't help being an elegant woman. See, now, how I'll make even this cap becoming." And Clara laid the delicate flowers among the blonde behind, where the effect was unmarred by the over-red cheeks, and nothing but a soft ruche lay over the dark hair in front.

"There, isn't that better?" she asked, with her own blooming face so full of interest it was a pleasure to see her.

"Infinitely better; really becoming, and just what I want with my new silver-gray satin. Dear me, what a thing taste is!" And Mrs. Tower regarded herself with feminine satisfaction in her really fine eyes.

Here a new arrival interrupted them, and Clara went to meet several girls belonging to what had lately been her own set. The young ladies did not quite know how to behave; for, though it seemed perfectly natural to be talking over matters of dress with Clara, there was an air of proud humility about her that made them feel ill at ease, till Nellie, a lively, warm-hearted creature, broke the ice by saying, with a little quiver in her gay voice,--

"It's no use, girls; we've either got to laugh or cry, and I think, on the whole, it would be best for all parties to laugh, and then go on just as we used to do;" which she did so infectiously that the rest joined, and then began to chatter as freely as of old.

"I speak for the opal silk, Clara, for papa has promised me a Worth dress, and I was green with envy when this came," cried Nellie, secretly wishing she wore caps, that she might buy up the whole dozen.

"You would be green with disgust if I let you have it, for no brunette could wear that most trying of colors, and I was rash to order it. You are very good, dear Nell, but I won't let you sacrifice yourself to friendship in that heroic style," answered Clara, with a grateful kiss.

"But the others are blue and lilac, both more trying than anything with a shade of pink in it. If you won't let me have this, you must invent me the most becoming thing ever seen; for the most effective dress I had last winter was the gold-colored one with the wreath of laburnums, which you chose for me," persisted Nellie, bound to help in some way.

"I bespeak something sweet for New Year's Day. You know my style," said another young lady, privately resolving to buy the opal dress, when the rest had gone.

"Consider yourself engaged to get up my bridesmaids' costumes, for I never shall forget what a lovely effect those pale green dresses produced at Alice's wedding. She looked like a lily among its leaves, some one said, and you suggested them, I remember," added a third damsel, with the dignity of a bride-elect.

So it went on, each doing what she could to help, not with condolence, but approbation, and the substantial aid that is so easy to accept when gilded by kind words and cheery sympathy.

A hard winter, but a successful one; and when spring came, and all her patrons were fitted out for mountains, seaside, or springs, Clara folded her weary hands content. But Mrs. Barlow saw with anxiety how pale the girl's cheeks had grown, how wistfully she eyed the green grass in the park, and how soon the smile died on the lips that tried to say cheerfully,--

"No, mamma, dear, I dare not spend in a summer trip the little sum I have laid by for the hard times that may come. I shall do very well, but I can't help remembering the happy voyage we meant to make this year, and how much good it would do _you_."

Watching the unselfish life of her daughter had taught Mrs. Barlow to forget her own regrets, inspired her with a desire to do her part, and made her ashamed of her past indolence.

Happening to mention her maternal anxieties to Mrs. Tower, that good lady suggested a plan by which the seemingly impossible became a fact, and Mrs. Barlow had the pleasure of surprising Clara with a "bright idea," as the girl had once surprised her.

"Come, dear, bestir yourself, for we must sail in ten days to pass our summer in or near Paris. I've got commissions enough to pay our way, and we can unite business and pleasure in the most charming manner."

Clara could only clasp her hands and listen, as her mother unfolded her plan, telling how she was to get Maud's trousseau, all Mrs. Tower's winter costumes, and a long list of smaller commissions from friends and patrons who had learned to trust and value the taste and judgment of the young modiste.

So Clara had her summer trip, and came home bright and blooming in the early autumn, ready to take up her pretty trade again, quite unconscious that, while trying to make others beautiful, she was making her own life a very lovely one.