

Midwestern Primitive

BERT went flying over to get May Douglas to come and look at her table. It was all ready now, and she had to show it to some one. There was nobody at home who knew or cared about such things. Everything that she did there was done against indifference or opposition.

"May! Busy? Want to come and see the table now I've got it fixed?"

"Oh, yes!"

May was delighted. She left her ironing where it was and followed Bert with eager excitement. She was one of the people in Shell Spring who stuck up for Bert Statzer. She thought that Bert was a wonder.

"We'll go right through the kitchen. Smells kind of good, don't it? There! Do you like it?"

"Bert!"

May was fairly speechless. She gazed at the table with fervent, faded eyes. It seemed to her the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She didn't see how Bert managed it!—how she ever thought of such things and how she learned to do them. Bert was just a genius, that was all.

"You really think it looks nice?"

Bert drank in May's admiration thirstily. She knew it didn't amount to much, that May would admire anything she did; but she had to get appreciation from somewhere.

"I think it's just too beautiful for words. You little marvel!"

She hugged Bert's thin, tense little form in fond worship. "I just don't see how you do it!" She sighed.

"Well, I'm glad you think it looks nice." Bert relaxed, with a long gratified sigh; but stiffened again to say to Maynard, who had tagged them into the dining room, "Be careful, Maynard! If you move one of those things—!"

May was looking at everything: the little fringed napkins of pink crepe, the tinted glass goblets that Bert had sent away for, the spray of sweet peas at every place, one pink and then the next one lavender, made of tissue paper—such a pretty idea! She had never seen any napkins like those. Bert went on talking excitedly.

"Well, if it's good enough for these folks, it'll be good enough for any one. I'll think that I've arrived, May!"

"I don't see how it can help—"

"Oh, but they're real big bugs. I've never had any one from Des Moines before. It scares me. This looks nice to us, but those people have all seen things—oh, my! Then, you know, they're going to have that famous writer with them. That's what I'm so excited about. If he likes it, then I thought maybe I could use his name. You know that'll help to get me known—if I can get his recommendation. Like those cold cream ads and everything—they're all doing that. Oh, I'm so excited, May! Feel my hands? Aren't they cold?"

"Why, you poor child!" May took Bert's tense, thin little hands and rubbed and fondled them. "You don't need to feel that way. I don't see how anybody could ask for anything nicer. If *this* isn't good enough for them—"

"Oh, I know, but people like that who have been places and seen things—! Well, I don't care, I've done the best I could. Maynard, look *out*!"

Bert's face was still gratified but screwed with worry. She knew how she really wanted things to look. She wanted flowered curtains instead of these old ones, and little painted tables instead of this big old thing . . . Of course, here was this stuck-in-the-mud little burg always holding her back, and her mother, and Arlie . . . Well, *she* didn't intend to be stuck in the mud, anyway! She had put up her sign where people could see it. "Hillside Inn." It made people in town laugh. They wanted to know where the "hillside" was. But she'd made a go of it so far, all the same.

She burst out: "The only trouble is mother!" And that was true. She couldn't do a thing with mother. Arlie would stay out—he didn't want folks like that to see him in his old working clothes—but mother thought she had to go in and entertain them, just the way she did with any one who came to the house. "I was so ashamed when those people from Cedar Rapids were here. The way mother came in! Now, of course May, I know mother's good as gold and means it the best in the world, but what do folks like that think of her? I can't get her to fix herself up or anything. She doesn't understand. 'Ach, well, if they don't like the way I look, then they can look at something they do like.' That's the way she is. She doesn't *see* things. She doesn't know one person from another—doesn't see why these people are any different from any others." May kept making little distressed murmurs. She did know how Mrs. Hohenschuh was. "Now, May, I went and bought a nice up-to-date dress for her, like people are wearing, when I was in Dubuque last. She'd look awfully nice in it if she'd wear it. But do you think she will? No, sir. Won't so much as put it on. 'Ach, I never wore anything like that. I'll stick to what I been wearing.' You don't know, May—" Bert's

voice tightened into bitterness—"nobody does, they all talk about how good-hearted mother is, and everything like that, they don't know how stubborn she is. Honestly, if mother didn't want to move, I don't believe a motor-cycle running into her could budge her one inch! She's just hopeless."

"Oh well, Bert, it'll come out," May said soothingly.

"I suppose. But she gives these people who come here the wrong idea. I don't want them to think we're all like she is."

"Oh, well, I guess they won't think that about you!"

Bert felt encouraged after May's visit. It was nice to have somebody appreciate what she was trying to do, anyway! She was excited, flying around the kitchen, doing the last few things, watching out for Maynard so that he would keep his little suit clean. Where was mother?—she thought in exasperation. Oh, there!—out in the garden—*digging!* Why didn't she come in and get ready? Bert had no time now to run out after her. Bert snatched a look at the clock. Almost time for them to get here! Oh dear, but she did want everything just right. What was mother thinking of? Did she want to get caught looking like that? She was hopeless. "Maynard, if you don't keep away from that table—!" Bert thought she would go crazy.

Then mother came serenely waddling in.

"Want I should help?"

"Not at this late date!"

That was all Bert was going to say. But she couldn't hold in, even if it was more of a triumph to be simply cold and cutting and bitter; she had to let it all out.

"Here I am working, trying to get everything nice, with everything all fixed, and you don't care, you just go on with your old digging out there in the garden, and don't see or care!"

Mrs. Hohenschuh looked abashed. "Ach, well," she began; then she retorted: "Well, I ain't wanted around here. You wouldn't be satisfied anyway with things the way I'd do them. Ach, all this fuss! What are you making all this fuss about? All this business!"

She finished with an angry mutter, and went waddling off to the door. Bert didn't know whether she was going to change her clothes or not. Well, if she wanted them to catch her looking that way, if she didn't care, didn't know any better . . . Bert was left weak and trembling with anger. She flew about the kitchen, put a few more nuts on each plate of salad, with shaking fingers changed her old apron for the bright green smock she was going to wear to do the serving . . . it was what they were wearing; it was like the one she'd seen in the photograph of "Betty Lee's Tearoom" in the cooking magazine. . . .

She went into the dining room. The shining glasses twinkled up at her, the sweet peas were rosy and stiff, the dishes looked so nice, the little napkins were so pretty . . . was everything right? She had got ideas wherever she could, but was she sure? It had to be right! Everything was so lovely. Her anger and fear changed into a shining glory. The whole table dazzled before her eyes. She caught hold of Maynard who was tagging her. "Look, Maynard!" she cried. "Isn't our table pretty?" She snatched a kiss from him in her trembling happiness.

Then she heard a car outside on the road. The people were coming!

A large green car rolled up to the cement block that still stayed in the thick grass beside the road as a relic of horse and buggy days. Bert in her green smock stood waiting, a tense

dynamic little person with her thin face and shining black eyes and short black hair threaded with early white. It seemed to her that it took the people a long time to get out of the car. She had time to wonder and to agonize over the place—the old frame house . . . she wished they could have it stuccoed . . . what would these people think? Then the people were out and coming up the walk, and she had just a confused, eager sight of two men and three women. . . .

One man was in advance. A large man with a rosy face and shell-rimmed glasses, smooth blackish-gray hair—he came toward her smiling. That must be the one who had ordered the dinner, the Des Moines man, Mr. Drayton.

"Mrs. Statzer?" Yes, that was who he was. "We heard you gave such good meals here that we thought we'd have to stop and try one of them."

Bert was so pleased and flattered that she scarcely heard his introductions—forgot the names just as soon as he mentioned them. She had been trying from the first to pick out the writer. It was that tall man, then, with the thick gray hair. She hadn't expected him to look like that, somehow. She wanted to show him that she knew who he was, even if most of the people here in town didn't. They hadn't known whom she had meant when she said Harry Whetstone was coming here. She held out her hand, alert and eager.

"Oh, this is the writer, is it? I certainly was honored when I heard we were going to entertain you. I haven't read any of your works yet, but I intend to—I don't get much time for reading . . ."

"No hurry, no hurry," the writer said with affable nonchalance.

She was looking, too, at the women. She hadn't got the

relationships between the women and men figured out yet. One looked older, one wore that smart little green dress and hat, and then there was that one who might be any age—where did *she* come in? They were looking around. "Isn't this lovely!" one of them was saying. What did they mean? Bert's brilliant eyes were watching them. She wondered what they thought of her sign. People in town made such fun of that sign. They were pointing to that terrible old brown tile in which mother had some geraniums planted. "Look, Harry! Isn't that lovely?" They couldn't really think it was *lovely*. *Lovely* had a different, suspicious meaning as these women used it. Bert's eyes were devouring the details of their clothes. She led them into the house. She was burning with anxiety, sensitiveness, eagerness. She knew how many things were wrong.

"I suppose you people would like to wash a little after your drive. We haven't any bathroom, I'm sorry to say, we want to have one, but this town is so slow, they've never piped the water out this far . . . But if you don't mind just washing in the old-fashioned washbowls—"

She hated that so. But they were nice about it. She was relieved.

"You know you're out in the country," she said with a nervous laugh, "and you have to take us the way you find us."

She ushered the women into her best bedroom, the guest room off the parlor. This was the one room in the house in which she could take some pride. She didn't mind showing them this room. She had fixed it up with furniture she had enameled herself, and white curtains with green ruffles, and she had put the stencil on the walls—all after the plan of the Model Bedroom she had seen in the household magazine for which she had taken subscriptions last winter.

"Now, if you'll just take off your hats and put them wherever you find a place—" She was eager and flustered. "I'm afraid I'll have to take you gentlemen upstairs."

"Well, now, can't we go out and give our hands a little shower bath under the pump?" Mr. Drayton asked genially.

Bert was horrified. He meant it for a joke, though. She was ashamed to take them up to her old room, full of horrid old dark furniture . . . was afraid, too, as she sped up the steep stairs ahead of them, although she knew it was all right, she had been up at four o'clock cleaning and getting the house ready. She banged the door of her mother's room shut as she went past. "Now I think you'll find everything—" She ran down.

The women were murmuring in the bedroom. She heard a soft laugh. She lingered in the front room, sensitive and alert, but she couldn't hear. The smartness of their clothes actually hurt her, showed her all sorts of unsuspected deficiencies in herself—although it pleased and gratified her too.

But when she went into the dining room and saw the table, she was exultant again. "If you'll excuse me," she called, "I'm afraid I'll have to be in the kitchen." They answered: "Oh, certainly!" She was in a flush of happiness. They were nice! Oh, dear. She had forgotten to ask the author to write in her visitors' book. Well, she would! And yet she was obscurely hurt and smarting. She wasn't sure they weren't laughing.

In the kitchen, she hustled about. Arlie had come in and was washing his hands at the wooden sink. "Well, are they here?" he asked. He didn't exactly like their coming, or to have Bert always fussing around with things like this—he didn't see why she wanted to do it—but then, he was all right, he kept out of the way. Bert was getting the roast chicken out of

the oven. Roasted not fried. She thought that was what these people were used to. "People in the East never think of *frying* chicken." She remembered hearing Mrs. Elliott say that when she came home from the East. Bert wanted these people to be able to say they had eaten as good a meal here in the Hillside Inn as ever they had got in any city restaurant. She had taken recipes out of cooking magazines. She was so excited now that the ordeal was on that she felt herself working in a kind of tense calm. She could manage everything, nothing could upset her. She gave Arlie his dinner in the back kitchen. These people, with this famous author, were even a notch above those wealthy people from Dubuque whom she had served, and who had told Mr. Drayton about the place. If she could make *them* satisfied—!

"You can come in to dinner now."

There was a moment of quiet and formality as she seated them. They didn't exclaim like those Dubuque people. "Well, well, I didn't know we were going to find a first-class hotel here in Shell Spring!" the Dubuque man had cried. But then, these were a different kind of people. She served them, wondering if she oughtn't to have got in Donna Peterson to help her—but then, Donna wouldn't "know," and she wanted things right. She didn't talk as she was serving. She tried to remember what things should go to the right and what to the left. When she went out into the kitchen, she ordered Maynard to keep back. She was going to bring him in after the meal, all dressed up in his new little suit, and just introduce him. "This is my little boy Maynard." She had read somewhere that that was the way people did other places.

Through her preoccupation with the food and the serving—wondering if everything tasted just right—she heard snatches

of the conversation. It was low-toned. The people seemed a little tired, maybe from that long drive. "Well, this is familiar." What did they mean by that? Did they like the little napkins or were they laughing at them? But those napkins were exactly the kind that were used in all the tearooms now! They must be right. "Standardization, I tell you. It gets into all corners." That meant nothing to Bert. They certainly must like these salads that May Douglas had said were simply too beautiful to be eaten. Nice salads were things people here in town didn't want to fuss with—"all those do-dads," mother said. The people were all affable and talking among themselves, and yet Bert could sense that the dinner didn't seem to be going just exactly as it should, and she couldn't see why. Her thin cheeks were flushed. In the kitchen, it was as if she were working in a vacuum, not in that shining flush of triumph she knew and craved. How fast everything was going—how soon this great dinner would be over!

Mrs. Hohenschuh had come into the kitchen from the back way. "Mother, you went and put on that old percale dress of yours, and I had that new one all laid out for you ready!" That seemed the crowning catastrophe. Bert suddenly began to tremble with anger. When she came into the kitchen the next time, she whispered furiously. "You aren't going to let those people see you in that! Since you had to go put it on, just to be stubborn, you can stay out of sight." How could she ever get anywhere with all this family to pull up after her? Mother looked like an old farm woman. Bert felt trembly and ready to cry and could scarcely bear to hear the quiet sound of the voices in the dining room.

The coffee cups were all set out on the little old sewing table that she was using for a serving table. She was going to serve

her coffee with dessert, the right way. "Ach, let 'em have their coffee!" Mrs. Hohenschuh pleaded. She thought it was terrible to deprive people of coffee all through a meal. She didn't much mind Bert's reproaches, either. "Ach, Bert, she always gets so cross when she's got anything to do, I don't know." The old lady made off into the garden. But Bert knew how mother was. It would be a miracle if she let any people get away without talking to them—and probably telling them the whole family history!

Bert took in the fragrant coffee and the homemade ice cream. They *must* like that. They did, too. They were much more complimentary. The woman in the cute green dress (she didn't seem to be the author's wife, after all; that was the one that didn't look nearly so much like "somebody"—it surprised Bert) said very flatteringly: "What delicious ice cream! Did you make it yourself?" The older woman—that was Mrs. Drayton—smiled up at Bert. They all praised the ice cream. The talk was freer now. The author seemed to be saying the least of any of them, though. That seemed funny to Bert. Mr. Drayton was lots more talkative and full of fun—peppier. She bet he could write awfully good stories, better than the other one, if he just wanted to.

She was almost happy, when she happened to look out of the window and saw mother climbing up from the cellarway outside, lugging something—a bottle! Oh, for . . . Before she got any chance to get out to the kitchen, the old lady came shy but beaming into the room, with a great big bottle of that dandelion wine. Bert was in torment. As if these people cared for anything like that!

But there mother stood and there was nothing to do but introduce her. Bert suffered agony. It was all the worse, some-

how, that they were being so polite and nice. "This is my mother." Mother began to beam at that. She loved to entertain people . . . that was all right, of course, but then she had never learned that people didn't do things the way she used to any more.

And mother was starting right in.

"Well, I thought it was mean you folks had to go all that time without your coffee, so I just brought you something else to drink." That awful old dandelion wine—mother was so proud of it! Bert hated it. "If you ain't afraid somebody's going to get after you—ach, it's all so funny these days—maybe you'll take a little drink of this wine. It's dandelion. I made it."

Bert couldn't stand it. She made for the kitchen. She sat down there, clenched her fists, and felt that she would actually fly to pieces.

The voices were louder in the dining room. She heard delighted laughter. Yes, now mother had some folks there, she had an audience, and she was just laying herself out for them—Bert knew how! She burned with humiliation. The whole thing was spoiled. How could anybody in this town try to do things the way they ought to be done?

Her mother came smiling out to the kitchen.

"Where are them little glasses gone?"

"Mother, why did you have to go in there with that stuff?"

"Ach, what are you fussing about? They like it."

After a while, Bert got up and began feverishly to get the messy plates cleaned off and stacked together. She couldn't eat a thing herself, not even good little crisp bits of chicken that were left. A lump in her throat was choking her. Mother had hold of them now. She heard them leave the dining room, and then the whole party trailed past the kitchen windows. Mother

was waddling in the lead. She was going to take the whole bunch out and show them her flower beds.

Maynard was whining. "Are you going to take me in and introduce me, mother?"

Bert looked at him, cold and remote.

"No. I'm not going to introduce *any-body*."

They were all out in the garden. Mrs. Hohenschuh always thought it her duty as a hostess to take her guests out and show them everything she had. Here where she felt that she "had things nice," too—this place in town which she and Mr. Hohenschuh had bought when they moved in from the country—she could take real enjoyment with visitors . . . even if Bert did go on about the place and say how behind the times it was now. But it was a long time since she had got hold of any people as appreciative as these. Most folks came to see Bert. They only pretended to like the kind of things she had in her garden. These people were really enjoying it. Mrs. Hohenschuh expanded.

"Well, I don't know as there's anything you folks'll care much about looking at—" (she didn't mean that; she said it in a rich, comfortable tone)—"I only got the same old kind of flowers I've always had, they ain't any of these new-fangled kinds with fancy names here—"

"Oh, we adore seeing them!" the woman in the green dress cried enthusiastically.

Mrs. Hohenschuh beamed. "Well, I think they're pretty nice, they suit me, but there's lots of folks nowadays wants different things, I guess. Ja. Anyway, that don't worry me. I let 'em talk. I go on doing things the way I want to."

The people all laughed and she was gratified.

"Well, here's what I got! I put in all these things myself. Bert, she don't want to bother. She's got too many irons in the fire all the time."

"This is lovely!"

Mrs. Hohenschuh stood fat and beaming while they looked and wandered about. She thought her garden was pretty nice—ja, you bet she did! And these folks all seemed to think so too. Why, they was awful nice folks! Why had Bert got so fussed up over having them here for dinner? Why, they was real nice and common! That one in the green dress (she was older than she wanted to let on, too, Mrs. Hohenschuh shrewdly judged) did the most running around and palaver-ing! but those other two, that husband and wife, enjoyed things just as much. The man in the glasses was *real* nice. Well, so was his wife, although she didn't have so much to say. But those other two, she kind of liked the best of the bunch. The woman was real sensible, the things she said and the questions she asked! and the man kind of trailed around after the others, and looked at things on his own account, the way Mrs. Hohenschuh liked to have folks do. That showed he wasn't putting it on, he was really enjoying himself.

Along with her answers and her explanations, Mrs. Hohenschuh managed to get in a good part of the family history. Bert had a fit when she told things like that; but Mrs. Hohenschuh never felt right until she'd . . . well, kind of given folks the facts and the right idea about the family. They'd hear it all anyway, so she might as well tell it herself.

"Have you had your garden long, Mrs. Hohenschuh?"

"Ja, ever since we moved into town. That's—how long is it a'ready?—ach, it's twenty years, I guess! Bert, she was only just in high school, then. That was partly why we come. The boys,

they didn't get to finish, but Pa he said Bert was to get her diploma, he was going to see to it, she was always the smartest, anyway. Ja, how old was Bert then? She was seventeen, I guess. She's thirty-seven now. Ja, she's such a thin little sliver, I don't know, women seems to want to be that way now, but she's thirty-seven! Her and Arlie's been married twelve years a'ready—and then this here little fellow's all they've got! Ach, I don't know!"

As she talked, all in her deep comfortable voice rich with chuckles and drolleries of German inflection, she waddled about among the flower beds, pointing out this kind and that. "These? Moss roses, I call 'em. I guess that ain't the right name, some folks say not, but they grow just the same—ain't that so? Ja, the old lady Douglas over there, when she was living, she had to have the right names for all her plants, but I told her mine grew better'n hers did if I did call 'em wrong! Ach, these names I know 'em by, them are the ones I like to call 'em!" The moss roses in their flat matted bed on the hot earth were gay spots of scarlet and crimson and yellow and cerise and white. They made one of the women think of the colors in old-fashioned patchwork quilts, she said.

"She's got the real old honest-to-God peppermint! I haven't smelled any of that for years. Come here, Mary!"

"Peppermint? Ja! That I always have. That I like too."

The woman in the green dress came running and clutched the other younger woman. "Come here, Jean! I want to show you. The pump! Isn't that just right? And see here—all these little flower pots set out and slips started in them . . . just see, this foliage stuff, this old red and green funny leaf stuff, my grandmother used to have that. And look back there! One of those great big green wire flower stands that I suppose used to

stand in the bay window. Didn't you just *yearn* to take your dolls promenading on that, and they wouldn't let you, because you might spoil the plants? Isn't this *per-fect*?" Mrs. Hohenschuh had told them, "Ja, sure, you look around anywhere you want to, what's the use of hiding what you got?" Charlie Drayton was enjoying the old lady's naïve revelations, but the other man lounged about poking into the woodshed where the light fell dim and dusty through a little square window high up in the wall, and into a tool shed where pans of seeds were set about in the midst of a clutter of ancient furniture. It was like going back thirty years.

There was a little apple orchard at the side, grown up to tall grass now; and there, on one of his silent excursions, he discovered a two-foot china troll plated down in a tiny hollow with grass grown about his base as it binds in ancient tombstones, and a little casual offering of fallen apples about his chipped feet. He stood looking at it. The woman in the green dress saw him and came running over.

"What have you found, Harry? *Oh!* Oh, isn't that *mar-velous*? Oh, Mrs. Hohenschuh, we've found something simply wonderful, won't you tell us what that is?"

Mrs. Hohenschuh wandered over. "That? Ach, is that old thing still out there? Ja, it's funny, but then, I don't know . . . Pa, he was the one that got that thing."

"It's German, isn't it?"

"Ja, it's German, all right. Pa, he come from the old country, he come over here when he was only eighteen years old, he had just twenty dollars when he landed in this country. Ja, it's German, is what it is. Pa, he always wanted to fix up the back yard like the places he'd seen in the old country—that was why he got this funny fellow, that was one reason we moved into

town when we did, because Pa wanted to fix up a place . . . ja, and then we hadn't lived here but a year or two when Pa got killed. He got run over, he was thinking of things the way he always done, and didn't hear the train coming . . . ja, that's the way of it!" But after a moment, while they all stood about her soberly, she roused herself and went on. "Bert, she always had a fit over that fellow. She was the one to put him out of the front yard and lugged him out here. But I don't know—" Mrs. Hohenschuh chuckled—"I always kind of liked the little fellow. Maybe because Pa thought so much of him. Well, I guess he's where she ain't likely to find him. She's too busy inside there to fool around out here much. I'm the one does that."

Slowly, Mrs. Hohenschuh in the lead, they trailed away from the orchard. The troll, with his colors faded to dim faint tints and curls chipped off his beard, stood smiling a one-sided but jovial smile at the rotting apples about his broken feet that had almost grown into the orchard ground.

Mrs. Hohenschuh picked some of each kind of flowers for every person. "Hold on, now! You ain't got any of the pansies yet." A circle of sticks set upright—little thin sticks with flaking bark—enclosed the massed, butterfly colors of the pansies. The tiger lilies grew in a straggling bunch tied with twine. "Pick yourself some if you like 'em. Go ahead!" What else were the flowers here for? "Here's a color you ain't got if you like them zinnies, Mrs. . . . well, you'll have to excuse me. I can't remember all you folkses' names." The sun shone down brightly on the garden, bringing out the hot colors of the moss roses, throwing clear antique shadows from the grape arbor, glinting and losing itself in coolness in the thick wet grass around the pump through which silent little streams of water soaked

slowly. They all had a drink before they went into the house. The sides of the glass were frosted with wet. The family story was twined with their wanderings among the little paths of the garden, tangled with the bright colors of the flowers, and brightened over with sunshine.

The house seemed cool when they went inside.

"Oh, you don't want to go yet! Come in and set awhile and let's finish our visit."

Mrs. Hohenschuh led them into the parlor.

"There's lots of things you ain't seen yet."

Mrs. Drayton was tired, even Mr. Drayton—although still genial—was ready to stop; but the other three seemed insatiable. Bert had heard her mother's invitation and burned with helpless shame. What else was mother going to show? And it was hopeless to try to lead her off now. Bert followed the others into the front room.

"I'll show you Pa's picture, Mr. . . . ach, that name's gone again! Well, I guess you know I mean you, don't you? Sure! That's right."

She got down that old faded purple plush album that held all the family pictures—Bert and the boys when they were youngsters, Mr. Hohenschuh when he first came to this country, wedding pictures of hired men. The two younger women sat eagerly close to her, the writer looked at all the pictures with a gravity that Bert couldn't fathom, Mr. Drayton laughed and made funny remarks about the clothes that pleased mother, and Mrs. Drayton looked at the pictures last with a pleased but tired smile; she wasn't quite in all the things the others were, Bert thought. "Ja, look at that one now! Ain't he funny-looking though? He was a cousin of mine. Ja, now they all look funny." Bert sat and suffered. Maynard sidled in. He couldn't

give up the promise of being introduced. They were all nice to him. The author showed him a funny pin he had, carved by the Indians, and the women all smiled at him. But they went on making that fuss over mother.

When she had showed them the photographs, she had to let them see her other things: the shells and the "curios" that she prized so, and that she kept on a shelf in the bookcase. "Look here! Did you ever see anything like this before?" How could they act so pleased, unless they were just false and putting it on to get mother to make a fool of herself? Bert could have cried. That shell! Of course they'd seen shells. They'd been everywhere. Those old feathers from the tail of the peacock they used to have out on the farm, the cocoanut husk, that big long German pipe, the glass paper-weight with the snowfall inside. What else could she find to show them? They were asking about fancy work. Did she ever make the real old knitted lace? Ja, not so much knit' as crotchet', though—wait she'd show them! It would be just like her to ask them to all go up to her room with her and look through those terrible drawers—and if she did that! Bert was ready to kill herself. That room of mother's (and it wasn't any use talking to her about it, Bert couldn't make her do a *thing*) with dresses hanging on nails, and quilts piled up in the corner, drawers filled with junk—a perfect museum!

Well, they weren't paying any attention to her and Maynard anyway, so Bert went back to the dining room. She might as well finish with the table. . . . At least they were staying a long time and seemed to be enjoying themselves. In that way, she supposed the dinner was a success. But she couldn't understand them. It was she to whom they ought to be paying attention—she who appreciated them, and knew how different they

were, and wanted to be like them; they couldn't really mean it when they made such a fuss over mother? Why should they? They must be laughing at her. What on earth could they see in all this old junk? It was so perverse and contrary and cruel that she wanted to cry. All the very awfullest things in the house—things *no-body* had any more! What kind of an idea of the town would they get? She looked into the parlor, and there was mother getting out all her old fancy work—that terrible piece, that huge table spread, with horses and dogs and cows and roosters crotcheted into it . . . and they were saying "lovely"! She heard them.

"That dress. Isn't it perfect? The real thing."

"Oh, she's a jewel!"

"Lovely!"

They were going at last. They were very nice to Bert then. The women sought her out in the dining room. "Such a wonderful dinner you gave us!"

"Well, I'm glad you liked it. I didn't know . . ."

She followed them into the parlor, feeling appeased and excited again, even though she seemed to scent a tactful patronage. But they were all complimenting her now, and she drank in the praise, eagerly, but afraid to believe they meant it.

Mr. Drayton had taken her aside. "And what do we owe you for this fine meal you gave us?" he asked her in a low, genial tone.

"Well . . . a dollar apiece." Bert said firmly. She blushed, but held her ground. She had heard that all the city tearooms charged a dollar and a quarter now. Of course, she couldn't ask quite as much as a city tearoom, that had everything just up to snuff; but her dinner was good and she knew it, and

she was going to stick to business. He didn't seem to think that she was charging them too much, however. He counted out some bills and handed them right over to her. But when she came to look at them, there were too many—a five and an extra one!

"Oh, I can't—why, you've given me—"

He tapped her shoulder. "That's all right. Don't notice it. Doesn't begin to pay for the entertainment we've had here."

She still protested, flushed and happy, but he wouldn't listen to her; so she guessed there was nothing else for her to do. . . .

She hadn't forgotten about the visitor's book. She got it out now. All the tearooms in the East had those, Mrs. Elliott had said. She had seen several famous names in one place where she had eaten. It advertised the place; and then it was an honor, too, to think such people had eaten there. Bert was a little bashful but determined.

"I hope you don't mind before you go." She laid the new visitors' book, a notebook with black covers that she had bought at the drug-store, before the author. "I'd like to have you put your name in my book so other folks can see you've been here."

He didn't seem very much flattered about it, she thought, but anyway he wasn't going to refuse. How funny! She would have thought it would please folks to be asked to do things like that. The others teased him a little. "You can't escape 'em, Harry!" They seemed to think it was sort of a joke. Bert stood flushed, waiting and determined. She was satisfied when she saw, at the very beginning of her book, the small firm signature: "Harry Whetstone."

"How little you write!" she cried in amazement. It was funny for a man to write so small as that. "Now I want all the rest of

you folks' names."

They protested.

"Yes I do. You're all along with him."

"Well, go on, girls. Sign yourselves," Mr. Drayton commanded.

They all signed. Mrs. Drayton blushed when she did it.

Bert wasn't through with the author yet. Before she let him go, she was going to get all she'd meant to get out of him.

"I wondered if you'd let me use your name, Mr. Whetstone."

He still had that funny, kind of bored way. His wife was really nicer.

"Say he ate with a large appetite, even mightier than usual," Mrs. Whetstone said.

But it seemed to Bert they were all amused.

She wanted to talk to the writer about his books. "You know I never met an author before," she said. "I've always been wanting to, because—" she flushed—"well, I've always wanted to write myself. I always thought I could if I just had the time to do it."

"Oh, don't," he assured her solemnly. But he wasn't as impressed as she had thought he would be. "It's much better to cook biscuits like those we devoured this noon. Infinitely better to make dandelion wine like your mother."

He was joking, of course. But Bert didn't quite like it. She had meant what she said, seriously. It was something she'd thought about all her life. He didn't seem to her a bit like an author.

Mrs. Hohenschuh came into the house, waddling and breathless.

"Dandelion wine!" she cried. "Ja, if you liked that, then you

come back here and you'll get some of the wild grape I'm going to make this fall. You come and let *me* get you up a dinner. I'll give you some real genuine fried chicken and you won't have to wait all meal for your coffee."

They all laughed. They seemed to think that was *funny*.

She had been out in the garden again. She had dug up some plants, and wrapped them in newspapers and brought some slips for the women to take along and set out.

"You take these along with you. Oh sure, you go ahead!"

She parceled them out right and left and gave directions. The people went out to the car swamped with packages. They were thanking Mrs. Hohenschuh profusely, and promising to do just what she told them, laughing delightedly at everything she said. She went right up to the car with them, as she always did with people who were leaving. Bert stood back with the bills wadded up in her hot hand, and with Maynard beside her. They had complimented her on the dinner, and said nice things to her, done all that she had asked them: but she stood hungering for just the one thing they hadn't said to her.

"Good-by, Mrs. Hohenschuh. We certainly have enjoyed this."

"You come again. All of you. You just drop in any time you feel like it."

"Good-by, Mrs. Statzer! . . . And Maynard!"

But they had to remember to say that.

Mr. Drayton took the wheel, the big engine started humming, the car rolled ahead. They waved—they were going. . . .

"Well!" Mrs. Hohenschuh said gratified, climbing back onto the walk. "They was real nice folks! I don't see why you made such a fuss over having them."

"Look at your hands, mother!" Bert said bitterly.

"Ja, I know. I dug up them plants. Well, it don't matter now, they're gone anyway."

She waddled serenely to the house.

Bert stood looking after the car. She didn't know just what she had expected this dinner to mean to her. Anyway, she hadn't thought that everything would be just as it was before, that mother would be the one they got on with (mother, who hadn't really lifted her hand!), that she would just go back into the house with a lot of dirty dishes to wash. She didn't yet see what their idea was.