

NEXT DOOR NEIGHBORS

By AUGUSTA LARNED

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CHAPTER I



There came a blank leaf and scribbled hastily on it.

Mark Spofford was lounging in his mother's sitting room in a great easy chair with his feet wide apart, engaged in snipping a bit of cloth with a pair of tiny embroidery scissors that scarcely fitted on the tips of his thumb and forefinger. Mark was a big fellow, long in the legs and arms, and broad of shoulder, deep chested and vigorous, with a thick crop of curling auburn hair and gray, speculative eyes under thick eyebrows. Eye-glasses dangled by a cord from his neck, but he seldom wore them, and a characteristic habit of contracting the eyelids was due to his shortsightedness. Mark's lips were made up for a whistle as he sat idly snipping the shred of cotton; then suddenly he threw up his arms and gave a great and prolonged yawn, showing all his beautiful firm white teeth back to his molars and bicuspids.

"Come, Mark," said his mother, who sat at a little table near by, engaged on some coarse kind of canvas, on which she employed a variety of bright colored embroidery silks "do bestir yourself. Here in this little room you seem to exhaust the air you are so big. I can hardly move without stumbling over you."

Mark got up, made a queer grimace that gave a comical expression to his plastic features, straightened himself slowly as if he were jointed, and were unpacking from some sort of a case, and then went over to where his mother sat, took her fair gray head in both his arms and hugged it against his huge breast.

"Oh, mamma, is there no way at all I can see Kitty? It is beastly dull here without her, as you must know. We have always been such fast friends, mamma dear, and now to be cut off from Kitty when we live just next door is what I call horrid cruelty."

Mrs. Spofford patted her boy's big hand with her own small white one, sparkling with rings, as she sat, her work suspended and her handsome head still in chancery to the lad's strong arms.

"What can we do, Mark? Your father has quarreled with Kitty's father, and non-intercourse is the rule of the two houses."

"I say it is beastly bad," said Mark, twisting his features into another queer grimace. "that we must break off all intercourse with our dearest friends because two old f—"

"Don't be disrespectful to your father," said Mrs. Spofford gravely.

"No, of course I don't intend to blame dad. He is not a patient man by any means, but I am of the opinion that old Childers goaded him past all endurance. Old Childers is a regular Tartar when his temper is once up, an unreasonable, pigheaded, prejudiced old scoundrel. How he ever came to be the father of Kitty I cannot imagine."

"Tut, tut," said Mrs. Spofford, freeing herself gently from her boy's embrace and proceeding to smooth her rumpled locks with both her delicate hands.

"Don't you remember not so many years ago when you always called him Uncle Ben, and how he used to ride you on his back and bring you a pocketful of goodies whenever he came to the house to see your father?"

"Of course, mamma, he was dad's best friend in those days, his old college chum. We all thought him the kindest hearted, jolliest man in the world; and he is generous, I will say that for him. And that time that dad got hurt on the railroad, I remember how he came and staid with him nights, and took care of him like a brother. But we did not know then what a devil of a temper he had—not till he persuaded dad to come out here to Littlefield and build this house next door to his own. The two houses were planned almost exactly alike, and there was never a stick or stone of wall or fence between. Their flower beds ran into ours, and our peas and lettuce hobnobbed with theirs, and that house was just as much of a home to me as ours was, and Kitty and Tom were like my own brother and sister, and now it is all so sadly changed. Dad and Uncle Ben quarreled about some confounded thing or another—protection and free trade and a town office, I believe it was that began the shindy—and things went from bad to worse, until Uncle Ben built that great brick wall between the gardens topped with iron spikes, and spoiled both places. Now when I come home Tom passes me by, like a contemptible cock-sparrow that he is, his hat on his ear, and Uncle Ben snorts like a locomotive, and Kitty pretends never to see me in church; her eyes are always fixed on her prayer

book. I am a stranger to them all, and the two cooks and the two coachmen and the two gardeners have taken up the quarrel, and all fight each other. Tom Childers shoots our cats when they perch on the brick wall, and the cook throws the dead cats over into our garden, and our cook throws them back, with the addition of broken crockery bottles and old boots."

"That is not the worst of it," said Mrs. Spofford with a sigh, taking up her embroidery again. "It is almost the same as if Kitty and Aunt Sophy and Uncle Ben were all dead and buried. Your father and I have agreed never to speak of them, to ignore the place just as if it did not exist, but we can't sit on our veranda when they are on theirs, for every word is plainly overheard, or if we do we are forced to speak in whispers. We have heard Uncle Ben say odious things about us when our backs were turned, and some of the warmest days I have closeted myself and nearly stifled because it was so painful to sit there and see my old friend Mrs. Childers looking thin and pale and worn. I know she is ill, too, poor woman! She has been ill lately, and it has gone to my heart to know she is so poorly without being able to say a kind word. Uncle Ben's nature seems quite changed. He tries to irritate your father in every way. The pipes broke some weeks ago and flooded the cellar, and now he has begun a suit against us for damages. Something about the connecting drains. I don't understand it at all, and I dare not ask your father to explain; it makes him look so apathetic. I sometimes think this quarrel will shorten his days. I would gladly sell the house and move away, but your father never will give in. It would look too much as if he were the under dog in the fight. Why, it's almost like living in a perpetual state of siege. You never know when your enemy will make a breach in the wall; and then to remember that you have once loved the enemy so dearly, and that now it is your duty to hate him, distorts things horribly."

Mark had gone back to his low chair, and sat with his elbows on his knees, and his big hands thrust through his thick chestnut locks. As he raised his eyes from the carpet his glance passed through the open window, and there in plain sight was the wall of Kitty's home, a brick and gray stone wall over-run with wisteria vine, that clambered about the drawing room window, screened by a lace curtain, with a large bowl of geraniums which Kitty's hands had arranged.

Mark knew that his own bedroom window was exactly opposite Kitty's, on the second story, across a pretty piece of greensward, shaded by a clump of drooping elms. But Kitty's window on that side was always closed with shutters and blinds. There were two other windows opening from her room on the garden, and the prospect of her ever appearing on the Spofford side of the house seemed quite hopeless. However, poor Mark was not absolutely without some sign of her existence. At that very moment the sound of Kitty's piano came stealing across from the other house. He could in fancy see his Kitty sitting there on the stool, lingering the white keys with her little dimpled hands, the rings of golden hair curling like tendrils about her forehead, and behind her ear, that pretty ear itself pearly and pink like a shell, and the gentle, snave turn of her neck, and her smile that seemed to flash out on him bewilderingly for no one ever had so sunny a smile as Kitty. It irradiated her whole face, flooded her blue eyes, touched the gracious curve of her forehead, dimpled her cheek and made her both captivating and arch. The thought of Kitty's smile maddened Mark. He got up and prowled about the room, disarranged the bric-a-brac on the chimney piece, overset the inkstand, broke a flower vase and turned his mother's work basket upside down, and at last that much enduring lady lost all patience.

"You are worse than a bull in a china shop, Mark. Do go and subdue yourself by practicing with Indian clubs or swinging dumb bells. I would suggest a ten mile walk, or the breaking of a wild pony—anything to work off your superfluous strength before you have broken everything within doors."

"I'll tell you, mamma dear, I've a mind to go and knock a hole in the garden wall."

"Better not, Mark. Tom keeps a terrible Siberian mastiff named Grip that even the family are afraid of. He came near tearing the butcher's boy in pieces the other day, and if you were to venture upon him when he is unchained there would be nothing left of you but the buttons."

Mark went out bareheaded into the garden and strolled around the paths in his slippers. He crammed his little black student's pipe full of tobacco, and began puffing away meditatively as he cast his weather eye up at Kitty's window on the garden side. With a great head and mighty shock of curling auburn hair, Mark had a good deal of inventive genius stowed away in the chambers of his capacious brain. He had given himself to the study of electricity with ardor, and had devised one or two little improvements that had brought him patent rights and some fame among the fraternity of electricians. But what was the use of being an inventor, with the thunderbolts of Jove in his possession, if he was walled in the dungeon of some genii's old Castle Dolorous, with Kitty in the extinguisher tower, and he unable to communicate with her by word or look, by telephone or phonograph, or any other means under heaven? He thought of setting himself up with a harp, like the minstrel under the windows of Richard Cœur de Lion, but it would necessarily have been a jewsharp, the only instrument he knew how to play.

Kitty, he thought, was certainly a girl destitute of originality, spirit or boldness, else she would have helped a little toward making it easy to get into communication. At least she might open her window just opposite to his own. Why should she be so ruthless and unfeeling as to deny him even a passing glimpse of her dear face? But he did

not love Kitty the less for being quite unfriendly and devoid of little arts by which to deceive her father.

Mr. Childers with stern, parental dignity had said to her, "Kitty, if there has ever been any spooning between you and that fellow Mark Spofford it must be broken off. Do you hear me, girl?"

"Yes, sir," sadly.

"Well, now, mind what I say; I would cut off a daughter of mine with a shilling who would dare to disobey me in such a case. With a shilling, d'ye hear?"

"Yes, sir," meekly.

"If he dares to write to you, Kitty, you must send his letters back unopened. D'ye hear, Kitty?"

"Yes, sir," tearfully.

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