

The Purple Lady

by Georgia Wood Pangborn

Two Little Children and
Some Paper Dolls; Two
Big Children, the Rack
of Dire Need—and a
Mother Who Wouldn't
Give Up.

IT WAS a rainy afternoon, so Joe and Althea were in the attic, cutting fashion ladies out of an old Godey's Lady's Book. That is, Althea cut out the ladies. Joe designed animals on yellow wrapping paper. These, he said, would eat the ladies up. But when the back of Althea's wrist went to her mouth and her eyes, fixed mournfully on him, filled and filled, he said hastily that it was only a few of the animals who were like that. The rest were good and would protect the ladies. Just let him have his turn at the scissors and she would see. And so, indeed, it proved, for the beasts fought so terribly among themselves that in a short time good and bad alike were nothing but a heap of torn scraps, while the ladies, quite unscathed, still stood along the floor crack. Then Joe said he smelled the cookies being taken out of the oven and went down to see.

Althea was hungry. People at home were sick. Mrs. Mack knew all about it and was terribly sorry, and helped by having Althea over at her house so much that she had begun to feel as if she had a little daughter of her own as well as that square, blundering, noisy little son. And as she watched the two together, how splendidly they got on, her dreams would sweep foolishly forward to a time when Joe should no longer be so square and blundering, nor Althea so tiny and frail. What a pair they would make if they carried out the fine promise of their babyhood!

Perhaps it was being hungry that made Althea's dream feeling so strong that day, for she had come away with even less luncheon than usual, and that after almost no breakfast at all. Now, at the smell of the cookies, she felt quite giddy and strange, as if the walls were mist, so that she had but to thrust out her hand and put it quite through them.

How sweet—how mysteriously sweet—those cookies smelled! Or was it the cookies? For it seemed more like clove pinks, when you put your nose right on the petals and draw them up against your nostrils.

The far corners of the attic were a little dimmer than she liked; in particular, the corner where the model of the machine stood, all legs and elbows and long fingers.

But, of course, now that things turned to dreams, the machine was as unsubstantial as the rest, so as she looked at it through half-closed eyes Althea was not surprised that it should thin, dissolve, become invisible. Oh, how lovely! She had done it! She had dreamed the lady real!

Yes, there she was, a real dream lady, lady size, too, not just a doll, and she wore a great braid of yellow hair around the top of her head like a crown.

She was sitting on the floor in front of the trunk, and her wide purple skirts made a billowing circle about her until she was like some great inverted flower. The trunk was open, and it was not just full of drawings and things. She was taking out the loveliest little dresses, just right for a doll, and holding them up and looking at them, then folding them up and putting them away again, the way you do to see if there are moths. Clove pinks! Well, I should think so! There they were at her throat, just where the lacy ruffle made a V, finished at its point with a tiny black velvet bow. As a paper lady she had not been wearing clove pinks. In a number of ways she was not quite the paper lady—only the way of wearing her hair, and the gown with its lovely wide skirts. The material had a white ground and was all sprinkled with tiny flowers and true lovers' knots.

And then, when she held up a tiny white dress between her face and Althea, Althea saw that her eyes were looking at her above the little outthrust dress. Her mouth was hidden, but Althea knew it smiled.

Just as Althea was about to speak Joe had come storming up, and then there was no lady except the paper one still in her hand, and the sprawling machine, as before, stood in front of the trunk.

There were not only cookies and milk, but a plate of sandwiches. It was on account of the sandwiches, Joe explained, that he had been so long. His mother had insisted on his waiting while she put them up, and they must be eaten first, she said.

Althea sat in the largest, most comfortable chair in what had been Mrs. Mack's room, but was now hers. Althea thought there was furnace heat throughout the house, in this room a bit of wood fire also helped to thrust back the January cold. For it was the January of 1918, and a winter storm was raging against the windows.

Mrs. Mack was sitting on an ottoman at Althea's feet—a dowager who had quite resigned her crown, but who remained—oh, yes, remained a power behind the throne of the new queen. Now, in the old queen's face, so long as it was unobserved, was the light of battle—perhaps of desperation. Only when the young woman's eyes were upon her—then it was calm, confident, reassuring.

"How warm and safe I am—here," said Althea. "When I think of those mothers and babies I feel wicked."

"I know," said Mrs. Mack. "But we are not wicked. We are reserves. Our part is to keep ourselves steady."



She was sitting on the floor, and her wide purple skirts made a billowing circle about her.

"Yes," said Althea, "only when the wind is like that I seem to hear them."

And indeed the wind had found a crevice which it could make whimper and wail like a tiny child in trouble.

"But it is the wind," said Althea. "Just only the wind."

She turned from the frosted window to Joe's mother.

"How was he when you looked in last?"

"Sleeping, I think. At least he was quiet."

"Well," said Althea confidently, "I can be patient. It isn't as if I couldn't understand why he can't bear the sight of me. 'The world is no place for women,' he said. That tells it all. He never could bear even small cruelties, and he has been seeing things that it almost kills us to read about. We know how he has fought—his medals would tell us, even if we didn't know anyway."

"Yes," said his mother, and her voice was calm. She even bent down and adjusted the logs more precisely. "It is a wound of the spirit, but as honorable a one as the other—or the gas. I have sometimes thought that in this war more than in other wars the enemy has had power to reach a man's soul. I may be mistaken, yet, even if it is so, such a wound must heal. I do not believe any such wound, even of the soul, can touch the real center. Come, now; we mustn't get too serious. That is a concession to the enemy."

"So you have the little things all airing? How sweet and confident they look with the little sleeves spread out! Wait till the arms get in them and begin to flap and wave! Joe wore out everything. I never saw such a baby. He scrubbed through his long dresses just as he did later through his knickerbockers. It's a shame that he didn't leave anything of his wardrobe for his own baby—but they never think of that! He chewed his sleeves and kicked the long skirts to shreds. So I couldn't save anything."

"I do wish," said Althea, "I could have embroidered some slips. Of course, the woolen things are most important this weather, but I wanted a frilly cap, too. Poor baby! He won't be going out much in this weather, but I'd like to see him in one. There's nothing quite like a baby's face with a frill around it and a bow under the chin."

"I wish—that little trunk in the attic, the one behind your father's model. Are you sure there's nothing in it but drawings and things like that?"

"You are thinking of your old attic ghost? Oh, my dear, don't get the notion that it was anything more than a phantom of your poor little hungry tummy."

"And yet," said Althea, touching the little display rather discontentedly, avaciously, "did you ever look into it—clear down to the bottom?"

"Why, no; not to the bottom, but enough so that I could see. It's only drawings. After my mother's death my father just put everything away, stuffed his drawings into the trunk, dragged the poor old model in front of it and forgot it as well as he could."

"I should think mothers would—come back, if anybody ever does," mused Althea. "I would."

"Would you, my dear?" Mrs. Mack thought it over. "Yes," she agreed. "It's hard to imagine anything keeping one away. I don't see how death could be strong enough," she said, thinking of Joe in the other room, Althea in this and the other now so near—and all of them with only herself to help them in their need. Mrs. Mack felt that she at least must be a stronger force than death.

"I thought then," said Althea, "it was old doll things she was looking over."

But now—I know," and she pointed at her own collection. "It wasn't doll things. If—if I could," she said, "I mean, if it were wise—I suppose it wouldn't be—I'd ask you to let me go up and look."

"Why, you dear, persistent little Fatima! I'll look; of course I will, though I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. It wouldn't do for you to go up those stairs and pull heavy attic things around, of course. How funny it would be if there should be anything under the poor old drawings!"

"I was only a year old when she died," said Mrs. Mack, looking wistfully at an ill-done crayon portrait. "I have no memory of her at all."

She paused, and then repeated the tragic little story. Althea had heard it, and she knew that Althea had heard it, yet she repeated it, as one does repeat some well-known tale or a song.

"She had gone out to pick some grapes for jelly. You know in those days there was a tongue of the real woods that came down then between our garden and the village. Hunters sometimes followed their game there, honestly supposing there were no houses near. On that morning my father heard shots and went out, as he sometimes did, to warn them. He found four lads who had just got a fox and were so proud of their splendid pet! He knew the boys, and they were especial pets of my mother's, too, and he brought them all up to the garden to find her and show her their prize. And—there she lay, with the grapes scattered about her—brought down like a partridge!"

"I believe she came back," said Althea. "She would!"

"If she could," agreed Mrs. Mack; "and now I must see to the furnace."

"You're going in to Joe first?"

"Yes."

"If he's sleeping, couldn't I—just look?"

"I don't believe I would—his sleep is so light, you know."

"Oh, well—it won't be long now. The baby will cure him. If I didn't believe so—but he will! Now do go and sit with him. Let him find your hand when he wakes. The sound of snow flaking against the window is so desolate, I'm afraid it will make him think—of those things. When you are there it is almost as if I were allowed to go in. I'll go on with this bootie and—then you'll look in the little trunk. If you aren't too tired? I suppose it was only a dream, but I shan't be quite satisfied until I'm sure."

So Joe's mother went softly into Joe's room. Not the room which she had given him and his little wife during their wild snatch of a honeymoon before Joe went away through black seas to that business of putting out a world fire, but the room of his boyhood, with its dado of lacrosse sticks, snowshoes, tennis racquets, newspaper cartoons, thumb-tacked to the wall.

She sat beside him, taking the left hand that lay outside, so white and gaunt and large, upon the black bear skin. The other one was still helpless. But recovering—oh, yes! Some day, if this wound of soul permitted, he would walk about and have two arms and hands. Had it been a mistake, bringing him home? It had been so costly—so difficult, getting him back into her own care, but she had been so sure that Althea and her great hope would rouse and cure him. And he had given just one understanding, terrified look, and shuddered away.

"Don't let her come in here," said Joe. "But tell her—you tell her—that—that I didn't know. I thought it was right to love."

"It's the most right thing in the world, little son. You did no wrong."

But he had only moaned and hid his

face, saying again: "This world is no place for women."

Joe shut his eyes and turned his head away. She would have stayed, but she was alert about her other nestling this stormy night. Besides, there was the furnace to see to, and the question of food, and she was only one mother to do everything—everything.

As Mrs. Mack stood for the moment in the doorway, smiling back at Althea, the girl thought once again how safe and cared for she was, here with Joe's mother, and she wondered at the older woman's fortitude, hoping humbly that when she should be 50 and had troubles she could stand as straight and calm under them.

But perhaps if she could have seen that other face as it turned away her stitches would have set less smoothly.

Haggard, fierce, threatening, old—50? This woman was 70 or more. Her eyes were the eyes of a deer with the hounds slashing at its flanks, or of a woman in Belgium seeking escape and finding none; but not giving up, no, not giving up! Merely, just for the moment, unmasked of that show of courage which must be assumed if others are not to despair also. Not needing for a little while to pretend to be unafraid.

And yet, you know, she was merely going down to see about the furnace and to plan the morning's breakfast.

Her only light through all that dark part of the house was one candle, though in Althea's room a pink-shaded lamp burned cheerfully. The house was wired for electricity, but there was none in use. She had given Althea to understand that this was not only because of the poor quality of the service supplied by the town but because she really liked candles and old-fashioned lamps better.

Althea never had the slightest hint that the meter had been taken out because the bills had not been paid. And when, at intervals, she heard her mother-in-law handling saw and ax in the cellar, and knew by the smell that the furnace was being fed with wood instead of coal, it never occurred to her that they were enduring a sharper coal famine than other families in town; that carload after carload of coal had come in, but that they had had to let their allotment go because they had no money to pay for it. Nor did Althea know of the mortgage, and how the money from it had all been licked up by old debts so quickly that there had been barely enough to finance that terrible journey after Joe.

When she fed the furnace with four-foot lengths of stout oak planks—for the bins, like the rest of the house, were solidly and honestly built—Mrs. Mack listened for a minute at the foot of the stairs to make certain that there was no sound of need from above, then lifted an inverted box and took from beneath it a hen which had been indignantly awaiting her fate since morning. She was the last—the last—of a flock of 50, and a pet, but she was a short, shaggy, but did not falter. What must be, must.

But it was the last—and now, what? As she mounted the cellar stairs with the candle in one hand and the chicken dangling from the other she almost smiled at a swift grotesque vision of herself making use of her knowledge of her neighbors' hen roosts; roosts which had not been depleted. Yet—was it so impossible? Was there anything in the wide world that she would not do for those two upstairs if it was possible—and safe? She had always sworn she would never get into debt—but she was in debt; that she would never, under any circumstances mortgage her house—yet how quickly she had done it when it was a question of getting Joe home!

Mrs. Mack hung her fowl upon a nail

and went the rounds of the kitchen. There was a little rice, a bit of dried codfish, perhaps half a dozen jars of jelly.

At any rate, sufficient unto the day. Rice, chicken, jelly—that would see them through tomorrow. Perhaps she could bring herself to lay the case before Dr. Robson if she must. He would not let Althea suffer—surely not! And, in time, the government would send Joe's pay—some day. And when Althea was all safe, why, then—then there were all sorts of work one could do.

And so she smoothed her face, straightened her shoulders, and went to look at the children again.

Joe was asleep, really asleep. She stole out and went to look at Althea. But that wise child had gone to bed and was asleep also. Here, too, Mrs. Mack paused. So austere lovely—so childlike still. Rough fate must surely turn aside from that!

She lifted her clenched hands and held them against her dry eyes for a moment as she turned away, then, seeing the gay, expectant garments still airing before the drying fire, she took up her candle once more and went up the garret stairs. She could do that much. Though, of course, there would be nothing. She had promised.

The garret's darkened rafters gave back no light at all from her candle flame; only the remote square of the tiny window flung back a spark as dim as her own, one small flash of greeting as she passed.

The trunk was locked, the key forgotten long ago. She pried the old hasp open. Poor, patient old drawings! There they lay. So many years of a man's life—so much hope, so much skill—so much rubbish!

She laid the drawing gently at one side. Under them were boxes. The first she lifted out was heavy. She knew what it must be, but lifted the cover to make sure. Yes, these were the disjointed parts of a small model of the machine. Exquisite bits of polished wood and carefully wrought metal, all arranged in order like a child's building blocks after a day of play. She put this box on top of the drawings and lifted the other, a large one, fitting the bottom of the trunk like a tray. If—there were anything in Althea's vision this must be the right box. It came up with such a different feel from the other box, so light, yet full! Her hands trembled. She lifted the pasteboard cover and touched the yellowed tissue paper.

"Mother!" she whispered. "Mother!" And then, just as she would have looked further at the contents, she heard herself called in a soft, guarded voice, and there was that in the call which turned her blood to ice. Oh, God! On a night like this—now?

Still holding the box and the candle, she darted to the stairhead and saw—as she knew she should see—Althea's face looking up at her. Althea also held a candle and she, too, was as white as the drifted snow. Her forehead glistened, her eyes were wide and black, but a smile fluttered upon her lips.

"Coming at once, darling," Mrs. Mack sped down the stairs like a swooping bird. "Back to bed. Don't be troubled. It will be all right—all right—all right!"

"Now I must telephone."

"How ever can the doctor get through!" gasped Althea. "Isn't it drifting terribly?"

"Oh," said the other serenely, "you don't know doctors. He won't try to use his sleigh. He'll just get on his little black cob. I've seen them going about in worse weather than this."

"The wires must be down."

"They won't be."

"I wasn't worrying—I only meant—if

they should be—don't worry. We can get along. Other women have." Then she shut her lips tight on a cry that almost came. But neither that wall nor any other passed her lips during that long night. For the sake of Joe, dreaming terrible things in the next room; for the sake of Joe, who had heard, God knows what cries, and so could bear no more, she kept silence—silence!

The wires were not down, but a colder thing that storm thrust her back when Mrs. Mack sent her call into the night.

"We can't take any more calls from you," came back sharp and fine—with a cruel edge of satisfaction in the under-bred voice. "The service is suspended for non-payment of the last three months' charges."

"Really!" said Mrs. Mack. "How careless of me. I'll see to that tomorrow. But I must ask you to take this call, because—" and she went on confidently to explain. But she found neither understanding nor pity in the only ear her voice could reach. Surely that could not be a laugh! Some sound of the storm breaking in. No human creature could laugh. "Orders is orders," decreed the voice. And central answered her no more.

But there was no time for anger. The nearest neighbors—but the nearest house was closed for the winter; the house beyond that had no phone, nor anyone able to help—just two feeble, deaf old women there. And if she tried to go farther still—it might take hours in such weather.

Well, then, what must be, must!

She built up the kitchen fire and put on water to boil. Then she went to the closet, where all her complete preparations for the doctor were kept. No, nothing lacked. She passed in lightning review all her knowledge of these matters and, then, with her calmest face, her gentlest tone, rejoined Althea.

"The phone does seem to be out of order," she admitted lightly, "but we'll keep our heads and come through with flying colors. Here's our chance to show what good pioneer stuff we are!"

And so they took up their battle—in silence.

And at last—at last—the snow ceased falling, and the wind was quiet, and a faint pink stole into the east, and one came who did not know of any reason for silence, who believed earnestly that lungs and voice were intended to be used to their utmost. Again and again he filled his mighty lungs with air and expelled it by way of his powerful larynx. A fine baby! A splendid baby! Such a one as had never come into the world before. Even Joe had not been able to cry so loud as that, Joe's mother assured Joe's baby's mother.

And Althea, having looked at him just once to make sure that he really was sound and straight, with the usual number of hands and feet, fingers and toes, whispered:

"Take him to Joe—to—cure him."

Joe was awake. He was raised up on his elbow and his eyes were terrible. Would it be safe? She thought, quailing. Who knew what wild fancy might seize him? But she stood her ground, holding that bundle of flannel which Althea had sent to Joe.

"Little son," she said softly, "here's something Althea wants you to take care of." She came nearer to the agonized face. "Something for you to keep warm under your splendid old bearskin."

She pulled down the black belt, watching his face intently. Would it soften to understanding?

There was a motion within the flannel bundle, a sound—and a hand came forth, groping. Joe's finger touched it questioningly, and the hand closed upon it masterfully. Joe looked at it for a long time, then drew the bundle under and looked up at his mother sanelly.

"How is she?"

"Well. Perfectly all right."

He gave a long, steady look at her face to make sure she spoke the truth, and then, with his son's strong hand holding him, relaxed and slept. But now his face was no longer dreadful.

And Althea was sleeping. Mrs. Mack began to realize that she was tired—tired almost beyond what it is possible to endure. She was so old—so tired. She must have made mistakes, some how, or they would never have come to this pass.

In the hall she saw the box which she had brought down with her the night before and brightened for a moment. How pleased Althea would be when she woke! Strange—so strange! Had it really been her mother the child had seen?

Yes, there they were, dainty old-fashioned little things. What embroidery! Like frost work. Women were more careless now in their stitches. Such long, sweeping skirts! But they must be all washed and bleached. They were yellow with their almost 50 years of lying away.

And then—then—she came upon the Purple Lady's message. For under everything there was a book and an envelope—a big manila envelope. But the book—"For my baby when she grows up" was written at the top of the first leaf.

"Dear, funny little daughter, sound asleep in your crib. I wonder how and where you'll read this—if you ever do? I'm so puzzled—so puzzled! So afraid I've done something wicked."

"I've just been to see dear old Judge Martin, and at last he has sold those western lands for me. I had told him I wanted the money in cash, and there he sat with it all spread out, but looking sad and stern. And when I told him I wanted it to give to your father, so that he could use it to finish his machine—Oh, dear, how he did lecture me! I don't know—I don't know what to think! I never dreamed before of not believing in your father's success, but when I'm told, so earnestly, that if I let him have my last money for his machine I am robbing you—what can I do? What can I say?"

"I am old-fashioned," he said, "I know you have promised to obey, but I counsel you now, not only to disobey; I counsel

(Concluded on Page 6)