

The Exchange of Araminta

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By Harry J. Wilkins-Treeman

"I'M READY for another basket, sister!" cried Araminta.

For the last six months, and more or less through the whole year since the preceding Christmas, Araminta and Sarah White had been preparing presents for the neighborhood and all their relatives. It was the day before Christmas now, and Araminta was darning them, as was her usual wont. She was wrapped up warmly-it was very cold-and she carried a large empty basket. "Here, fill it up again, quick," she cried, and pulled off her shawl to help herself. Araminta's older sister, Sarah, and the visiting cousin, Mrs. Martha Spear, from Olin, began gathering up small neat parcels in white paper, tied with red cord, from the table and sofa where they were piled.

"Land! what a lot of folks you do remember!" said the cousin, placing parcels gingerly in the basket.

"We don't leave out a single soul for half a mile each way," said Sarah, proudly, "or, rather, Araminta don't. She does the most of it."

"I don't do any more than you do, sister," said Araminta. "I tell you those Lumkins children were tickled when they saw me coming, poor little things. Every head was in the window, noses fat as dabs of putty against the glasses, the whole six."

"Six children?" said the cousin.

"Yes, six," replied Sarah, "and the father no money, and the mother no strength, all six sickly."

"And dirty," added Araminta, happily.

"Dressful," said the cousin.

"It can't help feelin' so sometimes," agreed Sarah, who was at times gently pessimistic.

But Araminta laughed with confidence. "Nonsense!"



"She got the girl all quieted down, and she went off with her real calm."

she, placing another parcel. "You ought to have seen them just now. It is six times as much fun Christmas as one child could have, and who's going to say it isn't worth while? And I guess there's fun enough left over from this Christmas for their whole lives. You'd ought to have seen them, how they tickled and laughed, sickly and dirty, and everything. Mother used to say she didn't want to have a cat put out of the world that took a mite of comfort in it, and I guess six children as happy as these this morning are more than cats. Their mother was pleased, too."

"Araminta made a nice flannel wrapper for her- and made it herself," said Sarah.

"She put it right on to see how it fitted, and she looked as pretty as a picture in it," said Araminta. The basket was full again, and she replaced the shawl over her shoulders, and pinned it tightly around her neck. She gathered up the basket on her arm, and stood in the doorway a second, smiling at the two women before starting.

"Jest look at her!" cried the cousin, with a mixture of admiration and wonder and amusement. "If she ain't the happiest-looking mortal I ever laid eyes on!"

Indeed, Araminta White, middle-aged, single, with the faded bluntness of advancing life on her thin face, with sparse gray hair, merely a line showing under her hood above a lift of candid forehead, which was heavily lined, seemed to give out a glow of pure delight. She was wonderful. Her blue eyes shone with something better than the youth of the flesh. She smiled a smile which took hold of immortal bliss. She looked like an incarnate joy, and the women dimly sensed it. Then she turned and went out, laughing happily like a child, like a goddess who holds youth and childhood forever. "I am happy," she called back. "My looks don't belie me. Nobody knows how I look forward to this all the year!"

"She gives right through the year, too," Sarah said. "When the door had shut and Araminta had passed the windows, I never saw anybody take so much comfort giving presents as Araminta. She can't give much in any way, either, for we haven't money enough, but she's a wonderful manager. She don't stint at home for any comforts, and we both have enough to look respectable."

"The cousin sat swaying back and forth in the rocking chair. She had not seen these relatives for years-not since her own girlhood, when she lived in the same village. Now her husband was dead, and she had turned middle-aged, stout and rather opinionated, to take up some of the old threads of her life. She had arrived the day before, and was to spend a number of weeks with Sarah and Araminta. Araminta hadn't changed very much in her looks," said Sarah, finally, with a reminiscent expression.

"No," replied Sarah. "I don't see as she has. Of course living with anybody right along is harder to tell." Sarah was perhaps ten years older than the visiting cousin, tall and slender, with an ineffaceable dignity of mien. She was fastening some little blue ribbon bows on the corners of a pincushion which Araminta was to take in the next basket, but she performed the trivial task with the same expression with which she would have signed documents of state. She had been a school teacher for nearly forty years, and she was stiffened into her old attitudes of life.

"She has a real happy disposition," remarked the cousin again. "And I can't see—" She hesitated again a minute.

"You can't see as she's anything so wonderful to make her happier than the other folks," said Sarah. "She has got to be the truth, Sarah, I can't." The cousin laughed apologetically. "Of course she's got a good, comfortable home here. She has all the comforts of life and she lives with her mother, and you mean she never got married," said Sarah, bluntly, with a slight tone of defiance.

"I don't suppose she cared to get married, or she wouldn't have," the cousin hastened to respond to Sarah.

"No, she didn't care to get married," Sarah said, with dignified emphasis, "or she would have. Araminta had a chance to know she must have," said the cousin, eagerly. "Of course Araminta was so pretty-looking."

"She didn't have but one chance. If she was pretty, but she did have one chance," said Sarah, firmly.

"Who was it? Anybody I know?"

"Well, I think you must have known him. It was Daniel Rodgers."

"My, yes. Of course I used to know him. He was about my age. I went to school with him. Why, he was pretty smart, wasn't he? His father had money, and Daniel was the only child. Araminta knew he was coming in for a good deal, but she didn't think of that a second. Some girls might have, but she didn't. He was real smart, too."

"He studied law with lawyer Clark, didn't he?"

"Yes, and he had set up his office with him. Lawyer Clark was kind of out of health; he didn't live long afterward, and Daniel would have had a good practice if he'd stayed right along here. But as soon as his father died he moved away to the city and set up business there. I hear he's done very well. I think he's a judge."

"He was good-looking, too, as I remember."

"Good looking! He was handsome-as handsome a fellow as I ever saw. There wasn't a young man in the village to compare with him in looks or appearance."

"And Araminta didn't take a fancy to him?" inquired the cousin, with wonder.

"Yes, she took a fancy to him; at least she did at first. It wasn't that, poor child. No, I won't say poor child. She wasn't poor a mite about it after she'd given him up."

"Araminta would have made a man a beautiful wife," assented the cousin.

"I guess she would, and Daniel Rodgers knew it, too. He had a pretty long head."

"Yes, I always thought he had."

"He had. Well, he begun coming to see Araminta when she wasn't over 18. She always seemed older, though. Araminta was real womanly. She didn't seem to have any of the silly ways of most young girls. She knew what she did know, and she knew what she didn't know, and she was real strong on that last knowledge. She was a good housekeeper, young as she was. She took right hold; you know I was school teaching and mother wasn't very well. It was three years after father died. You know we had just about enough to live on that he left us, and



"Araminta had dropped the broom, and was hanging on to her"

"I don't know," says Araminta, jumping up and going to open the door, "but she can hardly walk, poor thing, whoever she is. I'm sorry the snow has blown in on the path so. I don't know but I'd better get the broom and sweep it off again, so she can get in."

"And Araminta did. The snow had blown in on the front walk pretty bad, and Araminta got the broom and ran out and swept away some, so the girl could get in without wading up to her knees. I went to the door, and stood there with a shawl over my head.

"Are you Miss Araminta White?" I heard the girl kind of gasp out, while Araminta was swishing the broom in front of her. She stood as if she was going to melt right down like a snowflake the next minute, and I could see that her face in the red hood was white as a sheet, and she had a kind of breathless look.

"Yes," says Araminta, sweeping away. "I'm real sorry the path isn't better. I swept it out this morning, but the wind blows so the snow flies right back about as fast as I can sweep it off. And it did, sure enough. Both those girls stood there in a kind of whirlpool of snow, all glittering and glistening like a rainbow. Araminta was laughing real pleasant, making her broom fly as fast as she could, and the girl stood as if she was just about sinking down. There," says Araminta, in a minute. "Now I guess you can get in a little better," and she moves ahead with her broom, and the girl tries to follow. But the first thing I knew she staggered and Araminta had dropped the broom and was hanging on to her.

"What's the matter?" I cried out. I was scared.

"I guess she's faint," says Araminta. "Suppose you get a glass of the blackberry wine, Sarah." Araminta was half dragging the girl up the walk. Her hood was on her neck by that time, and her head was lopping, and she did look ghastly.

"Can you get her up the steps? I sings out. And Araminta said she could, and she did; but I never knew how she managed, for the girl was as big as she was, and most as heavy. I ran down cellar and got a bottle of blackberry wine. It was ten years old and real strong. When I got upstairs Araminta had her hood and coat off and she was laying on the sofa. She kept trying to get up, though she didn't look as if she could sit up a second. She acted dreadful kind of nervous."

"I poured out a good swig of that blackberry wine in a tumbler, and I went up to her. 'Here, drink this,' says I, 'and then you'll feel better and you can get up.'"

"She looked up at me dreadful pitiful and sort of dazed, a real good little face she had, not pretty a bit, but good, with nice soft brown eyes and hair. She looked like a real, sweet, obedient little girl, and sensible enough, if she didn't get to thinking too much of a man, and he didn't treat her fair, and that made a fool of her. She was white and forlorn looking, poor child. If she weren't any man that was worth it, Daniel, though I was out of patience with her, too. For my part, I have never seen how any woman could lose her pride enough to go on the way she did over a mortal man. I never saw a man that was worth it. Daniel Rodgers wasn't, though he wasn't a bad young man, only too much like other men when it came to a pretty face."

"Well, just as soon as she had swallowed that blackberry wine up she jumped. Araminta couldn't keep her down a minute longer. She was up on her two little feet, thin shoes and no rubbers in all that cold. What her father was in the city on business, he never knew about it. I guess he thought she would have come out in that fashion, man or no man! Her mother was dead, and her aunt, her father's sister, had brought her up. She was kind of flighty, from all I've heard."

"Yes, she was," assented the cousin, with a nod.

"And her sister had just married and gone away to live. What her father was in the city on business, he never knew about it. I guess he thought she would have come out in that fashion, man or no man! Her mother was dead, and her aunt, her father's sister, had brought her up. She was kind of flighty, from all I've heard."

"I guess he never knew of it. I know Araminta and I never heard a word about it, and I don't believe the girl did. I guess she had sense enough for that."

"Well, she just stood up, and ran to the mantel shelf where there was a picture of Daniel Rodgers in a shell frame. Araminta had made the frame herself all of a sudden, her arms went round Araminta's neck, and she was real pretty. She spent a week there in August. It was a real pretty picture. The shells were stuck in putty. It's in the parlor now, with a picture of a Madonna that one of her Sunday-school scholars gave her in it. Well, that girl, she made straight for that picture, and she stood looking at it dreadful wild and pitiful. It's true, then, that she was all at once, he voice so sharp that it didn't seem as if it could come from such a mild little mouth. 'I know it's true now,' says she, and she shakes her head and she looks at Araminta."

"Araminta turned kind of pale, but she didn't lose her self-control. She spoke as calm and even as a clock. 'What it is that you know is true?' says she. And she moves close to the girl, and puts her hand on her shoulder. The girl sort of pulls away from her at first, for all the world like a sulky baby. Then, all of a sudden, her arms went round Araminta's neck and her head was on her shoulder, and she was crying to break her heart, with her face hidden.

"Then Araminta raised her head and spoke real soothing. 'What is it, dear?' says she. 'What is the matter?' But the girl just sobbed and sobbed. 'What is it, dear?' says Araminta again.

"Then the girl raised her head and stood up a little way, and looked at Araminta with her poor little face all of a quiver, and the tears streaming, and her mouth all puckered up. 'I had him first,' says she, and the tears came again.

"Had you first?" says Araminta.

"Daniel," says the girl, Daniel.

"Do you mean Daniel Rodgers was going with you before he went with me?" says Araminta, and she spoke sterner than I had ever heard her.

"Yes," says the girl. "Yes, he was going with me a long time, ever since I was in long dresses. He used to see me home from places Aunt Clara didn't tell father, and then he used to come to call real often."

"When did he come to see you last?" says Araminta.

"Not since last Christmas time," says the girl, and I heard Araminta draw a long breath. I knew what she had been afraid of, and had suspected him of for a minute-that he had been to see both of them at the same time; but he wasn't so bad as that. I don't know as he had been so very bad, after all, only Araminta's pretty face had been a little too much for his faithfulness, because he was nothing but a man. He hadn't been very open, but I suppose he thought the least said soonest mended; and maybe he hadn't been actually engaged to Grace Ormsby, after all, though she thought so, and he must have given her a good deal of reason to think he was serious.

"Well, she began to cry again, and Araminta stood looking at her, and I must say she had a beautiful expression. She was smiling; I didn't see how she could fetch a smile, but she did. 'You thought Daniel liked you?' says she.

"Yes," says the girl, 'he did. He used to like me better than anybody till-till he saw you.' Then she sobbed out loud. 'Oh, oh, it's 'most Christmas,' says she, 'and I can't bear it, I can't! I won't have any present from him, and last Christmas he gave me such a beautiful box of candy and a gold pin. Now I shan't have any present from him this year. Oh, I wouldn't have come if it hadn't been Christmas. I couldn't bear it. The thinking of last Christmas, how happy I was, and this-I shan't have any present from him!'

"Perhaps you will," says Araminta.

"No, I shan't," sobs the girl. 'He'll-he'll give you the present this year!'

"Thanks I. 'What would she say if she were to see that fan?'

"I knew Araminta was thinking about it. Then Araminta kind of started back, as if she couldn't help it, for all of a sudden the girl ran to her again, and snuggled up to her, and cried on her shoulder.

"Oh, you wouldn't have taken him away if you had known how much I loved him, and how I had him first, would you?" says she, for all the world like a child.

"No," says Araminta, 'I wouldn't!'

"I don't see why he left me for you," says the girl. 'You are better-looking, but I didn't think that was what Daniel looked at more than anything else. I didn't think he was that kind of man, and he isn't, either, and you couldn't possibly love him any better than I do; and I am a pretty good housekeeper, and I was trying very hard to improve. Are you a very good scholar?'

"Not so very," says Araminta, and she actually laughed a little.

"I thought maybe you were, and that was the reason he liked you," says the girl. 'Daniel is such a scholar. I guess you must be more capable than I am, though I have tried very hard to be capable since Daniel began giving with me. Are you so very capable?'

"No, I guess not very," says Araminta, but she spoke as if she wasn't thinking of what she was saying.

"Then I speak up for the first time. 'Yes, you are capable, too,' says I; 'you know you are capable.'"

"That's that is the reason," says the girl, and she sobs, and clings to Araminta, and I wonder what she was getting out of patience. It seemed to me I had never seen such goings-on. 'Why don't you and she sit down, Araminta?' says I. 'You will be all first out.'

"Araminta looks over the girl's head and smiles, and shakes her head at me that I must not interfere. So I didn't say anything. How she ever got home, I don't know. 'You don't know, you don't know,' says the girl, 'sort of moaning-it was dreadful painful-how terrible it has all been. I've watched and watched for him to come, and I wondered and wondered if he was going with any other girl, and I couldn't find out; I didn't know anybody from here besides Daniel. Once I walked 'way over here one moonlight evening. Father and Aunt Clara thought I had gone to meeting. I went to the house where he lives. I hid behind the hedge till he came out, and then I crept out, and was going to follow him, but I didn't dare. I went back behind the hedge till he was gone. Then I went home. I ran 'most all the way. I was afraid.'"

"It is five miles to Bondville," says Araminta, in the kindest voice.

"Yes," says the girl. 'I walked ten miles that night. Then I cried till morning. I didn't sleep any. Father and Aunt Clara say I don't see why I have grown so thin.' She was thin, sure enough, poor child. Her little hands were like claws.

"You walked 'way over here today?" says Araminta.

"Yes," says the girl, 'but I don't know why I did. Then she cries out, real hysterical: 'Oh, why did I come? Why did I come? How she ever got home, I don't know. I am going to take you home,' says Araminta. 'The stage goes over at 11 o'clock, and I will go with you. Nobody need know. I shall not get out of the stage.'

"Oh, will you?" says the girl, and she clung to her tighter than ever. She was a queer kind of a creature. I don't believe many girls would have taken it the way she did.

"Then Araminta spoke real firm. 'Now,' says she, 'I want you to sit down here in the chair beside the stove. And I am going to make a good, hot cup of tea and cook you an egg and make you some toast. Have you eaten any breakfast?'

"No, I haven't," says the girl. 'I couldn't. Aunt Clara wanted to know why, but I wouldn't tell her. I guess she suspected.'

"Well, she did just as Araminta told her to. She sat down by the stove, and Araminta got a good, hot breakfast for her, and she ate it, too. She was just about worn out. I made her take off her soaking-wet shoes and stockings, and got some slippers. Araminta's for her while they dried. It was nearly an hour before the stage went.

"Well, I never knew how Araminta managed it, or just what she said, but she got the girl all quieted down, and she went off with her real calm."

"Araminta was gone about an hour and a half. She just went over in the stage and turned round

and came back again. I don't think anybody ever knew anything about it. She said there weren't any other passengers over to Bondville that morning. There were two coming back.

"When Araminta came into the room I couldn't bear to look at her at first. I could hear her moving about taking off her things. 'Dinner is all ready when you are,' says I, 'I didn't look at her when I said it. I had been getting dinner when she was gone.'

"But she spoke just as natural. 'I'm all ready now,' says she, 'and I am hungry, too. I smelled the beefsteak the minute I came into the yard.'

"Then I looked at her and she was just as usual. I didn't know what to say. We went out in the other room, and I took the beefsteak out of the oven, and she took up the potatoes.

"Well, what are you going to do?" says I when she sat down, and I could hear my voice shake.

"I am going to make a Christmas present," says Araminta, and she laughed just as pleasant.



"Know it's true now"

"To that girl?" says I.

"Yes," says she, 'I gave it to Grace Ormsby. She didn't send any card or anything. She knew the girl would jump at thinking he had sent it. Then she sends a note to Daniel, saying she won't be home Christmas, and off she goes and spends Christmas with her cousin Alice in Fayetteville. She'd told Grace to send him a little note, asking him to call on her Christmas evening, and he went. Araminta thought she could count on that, and she was right. He would be real huffy because she had gone off without a word to him, and when he heard from Grace he would be glad enough to go, and when he saw her the old feeling would come over him again-that is, if it had ever been worth anything; and she was right. And I suppose when he saw Grace Ormsby with the fan he had sent to Araminta he gave Araminta up on the spot.'

"I wonder if Grace Ormsby ever knew about the fan?" said the cousin.

"Yes," says Sarah. "Sometimes Araminta has felt kind of uneasy about her course with the fan, as if maybe she was sort of underhanded; but it turned out all right and she really felt as if the other girl was the one to have it. Anyway, it settled him as far as Araminta was concerned. Pretty soon we heard he was going with Grace Ormsby; then pretty soon they got married and went away to live. He has made him a very good wife. Once Araminta said to me that unless she had been quite sure that she would, she should have hesitated more than she did. She said it seemed to her that Grace Ormsby would make him very happy."

"I think Araminta seems happy enough herself without him," said the cousin.

"Yes, she does. She did just as well to let him go," replied Sarah. "He was a smart man, but she's just as well off in a good many ways. Here she is now." Then Araminta asserted and again stood in the doorway with her basket, empty of presents. "Look at her," said her sister, with a sort of tender pride. "Don't she look happy, Martha?"

"I never saw anybody take so much comfort in giving Christmas presents in all my life," said the cousin.

"Araminta laughed. "Sometimes it seems to me as if I was emptying all the baskets into my own heart, and didn't really give anything," said she.