

LYDIA'S TRANSFORMATION

All the heads in Peterson Corner were clustered at door and window to see Cyrus Strong driving his big motor car down the street. Whether vehicle or man excited the greater interest it would be hard to say, for the former was the first of its kind ever seen in that rustic community, and the latter was the one great man the place had produced—a farmer-lad who had gone West in his teens and made a fortune big enough to buy his native town and something over. This was his first visit to his old home in twenty years, and the place was all agog over it.

Cyrus whizzed through the village and got down at his mother's door, where the hired man waited, his eyes still bulging with excitement, though it was three days since this astonishing turnout had appeared at the farmhouse.

A keen-faced old lady, sitting with her knitting work in the sunny kitchen, looked up as Cyrus came in. 'Back the same day?' she said briskly. 'I mistrust you're gittin' tired o' Peterson Corner a'ready. You'll be for trappin' back to that outlandish place in Washington territory—'

'Washington is a State now, mother, put in the big man, good-naturedly, and a mighty smart one. 'Wall, wall, 'twas a territory in my day, an' I can't begin to learn the jography all over agin, at eighty-two,' retorted his mother, eyes and needles flashing back at him. 'An' as for goin' an' livin' with the Injuns at my time o' life, I shan't think of it. So I'll have to make up my mind to lose ye once more, Cyrus.'

'We don't exactly live with the Injuns in Seattle, mother, but I suppose you would miss the old home,' returned Cyrus a little wistfully, as his eye wandered from the quaint homely little room to the sunny garden outside, where one little white lilac tree seemed to beckon like the spirit of spring. Somehow the old life here, seen after so long an absence, struck him as pathetic in its narrowness and its ignorance of the pleasures that wealth brings. Yet he was strongly drawn to it, though he looked down upon it from a superior height; the great, gilt-edged West had never given him the home feeling.

His mother was surveying him sharply over her knitting. 'You've made about money enough, Cyrus,' she announced. 'You'd better settle down here, where it'll do some good. I don't want none o' yer fold-erols, but there's them that do. You don't know how much good you could do in a poor old town like this one—an' I sh'd think 'twould suit ye; helpin' lame dogs over stiles was alwiz your favorite occupation.'

There came up the garden path upon these words a figure in a gown that, whatever its original color, had faded to a parody of all colors, and was of such singular shape and dimensions as to be absolutely startling. Waist and skirt were fastened together with several large safety pins that blinked unabashed in the sunlight. An immense knob of hair entirely in the wrong place tilted a huge flat sunbonnet well down over the wearer's eyes.

Cyrus surveyed the figure from the window.

'Is this a lame dog?' he inquired.
'No,' answered his mother, curtly, 'that's Lyddy. She's been over to her aunt's for a day or two. She's been with me ever since you went away, and better hired help I never had. For keeping things clean an' neat, an' bein' always on hand with a good meal o' vittles, whether it's washin' day or soap-makin' or what, there ain't Lyddy's equal in the country, though she does wear unaccountable wigs, I don't deny. I don't know where she pick 'em up. I s'pose she's savin' her wages for old age—an' a good plan, too. It ain't for me to find fault.'

Cyrus had risen to go upstairs.
'She'll never get a beau if she goes lookin' that way,' he suggested cautiously.

The old lady's eyes and needles snapped.
'That's all a man thinks of,' she said sharply. 'I guess she'll be well enough if she don't. Lyddy wouldn't think of heavin' me though as for beaux, there's that Tim Clement has smashed my bush o' balm all to bits leanin' over the gate of a night when he comes along home, an' old man Millet comes every blessed Sunday night. But Lyddy won't have nothin' to say to 'em; though Tim owns two farms and old Millet's a deacon o' the Methodist Church, an' rich as mud, with no encumbrances except a red-headed boy that's too big a fool to get into mischief. Lyddy's got sense, an' she'll aiwiz have a good home with me.'

Cyrus was thoughtful as he went up to his little old room. His mother had evidently monopolised Lyddy. She ought to have a little pleasure and some

of the gay bright things women like. It wasn't too late, though Lydia was no longer a girl. Cyrus could dimly remember giving her twisted doughnuts out of his well-filled dinner-pail at the district school. Helping lame dogs over stiles was, as his mother had said, a favorite occupation even then. It gave him comfortable feeling of power, always this being able to help these people who had been left behind in the race of life.

He drove over to the country town next day, and ransacked its one good store. When he came back he brought several big boxes into the kitchen, and deposited them on the floor.

'You've done so much for mother, Lydia, that money can't pay for, I wanted to do something for you. I knew you wouldn't mind if I got you a present,' he said.

Lydia was washing at the hearth and she looked somewhat anxiously at his feet before she looked at the boxes. But Cyrus wore patent leathers now and they were speckled enough to suit even Lydia.

'Much obliged, I'm sure,' she said cheerfully; 'there seems to be considerable of it. I'll take it upstairs when I go.'

When in the solitude of her own room she opened the boxes she found a very complete outfit, for Cyrus never did anything on a small scale. There was a handsome tailored suit in two shades of brown, a light blue skirt-waist suit with a touch of lace at throat and wrists, a tea gown of silk and lace, a neat walking skirt with several separate waists, one or two pretty wrappers of print and percale, gloves, boots—everything, but headgear.

'I didn't dast to buy a blamed thing in the hat line,' explained Cyrus the next day, when Lydia thanked him for the gift. 'I knew that was ticklish business; but if you'll fix up and drive over with me this afternoon we'll make it right.'

Lydia looked at him a little curiously. She had tried on her new outfit before the glass last night, and the result had been a revelation. Lydia knew good clothes when she saw them, having assisted the Peterson Corner dressmaker to fit out many a village bride, but it had simply never occurred to her to think of a becoming dress in connection with herself. In the sensitive period of childhood she had been given to understand that she was hopelessly plain, and she had accepted the fact philosophically, reasoning that if she kept herself clean and neat it was sufficient in her case.

'I guess you hated to see me around lookin' so,' she said.

'I wanted you to have something gay,' returned Cyrus diplomatically. 'An' if I were you, Lyddy, I wouldn't pin my skirts with safety pins. I don't think it's exactly customary.'

Lydia laughed.

'I know more than you'd think to look at me. You needn't worry about the safety pins and I shan't wear the sunbonnet, either,' she said.

She was standing on the doorstep when Cyrus drove around from the barn. She wore the tailored suit, and she had evoked from somewhere a little brown cap quite suitable for a drive. Whatever Lydia undertook to do was always thoroughly done. The hired man's jaw dropped as he saw the trim, stylish figure, and from behind the blind a wrinkled, pleased old face peered out at them as they drove away.

The next day it was currently reported that there was a stylish lady visitor at the Strong house; everybody had seen her driving with Cyrus, and the gossips speedily figured it out that it was a rich widow who had come all the way from Seattle to make sure of not losing him. Aunt Molly Peterson tried to extract some information on the subject from Lydia, as that discreet handmaiden was picking gooseberries in the garden bordering the road, but the only replies forthcoming were as vague as those of the Delphic oracle.

As the days went by Cyrus began to feel a little like Aladdin after he had rubbed his lamp, for the transformation of his protege went on before his eyes with dreamlike rapidity. The scrub woman in the strange colored gown was no more. Lydia waited on them at breakfast in a pretty pink wrapper, which was replaced by a neat dark print during work hours. In the afternoon when she went to the store or post-office she wore a becoming skirt-waist and a chic sailor hat. The knob of hair in the wrong place had gradually become a dignified coiffure—nobody had ever known before that Lydia had beautiful hair.

'I thought Lyddy was mighty plain lookin' when I first come home,' observed Cyrus perplexedly one evening when, after the early supper, his mother's handmaiden in the silk lace tea gown had gone out of the room to bring something. Mrs. Strong asked for