

At first they laughed. Because I was youngest, the girls would look on me as a baby, but mother took it seriously and said it would be experience for me and a rest for her; so I told the girls to laugh away.

They did laugh, too, though not at our domestic blunders. What amused Lenore and Helen was friendship that grew up between Richardis and me. The truth was I could not coax her to make any friends outside the house, and neither could I ignore her loneliness. When evening came she would sit down by herself in the little kitchen, which she had polished until it shone, and there I used to find her with tears rolling down her cheeks. Instead of telling me the trouble, though, she always tried to smile, except once, when I accused her of being home-sick 'nach Berlin.' Then the tears came again, and she shook her head, murmuring in German that it was 'worse than that.'

Still, at other times, her manner was so bright that the girls were disposed to poke fun at my anxiety over her secret woe. 'It's just devotion to you, Janet,' Lenore would say. 'She can't help weeping whenever you are out of her sight!'

Lenore meant more than a joke. I had begun a series of evening lessons with Richardis, which kept me in the kitchen more than the girls thought proper; and they were sure that I was spoiling her, though I insisted, and it was true, too, that I was getting my half of the benefit every day, for it was a mutual school that Richardis and I had from the start. In the morning we addressed each other in German; in the afternoon in English, and the rule was that each should correct the other. She never minded when I laughed at her, but no matter how I floundered about in German, she would not allow herself so much as a smile at my expense, and always pulled me out of the bog in a respectful, even reverential, way.

It made me feel positively foolish at times to meet her worshipful glances. I knew she had idealized me into something so much better than I was. In the evening, after hearing her read, I used to set her at writing exercises in an English copy-book, while I went back to mother and the girls in the library. Sometimes a little later there would be a timid knock at the door, and Richardis would hand in a note she had written to me in her funny, mixed-up English.

At first I showed one or two of them to Helen and Lenore, but they quoted them to me so much that I was afraid Richardis might overhear; so after that I kept them, like the love letters they were, from every one except mother. She never laughed, and once she even cried a little. That was after reading the note that went like this:—

'Kleine Mutter,—I mus call it. You bin mutter to mir. Mos deer mutterchen. I lik ritē you letter und I not kno Englisch. I mus kno. Et iss misery ef I not kann. How soll I more say it. Et iss lov, lov on you all time von mir. Greeting on you.—Richardis.'

There are many like it in my desk—dear, funny little notes!

As the weeks went by I wondered more about the sorrow that kept showing through Richardis' smiles. I had noticed that, though she watched the mails eagerly, she received nothing, and once when I asked her whether she had any relatives, she answered that her father and mother were living in Germany. 'But in America—not one!' she added, straightening up and looking almost defiant.

Then came a morning when, after feeling wretchedly for a few days, I found myself too ill to rise. Old Dr. Maxwell called at once, and I could not help noticing how sharp his questions were, and how short a time he stayed in my room. He laid especial stress on the fact that I had spent a day in the city about two weeks earlier, and made me tell him exactly where I went and what I did. Then he nodded to mother, and they went out of my hearing. Afterward I knew that he called the family, including Richardis, into the library and began to ask when each one had been vaccinated.

As soon as the first shock of the horror was past they commenced to plan, and it was decided that Helen, who had already gone to her day's work in town, should be telegraphed to remain there.

'If she came she would have to stay, and that would expose her to danger, while she would be of comparatively little use to us,' Dr. Maxwell said. He knew very well that, since my father's death, Helen's position had meant the largest share of our little income. 'By all means,' he went on, 'have her stay where she is until the house is free from contagion. Now, about you and Miss Lenore, Mrs. Blakeslee.'

'I shall stay with my daughter,' mother said. (Lenore told me all about it afterward, word for word.)

'But you're not strong enough to nurse her alone. Now, I advise this: I will risk taking Lenore home with me to stay until the trouble is over, and I'll send to the city for some one to help you. There are nurses whose regular business is to take charge of this kind of case.'

Mother and Lenore both shuddered.

'I shall not leave Janet,' Dr. Maxwell, Lenore said suddenly. Bless her heart! Mother says she turned quite pale when she said it too. Lenore's complexion is a marvel.

'Indeed you shall leave her!' the doctor said. Lenore is not strong, and, besides, she is his favorite among us all.

At that moment Richardis, who had been standing silent and forgotten, went down on her knees in the midst of the group.

'I mus say! I not can keep still!' she cried.

'Why, Rigga!' mother said. 'You need not stay an hour if you are afraid. You are right to go.'

'No, no!' she answered. 'You not un'stan! I not haf fear! I vill bleiben. I vill take care litta mutter! Oh, lats' mich. Bitte! Bitte! Fraulein Lenore! Herr doctor! Mutter! I beg. Ach! I not can say auf Englisch, aber I beg.'

Mother's eyes were full of tears by that time, and all she could say was: 'There, there, Rigga!' But Dr. Maxwell, after one keen look at Richardis, asked:

'Well, why not?'

'Janet loves her,' mother said, half to herself; but Richardis understood.

'Oh,' she murmured, 'I not so good for dat. Ich vill sterben, aber, ef I not bin by litta mutter. I mus do it.'

So it was settled. Lenore, much against her will, was bundled off to Dr. Maxwell's, and mother, and Richardis stayed with me.

We went into quarantine at once. Provisions were left outside the gate, and people walked blocks to avoid passing our place. There was talk of forcing mother to send me away somewhere, but our grounds were large, and Dr. Maxwell managed that somehow. Stories spread and grew, until the gossips had us all down with a malignant form of the disease, doing every careless thing we could to scatter contagion, and it was only by the efforts of a stout-hearted few, who cared more for us than for a sensation, that the village panic was kept down.

But for days I knew nothing of these outside happenings. Even the memory of what went on within my darkened room is more of a vague nightmare than a reality. These were sheets wet with disinfectants, I know, flapping in the doorways and windows, and there were suffering and fever and delirium, but through it all ran the sense of Richardis' quiet, hopeful, tender presence. I shall never forget the thrill of relief that used to come when my burning hand was folded between her strong, cool palms.

Dr. Maxwell told me afterward that she was in despair at the thought of my face being disfigured until he told her how it might be prevented, when she began following his suggestions with a persistency that he never saw equalled.

'That's the way she did everything,' he added.

'Your mother gave you up from the first, and I almost gave you up at the last, but Richardis never gave you up at all.'

Lenore sent daily bulletins to Helen, who, rebellious at her exile, wrote anxious, lonesome letters in reply. The days dragged into weeks, and, to our joy, no one else contracted the disease.

At last, when I was really convalescent and the quarantine was lifted so that we could all be together again in a joyful reunion, Dr. Maxwell said one morning that his final prescription would be some long drives behind his old white horse—the first to be taken that very afternoon. 'And Richardis must be your driver,' he said.

We all guessed that he had been touched by her devotion to me, and that he chose this way of showing his appreciation.

The summer was in its prime, and it seemed to me that every separate flower and leaf in all outdoors was looking its sweetest just for us. Richardis did not ask where we should go, but turned the horse's head away from the village, and soon we were jogging gently along a shady country road.

I sat silent for a long while, feeling thankful. At last Richardis said softly:

'Litta mutter, I mus tell.'

'Must tell what, Richardis?'

She was very solemn. 'I haf vun sester in America.'

'Why, Richardis, you said—'