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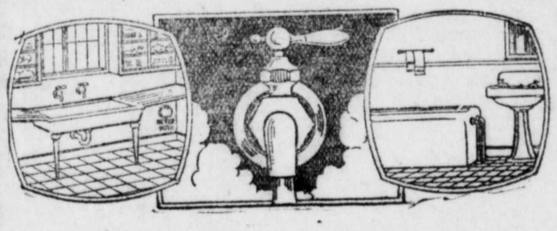
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THE NEW LIFE BEFORE THEM

By H. M. EGBERT

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THE two houses had formed one in more spacious days, but where the stout brick chimney reared itself through the center of the frame building a brick wall had been built in, extending from the cellar to the roof, and converting the one home into two. The only symbol of communion between the disunited parts of what had been organically one was that, on windy days, smoke from a stove set against the chimney on either side would issue down the flue into the stove in the adjacent room. And sometimes, too, if anyone listened at the sheet iron, one could hear words spoken upon the other side.

When Frank Barton and Ida Norris were children they had played at this game; but that was long ago. The intimacies of the old house were not evoked by childish play any more. Both were immeasurably old—each was twenty.

The double house stood in a small town, just such a town as may be seen almost anywhere in New England, neither rich nor poor, and proud of its history. Greenfield folks prided themselves on being ordinary Americans. Immigration had hardly touched them, for there was only one factory, and the French Canadian hands had something of the colonial tradition about them.

The Bartons and the Norrises had lived there for fifteen years, and had known each other for fifty. Sometimes the elders looked at each other from their opposite sides of the double piazza and smiled, when the boy came home, carrying the girl's school books for her, while she stepped at his side with all the assurant ownership that a small girl feels for her childish sweetheart.

But that was years before. The change of adolescence had set a barrier between the young couple's lives. Frank was in the local bank now. Perhaps he earned $25 a week. Ida stayed home and helped her mother.

The thing that happened came all in a moment. The girl had pictured it a thousand times, the boy never; but it was just as surprising to each. One moment they were friends, chatting together on the piazza, wondering whether the rain would kill the gypsy moths that devastated the shade trees; and the next they were looking at each other in amazed wonder.

What is more inarticulate than love at twenty? The strange helplessness, the sense of some tremendous power that holds one in terror of self-revelation; caprice and shyness, as inexplicable to one as to the other! For instance:

"Best get ready for the picture show, Ida."

"I'm not coming, Frank."

"Aw, why not, now?" You said you would. This is the last night of the week, and there won't be another in town for an age."

"I don't care; I'm not coming," she answered, snatching her hand away as he pulled at her wrist coaxingly. "Leave me alone!"

"Why, Ida!" exclaimed the boy, looking in wonder at her flushed face, "I didn't mean—honest, I didn't—say! You aren't mad at me?"

But the girl had flung into the house, leaving him standing outside and gaping after her. He could not understand what was the matter with her. As he stood there Mrs. Norris came out with the big watering can. She had a box of asters, which she was raising from seed; or, rather, it had been Ida's, but she had ceased to care for the tender shoots.

"Say, Mrs. Norris, Ida's all right, isn't she?" asked the boy.

The old woman looked at him, pursing her lips. "I guess there's nothing wrong with her," she answered, and began sprinkling the plants. There was a wise smile on her lips, and her face was faintly flushed.

"They're too young, Jim," she said that night to her husband, when the old couple were alone.

Outside, at the Barton end of the piazza, Frank was waiting. He had meant to go to the picture show alone. He had wished that he had some other girl to take with him. They would stroll past the double house together, their voices slightly raised, and Frank laughing. The thought pleased him; but he only sat sullenly at the end of the piazza, his chin on his hands, staring out into the dusk.

Ten yards away the girl sat by the window in the living room. She was alone, too; her father had gone out upon some errand, and her mother was making up accounts in the kitchen. From the corner of the window she could just see the Barton end of the piazza. She had a book in her hand, but she was not reading.

She had been trying hard not to cry, and she was exceedingly angry, because it was not about Frank Barton—and yet it was, too, in a sort of way. But what had he done? Nothing. That was just it; he was only a boy and couldn't understand. But what was there to understand, except that she hated him?

She went up to her room at last, and then she crouched down by the window and cried in earnest. Presently a slight squeaking sound inside the chimney made her tiptoe over to the stove. It had not been lit since the warm weather began, a month before. Something like a mouse was squeaking and scurrying behind the place where the stovepipe entered.

Frank Barton, at the end of the piazza, saw the girl's shadow thrown on the lawn. He was not going to look up at her. But he looked up and saw that she had pulled the stovepipe from its place and was bending over something.

"She's found a mouse's nest," he thought, and a wave of disgust surged over him. He had heard the little beasts scurrying to and fro at night. He had thought of pulling out the pipe and drowning them. How like a girl!

He almost hated Ida then. He hoped she had not been angry with him because—because she guessed! The shame of that would make him hang his head the rest of his days. He saw Ida clearly again, a pale young woman whose twin pigtails had changed into fluffy, straw-colored hair. He did not even want to take another girl to the picture show now.

"Aren't you getting cold, Frank? It's turning quite chilly," said his mother, from the window of the living room.

"I guess not," he answered.

"Shall I light the fire in the stove?" she asked.

He hesitated. "Yes, it might warm up the house," he answered.

The boy was in his room and it was morning. He leaned over the window sill. Underneath a lilac tree was beginning to blossom and the scent came up to him. The world was very fair that soft spring morning. Why was his heart aching so?

In the next house, but shut off as by a thousand leagues, was Ida. Sometimes she would lean from her window and wave a good morning to him, and he looked for her today. But there was no sign of her.

"She's still mad at me," he thought and the old sense of resentment began to stir in him again.

Suddenly he heard a sound of sobbing. It came from the next house. He heard it through the chimney, and put his mouth to the stovepipe.

"Ida!" he called. "Ida! Ida!"

There was no answer, and he went downstairs. He stood beneath the lilac tree. The beauty of nature seemed suddenly to have become accursed and dreary. He leaned against the trunk and idly plucked a spray of lilac. Then he saw a girl coming along the piazza and went toward her, a little sheepishly, not yet decided in what spirit to approach her. But he saw the tears in her eyes, and his heart leaped with remorse. And in her hand she was carrying something. She held it out indignantly.

It was three little dead birds—chimney swifts, which had been killed by the fire he had let his mother kindle.

"Aw, say, Ida! I didn't know. I thought they were mice," he protested.

"You have killed them for wantonness, just like a boy!" she said indignantly.

Her eyes were wet. She stroked the limp little wings and then suddenly burst into passionate tears. Frank stood by helplessly. He was sure now that she would never speak to him again.

"I'm sorry, Ida—honest, I am," he muttered.

She raised her eyes to his, but there was not anger in them any more. There was something he had never seen there before. It was not love; it was more like humility—that which is born of sudden understanding. Something of the tragedy of life had gripped them both, and the seriousness of it when one puts aside childish things.

"You didn't know—did you, Frank!" she said. And she slipped her arm through his, and in that moment the new life lay before them, though they only dimly realized what was happening in their souls. For when the butterfly emerges from the cocoon it at once forgets and only rejoices in its new happiness.

From her window Mrs. Norris looked down at the pair, strolling under the trees, and called her husband. There was the shadow of a smile upon her face.

"I don't know—maybe they're not too young, Jim," she said.

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Diamonds are found in eight California counties, usually amongst the gravels carrying placer gold. Some of them are pure, flawless stones, either white or straw-yellow in color. El Dorado, Butte and Amador counties produced the greatest number of diamonds, and Nevada county the largest stone—7¼ carats. From the volcano district, in Amador county, came quite a number, one of them a pale straw-yellow of 1¼ carats, while four others from there are now in the Morgan collection in the American museum in New York city.

Lovely topazes have been found near Ramona, San Diego county, many of them quite large, and either colorless, bluish or greenish in color. This new and important item of our gem products was discovered only in 1903; and the pale blue ones there found are much like those from Sarapulka in the Ural mountains. At one mine here the wedge-shaped crystals of topaz weighed over a pound, and were white, sea-green, sky-blue and light yellow in color. At another mine the topazes are sky-blue and aquamarine blue.

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Sailors Worried by Village That Moves

There is, unless it has quite recently been abandoned, a village in French Indo-China which is a source of worry to mariners of the vicinity. Captains of steamers are never quite certain where they will find it—a fact that cannot be said of any other village in the world. It is called Snok Frou, and its location is "somewhere" on the Mekong river.

It has, or had at last accounts a population of between two and three hundred and consists of a large number of huts built on rafts and lashed together with rattan ropes. Its inhabitants are engaged exclusively in the occupation of fishing. Its only evidence of terra firma is a connection maintained with half-submerged trees, and the whole town changes its position from time to time according to the vagaries of the river or the whims of its inhabitants.

Steamers passing up river may find it at one spot and on the return trip discover that it has moved elsewhere.

Pretty Legends Told About "Fairy Crosses"

"Fairy crosses" are natural crosses formed of iron pyrites, aluminum silicate or other minerals and are supposed by some people to bring more good luck than the proverbial rabbit's foot. They are found in great abundance in certain parts of Virginia, Georgia and other states. The mountaineers of the Blue Ridge mountains have an interesting myth as to the origin of these "fairy stones." They say that in the dim past, when the red men were masters of America, the Great Spirit showered down these crosses as a sign of coming salvation to the savage race. Another legend, the one which gives the crosses their name, says that when Christ was crucified fairy messengers carried the sad news to all parts of the world. When the tidings reached the fairies in the mountains they ceased their merry pranks and began to make these crosses as mementoes of the event.—Exchange.

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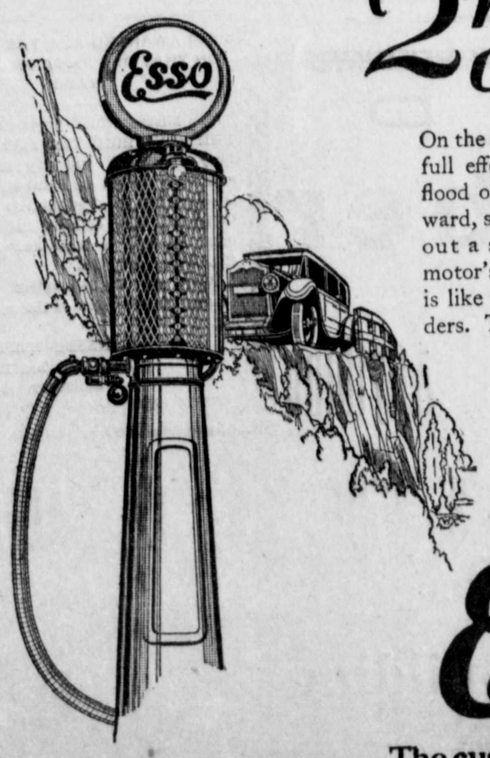
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