

## **CHAPTER XI NEEDLES AND TONGUES**

DEAR POLLY, The Sewing Circle meets at our house this P. M. This is in your line, so do come and help me through. I shall depend on you.

Yours ever, FAN.

"Bad news, my dear?" asked Miss Mills, who had just handed the note to Polly as she came in one noon, a few weeks after Jenny's arrival.

Polly told her what it was, adding, "I suppose I ought to go and help Fanny, but I can't say I want to. The girls talk about things I have nothing to do with, and I don't find their gossip very amusing. I 'm an outsider, and they only accept me on Fan's account; so I sit in a corner and sew, while they chatter and laugh."

"Would n't it be a good chance to say a word for Jenny? She wants work, and these young ladies probably have quantities done somewhere. Jenny does fine work exquisitely, and begins to feel anxious to be earning something. I don't want her to feel dependent and unhappy, and a little well- paid sewing would be all she needs to do nicely. I can get it for her by running round to my friends, but I really have n't the time, till I get the Mullers off. They are paupers here, but out West they can take care of themselves, so I've begged the money to send them, and as soon as I can get them some clothes, off they go. That 's the way to help people help themselves," and Miss Mills clashed her big scissors energetically, as she cut out a little red flannel shirt.

"I know it is, and I want to help, but I don't know where to begin," said Polly, feeling quite oppressed with the immensity of the work.

"We can't any of us do all we would like, but we can do our best for every case that comes to us, and that helps amazingly. Begin with Jenny, my dear; tell those girls

about her, and if I 'm not much mistaken, you will find them ready to help, for half the time it isn't hardness of heart, but ignorance or thoughtlessness on the part of the rich, that makes them seem so careless of the poor."

"To tell the truth, I 'm afraid of being laughed at, if I try to talk seriously about such things to the girls," said Polly, frankly.

"You believe that 'such things' are true? You are sincere in your wish to help better them, and you respect those who work for that end?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then, my dear, can't you bear a little ridicule for the sake of a good cause? You said yesterday that you were going to make it a principle of your life, to help up your sex as far and as fast as you could. It did my heart good to hear you say it, for I was sure that in time you would keep your word. But, Polly, a principle that can't bear being laughed at, frowned on, and cold-shouldered, isn't worthy of the name."

"I want to be strong-minded in the real sense of the word, but I don't like to be called so by people who don't understand my meaning; and I shall be if I try to make the girls think soberly about anything sensible or philanthropic. They call me old-fashioned now, and I 'd rather be thought that, though it isn't pleasant, than be set down as a rampant woman's rights reformer," said Polly, in whose memory many laughs, and snubs, and sarcasms still lingered, forgiven but not forgotten.

"This love and thought and care for those weaker, poorer, or worse than ourselves, which we call Christian charity, is a very old fashion, my dear. It began eighteen hundred years ago, and only those who honestly follow the beautiful example set us then, learn how to get genuine happiness out of life. I 'm not a 'rampant woman's rights reformer,'" added Miss Mills, with a smile at Polly's sober face; "but I think that women can do a great deal for each other, if they will only stop fearing what 'people will think,' and take a hearty interest in whatever is going to fit their sisters and

themselves to deserve and enjoy the rights God gave them. There are so many ways in which this can be done, that I wonder they don't see and improve them. I don't ask you to go and make speeches, only a few have the gift for that, but I do want every girl and woman to feel this duty, and make any little sacrifice of time or feeling that may be asked of them, because there is so much to do, and no one can do it as well as ourselves, if we only think so."

"I'll try!" said Polly, influenced more by her desire to keep Miss Mills' good opinion than any love of self-sacrifice for her sex. It was rather a hard thing to ask of a shy, sensitive girl, and the kind old lady knew it, for in spite of the gray hair and withered face, her heart was very young, and her own girlish trials not forgotten. But she knew also that Polly had more influence over others than she herself suspected, simply because of her candid, upright nature; and that while she tried to help others, she was serving herself in a way that would improve heart and soul more than any mere social success she might gain by following the rules of fashionable life, which drill the character out of girls till they are as much alike as pins in a paper, and have about as much true sense and sentiment in their little heads. There was good stuff in Polly, unspoiled as yet, and Miss Mills was only acting out her principle of women helping each other. The wise old lady saw that Polly had reached that point where the girl suddenly blooms into a woman, asking something more substantial than pleasure to satisfy the new aspirations that are born; a time as precious and important to the after-life, as the hour when the apple blossoms fall, and the young fruit waits for the elements to ripen or destroy the harvest.

Polly did not know this, and was fortunate in possessing a friend who knew what influences would serve her best, and who could give her what all women should desire to give each other, the example of a sweet, good life, more eloquent and powerful than any words; for this is a right no one can deny us.

Polly turned the matter over in her mind as she dressed, while Jenny played waiting maid, little dreaming what this new friend was meaning to do for her, if she dared.

"Is it going to be a tea-party, Miss?" asked Jenny, as the black silk went rustling on, to her great admiration, for she considered Polly a beauty.

"Well, no, I think it will probably be a lecture," answered Polly, laughing, for Jenny's grateful service and affectionate eyes confirmed the purpose which Miss Mills' little homily had suggested.

As she entered the Shaws' parlor an hour or two later, an appalling array of well-dressed girls appeared, each provided with a dainty reticule, basket, or bag, and each tongue going a good deal faster than the needle, while the white fingers stitched sleeves in upside down, put flannel jackets together hind part before, or gobbled button-holes with the best intentions in life.

"You are a dear to come so early. Here 's a nice place for you between Belle and Miss Perkins, and here 's a sweet little dress to make, unless you like something else better," said Fanny, receiving her friend with warmth and placing her where she thought she would enjoy herself.

"Thank you, I 'll take an unbleached cotton shirt if you have such a thing, for it is likely to be needed before a cambric frock," replied Polly, subsiding into her corner as quickly as possible, for at least six eye-glasses were up, and she did n't enjoy being stared at.

Miss Perkins, a grave, cold-looking young lady, with an aristocratic nose, bowed politely, and then went on with her work, which displayed two diamond rings to great advantage. Belle, being of the demonstrative sort, smiled and nodded, drew up her chair, and began a whispered account of Trix's last quarrel with Tom. Polly listened with interest while she sewed diligently, occasionally permitting her eyes to study the elegant intricacies of Miss Perkins' dress, for that young lady sat like a statue, quirking her delicate fingers, and accomplishing about two stitches a minute.

In the midst of Belle's story, a more exciting bit of gossip caught her ear, and she plunged into the conversation going on across the table, leaving Polly free to listen and admire the wit, wisdom, and charitable spirit of the accomplished young ladies about her. There was a perfect Babel of tongues, but out of the confusion Polly

gathered scraps of fashionable intelligence which somewhat lessened her respect for the dwellers in high places. One fair creature asserted that Joe Somebody took so much champagne at the last German, that he had to be got away, and sent home with two servants. Another divulged the awful fact that Carrie P.'s wedding presents were half of them hired for the occasion. A third circulated a whisper to the effect that though Mrs. Buckminster wore a thousand-dollar cloak, her boys were not allowed but one sheet to their beds. And a fourth young gossip assured the company that a certain person never had offered himself to a certain other person, though the report was industriously spread by interested parties.

This latter remark caused such a clamor that Fanny called the meeting to order in a most unparliamentary fashion.

"Girls! girls! you really must talk less and sew more, or our society will be disgraced. Do you know our branch sent in less work than any of the others. last month, and Mrs. Fitz George said, she did n't see how fifteen young ladies could manage to do so little?"

"We don't talk a bit more than the old ladies do. I just wish you could have heard them go on, last time. The way they get so much done, is, they take work home, and make their seamstresses do it, and then they take credit for vast industry," said Belle, who always spoke her mind with charming candor.

"That reminds me that mamma says they want as many things as we can make, for it 's a hard winter, and the poor are suffering ver much. Do any of you wish to take articles home, to do at odd times?" said Fan, who was president of this energetic Dorcas Society.

"Mercy, no! It takes all my leisure time to mend my gloves and refresh my dresses," answered Belle.

"I think if we meet once a week, it is all that should be expected of us, with our other engagements. Poor people always complain that the winter is a hard one, and never are satisfied," remarked Miss Perkins, making her diamonds sparkle as she sewed

buttons on the wrong side of a pink calico apron, which would hardly survive one washing.

"Nobody can ask me to do any more, if they remember all I 've got to attend to before summer," said Trix, with an important air. "I 've got three women hard at work, and want another, but everyone is so busy, and ask such abominable prices, that I 'm in despair, and shall have to take hold myself, I 'm afraid."

"There 's a chance for Jane," thought Polly, but had n't courage "to speak out loud in meeting," just then, and resolved to ask Trix for work, in private.

"Prices are high, but you forget how much more it costs to live now than it used to do. Mamma never allows us to beat down workwomen, but wishes us to pay them well, and economize in some other way, if we must," said Emma Davenport, a quiet, bright-eyed girl, who was called "odd " among the young ladies, because she dressed simply, when her father was a millionaire

"Just hear that girl talk about economy! I beg your pardon, she 's some relation of yours, I believe!" said Belle, in a low tone.

"Very distant; but I 'm proud of it; for with her, economy does n't mean scrimping in one place to make a show in another. If everyone would follow the Davenports' example, workwomen wouldn't starve, or servants be such a trouble. Emma is the plainest dressed girl in the room, next to me, yet any one can see she is a true gentlewoman," said Polly, warmly.

"And you are another," answered Belle, who had always loved Polly, in her scatter-brained way.

"Hush! Trix has the floor."

"If they spent their wages properly, I should n't mind so much, but they think they must be as fine as anybody, and dress so well that it is hard to tell mistress from maid. Why our cook got a bonnet just like mine (the materials were cheaper, but the effect was the same), and had the impertinence to wear it before my face. I forbid it, and she left, of course, which made papa so cross he would n't give me the camel's hair shawl he promised this year."

"It 's perfectly shameful!" said Miss Perkins, as Trix paused out of breath. "Servants ought to be made to dress like servants, as they do abroad; then we should have no more trouble," observed Miss Perkins, who had just made the grand tour, and had brought home a French maid.

"Perky don't practise as she preaches," whispered Belle to Polly, as Miss P. became absorbed in the chat of her other neighbors. "She pays her chamber girl with old finery; and the other day, when Betsey was out parading in her missis's cast-off purple plush suit, Mr. Curtis thought she was mademoiselle, and bowed to her. He is as blind as a bat, but recognized the dress, and pulled off his hat to it in the most elegant style. Perky adores him, and was mad enough to beat Betsey when she told the story and giggled over it. Betsey is quite as stylish and ever so much prettier than Perky, and she knows it, which is an aggravation."

Polly could n't help laughing, but grew sober a minute after, as Trix said, pettishly, "Well, I 'm sick of hearing about beggars; I believe half of them are humbugs, and if we let them alone they 'd go to work and take care of themselves. There 's altogether too much fuss made about charity. I do wish we could be left in peace."

"There can't be too much charity!" burst out Polly, forgetting her shyness all at once. "Oh, indeed! Well, I take the liberty to differ from you," returned Trix, putting up her glass, and bestowing upon Polly her most "toploftical stare," as the girls called it.

I regret to say that Polly never could talk with or be near Trix without feeling irritated and combative. She tried to conquer this feeling, but she could n't, and when Trix put on airs, Polly felt an intense desire to box

her ears. That eye-glass was her especial aversion, for Trix was no more near-sighted than herself, but pretended to be because it was the fashion, and at times used the innocent glass as a weapon with which to put down any one who presumed to set themselves up. The supercilious glance which accompanied her ironically polite speech roused Polly, who answered with sudden color and the kindling of the eyes that always betrayed a perturbed spirit, "I don't think many of us would enjoy that selfish sort of peace, while little children starve, and girls no older than us kill themselves because their dreadful poverty leaves them no choice but sin or death."

A sudden lull took place, for, though Polly, did not raise her voice, it was full of indignant emotion, and the most frivolous girl there felt a little thrill of sympathy; for the most utterly fashionable life does not kill the heart out of women, till years of selfish pleasure have passed over their heads. Trix was ashamed of herself; but she felt the same antagonism toward Polly, that Polly did toward her; and, being less generous, took satisfaction in plaguing her. Polly did not know that the secret of this was the fact that Tom often held her up as a model for his fiancée to follow, which caused that young lady to dislike her more than ever.

"Half the awful stories in the papers are made up for a sensation, and it's absurd to believe them, unless one likes to be harrowed up. I don't; and as for peace, I'm not likely to get much, while I have Tom to look after," said Trix, with an aggravating laugh.

Polly's needle snapped in two, but she did not mind it, as she said, with a look that silenced even sharp-tongued Trix, "I can't help believing what my own eyes and ears have seen and heard. You lead such safe and happy lives, you can't imagine the misery that is all round you; but if you could get a glimpse of it, it would make your hearts ache, as it has mine."

"Do you suffer from heartache? Some one hinted as much to me, but you looked so well, I could n't believe it."

Now that was cruel in Trix, more cruel than any one guessed; but girls' tongues can



deal wounds as sharp and sudden as the slender stiletto Spanish women wear in their hair, and Polly turned pale, as those words stabbed her. Belle saw it, and rushed to the rescue with more good-will than wisdom.

"Nobody ever accused you of having any heart to ache with. Polly and I are not old enough yet to get tough and cool, and we are still silly enough to pity unhappy people, Tom Shaw especially," added Belle, under her breath.

That was a two-edged thrust, for Trix was decidedly an old girl, and Tom was generally regarded as a hapless victim. Trix turned red; but before she could load and fire again, Emma Davenport, who labored under the delusion that this sort of skirmishing was ill-natured, and therefore ill-bred, spoke up in her pleasant way, "Speaking of pitying the poor, I always wonder why it is that we all like to read and cry over their troubles in books, but when we have the real thing before us, we think it is uninteresting and disagreeable."

"It 's the genius that gets into the books, which makes us like the poverty, I fancy. But I don't quite agree that the real thing is n't interesting. I think it would be, if we knew how to look at and feel it," said Polly, very quietly, as she pushed her chair out of the arctic circle of Miss Perkins, into the temperate one of friendly Emma.

"But how shall we learn that? I don't see what we girls can do, more than we do now. We have n't much money for such things, should n't know how to use it if we had; and it is n't proper for us to go poking into dirty places, to hunt up the needy. 'Going about doing good, in pony phaetons,' as somebody says, may succeed in England, but it won't work here," said Fanny, who had begun, lately, to think a good deal of some one beside herself, and so found her interest in her fellow-beings increasing daily.

"We can't do much, perhaps, just yet; but still there are things left undone that naturally fall to us. I know a house," said Polly, sewing busily as she talked, "where every servant who enters it becomes an object of interest to the mistress and her daughters. These women are taught good habits, books are put where they can get

them, sensible amusements are planned for them sometimes, and they soon feel that they are not considered mere scrubs, to do as much work as possible, for as little money as possible, but helpers in the family, who are loved and respected in proportion to their faithfulness. This lady feels her duty to them, owns it, and does it, as conscientiously as she wants them to do theirs by her; and that is the way it ought to be, I think."

As Polly paused, several keen eyes discovered that Emma's cheeks were very red, and saw a smile lurking in the corners of the mouth that tried to look demure, which told them who Polly meant.

"Do the Biddies all turn out saints in that well regulated family?" asked the irrepressible Trix. "No; few of us do that, even in the parlor; but every one of the Biddies is better for being there, whether they are grateful or not. I ought not to have mentioned this, perhaps, but I wanted to show you one thing that we girls can do. We all complain about bad servants, most as much as if we were house-keepers ourselves; but it never occurs to us to try and mend the matter, by getting up a better spirit between mistress and maid.

Then there 's another thing we can do," added Polly, warming up. "Most of us find money enough for our little vanities and pleasures, but feel dreadfully poor when we come to pay for work, sewing especially. Could n't we give up a few of the vanities, and pay the seamstresses better?"

"I declare I will!" cried Belle, whose conscience suddenly woke, and smote her for beating down the woman who did her plain sewing, in order that she might have an extra flounce on a new dress. "Belle has got a virtuous fit; pity it won't last a week," said Trix.

"Wait and see," retorted Belle, resolving that it should last, just to disappoint "that spiteful minx;" as she sweetly called her old school-mate.

"Now we shall behold Belle galloping away at a great pace, on her new hobby. I should n't be surprised to hear of her preaching in the jail, adopting a nice dirty little

orphan, or passing round tracts at a Woman's Rights meeting," said Trix, who never could forgive Belle for having a lovely complexion, and so much hair of her own that she never patronized either rats, mice, waterfalls, switches, or puff-combs.

"Well, I might do worse; and I think, of the two, I 'd rather amuse myself so, than as some young ladies do, who get into the papers for their pranks," returned Belle, with a moral air

"Suppose we have a little recess, and rest while Polly plays to us. Will you, Polly? It will do us good; they all want to hear you, and begged I 'd ask." "Then I will, with pleasure"; and Polly went to the piano with such obliging readiness, that several reproachful glances fell upon Trix, who did n't need her glass to see them.

Polly was never too sad, perturbed, or lazy to sing, for it was almost as easy to her as breathing, and seemed the most natural outlet for her emotions. For a minute her hands wandered over the keys, as if uncertain what to play; then, falling into a sad, sweet strain, she sang "The Bridge of Sighs." Polly did n't know why she chose it, but the instinct seemed to have been a true one, for, old as the song was, it went straight to the hearts of the hearers, and Polly sung it better than she ever had before, for now the memory of little Jane lent it a tender pathos which no art could give. It did them all good, for music is a beautiful magician, and few can resist its power. The girls were touched by the appeal; Polly was lifted out of herself, and when she turned round, the softened look on all the faces told her that for the moment foolish differences and frivolous beliefs were forgotten in the one womanly sentiment of pity for the wrongs and woes of which the listeners' happy lives were ignorant.

"That song always makes me cry, and feel as if I had no right to be so comfortable," said Belle, openly wiping her eyes on a crash towel. "Fortunately such cases are very rare," said another young lady, who seldom read the newspapers. "I wish they were, but I 'm afraid they are not; for only three weeks ago, I saw a girl younger than any of us, and no worse, who tried to destroy herself simply because she was so discouraged, sick, and poor," said Polly. "Do tell about her," cried Belle, eagerly.

Feeling that the song had paved the way for the story, and given her courage to tell it, Polly did tell it, and must have done it well, for the girls stopped work to listen, and

when she ended, other eyes beside warm-hearted Belle's were wet. Trix looked quite subdued; Miss Perkins thawed to such a degree, that something glittered on her hand as she bent over the pink pinafore again, better and brighter than her biggest diamond; Emma got up and went to Polly with a face full of affectionate respect, while Fanny, moved by a sudden impulse, caught up a costly Sevres plate that stood on the table, and laying a five-dollar bill in it, passed it round, quoting Polly's words, "Girls, I know you 'll like to help poor little Jenny 'begin again, and do better this time.' "

It was good to see how quickly the pretty purses were out, how generously each gave of its abundance, and what hearty applause broke from the girls, as Belle laid down her gold thimble, saying with an April face, "There, take that; I never have any money somehow it won't stay with me, but I can't let the plate pass me this time."

When Fanny brought the contributions to Polly, she just gathered it up in her two hands with such a glad, grateful face, the girls wished they had had more to give. "I can't thank you enough," she said, with an eloquent little choke in her voice. "This will help Jenny very much; but the way in which it was done will do her more good than double the money, because it will prove to her that she is n't without friends, and make her feel that there is a place in the world for her. Let her work for you in return for this; she don't ask alms, she only wants employment and a little kindness, and the best charity we can bestow is to see that she has both."

"I 'll give her as much sewing as she wants, and she can stay at our house while she does it, if she needs a home," said Trix, in a spasm of benevolence.

"She does n't need a home, thank you; Miss Mills has given half of hers, and considers Jane her child," answered Polly, with proud satisfaction in the fact.

"What an old dear!" cried Belle.

"I want to know her. May I?" whispered Emma.

"Oh, yes; I 'm glad to make her known to any one. She is a quiet little old lady, but she does one heaps of good, and shows you how to be charitable in the wisest way."  
"Do tell us about it. I 'm sure I want to do my duty, but it 's such a muddle, I don't know how," said Belle.

Then, quite naturally, the conversation fell upon the great work that none should be too busy to think of, and which few are too young or too poor to help on with their mite. The faces grew more earnest, the fingers flew faster, as the quick young hearts and brains took in the new facts, ideas, and plans that grew out of the true stories, the sensible hints, the successful efforts which Polly told them, fresh from the lips of Miss Mills; for, of late, Polly had talked much with the good lady, and learned quickly the lessons her unselfish life conveyed. The girls found this more interesting than gossip, partly owing to its novelty, doubtless; but the enthusiasm was sincere while it lasted, and did them good. Many of them forgot all about it in a week, but Polly's effort was not lost, for Emma, Belle, and Fanny remained firm friends to Jane, so kindly helping her that the poor child felt as if she had indeed been born again, into a new and happy world.

Not till long afterward did Polly see how much good this little effort had done her, for the first small sacrifice of this sort leads the way to others, and a single hand's turn given heartily to the world's great work helps one amazingly with one's own small tasks. Polly found this out as her life slowly grew easier and brighter, and the beautiful law of compensation gave her better purposes and pleasures than any she had lost. The parents of some of her pupils were persons of real refinement, and such are always quick to perceive the marks of culture in others, no matter where they find them.

These, attracted first by Polly's cheerful face, modest manners, and faithful work, soon found in her something more than a good teacher; they found a real talent for music, an eager desire for helpful opportunities, and a heart grateful for the kindly sympathy that makes rough places smooth.

Fortunately those who have the skill to detect these traits also possess the spirit to appreciate and often the power to serve and develop them. In ways so delicate that the most sensitive pride could not resent the favor, these true gentlefolk showed Polly their respect and regard, put many pleasures in her way, and when they paid her for her work, gave her also the hearty thanks that takes away all sense of

degradation even from the humblest service, for money so earned and paid sweetens the daily bread it buys, and makes the mutual obligation a mutual benefit and pleasure.

A few such patrons did much for Polly, and the music she gave them had an undertone of gratitude that left blithe echoes in those great houses, which money could not buy.

Then, as her butterfly acquaintances deserted her, she found her way into a hive of friendly bees, who welcomed her, and showed her how to find the honey that keeps life sweet and wholesome. Through Miss Mills, who was the counsellor and comforter of several, Polly came to know a little sisterhood of busy, happy, independent girls, who each had a purpose to execute, a talent to develop, an ambition to achieve, and brought to the work patience and perseverance, hope and courage. Here Polly found her place at once, for in this little world love and liberty prevailed; talent, energy, and character took the first rank; money, fashion, and position were literally nowhere; for here, as in the big world outside, genius seemed to blossom best when poverty was head gardener. Young teachers, doing much work for little pay; young artists, trying to pencil, paint, or carve their way to Rome; young writers, burning to distinguish themselves; young singers, dreaming of triumphs, great as those of Jenny Lind; and some who tried to conquer independence, armed only with a needle, like poor Jane. All these helped Polly as unconsciously as she helped them, for purpose and principle are the best teachers we can have, and the want of them makes half the women of America what they are, restless, aimless, frivolous, and sick.

To outsiders that was a very hard-working and uneventful winter to Polly. She thought so herself; but as spring came on, the seed of new virtues, planted in the winter time, and ripened by the sunshine of endeavor, began to bud in Polly's nature, betraying their presence to others by the added strength and sweetness of her character, long before she herself discovered these May flowers that had blossomed for her underneath the snow.