

CHAPTER XVI A DRESS PARADE

THE weeks that followed taught the Shaws, as many other families have been taught, how rapidly riches take to themselves wings and fly away, when they once begin to go. Mr. Shaw carried out his plans with an energy and patience that worked wonders, and touched the hearts of his hardest creditors. The big house was given up as soon as possible and the little house taken; being made comfortable with the furniture Madam left there when she went to live with her son. The old-fashioned things had been let with the house, and now seemed almost like a gift from Grandma, doubly precious in these troublous times. At the auction, several persons tried to show the family that, though they had lost their fortune, friends still remained, for one bid in Fanny's piano, and sent it to her; another secured certain luxurious articles for Mrs. Shaw's comfort; and a third saved such of Mr. Shaw's books as he valued most, for he had kept his word and given up everything, with the most punctilious integrity. So the little house was not bare, but made pleasant to their eyes by these waifs from the wreck, brought them by the tide of sympathy and good-will which soon set in.

Everybody who knew them hastened to call, many from a real regard, but more from mere curiosity to "see how they took it." This was one of the hardest things they had to bear, and Tom used strong language more than once, when some fine lady came to condole, and went away to gossip. Polly's hopes of Mrs. Shaw were disappointed, for misfortune did not have a bracing effect. She took to her bed at once, received her friends in tears and a point-lace cap, and cheered her family by plaintively inquiring when she was to be taken to the almshouse. This was hard for Fanny; but after an interval of despair, she came to the conclusion that under the circumstances it was the best thing her mother could have done, and with something of her father's energy, Fanny shouldered the new burden, feeling that at last necessity had given her what she had long needed, something to do.

The poor girl knew as much of household affairs as Snip; but pride and the resolution "to stand by Father," kept up her courage, and she worked away with feverish activity at whatever task came first till, just as strength and heart were about to fail, order began to emerge from chaos and the vision of a home made happy and comfortable by her skill and care came to repay and sustain her.

Maud, being relieved from the fear of back-door beggary, soon became reconciled to bankruptcy; thought it rather a good joke, on the whole, for

children like novelty, and don't care much for Mrs. Grundy. She regarded the new abode as a baby house on a large scale, where she was allowed to play her part in the most satisfactory manner. From the moment when, on taking possession of the coveted room, she opened the doors of the three-cornered closet, and found a little kettle just like Polly's, standing there, she felt that a good time was coming for her and fell to dusting furniture, washing cups, and making toast, the happiest, fussiest little housewife in the city. For Maud inherited the notable gifts of her grandmother, and would have made a capital farmer's daughter, in spite of her city breeding.

Polly came and went through all these changes, faithful, helpful, and as cheery as she could be when her friends were in trouble. The parts seemed reversed now, and it was Polly who gave, Fanny who received; for where everything seemed strange and new to Fan, Polly was quite at home, and every one of the unfashionable domestic accomplishments now came into play, to the comfort of the Shaws, and the great satisfaction of Polly. She could not do enough to prove her gratitude for former favors, and went toiling and moiling about, feeling that the hardest, most disagreeable tasks were her especial duty. In the moving nothing suited her better than to trot up and down, lugging heavy things, to pound her fingers black and blue nailing carpets and curtains, and the day she nearly broke her neck tumbling down the cellar stairs, in her eagerness to see that Mrs. Shaw's wine was rightly stored, she felt that she was only paying her debts, and told Tom she liked it, when he picked her up looking as grimy as a chimney-sweep.

"You can turn your hand to anything, you clever girl, so do come and give me some advice, for I am in the depths of despair," said Fanny when the "maid-of-all-work" as Polly called herself, found a leisure hour.

"What is it? Moths in the furs, a smoky chimney, or small-pox next door?" asked Polly, as they entered Fan's room, where Maud was trying on old bonnets before the looking-glass.

"Actually I have nothing to wear," began Fan impressively; "I 've been too busy to think or care till now, but here it is nearly May and I have hardly a decent rag to my back. Usually, you know, I just go to Mrs. O'Grady and tell her what I want; she makes my spring wardrobe, Papa pays the bill, and there I am. Now I 've looked into the matter, and I declare to you, Polly, I 'm frightened to see how much it costs to dress me."

"Not so much as some girls I know," said Polly encouragingly.

"Perhaps not, for I have a conscience, and taste is economy sometimes; but really, Polly, I have n't the heart to ask Papa for a cent just now, and yet I must have clothes. You are such a genius for planning and working wonders, that I throw myself upon you and ask, 'How shall I make a spring wardrobe out of nothing?' "

"Let me see the 'nothing' before I advise. Bring out every rag you've got, and we 'll see what can be done," said Polly, looking as if she enjoyed the prospect, for she had a great deal of that feminine faculty which we call "knack," and much practice had increased it.

Fanny brought out her "rags" and was astonished to see how many she had, for chair, sofa, bed, and bureau were covered, and still Maud, who was burrowing in the closets, kept crying, "Here 's another."

"There 's a discouraging heap of rubbish for you!" said Fan, as she added a faded muslin to the last pile.

"Now, to me your 'rubbish' looks very encouraging, because there is good material there, and not much worn-out finery, that 's my detestation, for you can't do anything with it. Let me see, five bonnets. Put the winter ones away till autumn, rip up the summer ones, and out of three old ones we 'll get a pretty new one, if my eyes don't deceive me."

"I 'll rip, and then do let me see you make a bonnet, it must be so interesting," said Maud, whipping out her scissors and eagerly beginning to reduce a shabby little bonnet to its original elements. "Now the dresses," continued Polly, who had rapidly sorted out the piles.

"Will you have the goodness to look at this?" said Fan, holding up a gray street suit faded past cure.

Polly whisked it wrong side out, and showing the clean, bright fabric, said, with a triumphant wave, "Behold your new suit; fresh trimming and less of

it will finish you off as smart as ever."

"I never wore a turned dress in my life; do you suppose people will know it?" said Fan doubtfully.

"What if they do? It won't hurt you. Not one in a hundred will ever think anything about your dress, except that it is pretty. I've worn turned and dyed gowns all my days, and it don't seem to have alienated my friends, or injured my constitution."

"That it has n't; I'm a goose, Polly, and I'll get over the feeling that it's sort of disgraceful to be poor and have to economize. We'll turn the gray, and I'll wear it bravely."

"Then it will be more becoming than ever. Oh, here's the pretty violet silk. That will make a lovely suit," cried Polly, going on with the review.

"Don't see how two draggled skirts and a stained waist can be transformed into a whole rig," said Fan, sitting on the bed, with her garments strewn about her in various attitudes of limp despondency.

"Well, ma'am, my plan is this," began Polly, imitating Mrs. O'Grady's important tone, and bad grammar: "Gores is out, and

plaits is in; therefore, as the top of this skirt is quite fresh, we will take off the ruffles, turn it upside down, and leave it plain. The upper skirt will be made scanter, and finished with a frill; then the waist can be refreshed with the best parts of these wide flounces, and out of those new bits we will concoct a hat. The black lace Maud has just taken off the green one will do to edge the violet, and with your nice silk mantilla you are complete, don't you see?"

"I don't quite see it yet, but I have firm faith that I shall in time, and consider my calling costume finished," said Fanny, getting more and more interested as she saw her condemned wardrobe coming out fresh again under Polly's magic knack.

"There are two; then that piqué, is all right, if you cut the tail off the jacket and change the trimming a bit. The muslins only need mending and doing up to look as well as ever; you ought not to put them away torn and soiled, my child. The two black silks will be good stand-bys for years. If I were you, I 'd have a couple of neat, pretty prints for home-wear, and then I don't see why you are n't fixed well enough for our short season."

"Can't I do anything with this baregè? It 's one of my favourite dresses, and I hate to give it up."

"You wore that thoroughly out, and it 's only fit for the rag-bag. Yes, it was very pretty and becoming, I remember, but its day is over."

Fanny let the dress lie in her lap a minute as she absently picked at the fringe, smiling to herself over the happy time when she wore it last and Sydney said she only needed cowslips in her lap to look like spring. Presently she folded it up and put it away with a sigh, but it never went into the rag-bag, and my sentimental readers can understand what saved it.

"The ball dresses had better be put nicely away till next year," began Polly, coming to a rainbow colored heap.

"My day is over, I shall never use them again. Do what you like with them," said Fan calmly.

"Did you ever sell your cast-off finery, as many ladies do?" asked Polly.

"Never; I don't like the fashion. I give it away, or let Maud have it for tableaux."

"I wonder if you would mind my telling you something Belle proposed?"

"If it 's an offer to buy my clothes, I should mind," answered Fanny, sharply.

"Then I won't," and Polly retired behind a cloud of arsenic-green gauze, which made her look as if she had the cholera.

"If she wanted to buy that horrid new 'gooseberry-colored gown,' as Tom calls it, I 'd let her have it cheap," put in Maud, who was of a practical turn.

"Does she want it, Polly?" asked Fan, whose curiosity got the better of her pride.

"Well, she merely asked me if I thought you 'd be mortally offended, if she offered to take it off your hands, as you 'd never worn it. You don't like it, and in another season it will be all out of fashion," said Polly from her verdant retreat.

"What did you say?"

"I saw she meant it kindly, so I said I 'd ask. Now between ourselves, Fan, the price of that dress would give you all you 'll want for your spring fixings, that 's one consideration; then here 's another, which may have some weight with you," added Polly slyly. "Trix told Belle she was going to ask you for the dress, as you would n't care to wear it now. That made Belle fire up, and say it was a mean thing to do without offering some return for a costly thing like that; and then Belle said, in her blunt way, 'I 'll give Fan all she paid for it, and more, too, if it will be any help to her. I don't care for the dress, but I 'd like to slip a little money into her pocket, for I know she needs it and is too good to ask dear Mr. Shaw for anything she can get on without.' "

"Did she say that? I 'll give her the dress, and not take a penny for it," cried Fan, flushing up with mingled anger toward Trix and gratitude to Belle.

"That won't suit her; you let me manage it, and don't feel any shame or anxiety about it. You did many a kind and generous thing for Belle when you had the power, and you liked to do it; now let her pay her debts, and have the same pleasure."

"If she looks at it in that way, it makes a difference. Perhaps I 'd better the money would be an immense help only I don't quite like to take it."

"Kings and queens sell their jewels when times are hard or they get turned

off their thrones, and no one thinks it anything amiss, so

why need you? It 's just a little transaction between two friends who exchange things they don't want for things which they do, and I 'd do it if I were you."

"We 'll see about it," said Fan, privately resolving to take Polly's advice.

"If I had lots of things like Fan, I 'd have an auction and get all I could for them. Why don't you?" asked Maud, beginning on her third bonnet.

"We will," said Polly, and mounting a chair, she put up, bid in, and knocked down Fan's entire wardrobe to an imaginary group of friends, with such droll imitations of each one that the room rang with laughter.

"That 's enough nonsense; now we 'll return to business," said Polly, descending breathless but satisfied with the effect of her fun.

"These white muslins and pretty silks will keep for years, so I should lay them by till they are needed. It will save buying, and you can go to your stock any time and make over what you want. That 's the way Mother does; we 've always had things sent us from richer friends, and whatever was n't proper for us to wear at the time, Mother put away to be used when we needed it. Such funny bundles as we used to have sometimes, odd shoes, bonnets without crowns, stockings without heels or toes, and old finery of all sorts. We used to rush when a bundle came, and sit round while Mother opened it. The boys always made fun of the things, though they were as grateful, really, as any of us. Will made a verse one day which we thought pretty well for a little chap: "To poor country folks Who have n't any clothes, Rich folks, to relieve them, Send old lace gowns and satin bows."

"I think that Will is going to be as nice a poet as Mr. Shakespeare," remarked Maud in a tone of serious conviction.

"He is already a Milton; but I don't believe he will ever be anything but a poet in name," said Polly, working away while she talked.

"Did n't your mother ever let you wear the nice things that came?" asked Maud.

"No, she thought it was n't the thing for a poor minister's girls to go flourishing about in second-hand finery, so she did what I 'm doing now, put away what would be useful and proper for us by and by, and let us play with the shabby, silk bonnets and dirty, flounced gowns. Such fun as we used to have up in our big garret! I remember one day we 'd been playing have a ball, and were all rigged up, even the boys. Some new neighbors came to call, and expressed a wish to see us, having been told that we were pattern children. Mother called us, but we had paraded out into the garden, after our ball, and were having a concert, as we sat about on the cabbages for green satin seats, so we did n't hear the call, and just as the company was going, a great noise arrested them on the doorstep, and round the corner of the house rattled Ned in full costume, wheeling Kitty in a barrow, while Jimmy, Will, and I ran screaming after, looking like Bedlamites; for we were playing that Lady Fitz Perkins had fainted, and was being borne home senseless in a cab. I thought mother would kill herself with laughing; and you can imagine what a fine impression the strangers received of the model children."

Maud was so tickled with this youthful prank that she unguardedly sat down to laugh on the edge of an open trunk, immediately doubled up, fell in, and was with difficulty extricated.

"People in the country have great deal nicer times than we do. I never rode in a wheelbarrow, I never sat on cabbages, and I don't think it 's fair," she said with an injured expression. "You need n't save any old silk gowns for me; I don't mean to be a fine lady when I grow up, I 'm going to be a farmer's wife, and make butter and cheese, and have ten children, and raise pigs," she added in one enthusiastic burst.

"I do believe she will if she can find a farmer anywhere," said Fanny.

"Oh, I 'm going to have Will; I asked him and he said, 'All right.' He 's going to preach Sundays, and work on the farm the rest of the time. Well, he is, so you need n't laugh, for we 've made all our plans," said Maud with comical dignity as she tried the effect of an old white bonnet, wondering if farmers' wives could wear ostrich feathers when they went to meeting.

"Blessed innocence! Don't you wish you were a child, and dared tell what you want?" murmured Fanny.

"I wish I had seen Will's face when Maud proposed," answered Polly, with a nod which answered her friend's speech better than her words.

"Any news of anybody?" whispered Fan, affecting to examine a sleeve with care.

"Still at the South; don't think late events have been reported yet; that accounts for absence," answered Polly.

"I think Sir Philip was hit harder than was supposed," said Fan. "I doubt it, but time cures wounds of that sort amazing quick."

"Wish it did!"

"Who is Sir Philip?" demanded Maud, pricking up her ears.

"A famous man who lived in the time of Queen Elizabeth," answered Fan, with a look at Polly.

"Oh!" And Maud seemed satisfied, but the sharp child had her suspicions nevertheless.

"There will be an immense deal of work in all this fixing over and I hate to sew," said Fanny, to divert a certain person's thoughts.

"Jenny and I are going to help. We are your debtors, as well as Belle, and demand the privilege of paying up. Blessings, like curses, come home to roost, Fan."

"Mine come home a good deal bigger than they went," answered Fanny, looking pleased that little favors should be so faithfully remembered.

"The interest on that sort of investment rolls up beautifully, you know. Now rip that dress for Jenny to put in order, and I'll toss you up a bonnet in less than no time," said Polly, determined to have things go smoothly, for she knew Fan's feelings had been a good deal tried lately, in many ways.

"I must have something to match my dress, and blue inside," said Fanny, bringing out her ribbon boxes.

"Anything you like, my dear; when it comes to bonnets, I am usually inspired. I have it! There we are! And nothing could be nicer," cried Polly, making a dive among the silks Fan was turning over with a lost expression. "This bit of silver-gray is all I ask, here's enough for a killing bonnet, and those forget-me-nots are both pretty and appropriate."

"You wretch, be still!" cried Fanny, as Polly looked up at her with a wicked laugh in her eyes.

"It will be done in time, and the dress likewise, so look your prettiest, and accept my blessing," continued Polly, seeing that Fan liked her raillery.

"Time for what?" asked Paulina Pry.

"Your wedding, dear," sweetly answered Fan, for Polly's pleasant hints and predictions put her in a charming humor, and even made old clothes of little consequence.

Maud gave an incredulous sniff, and wondered why "big girls need to be so dreadful mysterious about their old secrets."

"This silk reminds me of Kitty's performance last summer. A little checked silk was sent in our spring bundle from Mrs. Davenport,

and Mother said Kit might have it if she could make it do. So I washed it nicely, and we fussed and planned, but it came short by half of one sleeve. I gave it up, but Kit went to work and matched every scrap that was left so neatly that she got out the half sleeve,

put it on the under side, and no one was the wiser. How many pieces do you think she put in, Maud?"

"Fifty," was the wise reply.

"No, only ten, but that was pretty well for a fourteen-year-old dressmaker. You ought to have seen the little witch laugh in her sleeve when any one admired the dress, for she wore it all summer and looked as pretty as a pink in it. Such things are great fun when you get used to them; besides, contriving sharpens your wits, and makes you feel as if you had more hands than most people."

"I think we 'll get a farm near your house; I should like to know Kitty," said Maud, feeling a curious interest in a girl who made such peculiar patchwork.

"The dress-parade is over, and I 'm ever so much obliged to you, Polly, for helping me through, and showing me how to make the best of things. I hope in time to have as many hands as you," said Fan gratefully, when the simple bonnet was done and everything planned out ready to be finished.

"I hope you will soon have two good, strong ones beside your own, my dear," answered Polly, as she vanished, with a parting twinkle that kept Fan's face bright all day.