

X

THE lesson went home; Laura began to model herself more and more on those around her; to grasp that the unpardonable sin is to vary from the common mould.

In August, after the midwinter holidays, she was promoted to the second class; she ^acommenced Latin; ^band, as a reward, was allowed by Mother to wear ^cher dresses below her knees. She became a quick, adaptable pupil, with a parrot-like memory, ^dand at the end of the ^eschool-year delighted Mother's heart with a couple of highly gilt volumes,¹ of negligible contents.

At home, during those first holidays, she gave her sister and brothers cold creeps down their spines, with her stories of the great doings that took place at school; and none of her classmates would have ^frecognised in this arrant drawer-of-the-long-bow,² the unlucky little blunderbuss of the early days.

On her return ^gto school, Laura's circle of friends was enlarged. The morning after her arrival, on entering the dining-hall, she found a new girl standing shy and awkward before the fireplace. This was the daughter of a millionaire squatter named Macnamara;³ and the report of her father's wealth had preceded her. Yet here she now had to hang about, alone, unhappy, the target of all eyes. It might be supposed that Laura would feel some sympathy for her, having so recently undergone the same experience herself. But that was not her way. She rejoiced, in barbarian fashion, that this girl, older than she by about a year, and of a higher social

^acommenced] began *E2* ^band, . . . reward,] ~ . . . ~ *E2* ^cher dresses below her knees *E1*] longer dresses *TS2/R* her dresses an inch below her knees *E2* ^dand] ~, *E1* ^eschool-year] ~, *E1* school year *E2* ^frecognised] ~, *E1*⁺ ^gto school] *Om. E2*

standing, should have to endure a like ordeal. Staring heartlessly, she accentuated her ^arôle of old girl ^bknowing all the ropes, and was so inclined to show ^coff that she let herself in for a snub from Miss Snodgrass.

Tilly Macnamara joined Laura's class, and the two were soon good friends.

Tilly was a short, plump girl, with white teeth, rather boyish hands, and the blue-grey eyes predominant in Australia. She was usually dressed in silk, and she never wore an apron to protect the front of her frock. Naturally, too, she had a bottomless supply of pocket-money: if a subscription were ^dto be raised, she gave ten shillings where others gave one; ^eand, on the Saturday holidays, she flung about with ^fhalf-crowns, as Laura would have been afraid to do with pennies.

For the ^glatter, with her tiny dole, which had to last so and so long, since no more was forthcoming, it was a difficult task to move gracefully among ^hcompanions none of whom knew what it meant to be really poor. Many trivial mortifications were the result; and countless small subterfuges had to be resorted to, to prevent it leaking ⁱout, just how paltry her allowance was.

But the question of money was, after all, trifling, compared with the infinitely more important one of dress.

With regard to dress, Laura's troubles were manifold. It was not only that here, too, by reason of Mother's straitened means, she was forced to remain an outsider: that, in itself, she would have borne lightly; for, as little girls go, she was indifferent to finery. Had she had a couple of new frocks a year, in which she could have been neat and unremarkable, she would have been more than content. But, from her babyhood on, Laura—and Pin with her—had lamented the fact that children could not go about clad in sacks, mercifully indistinguishable one from another. For they were the daughters of an imaginative mother, and, ^jbalked in other outlets, ^kthis imagination had wreaked itself on their clothing. All her short life long, Laura had suffered under a home-made, picturesque style

^arôle] part *E2* ^bknowing all the ropes *E1*] who felt quite at home *TS2/R* ^coff] ~, *E1* ^dto be] *Om. E2* ^eand, . . . holidays,] ~ . . . ~ *E2* ^fhalf-crowns,] ~ *E2* ^glatter,] ~ *E2* ^hcompanions] ~, *E1* ⁱout,] ~ *E2* ^jbalked] balked *E1+* ^kthis] her *TS2*

of dress; and she had ^aresented with a violence even Mother did not gauge, this use of her young body as a peg on which to hang fantastic garments. After her tenth ^bbirthday, she was, she thanked goodness, considered too old for the quaint shapes beneath which Pin still groaned; but there remained the matter of colour for Mother to sin against, and in this she seemed to grow more intemperate year by year. Herself dressed always in the soberest ^cgreys and blacks, she liked to see her young flock gay as Paradise birds, lighting up a drab world; and when Mother liked a thing, she was not given to consulting the wishes of little people. Those were awful times when she went, say, to Melbourne, and ^dpurchased, as a ^ebargain, a whole roll of cloth of an impossible colour, which had to be ^futilised, to the last inch; or when she unearthed, from an old trunk, some antiquated garment to be cut up and ^gre-shaped—a Paisley shawl, a puce ball-dress, even an old pair of green rep curtains.

It was thus a heavy blow to Laura to find, on going home, that Mother had already bought her new spring dress. In one ^hrespect, all was well: it had been made by the local dressmaker, and consequently had not the home-made cut that Laura abhorred. But the colour! Her heart fell to the pit of her stomach the moment she set eyes on it, and only with difficulty did she restrain her tears.—Mother had chosen a vivid purple, of a crude, old-fashioned shade.

Now, quite apart from her personal feelings, Laura had come to ⁱknow, very exactly, during the few months she had been at school, the views held by her companions on the subject of colour. No matter how sumptuous or how simple the material of which the dress was made, it must be dark, or of a delicate tint. Brilliancy was a sign of vulgarity, and put the wearer outside the better circles. Hence, at this critical juncture, when Laura was striving to ape her fellows in all vital matters, the unpropitious advent of the purple threatened to undo her.

After her first dismayed inspection, she retreated to the bottom of the ^jgarden, to give vent to her feelings.

^aresented] ~, *E1*⁺ ^bbirthday,] ~ *E2* ^cgreys] browns *E2* ^dpurchased,] bought *E2* ^ebargain,] ~ *E2* ^futilised,] ~ *E2* ^gre-shaped] reshaped *E1*⁺
^hrespect,] ~ *E2* ⁱknow,] ~ *E2* ^jgarden,] ~ *E2*

"I shall never be able to wear it," she moaned. "Oh, how *could* she buy such a ^athing! And I needed a new dress so awfully, awfully much."

"It isn't really so bad, Laura," pleaded Pin. "It looks darker, I'm sure, if you've got it on—and if you don't go out in the sun."

"You haven't got to wear ^cit! It was piggish of you, Pin, perfectly piggish! You *might* have watched what she was buying."

"I did, Laura!" asseverated Pin, on the brink of tears. "There was a nice dark ^dbrown, and I ^esaid, take that, you would like it better, and she ^fsaid, hold your tongue, and did I think she was going to dress you as if you were your own grandmother."

This dress hung for weeks in the most private corner of Laura's school wardrobe. Her companions had all returned with new outfits, ^gand, on the first assemblage for church, there was a great mustering of one another, both by girls and teachers. Laura was the only one to descend in the dress she had worn throughout the winter. Her heart was sore with bitterness, and when the handful of Episcopalianes were marching to St Stephen's-on-the-Hill,⁴ she strove to soothe her own wound.

"I can't think why my dress hasn't come," she said gratuitously, out of this hurt, with an oblique glance to see how her partner took the remark: it was the good-natured Maria Morell, who was resplendent in velvet and feathers. "I expect that stupid dressmaker couldn't get it done in time. I've waited for it all the week."

"What a sell!" said Maria, but with mediocre interest; for she had cocked her eye at a harmless-looking youth, who was doing his best not to ^hblush, on passing the line of girls.—"I say, do look at that toff making eyes. Isn't he a ⁱnanny-goat!"

On several subsequent Sundays, Laura fingered, in an agony of indecision, the pleasing stuff of the dress, and ruefully considered its modish cut. Once, no one being present, she even took it out of the wardrobe. But the merciless spring sunshine seemed to make the purple shoot fire, to let loose a host of other colours in it as well, and, with a shudder, she re-hung it on its peg.

But the evil day came. After a holiday at Godmother's, she

^athing!] ~? E2 ^bIt looks] It'll look E2 ^cit!] ~. E2 ^dbrown,] ~ E2 ^esaid,] ~ E2
 ~ E2 ^fsaid,] ~ E2 ^gand, . . . church,] ~ . . . ~ E2 ^hblush,] ~ E2 ⁱnanny-goat!] ~. E2

received a hot letter from Mother. Godmother had complained of her looking “dowdy,” and Mother was exceedingly cross. Laura was ordered to spend the coming Saturday as well at Prahran, ^ain her new dress, under penalty of a correspondence with Mrs Gurley. There was no going against an order of this kind, ^band, with death at her heart, Laura prepared to obey. On the fatal ^cmorning, she dawdled as long as possible over her mending, thus postponing dressing to go ^dout, till the others had vacated the bedroom; ^eand that she should not be forced to see herself, she kept her eyes half shut, and turned the looking-glass hind-before. Although it was a warm day, she hung a cloak over her shoulders. But her arms peeped out of the loose sleeves, and at least ^fhalf a yard of skirt was visible. As she walked along the corridor and down the stairs, she seemed to smudge the place with colour, ^gand, directly she entered the dining-hall, ^hcomet-like, she drew all eyes upon her. Astonished titterings followed in her wake; even the teachers goggled her, afterwards to put their heads together. In the ⁱreception-room, Marina remarked at once: “Hullo!—is *this* the new ^jdress, your mother wrote us about?”

Outside, things were no better; the very tram-conductors were fascinated by it; and every passer-by was a fresh object of dread: Laura waited, her heart a-thump, for the moment when he should raise his ^keyes, and, with a start of attention, become aware of the screaming colour. At ^lGodmother’s, all the faces disapproved: Georgina ^msaid: “What a guy!” when she thought Laura was out of earshot; but the boys stated their opinion ⁿopenly, as soon as they had her to themselves.

“Oh, golly! Like a parrot—ain’t she?”

“This way to the purple parrot—this way! Step up, ladies and ^ogentlemen! A penny the whole show!”

That evening, she tore the dress from her ^pback, and hanging it up inside the cloak, vowed that, come what might, she would never put it on again. A day or two later, on unexpectedly entering her

^ain] and in *E2* ^band, . . . heart,] ~ . . . ~ *E2* ^cmorning,] ~ *E2* ^dout,] ~ *E2* ^eand that she should not] where, in order not to *E2* ^fhalf a yard] a foot *E2* ^gand,] ~ *E1* ^hcomet-like,] ~ *E2* ⁱreception-room,] ~ *E2* ^jdress,] ~ *E1*⁺ ^keyes,] ~ *E2* ^lGodmother’s,] ~ *E2* ^msaid:] ~, *E1*⁺ ⁿopenly,] ~ *E2* ^ogentlemen] gentlemen *E1*⁺ ^pback, and] ~ ~ *E1* ~ ~, *E2*

bedroom, she found Lilith Gordon and another girl at her wardrobe. They grew very red, and hurried giggling from the room, but Laura had seen what they were looking at. After this, she tied the dress up with string and brown ^apaper, and hid it in a drawer, under her nightgowns. When she went home at ^bChristmas, it went with her, still in the parcel, and then there was a stormy scene. But Laura was stubborn: rather than wear the dress, she would not go back to the College at all. Mother's heart had been softened by the prizes; Laura seized the occasion, and extracted a promise that she should be ^callowed, in future, to choose her own frocks.—And so the purple dress was passed on to Pin, who detested it with equal heartiness, but, living under Mother's eye, had not the spirit to fight against it.

"Got anything new in the way of clothes?" asked Lilith ^dGordon, as she and Laura undressed for bed, a night or two after their return.

"Yes, one," said Laura shortly.—For she thought Lilith winked at the third girl, a publican's daughter from Clunes.⁵

"Another like the last? Or have you gone in for yellow ^eochre, this time?"

Laura flamed in silence.

"Great Scott, what a colour that was! Fit for an Easter Fair—Miss Day said so."

"It wasn't mine," retorted Laura passionately. "It . . . it belonged to a girl I knew who died—and her mother gave it to me as a remembrance of her—but I didn't care for it."

"I shouldn't think you did.—But I say, does ^fyour mother let you wear other people's clothes? What a rummy thing to do!"

She went out of the room—no doubt to spread this piece of gossip further. Laura looked daggers after her. She was angry enough with Lilith for having goaded her to the lie, but much angrier with ^gherself, for its blundering ineffectualness. It was not likely she had been believed, ^hand, if she were, well, it made matters worse instead of better: people would conclude that she lived on charity. Always when unexpectedly required to stand on the defensive, she said or did something foolish. That very morning,

^apaper,] ~ E2 ^bChristmas,] ~ E2 ^callowed, in future,] ~ ~ ~ E2 ^dGordon,]
~ E2 ^eochre,] ~ E2 ^fyour] your E2 ^gherself,] ~ E2 ^hand,] ~ E2

for instance, a similar thing had happened—it had rankled all day in her mind. On looking through the washing, Miss Day had exclaimed in horror at the way in which her stockings were mended.

“Whoever did it? They’ve been done since you left here. *I* would never have passed such darns.”

Laura crimsoned. “Those? Oh, an old nurse we’ve got at home. We’ve had her for years and years—but her eyesight’s going now.”

Miss Day sniffed audibly. “So I should think. To cobble like that!”

They were Mother’s darns, hastily made, late at night, and with all Mother’s genial impatience at useful sewing as opposed to beautiful. Laura’s intention had been to shield Mother from criticism, as well as to spare Miss Day’s feelings. But to have done it ^aas clumsily as this! To have had to wince under Miss Day’s scepticism! It was only a wonder the governess had not there and then taxed her with the fib. For who believed in old nurses nowadays? They were a stock property, borrowed on the spur of the moment from readings in *The Family Herald*, from Tennyson’s *Lady Clare*.⁶ Why on earth had such a far-fetched excuse leapt to her tongue? Why could she not have said Sarah, the servant, the maid-of-all-work? Then Miss Day would have had no chance to sniff, and she, Laura, could have believed herself believed, instead of having to fret over her own stupidity.—But what she would like more than anything to know was, why the mending of the stockings at home should *not* be Sarah’s work? Why must it just be Mother—her mother alone—who made herself so disagreeably conspicuous, and not merely by darning the stockings, but, what was a still greater grievance, by ^bnot even darning them ^cwell?

^aas] so *E2* ^bnot even *Er*] not *TS2/R* ^cwell? *Er*] ~. *TS2/R*