

A General Utility Girl.

DORA FIFER had none of the accomplishments of her three sisters, which was a matter of some surprise to her family and friends. May, the eldest daughter, was not only a beauty, but she was regarded as little short of a genius because of her skill in painting on china, velvet or anything that would retain paint. Then she had a dashing air and was a brilliant conversationalist. Rose, the next daughter, was almost as dashing and gifted as her sister, and she had a great deal of that somewhat indefinite thing that some people call "style." She confessed to a great fondness for dress, and some of her admirers would have been surprised if they could have known how unpleasant really disagreeable Rose could be when compelled to give up the purchase of a dress or hat on which she had set her heart. Rose could make a greater variety of embroidery than any other girl in Wilford. She learned all of the new "fancy stitches" as soon as they came out, and she spent more money than her father could really afford to have her spend for floss and other kinds of embroidery silk and stamped mats of every description, some of which she was two weeks in embroidering.

Dora was the third daughter, and then came Margaret, who had her first visiting cards printed "Marguerite." Margaret was fond of society, and no one could "pour" at an afternoon tea with more grace than Margaret. She had no end of small talk at her tongue's end, and the people of Wilford regarded her as a phenomenal singer, but those qualified to judge would have said that her voice was little more than an ordinary soprano of limited range, with one or two serious defects. Margaret was in great demand as a singer at the local concerts given in Wilford, and no society event was regarded as a perfect success without her. She was one of those girls who always "look pretty," and she was witty in a way that was not always pleasing, because there was often a certain sharpness in her witty sayings and unkindness of the feelings of her friends.

Dora had none of the traits that gave her sisters the reputation of being "such bright, smart girls," and she lacked their beauty of face and form. She lacked "style," she had none of the "air" of Margaret nor the "dash" of May. She was not clever with her tongue, but it would have surprised some of her sisters' friends to know that Dora's reading was of the highest order, and that she sometimes wrote her sister's notes for them because she wrote a beautiful hand, and because, as they were sometimes generous enough to admit, she always "put things so nicely in a note." She knew nothing about Rose's "fancy stitches," but when Dora sewed on a button it "stayed," as her father declared, and it was admitted in the family that no one could mend or darn like Dora. She cleaned gloves for the whole family because none of them could take a soiled pair of gloves and make them look as Dora could make them look. And she could take an old dress skirt that almost any one else would have regarded as hopeless and turn and sponge and press it, and add little touches here and there that made it look "as good as new."

Although some of the friends of the Fifers thought Dora "so commonplace," they said that she was "a good-natured little thing," and that she had "really good manners." Sometimes it was said that she had "a real wholesome look," and I suppose that this remark was prompted by the fact that Dora had fresh, rosy cheeks and a pair of honest brown eyes, and that she was always exquisitely neat, if not exactly "stylish."

It was true that Dora had abundant good nature, and that she did cheerfully a great many things for her sisters and the whole family that a less kindly girl would have declined doing. She was "handy" at doing many little things. Some of them were not really agreeable duties, but Dora often said:

"Some one must do them if the machinery of the household is not to get all clogged up, and I may as well do them as any one."

Mr. Fifer did not have a large income. In fact, it was so small that it required a great deal of contriving and good management to make both ends meet, and it was Dora who did most of the contriving, for Mrs. Fifer was too much of an invalid to take upon herself any household cares. Dora's sisters confined their household duties to some perfunctory sweeping and dusting and the care of their own rooms. May sometimes made a cake and Rose occasionally attempted a fancy dessert that was in most cases a failure.

The fact that it required every dollar of his income to meet the expenses of his home was a source of much anxiety to Mr. Fifer, because he was no longer young, and he felt the necessity of making some provision for his old age. But if he thought at times that some of his daughters ought to do something to make themselves self-supporting he did not say so. He was an affectionate and over-indulgent father, and he knew that at least three of his daughters had the kind of pride which made them feel that it would detract in some way from their social position to become clerks or bookkeepers, or even teachers, had they been fitted for any of these duties. Dora had intimated that she was willing to do something

for her own support, but there was vigorous protest on the part of the rest of the family because of Dora's manifest usefulness at home.

It was a great shock to the family when, one autumn day, Mr. Fifer was brought home very ill and before night the angel of death had entered the home and the four girls were fatherless. May and Rose became hysterical and Margaret locked herself in her own room. Dora, although her heart was as heavy as the hearts of her sisters, bravely took upon herself the duties that some one member of the family must always assume at such times. She discharged these duties so well that old Squire Addison, a lifelong friend of Mr. Fifer's, said to his wife when he went home after several hours spent in the Fifer home:

"That little Dora Fifer is worth more than all the rest of the Fifer girls put together at a time when common sense is needed. I did admire the way she held herself in the midst of her sorrow to-day. I don't see how her folks can talk as if she wasn't as smart as any of her sisters. To my mind she's smarter than the whole caboodle of 'em. I don't know what's to become of that family now. I doubt if poor John Fifer left more than enough to bury him decently, unless there's some life insurance that I don't know anything about."

There was one life insurance policy for \$1,500, and this money and her home constituted Mrs. Fifer's entire fortune.

"What in the world are we going to do?" asked May with tearful eyes as the bereft family sat at the breakfast table ten days after the death of Mr. Fifer.

"What can we do?" added Rose, clasping her hands together with a gesture of despair.

"Goodness only knows!" exclaimed Margaret, shaking her head dolefully. "I know very well what I shall do," said Dora. "I shall go to work."

"At what?" asked May.

"At anything I can get to do."

"Dora Estelle Fifer!" said Rose. "You wouldn't do just any kind of common work, would you?"

"I will do any kind of useful work and as I am but a commonplace girl I am fitted for only commonplace work."

"But you wouldn't go into any one's kitchen, would you?"

"I expect to do that very thing."

"Dora Fifer!" exclaimed Rose and May in the same breath, and May added: "Do you want to disgrace the whole family?"

"Nonsense!" retorted Dora, laughing as she had not laughed since her father's death. "It is not a disgrace to do any kind of useful, honest work. What I propose to do is to become a general utility girl. I am not going to take a regular place as a house servant, although I am not above doing so; but mother needs me at home some of the time, and I am going to offer my services by the hour, day or evening to people who want all sorts of commonplace but necessary things done. Squire Addison has already engaged me for two hours a day to help him in his office. He says that he has often wished that he could get some one to help him about two hours a day, for he has not enough to do to employ an assistant all of the time. He and Mrs. Addison are going to speak to their friends in regard to employing me as a sort of an 'odd job girl.'"

"Odd job" sounds so unrefined," said Margaret.

"Well, then, you may call me a general utility girl," replied Dora. "Since I have no great talent for any one thing in particular, I must make the most of my ability to do things in general. It cannot and shall not be said that I am a useless person because I have no great talent in any one direction."

The very next morning Dora received a note from one of the wealthier women in Wilford saying that Mrs. Addison had spoken to her about Dora, and that she had been glad to hear of some one whom she could employ two or three hours a day.

"My eyesight is failing so that I am compelled to give up reading and writing," she wrote, "and I want some one to write notes and letters for me and relieve me of a good many other duties I am no longer able to attend to myself. Will you kindly call on me at your earliest convenience?"

A day or two later Dora had a request to assist a mother in the care of her children two or three hours each afternoon.

"Dear me, it seems so much like going out as a common nurse girl," said Rose.

"The 'common nurse girl' who does her duty faithfully is about as useful a person as I know of," replied Dora with unusual spirit. "There can be no more responsible or honorable position than that of giving proper care to little children. I am fond of children, and the three little ones of Mrs. Blaney's are dear little souls. I shall accept the place and thank Mrs. Blaney for offering it to me."

At the end of the second week after Dora had announced her intention of going out as a general utility girl she had all her time engaged from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon, excepting on Saturdays, which she reserved for duties in her own home. She had even some of her evenings engaged, and some weeks she earned ten dollars. She was very skillful with her needle and sewed two forenoons and one afternoon each week. So great was the demand for a really capable seamstress that Dora could have made engagements for every day in the week at a dollar and a half a day; but some of her other work was even more profitable, and she preferred variety.

One lady with five children, all boys

but one, said to Dora one day: "You do the neatest patching and darning I ever saw. It is something I never could do well and that I have always disliked exceedingly. It is such a relief to me to get rid of it and to have it done so much better than I could do that hereafter I am going to pay you 25 cents an hour for it. You do this homely, uninteresting work as if you really enjoyed it."

"I enjoy being useful and I believe in doing even homely and uninteresting work thoroughly," replied Dora.

May and Rose and Margaret had pride enough to be unwilling to allow Dora to support them in idleness, even if her income had been large enough for her to have done so. They expressed themselves as willing to "do something" if they could find something they could do. May graciously indicated her willingness to travel as a companion with some lady, and Rose was willing to do embroidery at home, while Margaret tried to get a position as a singer in some church, and she even talked of studying to become an opera singer. It surprised and offended her to have a teacher of voice culture tell her frankly that her voice was of too average a volume and too ordinary in quality for her to hope it to make a source of income even with the best of training.

May finally secured a few pupils in china painting, and Rose formed a little class in embroidery; but Wilford was a small town and as there were already several teachers of painting and embroidery in it, May and Rose found it difficult to secure pupils. A relative of Mr. Fifer's offered Margaret a home with her in a large city in return for some such service as Dora was rendering to others in Wilford, but at the end of two months Margaret was at home again, her mother's cousin writing with unnecessary bluntness that "the girl was of no account."

Finally, Margaret married a clerk in a store in Wilford who was fascinated by her dashing manners and pretty face, and they began a life of almost certain unhappiness in a boarding house.

One day Dora came home from one of her afternoons with Mrs. Raymond, the wealthy woman for whom she wrote letters and notes and to whom she had become useful in many other ways. Dora's brown eyes were shining and her step was quick and elastic. May was in an ill-humor because of what she called the "utter stupidity" of one of her pupils, and Rose had just said that she fairly loathed the sight of embroidery of any kind.

"O girls and O mother, what do you think dear Mrs. Raymond wants me to do? You never could guess!"

"Then why do you ask me to try?" asked Rose petulantly.

"It is foolish of me, isn't it?" replied Dora, with her unflinching good-humor. "Well, Mrs. Raymond is going abroad next month to be gone a whole year and she has asked me to go with her. Think of it!"

"Dora Estelle Fifer!" exclaimed Rose in much the same tone in which she had used when exclaiming over Dora's intention to go out as a general utility girl.

"You don't mean it?" cried May, while Mrs. Fifer said with shining eyes: "I am so glad for you, dear. Tell us all about it."

"I never shall tell all of the nice things Mrs. Raymond said to me when she asked me to go," said Dora. "It would sound too vain. But she said that I had become so useful to her and so necessary to her comfort that she could not go without me. She is going to pay me as much as I have been earning in my other places, and of course, she will pay all of my expenses. We are going to Paris, to Rome, to Geneva, to Germany—oh, all over Europe and to other countries! Can you spare me for so long, mother?"

"Spare you, dear? I would not for anything have you miss the opportunity. You know that my health is better now that it has been for years, and I am perfectly able to take full charge of the house."

"Mrs. Raymond is going to pay me half of my year's salary in advance so that I can give it to you before I go," said Dora. "Oh, doesn't it sound too good to be true? I am the happiest, happiest girl in the world, even though I am only a general utility girl."

A few days later Mrs. Raymond called on Mrs. Fifer when Dora was out and said: "I came partly to ask your forgiveness for taking Dora away from you, but as you have four daughters and I none at all, you may be willing to let me have one of yours for a while. Dora has really become indispensable to me. I have come to depend upon her so much. She does everything so well. No duty is too humble for her to do it cheerfully and thoroughly. Then she has so much tact and such beautiful patience. In all the year and more that she has been my helper I have never known her to become irritable or impatient or to slight any duty. Indeed, she has taught me lessons in patience and cheerfulness. I cannot tell you how fond I am of her."

So it came about that a "commonplace" girl met with the reward that not infrequently comes to those who do the humble, commonplace duties of life cheerfully and faithfully, the reward of appreciation and gratitude, for there are many who give these duties their true value and rank them with the brilliant accomplishments and achievements of life.—Young People.

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