

The Homely Heroine

Edna Ferber

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MILLIE WHITCOMB, of the fancy goods and notions, beckoned me with her finger. I had been standing at Kate O'Malley's counter, pretending to admire her new basket-weave suitings; but in reality reveling in her droll account of how, in the train coming up from Chicago, Mrs. Judge Porterfield had worn the negro porter's coat over her chilly shoulders in mistake for her husband's. Kate O'Malley can tell a funny story in a way to make the after-dinner pleasantries of a Washington diplomat sound like the clumsy jests told around the village grocery stove.

"I wanted to tell you that I read that last story of yours," said Millie, sociably, when I had strolled over to her counter, "and I liked it, all but the heroine. She had an `adorable throat' and hair that `waved away from her white brow,' and eyes that `now were blue and now gray.' Say, why don't you write a story about an ugly girl?"

"My land!" protested I. "It's bad enough trying to make them accept my stories as it is. That last heroine was a raving beauty, but she came back eleven times before the editor of Blakely's succumbed to her charms."

Millie's fingers were busy straightening the contents of a tray of combs and imitation jet barrettes. Millie's fingers were not intended for that task. They are slender, tapering fingers, pink-tipped and sensitive.

"I should think," mused she, rubbing a cloudy piece of jet with a bit of soft cloth, "that they'd welcome a homely one with relief. These goddesses are so cloying."

Millie Whitcomb's black hair is touched with soft mists of gray, and she wears lavender shirtwaists and white stocks edged with lavender. There is a Colonial air about her that has nothing to do with celluloid combs and imitation jet barrettes. It breathes of dim old rooms, rich with the tones of mahogany and old brass, and Millie in the midst of it, gray-gowned, a soft white fichu crossed upon her breast.

In our town the clerks are not the pert and gum-chewing young persons that story-writers are wont to describe. The girls at Bascom's are institutions. They know us all by our first names, and our lives are as an open book to them. Kate O'Malley, who has been at Bascom's for so many years that she is rumored to have stock in the company, may be said to govern the fashions of our town. She is wont to say, when we express a fancy for gray as the color of our new spring suit:

"Oh, now, Nellie, don't get gray again. You had it year before last, and don't you think it was just the least leetle bit trying? Let me show you that green that came in yesterday. I said the minute I clapped my eyes on it that it was just the color for you, with your brown hair and all."

And we end by deciding on the green.

The girls at Bascom's are not gossips — they are too busy for that — but they may be said to be delightfully well informed. How could they be otherwise when we go to Bascom's for our wedding dresses and party favors and baby flannels? There is news at Bascom's that our daily paper never hears of, and wouldn't dare to print if it did.

So when Millie Whitcomb, of the fancy goods and notions, expressed her hunger for a homely heroine, I did not resent the suggestion. On the contrary, it sent me home in thoughtful mood, for Millie Whitcomb has acquired a knowledge of human nature in the dispensing of her fancy goods and notions. It set me casting about for a really homely heroine.

There never has been a really ugly heroine in fiction. Authors have started bravely out to write of an unlovely woman, but they never have had the courage to allow her to remain plain. On Page 237 she puts on a black lace dress and red roses, and the combination brings out unexpected tawny lights in her hair, and olive tints in her cheeks, and there she is, the same old beautiful "YOU'RE LOOKING REAL PEAKED LATELY, PEARLIE."

heroine. Even in the "Duchess " books one finds the simple Irish girl, on donning a green corduroy gown cut square at the neck, transformed into a wild-rose beauty, at sight of whom a ball-room is hushed into admiring awe. There's the case of Jane Eyre, too. She is constantly described as plain and mouse-like, but there are covert

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hints as to her gray eyes and slender figure and clear skin, and we have a sneaking notion that she wasn't such a fright after all.

Therefore, when I tell you that I am choosing Pearlie Schultz as my leading lady you are to understand that she is ugly, not only when the story opens, but to the bitter end. In the first place, Pearlie is fat. Not plump, or rounded, or dimpled, or deliciously curved, but FAT. She bulges in all the wrong places, including her chin. (Sister, who has a way of snooping over my desk in my absence, says that I may as well drop this now, because nobody would ever read it, anyway, least of all any sane editor. I protest when I discover that Sis has been over my papers. It bothers me. But she says you have to do these things when you have a genius in the house, and cites the case of Kipling's "Recessional," which was rescued from the depths of his wastebasket by his wife.)

Pearlie Schultz used to sit on the front porch summer evenings and watch the couples stroll by, and weep in her heart. A fat girl with a fat girl's soul is a comedy. But a fat girl with a thin girl's soul is a tragedy. Pearlie, in spite of her two hundred pounds, had the soul of a willow wand.

The walk in front of Pearlie's house was guarded by a row of big trees that cast kindly shadows. The strolling couples used to step gratefully into the embrace of these shadows, and from them into other embraces. Pearlie, sitting on the porch, could see them dimly, although they could not see her. She could not help remarking that these strolling couples were strangely lacking in sprightly conversation. Their remarks were but fragmentary, disjointed affairs, spoken in low tones with a queer, tremulous note in them. When they reached the deepest, blackest, kindest shadow, which fell just before the end of the row of trees, the strolling couples almost always stopped, and then there came a quick movement, and a little smothered cry from the girl, and then a sound, and then a silence. Pearlie, sitting alone on the porch in the dark, listened to these things and blushed furiously. Pearlie had never strolled into the kindly shadows with a little beating of the heart, and she had never been surprised with a quick arm about her and eager lips pressed warmly against her own.

In the daytime Pearlie worked as public stenographer at the Burke Hotel. She rose at seven in the morning, and rolled for fifteen minutes, and lay on her back and elevated her heels in the air, and stood stiff kneed while she touched the floor with her finger tips one hundred times, and went without her breakfast. At the end of each month she usually found that she weighed three pounds more than she had the month before.

The folks at home never joked with Pearlie about her weight. Even one's family has some respect for a life sorrow. Whenever Pearlie asked that inevitable question of the fat woman: "Am I as fat as she is?" her mother always answered: "You! Well, I should hope not! You're looking real peaked lately, Pearlie. And your blue skirt just ripples in the back, it's getting so big for you."

Of such blessed stuff are mothers made.

But if the gods had denied Pearlie all charms of face or form, they had been decent enough to bestow on her one gift. Pearlie could cook like an angel; no, better than an angel, for no angel could be a really clever cook and wear those flowing kimono-like sleeves. They'd get into the soup. Pearlie could take a piece of rump and some suet and an onion and a cup or so of water, and evolve a pot roast that you could cut with a fork. She could turn out a surprisingly good cake with surprisingly few eggs, all covered with white icing, and bearing cunning little jelly figures on its snowy bosom. She could beat up biscuits that fell apart at the lightest pressure, revealing little pools of golden butter within. Oh, Pearlie could cook!

On week days Pearlie rattled the typewriter keys, but on Sundays she shooed her mother out of the kitchen. Her mother went, protesting faintly:

"Now, Pearlie, don't fuss so for dinner. You ought to get your rest on Sunday instead of stewing over a hot stove all morning."

"Hot fiddlesticks, ma," Pearlie would say, cheerily. "It ain't hot, because it's a gas stove. And I'll only get fat if I sit around. You put on your black-and-white and go to church. Call me when you've got as far as your corsets, and I'll puff your hair for you in the back."

In her capacity of public stenographer at the Burke Hotel, it was Pearlie's duty to take letters dictated by traveling men and beginning: "Yours of the 10th at hand. In reply would say . . ." or: "Enclosed please find, etc." As clinching proof of her plainness it may be stated that none of the traveling men, not even Max Baum, who was so fresh that the girl at the cigar counter actually had to squelch him, ever called Pearlie "baby doll," or tried to make a date with her. Not that Pearlie would ever have allowed them to. But she never had PEARLIE WAS PREPARING TO GO HOME WHEN SAM APPROACHED HER.

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had to reprove them. During pauses in dictation she had a way of peering near-sightedly over her glasses at the dapper, well-dressed traveling salesman who was rolling off the items on his sale bill. That is a trick which would make the prettiest kind of a girl look owlsh.

On the night that Sam Miller strolled up to talk to her, Pearlie was working late. She had promised to get out a long and intricate bill for Max Baum, who travels for Kuhn and Klingman, so that he might take the nine o'clock evening train. The irrepressible Max had departed with much eclat and clatter, and Pearlie was preparing to go home when Sam approached her.

Sam had just come in from the Gayety Theatre across the street, whither he had gone in a vain search for amusement after supper. He had come away in disgust. A soiled soubrette with orange-colored hair and baby socks had swept her practiced eye over the audience, and, attracted by Sam's good-looking blond head in the second row, had selected him as the target of her song. She had run up to the extreme edge of the footlights at the risk of teetering over, and had informed Sam through the medium of song — to the huge delight of the audience, and to Sam's red-faced discomfiture — that she liked his smile, and he was just her style, and just as cute as he could be, and just the boy for her. On reaching the chorus she had whipped out a small, round mirror and, assisted by the calcium-light man in the rear, had thrown a wretched little spotlight on Sam's head.

Ordinarily, Sam would not have minded it. But that evening, in the vest pocket just over the place where he supposed his heart to be, reposed his girl's daily letter. They were to be married on Sam's return to New York from his first long trip. In the letter near his heart she had written prettily and seriously about traveling men, and traveling men's wives, and her little code for both. The fragrant, girlish, grave little letter had caused Sam to sour on the efforts of the soiled soubrette.

As soon as possible he had fled up the aisle and across the street to the hotel writing-room. There he had spied Pearlie's good-humored, homely face, and its contrast with the silly, red-and-white countenance of the unlaundered soubrette had attracted his homesick heart.

Pearlie had taken some letters from him earlier in the day. Now, in his hunger for companionship, he strolled up to her desk just as she was putting her typewriter to bed.

"Gee! This is a lonesome town!" said Sam, smiling down at her.

Pearlie glanced up at him, over her glasses. "I guess you must be from New York," she said. "I've heard a real New Yorker can get bored in Paris. In New York the sky is bluer, and the grass is greener, and the girls are prettier, and the steaks are thicker, and the buildings are higher, and the streets are wider, and the air is finer, than the sky, or the grass, or the girls, or the steaks, or the air of any place else in the world. Ain't they?"

"Oh, now," protested Sam, "quit kiddin' me! You'd be lonesome for the little old town, too, if you'd been born and dragged up in it, and hadn't seen it for four months."

"New to the road, aren't you?" asked Pearlie.

Sam blushed a little. "How did you know?"

"Well, you generally can tell. They don't know what to do with themselves evenings, and they look rebellious when they go into the dining-room. The old-timers just look resigned."

"You've picked up a thing or two around here, haven't you? I wonder if the time will ever come when I'll look resigned to a hotel dinner, after four months of 'em. Why, girl, I've got so I just eat the things that are covered up — like baked potatoes in the shell, and soft boiled eggs, and baked apples, and oranges that I can peel, and nuts."

"Why, you poor kid," breathed Pearlie, her pale eyes fixed on him in motherly pity. "You oughtn't to do that. You'll get so thin your girl won't know you."

Sam looked up, quickly. "How in thunderation did you know — — ?"

Pearlie was pinning on her hat, and she spoke succinctly, her hatpins between her teeth: "You've been here two days now, and I notice you dictate all your letters except the longest one, and you write that one off in a corner of the writing-room all by yourself, with your cigar just glowing like a live coal, and you squint up through the smoke, and grin to yourself."

"Say, would you mind if I walked home with you?" asked Sam.

If Pearlie was surprised, she was woman enough not to show it. She picked up her gloves and handbag, locked her drawer with a click, and smiled her acquiescence. And when Pearlie smiled she was awful.

It was a glorious evening in the early summer, moonless, velvety, and warm. As they strolled homeward, Sam told her all about the Girl, as is the way of traveling men the world over. He told her about the tiny apartment they

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had taken, and how he would be on the road only a couple of years more, as this was just a try-out that the firm always insisted on. And they stopped under an arc light while Sam showed her the picture in his watch as is also the way of traveling men since time immemorial.

Pearlie made an excellent listener. He was so boyish and so much in love and so pathetically eager to make good with the firm, and so happy to have someone in whom to confide.

"But it's a dog's life, after all," reflected Sam, again after the fashion of all traveling men. "Any fellow on the road earns his salary these days, you bet. I used to think it was all getting up when you felt like it, and sitting in the big front window of the hotel, smoking a cigar and watching the pretty girls go by. I wasn't wise to the packing, and the unpacking, and the rotten train service, and the grouchy customers, and the canceled bills, and the grub."

Pearlie nodded understandingly. "A man told me once that twice a week regularly he dreamed of the way his wife cooked noodle-soup."

"My folks are German," explained Sam. "And my mother — can she cook! Well, I just don't seem able to get her potato pancakes out of my mind. And her roast beef tasted and looked like roast beef, and not like a wet red flannel rag."

At this moment Pearlie was seized with a brilliant idea. "To-morrow's Sunday. You're going to Sunday here, aren't you? Come over and eat your dinner with us. If you have forgotten the taste of real food, I can give you a dinner that'll jog your memory."

"Oh, really," protested Sam. "You're awfully good, but I couldn't think of it. I — —"

"You needn't be afraid. I'm not letting you in for anything. I may be homelier than an English suffragette, and I know my lines are all bumps, but there's one thing you can't take away from me, and that's my cooking hand. I can cook, boy, in a way to make your mother's Sunday dinner, with company expected look like Mrs. Newlywed's first attempt at `riz' biscuits. And I don't mean any disrespect to your mother when I say it. I'm going to have noodle-soup, and fried chicken, and hot biscuits, and creamed beans from our own garden, and strawberry shortcake with real — —"

"Hush!" shouted Sam. "If I ain't there, you'll know that I passed away during the night, and you can telephone the clerk to break in my door."

The Grim Reaper spared him, and Sam came, and was introduced to the family, and ate. He put himself in a class with Dr. Johnson, and Ben Brust, and Gargantua, only that his table manners were better. He almost forgot to talk during the soup, and he came back three times for chicken, and by the time the strawberry shortcake was half consumed he was looking at Pearlie with a sort of awe in his eyes.

That night he came over to say good-by before taking his train out for Ishpeming. He and Pearlie strolled down as far as the park and back again.

"I didn't eat any supper," said Sam. "It would have been sacrilege, after that dinner of yours. Honestly, I don't know how to thank you, being so good to a stranger like me. When I come back next trip, I expect to have the Kid with me, and I want her to meet you, by George! She's a winner and a pippin, but she wouldn't know whether a porterhouse was stewed or frapped. I'll tell her about you, you bet. In the meantime, if there's anything I can do for you, I'm yours to command."

Pearlie turned to him, suddenly. "You see that clump of thick shadows ahead of us, where those big trees stand in front of our house?"

"Sure," replied Sam.

"Well, when we step into that deepest, blackest shadow, right in front of our porch, I want you to reach up, and put your arm around me and kiss me on the mouth, just once. And when you get back to New York you can tell your girl I asked you to."

There broke from him a little involuntary exclamation. It might have been of pity, and it might have been of surprise. It had in it something of both, but nothing of mirth. And as they stepped into the depths of the soft black shadows he took off his smart straw sailor, which was so different from the sailors that the boys in our town wear. And there was in the gesture something of reverence.

Millie Whitcomb didn't like the story of the homely heroine, after all. She says that a steady diet of such literary fare would give her blue indigestion. Also she objects on the ground that no one got married — that is, the heroine didn't. And she says that a heroine who does not get married isn't a heroine at all. She thinks she prefers

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the pink-cheeked, goddess kind, in the end.