

## Black-eyed Peas.

BY H. W.

Clover stood biting the corner of her apron viciously, and with her nose tilted decidedly upward, and her eyebrows drawn down to her eyes, she looked a perfect raven, and she scowled and snarled at the great black-eyed peas before her, brimful of "black-eyed peas," unshelled, the long, dry pods twisted and tangled together, looking very hard, and obstinate, and discouraging, indeed.

"I won't shell 'em—I won't shell 'em!" vowed Clover, putting out her little foot, and giving the basket a kick that sent it clear under the kitchen table.

"Clover Fleetwood, you will! You'll shell the last one!"

Clover's aunt was thin, and limp, and languid of motion, but very determined withal, and now she shut her mouth like a steel-trap, and pointed an uncompromising finger at the peas, after which she trailed her limp skirt out to the back yard, where a big black kettle of soap was bubbling.

And sulky little Clover, left alone, confronted by the terrible peas, bit a big hole in the corner of her apron, and kicked the basket over on its side, and stamped her foot, and bit her lip, and finally got a tin-pan and a chair, and began the hopeless-looking task with impatient, savage little fingers.

Poor Clover was only seventeen, not wise, not prepared for the hard phases of life, nor even the small, unpleasant tasks, by the strength, and patience, and faith that must come later, especially with tender, considerate guidance. But at present, with the good yet undeveloped, and all the little sharp points of temper and contrariness rubbed up the wrong way, with little, half-unconscious and unsatisfied longings for help to grow upward into a brighter and a better atmosphere than she knew, and with an admixture of real faults, Clover often appeared a decided villain.

There was one who, she felt instinctively, could help her in her would—the gentleman who boarded at her aunt's, and who possessed the broad liberality and sympathy of a truly wise and noble nature. But he spent the greater part of his time in his own room, writing treatises on entomology.

"He cares a heap more for bugs than he does for me," said Clover, discontentedly. "If he ever looks at me at all, it is in a way as if he was thinking, 'I wonder what kind of an insect this is! Is it a new specimen?' I hope he won't take a notion some time to send me to the State entomologist in a bottle."

Just now, those dreadful black-eyed peas were almost too much for Clover. The shells of some were tough and refused to open, and some were stiff and brittle, and snapped open unexpectedly, and the peas flew all around the room. Her fingers were sore and her shoulders ached.

It was late in the afternoon; her aunt was busy emptying her soft-soap into stone jars, and carrying it to the smoke-house. It was so hard to resume the tiresome shelling that at last a dark temptation assailed Clover. The basket was yet half-full of the dreadful things, and there, just a few feet away, was a big, empty fire-place, with a fire-board before it. Now it could very easily swallow up all these peas, without injuring its digestion in the least; and these, shelled peas, put away in the attic, in the big bag with the rest, could tell no tales. If the unshelled peas were at last discovered, she would at any rate have a respite.

"Whatever is the child up to?"

Mr. Clarendon stood in the doorway, viewing, with curious amusement, Miss Clover's performance of dumping a great heap of rustling pea-pods in between the two big andirons. She banged the fire-board up into its place with a spiteful, defiant little motion, and gazed at the interviewer with unflinching eyes, although the blood was in her cheeks.

"I'm hiding 'em, so I won't have to shell 'em," said she. "That's what I'm up to."

"But, dear Miss Clover," he began, half-puzzled.

"You needn't lecture me," she broke in. "I won't touch one of them, not if you tell Aunt Bethany."

"I wouldn't think of telling Aunt Bethany," he answered. "I only appear to you. Does your conscience approve?"

Clover looked at him sulkily from under her fringing, flaxen top-knot.

"Maybe, if your fingers were sore and your shoulders were lame, and you detested the sight of a black-eyed pea as much as I do, you would not ask the advice of your conscience, either," she said, with a faint tremor in her voice.

He smiled, but it was a gentle, pitying smile.

"Poor little—perhaps he was going to say 'insect,' but a limp calico dress, with a limp woman inside of it, came languidly up the steps, and dropped into a chair as if they had suddenly melted together at that point.

"Clover," spoke her aunt, in a voice which was in violent contrast to her manner, "if you've got them everlasting peas out of the way at last, you better get that coffee a-roasting."

For once Mr. Clarendon was guilty of great nonsense in the very first sentence of his treatise, for he wrote:

"This new specimen is a poor, over-worked, simple, foolish, darling little dunc."

Whatever Clover pretended, the black-eyed peas, hidden behind the fire-board, grew to be something of a burden. She knew it would have been better for her had she gone through with the task, instead of shifting the burden from her hands to her conscience. But she would not acknowledge it; and when she found, Mr. Clarendon regarding her with serious eyes, she grew defiant, and, taking a streak of reckless inconsistency, blamed him for it, and nerves and temper together led her to a climax of bad behavior, including the sins of kindling the fire with his treatises, and giving his specimens upside down upon the lid of a box, that might have made him believe in her total depravity, had his insight been less penetrating and kindly than it was.

Retribution came at last, though not at his hands.

There was company at dinner, one

day—a gentleman who had come down to buy some land of Clover's uncle, and was going to build thereon. Clover refused to appear at dinner, because she would not be at the trouble of making herself presentable.

She had taken her station at the kitchen-table, just beside the open dining-room door, where she could hear the conversation and enjoy a little lunch all to herself at the same time.

A sentence from her uncle suddenly startled her:

"Just come out here. You can see the best site you'll have for a building spot square from the kitchen-door."

And there was a sound of shoving back chairs and of footsteps.

Clover's dress was torn, and her apron showed indications of an acquaintance with the sooty wash-kettle. Her flaxen coil was escaping from the comb and rolling down her back, and she was armed with the iron kitchen-spoon with which, I am sorry to say—for it is very unromantic—she had been eating rice-pudding out of a yellow earthen dish.

She could not make her escape out of the kitchen-door, because the dining-room door commanded a full view of it, and she would be detected by the invaders; yet it would not do to be found thus.

Again the big fireplace came to the rescue, and in a flash Clover was behind the board and among the black-eyed peas.

As she sank down among them they rustled and creaked, seeming to lift up accusing voices, and to reproach her for her deception.

But now the strange gentleman in the kitchen was speaking, and his voice drowned theirs:

"Here is something I want—a real old-fashioned fireplace. How wide is it?"

She heard his footsteps approaching, and knew she would be discovered. She jumped to her feet with some dim idea of trying to climb up the inside upon the jagged, broken rocks. The quick, nervous motion brought her elbow in abrupt contact with the board.

Down it went with a bang, and there stood terrified, blushing Clover among the black-eyed peas, still grasping the big iron spoon; and there they all were glaring at her, her limp, stony aunt, her astonished uncle, the amazed stranger, and Mr. Clarendon, looking down at her with grave pity.

With sudden desperation, she broke through them all, and never stopped in her flight until she reached the cool, quiet attic, with its soothing odor of dried herbs and fruit and hops.

It was late in the evening when she went down stairs. Supper was all over, but she did not care for that.

"Perhaps you'll finish shelling them there peas now, Miss Fleetwood," her aunt observed, with chill politeness, as the small figure glided through the dusky hall.

And Clover gathered them up in the big basket, and carried them out of the back door, sitting down upon a locust tree beside the long pine table where the milk-pans were turned up in a row. The moon was up a little way, and flocks of plummy white clouds were drifting from the east.

"They are angels with great soft wings," said Clover; "they are going—up there! And I am, oh, so far away! I wonder I wouldn't come near such a wicked little wretch as me!"

Some one laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Clover—Clover, child!" Mr. Clarendon said, "you are tired—and, I think, sad. Let me help you."

She bent over the pan of peas, with a little rush of tears.

"Yes," she said, "so tired, and so hateful, and disagreeable!"

"No," he answered, "that is not at all true. You are a child, and your feet have not yet found the paths of peace; but they will in time. I could help you, I think, if I might—if you would let me. But I fear you will not."

She glanced up slyly, forgetting her tears.

"I have cried sometimes," she murmured, "because I was afraid you cared more for the bugs than for me."

And here somebody's arms were around her in such a tight hug, she forgot the pan of peas, and it slid from her lap; and the peas rustled and rattled as if in soft laughter, and the bright tin pans on the table, catching glints of moonlight, smiled at each other; and perhaps even the angels up in the clouds did not disdain to rejoice a little over the happiness that had come to the repentant little sinner, and the help that was to assist her in her upward growth.

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Oct. 3, 1881.

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