

FICTION

Carolyn Wells

The Seven Ages of Childhood



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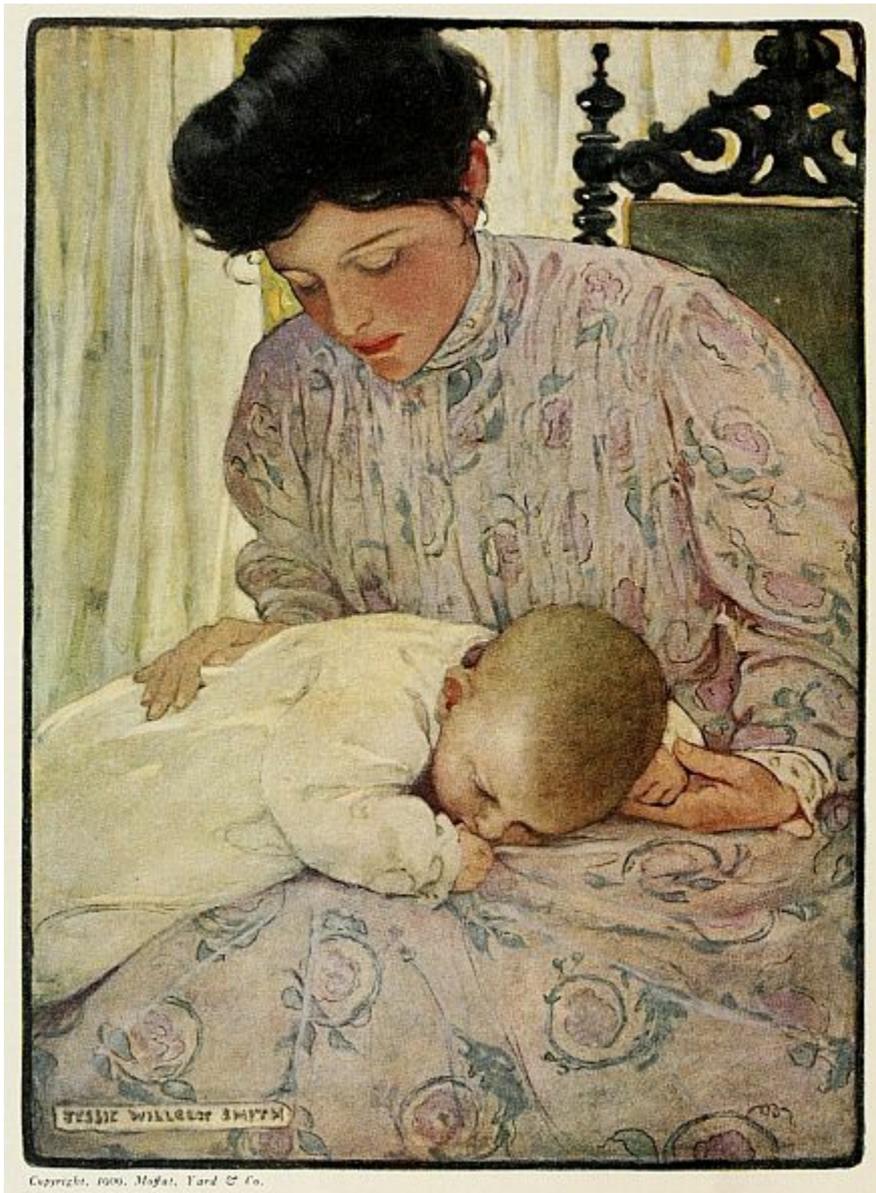
FICTION

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**THE SEVEN AGES
OF
CHILDHOOD**



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First the Infant in Its Mother's Arms



THE SEVEN AGES OF CHILDHOOD

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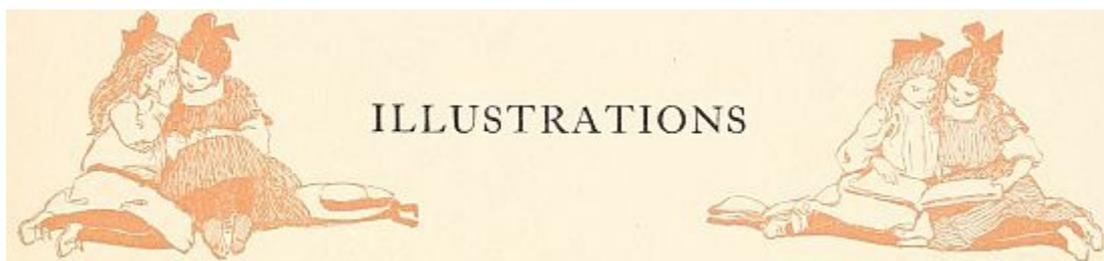
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NEW YORK

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To
THE SEVEN LITTLE FRIENDS
WHO SO KINDLY HELPED ME IN MAKING
THESE PICTURES, THIS BOOK
IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED



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I

First the Infant in Its Mother's Arms



Baby, of all mysterious things,
You're stranger far than stars or kings.
You stare superbly day by day,
Nor let your large reserve give way.
Unfathomable mysteries
Lurk in your big, unseeing eyes,
Making brave memories, and yet,
Making them only to forget.
But though reflectively you blink,
Trying to make us think you think,
We know you cannot think or talk,
You cannot run, you cannot walk;
You little human mystery,
You can't do anything but be.

You small, content, safe-guarded thing,
Nestling beneath your mother's wing.
You're all so new; your roseleaf skin,
Your dewy eyes and dimpled chin,
Your pinch of hair and pound of flesh
Are all so delicate and fresh.
Then, Baby, every little while
You cry. And then perhaps you smile.
You cry without a bit of reason,
You laugh both in and out of season;
A wise proceeding, I suppose,
If that is all the speech one knows.

But sometimes do the dull hours drag?
And sometimes does your patience flag?
Long days and nights you must get through,
Without a single thing to do.
And though perhaps you see and hear,
It means naught to your eye and ear.

But, Baby, you don't seem to care,
You hark at silence,--look at air!

And in the stillness, or the dark,
Absorbedly you look and hark.
So, then, what difference can it make,
Whether you are asleep or 'wake?
You cannot think, and it would seem
You do not know enough to dream.
How can you dream, not knowing words?
Or is it like the song of birds,
Or scent of flowers, or sunshine bright,
Or South breeze on a summer's night?

Perhaps your thoughts just flounder 'round
In seas of color, waves of sound;
In notions vague of shape or form.
As,--Life is something soft and warm.
Mother is just a happy place;
Nurse is a sort of vacant space.
And father is a kind of stuff,
That's woolly, black and rather rough.

And then some day into your eyes
There comes a look exceeding wise.
And then your brain begins to grow;
You learn "How does the Kitty go?"
You learn to "Love the Lambie Baa,"
And "Make a Face at Grandmamma!"
And then upon your own account
You seem to learn a large amount,
As you laboriously prove
That your own fingers really move!
And if you have accomplished this,
And if you've learned "a Spanish kiss;"
And if three times you've said "Goo--goo!"
Why, that's a busy day for you!



II

Then the Toddling Baby Boy,
With shining morning face,
Creeping like a snail.



Queer, drifting fancies, vague and dim,
'Neath his gold curls are hid.
The kitchen steps appear to him
Those of a pyramid.

With mighty purpose in his mind,
He clammers up. And then,
With purpose quite as well defined,
He scrambles down again.

Then, of all busy ones of earth,--
Toilers beneath the sun,
Working away for all they're worth,
He is the busiest one!

Down in the sand he has to dig
A hole, exceeding deep;
And by its side, all smooth and big,
He piles a lovely heap.

With both hands then he scatters it
Round the verandah floor;
And when he's scattered every bit,
He scoops it up once more.

He has to watch the rainy drops
Drip, dripping from the wall;
Then, quick as anything, he stops
To go and roll his ball.

Across the lawn he seems to see
A funny little stick;
So he must needs go hastily
And give the thing a kick.

The laughing sunshine sifts right through
His mop of tangled curls;
Turning it to a golden hue,
And kinking it in twirls.



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*Then the Toddling Baby Boy—
With shining morning face,
Creeping like a snail.*

And then he hums with all his might
A funny little song;
Some of the notes are almost right,
And some are sort of wrong.

Then he must watch a lady-bird
That crawls across the floor;
Then listen! for he *thinks* he heard
An awful lion roar!

He has to stop and 'member things;
"Once out at Gran'ma's house
They was a birdy wiv red wings!
And kitty caught a mouse!

"And then in Sunday-school one day,
The children all stood 'round,
And sang a song 'bout why--delay,--
It had a lovely sound."

Whatever can, or can't be known,
He much desires to know;
For suddenly his wonder-bone
Has just begun to grow.

"I wonder what that birdy's at
Over to Gran'ma's house.
I wonder why a kitty cat
Is 'llowed to catch a mouse.

"I wonder why the doggie whines,
I wonder why he does;
I wonder why the dandy-lines
All turns to fuzzy-fuzz.

"I wonder why my shadow-boy
Hops fast along as me;
I wonder why my newest toy
So broken seems to be.

"I wonder why they disappear
That sharp and shiny tool;
I wonder why my muvver dear
Won't let me go to school.

"I wonder why a deaded fly
Won't ever come alive;
I wonder why I'm only free,
An Dorofy is five!"

Each hour with wonder new is fraught;
Until he thinks so fast,
He wonders what it was he thought
When he was thinking last.

Wondering, singing, 'membering,--
He learns anew each day,
The world is but a bounding ball
For him to kick in play.



III

Then the Epicure
With fine and greedy taste for porridge.



Next to the Epicure we turn,
With a discerning taste in porridge;
Yet careful, lest her mouth she burn,
Like the o'er hasty man from Norwich,
For now, her judging powers have grown;
She thinks with wisdom all her own.

In tones that leave no room for doubt
She intimates she is unable
To eat her bread and milk without
Her bear and dolly on the table.
And nurse, because of her insistence,
Follows the line of least resistance.

She does not want a nice clean dress;
She's very, very sure she doesn't!
She wants to go to Grandma's,--yes!
She wasn't naughty,--no, she wasn't!
And knows with wilful, shaking head,
She does not want to go to bed!

She doesn't want to speak her piece;
She doesn't want her hair all curly;
She isn't Auntie's pressus niece!
She isn't mother's darling girlie!
Then suddenly, a change pacific,--
And her new mood is beatific!



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*Then the Epicure,
With fine and greedy taste for porridge*

Cherubic smiles drive frowns away,
She vows that she loves evvybuddy!
She *will* be goody-girl all day;
Nor get her shoes and stockings muddy.
She will not go outside the yard;
And she "loves muvver awful hard!"

Sometimes the martyr mood appears,
She's good in meek, submissive fashion;
Reproachful eyes show signs of tears,
And red cheeks hint a stifled passion.
She wonders, "when she gets to heaven,
If children go to bed at seven!"

She favors games of "let's p'tend,"
And with an energy unfailing,
She plays the role of calling friend,
Dressed up in anything that's trailing.
From, "Ding-a-ling!" "Come in"; a bow,--
To, "Well, I must be going now."

Her reasoning powers have come alive,
Her mind is rapidly awaking.
The sharpest bargains she can drive,
Conditions she is ever making.
"I'll sing my song for uncle,--yes,
If you will make my doll a dress."

Her mind, obeying nature's law,
Like morning-glory's soft unfolding,
Fills with a deep, enchanting awe
Those who are breathlessly beholding;
And they exclaim, "Well, did you ever!"
"She's surely going to grow up clever!"

She dances down Life's primrose way
Unconscious of her faults and merits;
The grown-ups watch her at her play,
And they opine that "she inherits
Her mother's gentleness; but still
She seems to have her father's will."



IV

Then the Lover, sighing like a furnace.



In the soft soil of little lives
Affection quickly springs and thrives
And grows like anything;
Its tiny tendrils Love puts out,
Not knowing what it's all about,
But glad to smile and sing.

Perhaps it is a favorite doll,
Often the raggedest of all,
That bids affection start.
Unstinted love is gladly poured
Upon the dolly so adored
By little Tenderheart.

Now love grows very fast, and so
The little heart will overflow,
And love will run to waste;
It must needs fall on this or that,--
The dog, the baby or the cat;
Quite Catholic its taste.

Perhaps a schoolmate gets a share;
The little girl with braided hair,
That sits next in the class;
The one with wide, pathetic eyes,
Blue as the warm midsummer skies,
A timid little lass.



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Then the Lover, sighing like a furnace

A bashful glance,--a furtive look,--
Some words about a lesson book;
And then a smile or two.
Then,--"You're the nicest girl I know!"
And, "So are you!" "I love you so."
And, "So do I love you!"

Together arm in arm they walk,
They do not care for others' talk,
Nor with the others play;
In softest whispers they impart
The secrets of each little heart,
Intimate friends are they.

And yet, though fair and sweet the fruits,
So fragile are affection's roots,
A trifle works them ill;

A single hasty word, or curt,
The little tendrils oft will hurt;
A frown perhaps may kill.

"She told me what you said 'bout me!"
"I think she's mean as she can be!"
"I'm mad at you! So there!"
"I'll never speak to you again!"
"All right, Miss Meany, don't you then!
You needn't think I care!"

And then, just as the big tears start,
Homeward runs little Broken-heart,
And to her own room flies;
"Dolly, my darling dolly, pet,
You love me, dear, you love me yet!"
She whispers with wet eyes.

Ah, human love brings but unrest,
Once more she catches to her breast
The love that cannot fail;
The love that makes her heartache cease,
The love that brings a soothing peace,
No other can avail.

Instinctive love, that can't be taught,
That giveth all and asketh naught,
Reigns in one heart alone.
Its own reward it can create,
It makes the heart inanimate
Responsive to her own.



V

Then the Scholar;
With eyes severe, and hair of formal cut.

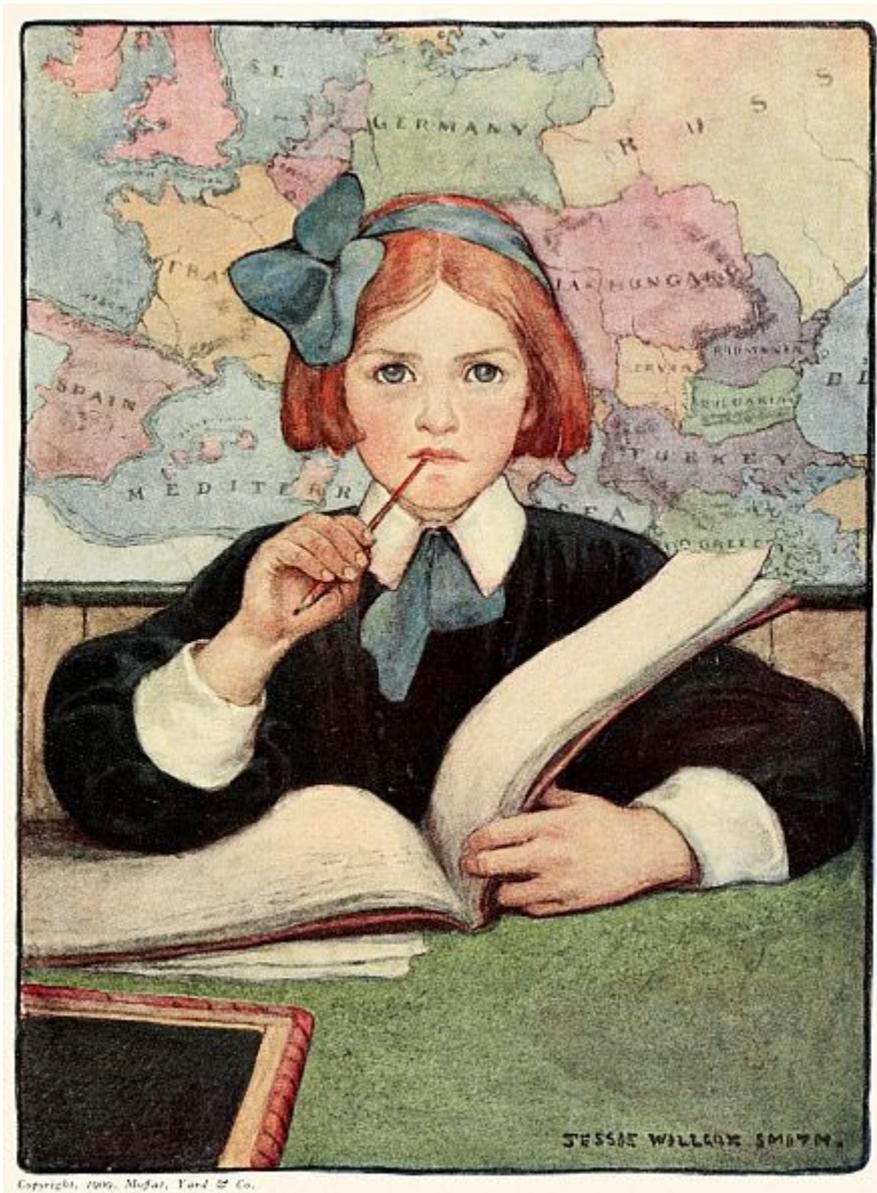


Nothing is quite so hard, I think,
As drawing maps with pen and ink.
You dot the cities, every one,
And make long lines where rivers run.

And every single coasting line
Must wave in curves as fine as fine.
The rivers wriggle up and down
Across the green and through the brown;

You have to measure all the while,—
A half an inch is 'most a mile.
I do think maps are awful queer,
They seem to bring the whole world here.

Why, as I sit here in my chair,
I see the countries everywhere.
I see across to far Japan,
With funny people, like a fan.



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*Then the Scholar,
With eyes severe and hair of formal cut*

All red and purple clothes they wear,
And knobby hatpins in their hair,
And flowers and trees of simple kind,
And that big mountain far behind.

Then, in the class, we have to give
Description where the natives live.
The countries that are colored pink
Are where the natives live, I think.

The people that live there, I'm sure
Must be extremely sad and poor,
With only rice and things to eat,
And not a single shady street.

I wonder if they ever think

They live in countries colored pink.

But drawing maps,--that isn't all;
I was promoted in the Fall,
And now I've lots of bigger books.
Reading is harder than it looks.

You have to say your words just so,
You mustn't read too fast or slow.
It 'stracts you so, you can't find out,
Sometimes, what stories are about.

But reader stories, anyway,
Are never very glad or gay;
They're mostly 'bout some noble deed,
With fine, high-sounding words to read.

And though it sounds quite loud and grand,
It's pretty hard to understand.
But Friday afternoon's the time!
We all speak pieces made of rhyme.

Next week, mine is the loveliest one,
About "The South Wind and the Sun."
It has such soft and singing words,
Like "lily-bells, and humming birds."

The south wind and the sun, you see,
Were comrades, just like May and me.
And they went wandering all about,
Just full of laugh, and gleeful shout.

Dancing all springy on their toes;
Wait! This is the way it goes:
"Arm in arm they went together,
Over heights of morning haze.

"Over slanting slopes of lawn,
They went on and on and on,
Where the daisies looked like star-tracks,
Trailing up and down the dawn."

Don't you think that is nice to say
Upon a breezy, shiny day?
Some poets just know how to write,
The loveliest pieces to recite;

So many that I'd love to speak,
And just one Friday in each week!
But then I study other things,--
The Civil War, and Saturn's rings,--

I have to study hard, for, oh!
There is so much I want to know.
There's lots of knowledge, I suppose,
More even than my Grandpa knows.

I look ahead, and seem to see
That knowledge waiting there for me.

I think, when I grow big and tall,
I prob'ly shall have learned it all.



VI

The Sixth Age shifts
To lean and slender maidenhood,
With thoughtful eyes and quiet mien.





When all the others are at play,
Sometimes I like to go away
And sit beneath the willow tree,
And wait for thought to come to me.

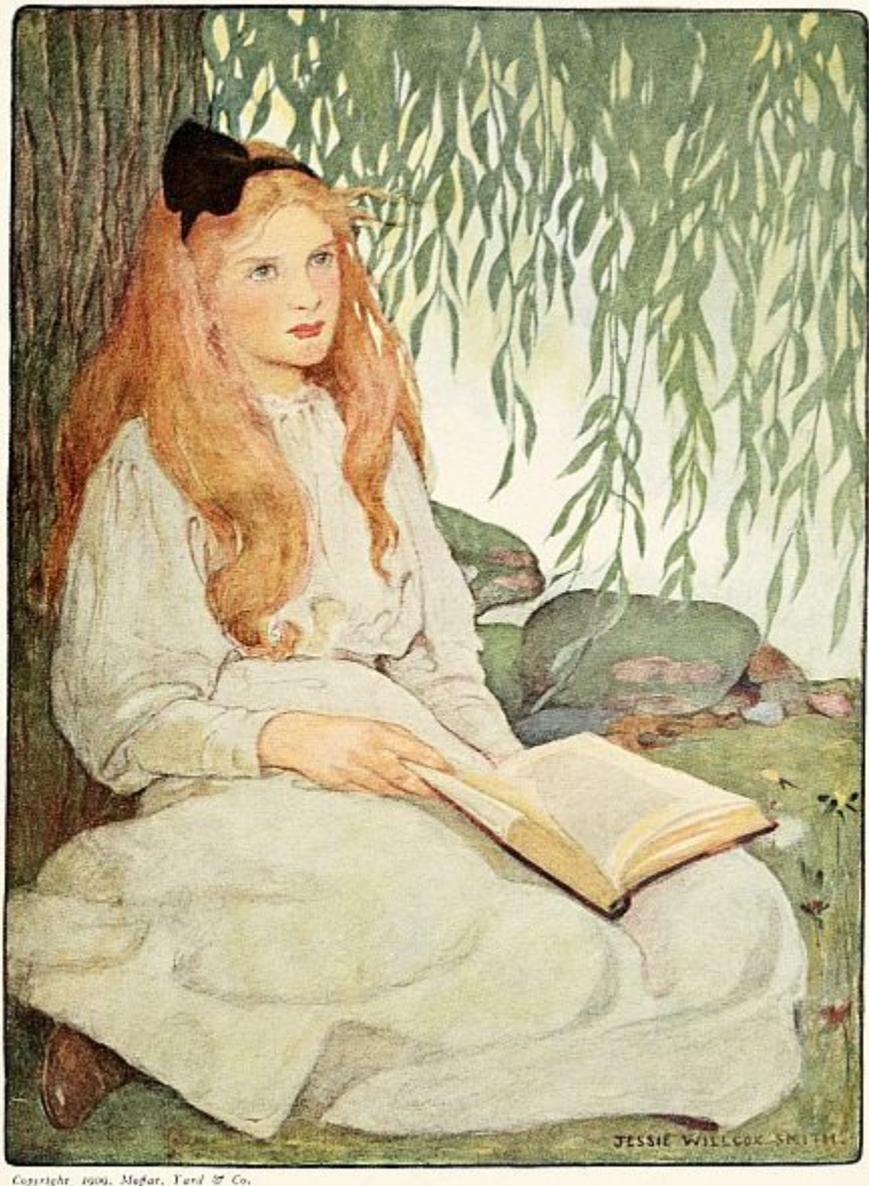
It's just the dearest quiet spot,
Where I can think as well as not;
And little breezes softly blow,
That seem to make my feelings grow.

And all the sunny, golden air
Is full of living, everywhere.
Then, with a happy little sound,
The branches murmur all around,

So close, I scarcely can see through
The willow leaves against the blue.
Yet far less clearly can I see
Through tangled thoughts that come to me.

There seem to be, on every side,
Doors suddenly flung open wide;
Leading to places strange and fair,
I want to go,--yet don't quite dare.

I've been a little girl so long,
That, somehow, it seems almost wrong
To think how grown-up I shall be
In days that have to come to me.



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The Sixth Shifts
To lean and slender maidenhood,
With thoughtful eyes and quiet mien

Then, with my mind, I seem to look
At life, spread open as a book;
And I am almost glad, at last,
That I am growing old so fast.

Cornelia,--she just wants to be
A lady, and have friends to tea.
But I should like,--I'm sure I should,--
To be more nobly great and good.

Some one like Joan of Arc, you know;
Saint Katharine, or Mrs. Stowe;
And do brave deeds as they have done.
I wouldn't marry any one;

Unless,--well, maybe, if there came

A noble knight of doughty fame,
Or else an Emperor or King
Who wanted me like anything,

Maybe,--perhaps,--I might say yes,--
But likely I'd say no, I guess,
Well, as to that, some thought I'd give;
But of one thing I'm positive,

I'll have a softly trailing gown,--
Blue velvet edged with snow-white down.
But, such a robe as that to wear,
I'd have to be a Princess Fair.

And I'm quite sure I'd rather be
Nothing but just a grown-up me,
And have the wonders all come true
That through those opening doors I view.



VII

Last scene of all that ends
This strange eventful History--
Is First Love and mere enchantment--
Sans mother, sans father, sans brother--sans everything.



The year was at its very Spring,
A dawning glory filled the air;
So marvelous, it seemed to bring
A sense of something strange and fair.

Slowly along the blossomed lane,
Strolled, wondering, a girl and boy,
Happy,--yet powerless to explain
Whence came this new and mystic joy.

The pinky blooms upon the trees
Swam in a fragrant, rosy blur;
And suddenly he knew that these
Had not the loveliness of her.

The knowledge made his heart stand still;
Exquisite fancies filled his mind;
He felt a power to voice at will
Speech of the most exalted kind.

Poetic lines sang in his ears,
Strophes ran riot in his head;
And, almost with a thrill of tears,
"It--it's a lovely day!" he said.

Unconsciously her hand met his;
His simple nearness seemed to bless;

She only murmured, "Yes, it is!"
But all the world breathed tenderness.



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*Last scene of all that ends
This strange eventful history--
Is First Love and mere enchantment--
Sans Mother, Sans Father, Sans Brother, Sans Everything*

Again the raptured silence fell;
There was no need of spoken word;
For each was conscious of the spell,
And each the silent music heard.

From heart to heart the glad thoughts flew,
Such sympathy the clasped hands gave,
Her shyness made him timid, too,--
His daring made her also brave.

Joy's cup seemed suddenly to brim,
With magic nectar, sweet and rare.
He was so glad she walked by him;
She was so glad that he was there.

With silent lips and hearts aglow,
They entered on life's Primrose way.
Then, moved to speech, he cried out, "Oh!
I think it's beautiful to-day!"

She looked, unheeding, at the skies,
She gazed, unseeing, at the blue;
Then glancing straight into his eyes,
She softly said, "Oh, I do, too!"

A glory fell on each young brow,
As, through an ever-widening rift
Between the days of Then and Now,
Shone promise of Life's fairest gift.



