

Five Girls

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

“THERE WON’T be many more such good times as these for us,” said Olive Sargent, mournfully hugging her knees as she sat on the floor under the big Victory; “we’ve got to go out into the cold world presently and earn our livings.”

“I don’t mind earning the living a bit,” pretty Mollie Edgerton asserted; “I like to, and I shall never give it up; but I do hate to be separated the way we shall be. I wish we needn’t.” And Mollie dusted the crumbs of her luncheon from her spotless gingham apron.

The other girls always had charcoal on their aprons, or water colors, or oil, or dabs of clay; even sometimes all of these; but Mollie’s was always clean. To be sure, her work was mostly pencil drawing, the making of delicately beautiful designs for jewelry, for fans, for wood carving, for lace even—she was a born designer, and made the other girls green with envy.

Then Serena Woods opened her mouth and spoke. Serena was going to be an architect; indeed she was one already in a modest way, having planned the school-house in her native town, and also the dwelling of her married sister. To be sure, the sister did sometimes complain to intimate friends of certain minor deficiencies in the edifice, but what is that to a rising architect whose brain glows with enthusiasm and lives in a luminous cloud of architraves, pediments, and facades. She spoke slowly, looking down from her perch on a high stool. “Girls, let’s not separate. “Let’s go and live together in a house of our own. I’ll build it.”

“O do!” said Julia Morse, “I’ll decorate it! We shall each have a room in our favorite color, with most appropriate designs, and the rooms down stairs shall be a real sermon and poem in one!” And Julia gushed on with fervid descriptions of her proposed scheme of mural decoration, while the others joined in rapturous applause.

Then Maud Annersley joined in. Maud was a tall, pale, slender girl, with dark, thoughtful, blue eyes and a quiet voice. She was a painter, and had had a picture in the last exhibition which had won approval from the best critics. “Do you know,” she

said earnestly, "that we really might do this thing? We are all good friends and used to rooming together for these two years. We know all we mean to each other and when to stop—when to let each other alone. We've all got to earn our living, as Olive says, and it would be cheaper to earn it together than it would apart." And Maud rinsed her biggest brush in the turpentine cup with severe decision.

Olive rose to her feet tempestuously.

"I do believe we could!" she said, her blue eyes lighting with sudden fervor. "What is to hinder our joining forces and working on together, having the sweetest, grandest, most useful life in the world! We could club our funds, go to some nice place where land is cheap, and Serena could really plan for us one of those splendid compound houses that are so beautiful and convenient. We could arrange it with studios, all as they should be, and other artists could rent them of us to help on. You know I shall have some money as soon as I'm twenty-one; and I'd rather invest it so than any way I know." Olive stopped for breath, flushed and triumphant; and the others looked at each other with new earnestness.

"We're talking of an awfully serious thing," said Maud. "It would mean living, you know, really living right along;" and she scraped her palette softly as she talked, making a beautiful mixed tint of the spotty little dabs of burnt sienna, cadmium and terre vert. "There is no reason we should not do it though. But it ought to mean for life, and we're not all going to be single, I hope."

Beautiful Maud, with her pale, sweet, oval face and wealth of soft, glistening, chestnut hair, had seen her lover buried, and turned to her chosen art as a life-long companion. But, she could speak all the more earnestly to her heart free friends; though there was a tell-tale blush on pretty Mollie's cheek, and Julia looked a little conscious as she spoke.

"Well anyway," said the last named damsel, with rather a defiant tone; "if we do marry we don't mean to give up our work I hope. I mean to marry some time, perhaps—but I don't mean to cook! I mean to decorate always, and make lots of money and hire a housekeeper."

"I don't see" said Mollie dimpling softly, "why that should be an obstacle. Couldn't we have a house so big and beautiful

and live so happily and get to be so famous that—that—if any one wanted to marry us they could come there too?”

“What sort of compound fractions do you think we are?” demanded Serena. “Any one marry us indeed! It would take five to marry us, Mollie!”

“Now stop joking, girls,” said Olive. “We are all grown and trained. We all want to always work—indeed, some of us have got to. Now, honestly, why shouldn’t we build a sort of apartment home you know, a beautiful ‘model tenement’ affair, artistic and hygienic and esthetic and everything else; with central kitchens and all those things; and studios and rooms for ourselves, and a hall to exhibit in and so on. Then we could have suites of apartments for families and let them; and bye and bye, if we are families, we can occupy those ourselves and let the others!”

And Olive hugged the headless Victory in her enthusiasm while the girls applauded rapturously.

Then what a happy year they had before their course at the Institute was finished! Such innumerable plans and elevations; such glowing schemes of color, such torrents of design for carving and painting and modelling, such wild visions of decoration, where races and epochs and styles waltzed madly together in interminable procession.

The class work went on, of course, and Maud’s great picture won the first prize at the exhibition, though no one guessed that the lovely walls in the background were from one of Serena’s least practicable elevations, and that the group of girls in front were the future owners thereof. There was a troubadour in it also, but he was purely imaginary; though Maud did tell Mollie that he was the fortunate youth that was going to marry them.

It was but a year or two before the lovely plan came true, for after all there was nothing impossible in it. Between them all there was money enough to buy the lot and build the house, and the “families” consented to hire apartments therein to such an extent as to furnish all the funds for running expenses.

Julia Morse’s redoubtable Aunt Susan came down from her New Hampshire home to keep house in the new mansion, and declared that she never had had half a chance to show what was in her before.

Olive’s widowed mother made the dearest of chaperones for

the girls, and their long parlor rang with music and merriment on the pleasant winter evenings.

The studios were easy to let also, and the velveteen coat and loose blouse became as frequent in the long halls as the paint-daubed gingham apron. Also the troubadour materialized in the shape of a most angelic-voiced singing master, who occupied a room on the top floor; and who, though he did not marry them all, as was aforesaid suggested, did marry Olive in due season and stayed in the same pleasant quarters thereafter. Only a "family" was evicted, so to speak, for their convenience, and Olive's room was let to an aspiring little sister of the troubadour.

Pretty Mollie followed suit in a few months more—it took some time to convince her devoted but conservative lover that they could just as well have a suite in this beautiful great home cluster as in a flat near the park. Every girl of them married, as years passed on; even Maud, who forgot her early sorrow in a newer, deeper joy.

But live together they did, and work together always, with various breaks and lapses, as the sweet home cares sometimes interfered with working hours, and the charming little kindergarten in the south wing grew fuller and fuller.

"There's nothing like planning things for life," said Olive one still June evening in after years, as the same five girls sat together on the rose shadowed porch; older, but no less earnest in their work and their love for each other.

"That's so," said Serena heartily—"especially when you do the things you plan."
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