

A MOTHER OF FIVE

by Bret Harte

She was a mother--and a rather exemplary one--of five children, although her own age was barely nine. Two of these children were twins, and she generally alluded to them as "Mr. Amplach's children," referring to an exceedingly respectable gentleman in the next settlement who, I have reason to believe, had never set eyes on her or them. The twins were quite naturally alike--having been in a previous state of existence two ninepins--and were still somewhat vague and inchoate below their low shoulders in their long clothes, but were also firm and globular about the head, and there were not wanting those who professed to see in this an unmistakable resemblance to their reputed father. The other children were dolls of different ages, sex, and condition, but the twins may be said to have been distinctly her own conception. Yet such was her admirable and impartial maternity that she never made any difference between them. "The Amplach's children" was a description rather than a distinction.

She was herself the motherless child of Robert Foulkes, a hardworking but somewhat improvident teamster on the Express Route between Big Bend and Reno. His daily avocation, when she was not actually with him in the wagon, led to an occasional dispersion of herself and her progeny along the road and at wayside stations between those places. But the family was generally collected together by rough but kindly hands already familiar with the handling of her children. I have a very vivid recollection of Jim Carter trampling into a saloon, after a five-mile walk through a snowdrift, with an Amplach twin in his pocket. "Suthin' ought to be done," he growled, "to make Meary a little more careful o' them Amplach children; I picked up one outer the snow a mile beyond Big Bend." "God bless my soul!" said a casual passenger, looking up hastily; "I didn't know Mr. Amplach was married." Jim winked diabolically at us over his glass. "No more did I," he responded gloomily, "but you can't

tell anything about the ways o' them respectable, psalm-singing jay birds." Having thus disposed of Amplach's character, later on, when he was alone with Mary, or "Meary," as she chose to pronounce it, the rascal worked upon her feelings with an account of the infant Amplach's sufferings in the snowdrift and its agonized whisperings for "Meary! Meary!" until real tears stood in Mary's blue eyes. "Let this be a lesson to you," he concluded, drawing the ninepin dexterously from his pocket, "for it took nigh a quart of the best forty-rod whisky to bring that child to." Not only did Mary firmly believe him, but for weeks afterwards "Julian Amplach"--this unhappy twin--was kept in a somnolent attitude in the cart, and was believed to have contracted dissipated habits from the effects of his heroic treatment.

Her numerous family was achieved in only two years, and succeeded her first child, which was brought from Sacramento at considerable expense by a Mr. William Dodd, also a teamster, on her seventh birthday. This, by one of those rare inventions known only to a child's vocabulary, she at once called "Misery"--probably a combination of "Missy," as she herself was formerly termed by strangers, and "Missouri," her native State. It was an excessively large doll at first--Mr. Dodd wishing to get the worth of his money--but time, and perhaps an excess of maternal care, remedied the defect, and it lost flesh and certain unemployed parts of its limbs very rapidly. It was further reduced in bulk by falling under the wagon and having the whole train pass over it, but singularly enough its greatest attenuation was in the head and shoulders--the complexion peeling off as a solid layer, followed by the disappearance of distinct strata of its extraordinary composition. This continued until the head and shoulders were much too small for even its reduced frame, and all the devices of childish millinery--a shawl secured with tacks and well hammered in, and a hat which tilted backward and forward and never appeared at the same angle--failed to restore symmetry. Until one dreadful morning, after an imprudent bath, the whole upper structure disappeared, leaving two hideous iron prongs standing erect from the spinal column. Even an imaginative child like Mary could not accept

this sort of thing as a head. Later in the day Jack Roper, the blacksmith at the "Crossing," was concerned at the plaintive appearance before his forge of a little girl clad in a bright-blue pinafore of the same color as her eyes, carrying her monstrous offspring in her arms. Jack recognized her and instantly divined the situation. "You haven't," he suggested kindly, "got another head at home--suthin' left over," Mary shook her head sadly; even her prolific maternity was not equal to the creation of children in detail. "Nor anythin' like a head?" he persisted sympathetically. Mary's loving eyes filled with tears. "No, nuffen!" "You couldn't," he continued thoughtfully, "use her the other side up?--we might get a fine pair o' legs outer them irons," he added, touching the two prongs with artistic suggestion. "Now look here"--he was about to tilt the doll over when a small cry of feminine distress and a swift movement of a matronly little arm arrested the evident indiscretion. "I see," he said gravely. "Well, you come here tomorrow, and we'll fix up suthin' to work her." Jack was thoughtful the rest of the day, more than usually impatient with certain stubborn mules to be shod, and even knocked off work an hour earlier to walk to Big Bend and a rival shop. But the next morning when the trustful and anxious mother appeared at the forge she uttered a scream of delight. Jack had neatly joined a hollow iron globe, taken from the newel post of some old iron staircase railing, to the two prongs, and covered it with a coat of red fireproof paint. It was true that its complexion was rather high, that it was inclined to be top-heavy, and that in the long run the other dolls suffered considerably by enforced association with this unyielding and implacable head and shoulders, but this did not diminish Mary's joy over her restored first-born. Even its utter absence of features was no defect in a family where features were as evanescent as in hers, and the most ordinary student of evolution could see that the "Amplach" ninepins were in legitimate succession to the globular-headed "Misery." For a time I think that Mary even preferred her to the others. Howbeit it was a pretty sight to see her on a summer afternoon sitting upon a wayside stump, her other children dutifully ranged around her, and the hard, unfeeling head of Misery pressed deep down

into her loving little heart as she swayed from side to side, crooning her plaintive lullaby. Small wonder that the bees took up the song and droned a slumberous accompaniment, or that high above her head the enormous pines, stirred through their depths by the soft Sierran air--or Heaven knows what--let slip flickering lights and shadows to play over that cast-iron face, until the child, looking down upon it with the quick, transforming power of love, thought that it smiled.

The two remaining members of the family were less distinctive. "Gloriana"--pronounced as two words: "Glory Anna"--being the work of her father, who also named it, was simply a cylindrical roll of canvas wagon-covering, girt so as to define a neck and waist, with a rudely inked face--altogether a weak, pitiable, manlike invention; and "Johnny Dear," alleged to be the representative of John Doremus, a young storekeeper who occasionally supplied Mary with gratuitous sweets. Mary never admitted this, and as we were all gentlemen along that road, we were blind to the suggestion. "Johnny Dear" was originally a small plaster phrenological cast of a head and bust, begged from some shop window in the county town, with a body clearly constructed by Mary herself. It was an ominous fact that it was always dressed as a BOY, and was distinctly the most HUMAN-looking of all her progeny. Indeed, in spite of the faculties that were legibly printed all over its smooth, white, hairless head, it was appallingly lifelike. Left sometimes by Mary astride of the branch of a wayside tree, horsemen had been known to dismount hurriedly and examine it, returning with a mystified smile, and it was on record that Yuba Bill had once pulled up the Pioneer Coach at the request of curious and imploring passengers, and then grimly installed "Johnny Dear" beside him on the box seat, publicly delivering him to Mary at Big Bend, to her wide-eyed confusion and the first blush we had ever seen on her round, chubby, sunburnt cheeks. It may seem strange that with her great popularity and her well-known maternal instincts, she had not been kept fully supplied with proper and more conventional dolls; but it was soon recognized that she did not care for them--left their waxen faces, rolling eyes, and abundant hair in ditches, or

stripped them to help clothe the more extravagant creatures of her fancy. So it came that "Johnny Dear's" strictly classical profile looked out from under a girl's fashionable straw sailor hat, to the utter obliteration of his prominent intellectual faculties; the Amplach twins wore bonnets on their ninepins heads, and even an attempt was made to fit a flaxen scalp on the iron-headed Misery. But her dolls were always a creation of her own--her affection for them increasing with the demand upon her imagination. This may seem somewhat inconsistent with her habit of occasionally abandoning them in the woods or in the ditches. But she had an unbounded confidence in the kindly maternity of Nature, and trusted her children to the breast of the Great Mother as freely as she did herself in her own motherlessness. And this confidence was rarely betrayed. Rats, mice, snails, wildcats, panther, and bear never touched her lost waifs. Even the elements were kindly; an Amplach twin buried under a snowdrift in high altitudes reappeared smilingly in the spring in all its wooden and painted integrity. We were all Pantheists then--and believed this implicitly. It was only when exposed to the milder forces of civilization that Mary had anything to fear. Yet even then, when Patsy O'Connor's domestic goat had once tried to "sample" the lost Misery, he had retreated with the loss of three front teeth, and Thompson's mule came out of an encounter with that iron-headed prodigy with a sprained hind leg and a cut and swollen pastern.

But these were the simple Arcadian days of the road between Big Bend and Reno, and progress and prosperity, alas! brought changes in their wake. It was already whispered that Mary ought to be going to school, and Mr. Amplach--still happily oblivious of the liberties taken with his name--as trustee of the public school at Duckville, had intimated that Mary's bohemian wanderings were a scandal to the county. She was growing up in ignorance, a dreadful ignorance of everything but the chivalry, the deep tenderness, the delicacy and unselfishness of the rude men around her, and obliviousness of faith in anything but the immeasurable bounty of Nature toward her and her children. Of course there was a fierce discussion between "the boys"

of the road and the few married families of the settlement on this point, but, of course, progress and "snivelization"--as the boys chose to call it--triumphed. The projection of a railroad settled it; Robert Foulkes, promoted to a foremanship of a division of the line, was made to understand that his daughter must be educated. But the terrible question of Mary's family remained. No school would open its doors to that heterogeneous collection, and Mary's little heart would have broken over the rude dispersal or heroic burning of her children. The ingenuity of Jack Roper suggested a compromise. She was allowed to select one to take to school with her; the others were ADOPTED by certain of her friends, and she was to be permitted to visit them every Saturday afternoon. The selection was a cruel trial, so cruel that, knowing her undoubted preference for her firstborn, Misery, we would not have interfered for worlds, but in her unexpected choice of "Johnny Dear" the most unworldly of us knew that it was the first glimmering of feminine tact--her first submission to the world of propriety that she was now entering. "Johnny Dear" was undoubtedly the most presentable; even more, there was an educational suggestion in its prominent, mapped-out phrenological organs. The adopted fathers were loyal to their trust. Indeed, for years afterward the blacksmith kept the iron-headed Misery on a rude shelf, like a shrine, near his bunk; nobody but himself and Mary ever knew the secret, stolen, and thrilling interviews that took place during the first days of their separation. Certain facts, however, transpired concerning Mary's equal faithfulness to another of her children. It is said that one Saturday afternoon, when the road manager of the new line was seated in his office at Reno in private business discussion with two directors, a gentle tap was heard at the door. It was opened to an eager little face, a pair of blue eyes, and a blue pinafore. To the astonishment of the directors, a change came over the face of the manager. Taking the child gently by the hand, he walked to his desk, on which the papers of the new line were scattered, and drew open a drawer from which he took a large ninepin extraordinarily dressed as a doll. The astonishment of the two gentlemen was increased at the following quaint colloquy between the manager and the child.

"She's doing remarkably well in spite of the trying weather, but I have had to keep her very quiet," said the manager, regarding the ninepin critically.

"Ess," said Mary quickly, "It's just the same with Johnny Dear; his cough is f'ightful at nights. But Misery's all right. I've just been to see her."

"There's a good deal of scarlet fever around," continued the manager with quiet concern, "and we can't be too careful. But I shall take her for a little run down the line tomorrow."

The eyes of Mary sparkled and overflowed like blue water. Then there was a kiss, a little laugh, a shy glance at the two curious strangers, the blue pinafore fluttered away, and the colloquy ended. She was equally attentive in her care of the others, but the rag baby "Gloriana," who had found a home in Jim Carter's cabin at the Ridge, living too far for daily visits, was brought down regularly on Saturday afternoon to Mary's house by Jim, tucked in asleep in his saddle bags or riding gallantly before him on the horn of his saddle. On Sunday there was a dress parade of all the dolls, which kept Mary in heart for the next week's desolation.

But there came one Saturday and Sunday when Mary did not appear, and it was known along the road that she had been called to San Francisco to meet an aunt who had just arrived from "the States." It was a vacant Sunday to "the boys," a very hollow, unsanctified Sunday, somehow, without that little figure. But the next, Sunday, and the next, were still worse, and then it was known that the dreadful aunt was making much of Mary, and was sending her to a grand school--a convent at Santa Clara--where it was rumored girls were turned out so accomplished that their own parents did not know them. But WE knew that was impossible to our Mary; and a letter which came from her at the end of the month, and before the convent had

closed upon the blue pinafore, satisfied us, and was balm to our anxious hearts. It was characteristic of Mary; it was addressed to nobody in particular, and would--but for the prudence of the aunt--have been entrusted to the post office open and undirected. It was a single sheet, handed to us without a word by her father; but as we passed it from hand to hand, we understood it as if we had heard our lost playfellow's voice.

"Ther's more houses in 'Frisco than you kin shake a stick at and wimmens till you kant rest, but mules and jakasses ain't got no sho, nor blacksmiffs shops, wich is not to be seen no wear. Rapits and Skwirls also bares and panfers is on-noun and unforgotten on account of the streets and Sunday skoles. Jim Roper you orter be very good to Mizzery on a kount of my not bein' here, and not harden your hart to her bekos she is top heavy--which is ontroo and simply an imptient lie--like you allus make. I have a kinary bird wot sings deliteful--but isn't a yellerrhamer sutch as I know, as you'd think. Dear Mister Montgommery, don't keep Gulan Amplak to mutch shet up in office drors; it isn't good for his lungs and chest. And don't you ink his head--nother! youre as bad as the rest. Johnny Dear, you must be very kind to your attopted father, and you, Glory Anna, must lov your kind Jimmy Carter verry mutch for taking you hossback so offen. I has been buggy ridin' with an orficer who has killed injuns real! I am comin' back soon with grate affeckshun, so luke out and mind."

But it was three years before she returned, and this was her last and only letter. The "adopted fathers" of her children were faithful, however, and when the new line was opened, and it was understood that she was to be present with her father at the ceremony, they came, with a common understanding, to the station to meet their old playmate. They were ranged along the platform--poor Jack Roper a little overweighted with a bundle he was carrying on his left arm. And then a young girl in the freshness of her teens and the spotless purity of a muslin frock that although brief in skirt was perfect in fit, faultlessly booted and gloved, tripped from the train, and offered a

delicate hand in turn to each of her old friends. Nothing could be prettier than the smile on the cheeks that were no longer sunburnt; nothing could be clearer than the blue eyes lifted frankly to theirs. And yet, as she gracefully turned away with her father, the faces of the four adopted parents were found to be as red and embarrassed as her own on the day that Yuba Bill drove up publicly with "Johnny Dear" on the box seat.

"You weren't such a fool," said Jack Montgomery to Roper, "as to bring Misery here with you?"

"I was," said Roper with a constrained laugh--"and you?" He had just caught sight of the head of a ninepin peeping from the manager's pocket. The man laughed, and then the four turned silently away.

"Mary" had indeed come back to them; but not "The Mother of Five!"