CLASSICS TO GO

THE STAYING GUEST

CAROLYN WELLS

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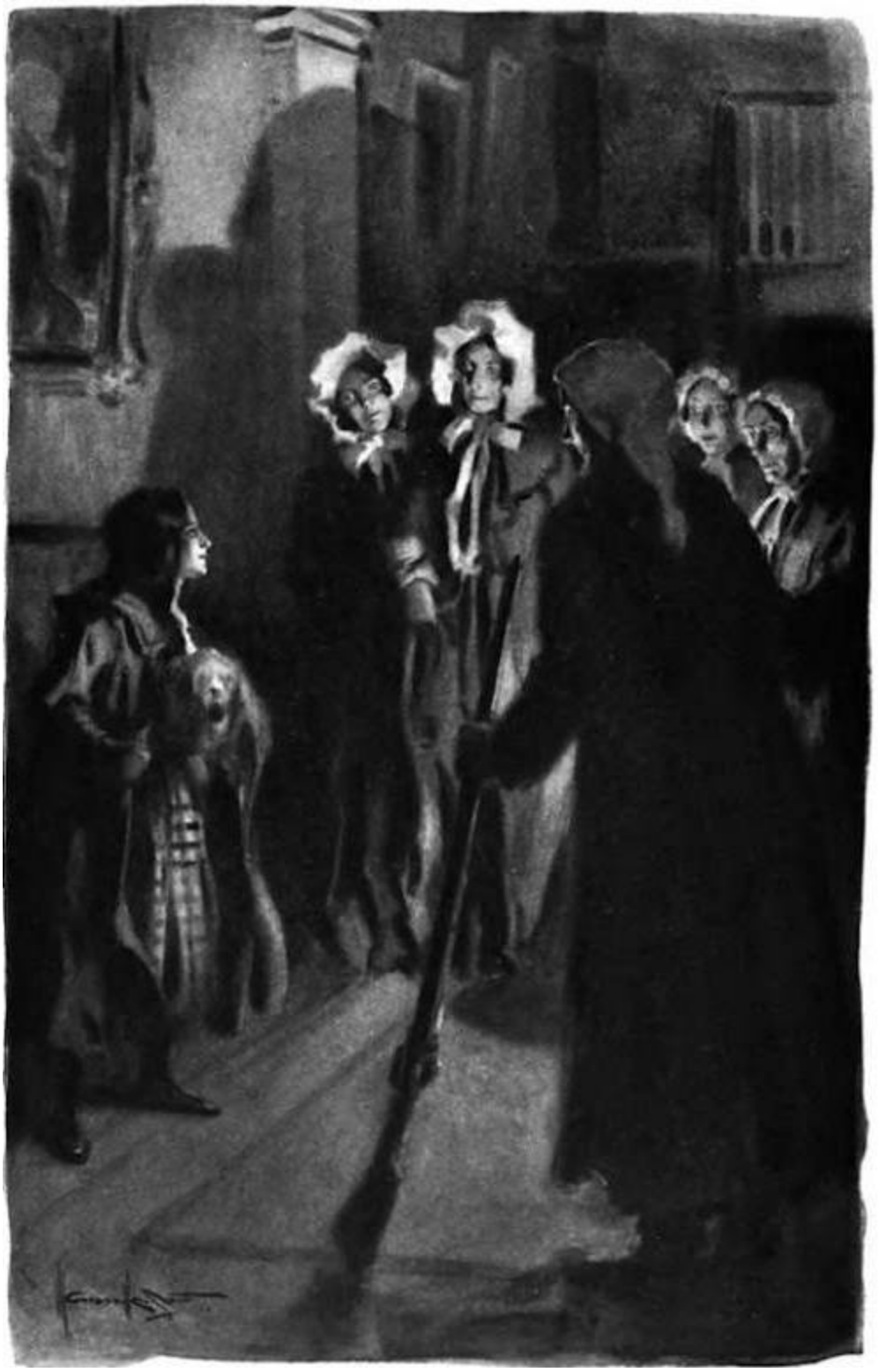

“‘I’m Ladybird, and I’ve come to stay’”

CHAPTER I
PRIMROSE HALL

Over the hills and far away there was once a quaint little old town which was safely beyond the reach of the long, grasping arms of any of the great cities.

The little town nestled up against the side of a big, kind hill, at the top of which was a beautiful old country-place, called Primrose Hall.

The house was a great white colonial affair that had belonged to the Flint family for generations; and at present was occupied only by two elderly maiden ladies who admirably fitted their names of Priscilla and Dorinda.

Now of course you know, without being told, what a lady named Priscilla Flint would look like. Tall, straight, thin, stiff, formal, prim, smug, demure, with a stately, old-fashioned dignity and refinement. And Miss Dorinda Flint was like unto her, except that she was a little taller, straighter, thinner, stiffer, and a trifle more stately and old-fashioned. And these ladies, whene’er they took their walks abroad, or drives either, for that matter, wore stiff, prim black silk dresses, and black lace mitts, and little point-lace collars pinned with big gold brooches; and they always carried tiny, black, ruffled parasols that tipped on their handles to any desired angle.

With such mistresses as these, it is easy to see why Primrose Hall was the stiffest, primmest place in the whole world.

Never a chair dared to move from its exact place against the wall; never a curtain dared to flutter with joy if a

morning breeze came in to tell it the news. Even the clock ticked softly and very regularly; the well-bred fire never crackled or sputtered, but let its flame glide decorously up the chimney; and the cat looked as if she had never been a kitten.

Out of doors it was just the same. The carefully trimmed hedges wouldn't think of poking out a stray leaf or twig, and every blade of grass on the lawn measured itself against its neighbor that it might be exactly the same length and breadth.

One bright May morning the sun was shining all over the place, and, out of sheer curiosity, I suppose, was doing his best to poke himself into the house. But it was all shut up tighter than a drum, and he could get in only at one little window, and even that was a mistake, and ought not to have been left open, for it was the next window but one to where the ice-box stood. But the sun was in a mischievous mood, and he aimed his beams again and again at the parlor windows in hopes that he could squeeze himself in and fade a sofa or a bit of carpet. And finally he did get in through a tiny space at the side of a shade which was pulled down crooked, when, to his great disgust, he found newspapers spread all over that very blue satin sofa he was after. Miss Priscilla had looked out for just such a trick, and the sun concluded he would have to get up very early in the morning to get ahead of Miss Priscilla Flint.

Always during the summer months Primrose Hall had its doors and windows thrown open soon after daybreak, to "air" the house, and at eight o'clock precisely they were all closed again, and the shades drawn to preserve the carpets and furniture from any possible contamination of sun and dust. This caused a sort of artificial night during the middle of the day, but the Primrose ladies were used to it, and went

about the darkened house like cats or bats or owls or moles, or any other creatures who can see in the dark.

Miss Priscilla Flint was the older of the sisters, and therefore was nominally mistress of Primrose Hall. But it was her habit in every household matter to express her opinion at length, and then to ask Miss Dorinda what she thought about it. And as Miss Dorinda's opinion always coincided with Miss Priscilla's it would be impossible to say what would have happened if it hadn't.

On this particular morning, then, when the sun was baffled in his attempt to fade even a streak on the blue satin sofa, and was so provoked about it that he went behind a cloud to sulk, and stayed there quite a little while, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda sat in the morning-room holding their after-breakfast conference.

"It seems to me," Miss Priscilla was saying, "that spring has really come at last. I saw a fly in the library yesterday morning. I didn't speak of it to you, for I thought I might have been mistaken, as I had on my near-glasses, but Martha says she saw it too, so there can be no doubt about it. And I think, Dorinda, that as we go to the sewing-society to-morrow, and it may rain the next day, I think that to-day we will clean the attic."

"Yes, sister," said Miss Dorinda, "it is quite time, and we will set about it at once."

Cleaning the attic was a mere figure of speech, for how can any one clean what is already spick and span, and speckless?

But although frequent periodical sweepings and dustings kept every nook and cranny of Primrose Hall as bright as a new penny, yet a semi-annual housecleaning occurred as

regularly as the spring and fall came; and, indeed, I daresay the Misses Flint thought that spring and fall were invented as comfortable seasons for the performance.

The morning-room at Primrose Hall had a wide bay-window in which were two great arm-chairs facing each other, and in these chairs the two ladies sat every morning while they systematically planned the day's occupations.

Near Miss Priscilla's hand was a bell, and after she had pressed it, Bridget, the cook, appeared—automatically, it seemed—in the doorway, which, by the way, she nearly filled.

Miss Priscilla gave her the kitchen orders for the day, then dismissed her and rang for Martha, the waitress.

Then Martha came and stood in the doorway. She was a pretty young German girl, and seemed to be attired principally in starched pieces.

"Martha," said Miss Priscilla, pleasantly, "to-day we will clean the attic. Send Matthew after Mrs. Dolan and her granddaughter to assist us, and we will start at ten o'clock."

Martha disappeared with a starchy rustle, and Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda went to make their toilettes for the great event.

Their housecleaning costumes had been renewed, but never varied, during many springs and falls; and when attired for the fray, each good lady wore a black stuff skirt, short and scant, a white muslin sacque with a bit of neat embroidery at throat and wrists, and a huge checked gingham apron. As Miss Priscilla observed, "No one can work if she is conscious of her clothes," and this garb had been chosen as the best possible compromise between usefulness and comeliness.

On their dignified heads the sisters wore ruffled sweeping-caps made of shiny muslin, and in the way of accoutrements, each carried a pair of scissors, a ball of string, a paper of pins, some sheets of paper, and a pencil.

“Precisely at ten o’clock the procession formed”

Precisely at ten o’clock the procession formed and solemnly ascended the attic stairs. Miss Priscilla went first, then Miss Dorinda, then Martha, with dusters, hammer and tacks, camphor-balls and moth-powders. Then Mrs. Dolan, with big broom, little broom, and dust-pans. Then Mrs. Dolan’s granddaughter, with soap, pail, scrub-brush, and floor-cloths, and sedately following all walked Tabby, the cat.

Having arrived at the scene of action, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda set themselves to work, and at the same time gave orders to their assistants, which were vigorously carried out, and soon the attic seemed to be in the path of a well-trained cyclone. Quilts and feather beds were shaken and beaten; trunks and chests were emptied of contents which were

unrolled, inspected, rolled up again, patted and punched, and returned to their places. Discarded garments were critically examined to see what should be given away and what should be packed in tar-balls for the summer.

“This gray barege always makes me think of chicken-pie,” said Miss Dorinda, unfolding an old-fashioned skirt.

“Why?” said Miss Priscilla, in muffled tones, by reason of her head and shoulders being deep in a huge trunk.

“Because I wore it the day Ann Haskell came to see us. Do you remember? She came in the morning to spend the day, and she stayed a full-fledged week. I thought she never would clear herself off. And she wanted chicken-pie made for her.”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla; “and then when she got it she wouldn’t eat it.”

“No; and we couldn’t eat it, because she *would* have onions in it. And the cats wouldn’t eat it: nothing would eat it, and at last we had to throw it away.”

“I suppose we’re not very hospitable,” said Miss Priscilla; “but I just hate to have company, they upset things so.”

“But sometimes it seems a duty,” said her sister.

“Not at all; that’s where you’re silly, Dorinda. I believe in charity, and giving of our worldly goods to help our less fortunate neighbors; but that doesn’t mean we’re to open our doors and let them all come in and make themselves at home. Do you remember when Ann Haskell came again, and rode up in a hack from the station, bringing a big bag with her?”

“Yes; and you told the driver to come for her again directly after dinner.”

“I did, or she would have stayed another week. My, but she was surprised!”

“I know it; *I* couldn’t do anything like that!”

“Then you’re a coward, Dorinda. It is certainly cowardly to have company because you’re afraid to tell them they can’t stay. Now here’s another matter. The Dorcas Circle wants to make up a box of clothing for those fire-sufferers; so what do you think of giving them some of Lavinia’s things?”

“Oh!” gasped Miss Dorinda, in a startled tone.

“I think we may as well,” went on Miss Priscilla. “It’s fourteen years now since Lavinia died. They say, keep a thing seven years, and you’ll have use for it again; but we’ve kept these things twice over seven years, and I don’t see how they can ever be of use to us, except to give away.”

“Well,” said Miss Dorinda, still dazed, “perhaps you are right.”

Lavinia Flint, the younger, very much younger sister of these two ladies, had run away from her home fifteen years ago to marry a dashing young soldier named Jack Lovell, and had sailed with him to India. A year or so later the Flint ladies heard from Mr. Lovell that his wife had died, leaving a tiny baby named Lavinia. He sent them no address, so they could not have answered his letter if they had wanted to. And they had no desire to answer it, for they looked upon their sister as lost to them from the day of her elopement, and they had no wish to see her husband or child.

The Flints were a hard-hearted, stiff-necked race, and if one of the family did wrong, the others felt no relenting mercy because of ties of blood.

And so when Lavinia went away, her pretty dresses and other girlish finery were packed away in the attic, and had lain there ever since.

She was so much younger than her sisters that they had petted her as a child, and had taken great pleasure in her girlish enjoyments. But when she left them, with only a note to say she had eloped with Jack Lovell, their hearts hardened, and they now rarely mentioned her, even to each other.

And so year after year the trunks of Lavinia's clothing had been looked over and put in order, with no reference to their future disposition, until now Miss Priscilla concluded the time had come.

But when they shook out the old-fashioned gowns, the lovely taffetas and organdies and embroidered muslins did seem inappropriate to send to people who were suffering for plain, substantial clothing.

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Dolan's granddaughter, her eyes as big as saucers, as she looked at the beautiful show, "ain't them just elegant! I wisht I was a fire-sufferer, or a freshet victim."

"How well I remember Vinnie in that flowery frock," said Miss Dorinda; "she looked like a spring blossom herself, she was so pretty and fresh."

Miss Dorinda sighed; but Miss Priscilla shut her teeth together with a snap, and returned the dresses to their

trunks and shut down the trunk-lids with a snap, and the cleaning of the attic went on again.

Except during an interval for luncheon, the workers worked all day, and at five o’clock the attic was cleaned, and the procession filed down-stairs again.

“Deary me,” said Miss Dorinda, as she reached her own room, “how tired I am! I believe I grow older every year. Are you tired, sister?”

“Yes; but I’m so thankful that the attic is done. When that’s over I always feel like singing the long-meter doxology.”

“Well, I’m too tired to sing; I’ll rest a bit before dinner.”

CHAPTER II
LADYBIRD

Dinner at Primrose Hall was rather an elaborate meal, and was always served promptly at six o’clock. Old Josiah Flint had been very particular about his household appointments and habits, and since his death his daughters had made no changes.

After dinner the ladies always went to the library and read the village newspaper, or dozed over their knitting-work until bedtime.

But one evening in early June this routine was interfered with, by the arrival of a letter bearing a foreign postmark. It was addressed in what was evidently a man’s hand, and the two good ladies were greatly excited. Miss Dorinda felt a pleasant flutter of anticipation, but Miss Priscilla felt a foreboding that something disagreeable was in the letter, and she hesitated before she opened it.

“It’s postmarked ’London’”

“It’s postmarked ‘London,’” she said. “Do we know any one in London? Maria Peters went there once, but she came back, and anyway, she’s dead.”

“Open it, sister,” implored Miss Dorinda. And after scrutinizing it thoroughly once more, Miss Priscilla did open it.

“It is signed ‘Thomas J. Bond,’” she exclaimed, looking at the signature. “Now, can it be Tom Bond who was old

Jonathan Bond’s son? His mother was a Coriell.”

“Read it, sister,” said Miss Dorinda.

So Miss Priscilla read the letter aloud, and this is what it said:

MISS PRISCILLA FLINT,
DEAR MADAM:

During a recent visit to India I learned that a friend of mine, Jack Lovell, was living at Bombay, and I went there to see him. But it was my sad experience to reach his home the day after he had died from a sudden attack of fever. He left a little child, who told me that her mother had been dead many years, and, indeed, the poor child seemed utterly alone in the world. I tried to find out from Lovell’s papers something about his effects, but as he was of a roving and careless disposition, everything was left at sixes and sevens, and I am afraid there is no provision for the child. Therefore, since Jack’s wife was your sister, I think the right thing to do is to send the little girl to you at once. And if I can find any money or property belonging to her I will advise you later.

My wife and I brought her from India to London with us, and I will send her to you on the next steamer.

Trusting that this letter will insure her a kindly reception, I am

Yours very respectfully,
THOMAS J. BOND.

To say that after reading this remarkable letter Miss Priscilla appeared surprised, amazed, astounded, excited, irritated, angry, umbrageous, furious, or even to say that she was in a state of high dudgeon, would give but an inadequate idea of the indignation shown in her face and manner.

But she only said, “She cannot come!” and snapped her teeth shut in the way she always did when very decided.

“But she’ll have to come, sister,” said Miss Dorinda; “how will you prevent her?”

“Well, then, she cannot stay,” said Miss Priscilla, with another snap; “I will send her back just as I did Ann Haskell. Why, think of it, Dorinda! Think of a child living in this house! She’d very likely leave doors open, and she’d be sure to chatter when we wished to be quiet, and she’d fairly worry us into our graves.”

“Yes,” said Miss Dorinda, “I suppose she would. But I don’t see how you *can* send her away.”

“I don’t care whether I can or not, I’m going to do it. This Lawrence J. Bond, or whoever he is, discovered her without our consent; now he can attend to the rest; I shall simply get her a ticket back to his address in London and pack her off.”

“Of course that is the only thing to do—we *can’t* have her here. And yet—Priscilla—she is Lavinia’s daughter.”

“What of it? Lavinia didn’t consider our feelings when she deserted and disgraced us, so why should we concern

ourselves about her child?”

“True enough; and yet I shall be glad to see the little girl. How old is she, Priscilla?”

“I suppose she must be about fourteen. Yes; it was fourteen years ago that Jack Lovell wrote, saying his wife had died, leaving a tiny baby. He said the little one had blue eyes and golden curls, so I daresay she has grown up to look like her mother. Lavinia *was* pretty.”

“Oh, she was. And how sweet she used to look dancing round the house in her bright, pretty frocks.”

“Well, what if she did? Lavinia’s daughter is not Lavinia, and I wash my hands of the little nuisance. If you choose to—”

“Oh, no, no! I wouldn’t do anything that you would disapprove of. But I only thought—perhaps—if she is a sweet, docile child she might be a comfort to us.”

“Are you losing your mind, Dorinda? What comfort could come of a responsibility like that? Think of the worrying over her clothes and education and accomplishments. And then, after a while, probably she would treat us as her mother did, and run away with a good-for-nothing scamp.”

“Yes, yes, sister, you are quite right. What is the child’s name, do you know?”

“Lavinia; don’t you remember her father said so in that letter—the only letter he ever wrote us? If he had acted more kindly toward us, I might feel different toward the child; but as it is, I’ve no use for her.”

“Do you remember sister Lavinia at fourteen? She was a lovely child, chubby and rosy-cheeked, with eyes like the

sky, and beautiful, soft golden curls. She didn't look much like us, Priscilla."

"No," admitted the older sister; "but beauty is a doubtful good. I'd rather be plain and do my duty, than to be handsome and break the hearts of those who love me."

"Well," said Miss Dorinda, placidly, "we'd better not talk any more about it, or we'll get so excited we won't be able to sleep. Let's go to bed, sister, and to-morrow morning, after breakfast, we'll read the letter again and decide what we can do."

So, taking their bedroom candles, the two old ladies went up-stairs. But as Miss Dorinda had feared, they could not get to sleep, and they lay awake thinking about their sister and their sister's child.

And so it happened that they were both awake when at about eleven o'clock the great brass knocker on the front door sent clattering clangs all through the house. Such a thing had never before been known at Primrose Hall, and the sisters, terror-stricken, jumped from their beds and met at the door of their connecting rooms, where they faced each other with pale, startled faces.

"What can it be?" whispered Miss Dorinda.

"The house must be on fire," said Miss Priscilla, decidedly; "let us get our fire-gowns."

These were commodious robes of thick, dark flannel which hung on the sisters' bed-posts, to be hurried on in case of fire. For years they had been hung there every night and put away every morning, but it seemed that at last their time had come.