

IN THE SIXTIES

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In the Sixties by Sarah B. Ricker

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BY
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FOREWORD.

THE colonial days of our sires have been given to us in book and story, and of their everyday life have we heard in wildest romance; while the tale of the pioneer, who first invaded our primeval forests, has been handed down in all its weird adventure and heroism.

Wealth has been represented in its glittering array; poverty in its ragged attire, even the slums of our great cities have been pictured to us in truth and fable; but the former operative of our New England mills, and the usages of those early days, have been largely lost to the public, and suffered to remain enveloped in the shadows of the past. In the earlier days of our history, the sites of our extensive cities were but sparsely settled towns, peopled by a farming community, who gained from the grudging soil a subsistence, but found few dollars for the less positive wants of a numerous family. Then, as a day star to woman, came the cotton mill, and gave to her fettered ambition the first chance to show the world her latent power for good. To the grasping of this first opportunity may we not trace (in part), the individuality and self-supporting independence which characterizes the woman and girl of to-day. With Yankee energy these mills were pushed forward, till in the sixties, they were to be found on many of our rivers and streams.

In sending forth a work touching the gone-by period, we are not thoughtless of the many discouragements to be met, writers of name and experience, and books whose number is legion. The

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whispered voice of approval may be silenced by the seething words of criticism and censure, and its future, at best, be uncertain as the frail bark on the wind-swept wave.

The incidents here recorded may not be in accord with present happenings, yet a few may look back, and forgetting the intervening decades, live for a brief moment in the realities of earlier days.

But the sixties were long, long ago, and we are living, not only in a time when the locomotive supplants the mule express, but in a new century, and in those changed conditions which time invariably brings around.

In the sixties, when war swept our broad domain, and blood was written on every doorpost, the occurrences here recorded were collected, varying but little from transpiring events in real life. Founded on facts, with no character overdrawn, it has been kept as a memorial of the past, until later circumstances have called it from its hiding, and we send it forth, hoping the adventurous tale may not be wholly ignored, but accepted as a true reminiscence and souvenir of the sixties.

IN THE SIXTIES.

CHAPTER I.

*Oh, did we but see, how in smallest things
Are beginnings of that which is great,
Life's soil would be watered by countless springs,
That now 'neath the surface wait,
We should feel when earthward kindly sent,
For heroes and heroines all were meant.*

—CHARLOTTE YONGE.

IN a country town near the interior of rockbound Maine, stood a small brown house, that in its more youthful days would have impressed the passing traveller with only a small idea of comfort and plenty; and now that it had braved the storms and winds of many seasons, its blackened and mossy surface spoke but too plainly of indigence within; yet nothing portrayed an idle shiftlessness, which is often plainly pictured on old and timeworn habitations. The small lawn in front, though limited in extent, was kept free from rubbish, and the grass still remained fresh and green, while the few flowers and climbing vines on each side of the low door, seemed inviting the soft rays of the western sun to hide 'mid the fluttering branches, and help relieve the lone house of its desolate look.

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It was here that a young girl, with flashing eyes and golden ringlets, skipped lightly up a well-kept path, and with a face radiant with excitement and hope, entered a small room where an older sister sat, a trifle pale from slight indisposition, exclaiming as she circled her small arms around her neck:

"All right, Annie, or are you as Mrs. North says of her hired girl, awful sick if there is anything to do?"

"I do not often resort to subterfuge," replied the sister, "but what is there to be done?"

"You know we are preparing for school examination. Rev. Mr. Merten and Dr. Meags have visited our room this afternoon; am sorry you were not there, you always plan a headache the wrong day."

"Can't you repeat what interests you so much?"

"Not to sound as it did there. You know Mr. Merten is different from any other man. He talked to the boys in his own way, told them they might be great and good; that the door to advancement was never closed to the American boy, who, by application can develop latent energies, and, step by step rise higher and higher, till like a Cromwell, he can control armies, or follow the steps of a Milton, whose works have come down the centuries with unabated lustre; or yet nearer home, a Webster, the greatest of American orators, who for a quarter of a century swayed our legislative halls by his sublime eloquence. They could be all this—and like them,

"Leave behind footprints on the sands of time."

Finally, holding up a golden medal, he told them it would be awarded for the best declamation."

"What did he say to the girls?" asked Miss Annie, the curl of her pouting lip becoming more positive.

"Not much—only there is to be a prize essay which is to draw a book from the parson's library."

"'Baxter's Catholic Theology,' 'Jonathan Edwards' Sermons,'"

replied Annie, "or some other metaphysical work, which one would be expected to read, and give a bow of assent at various points, not knowing whether the affirmative nod was in the right place or the wrong."

"Not of that class at all. But why speak so sarcastically of those books? I supposed they were standard works and very good."

"So they were, in their day and generation. But the world moves, a fact Mr. Merten has forgotten, and he still clings to those old dogmas as the keystone of his religious structure."

"No matter about Mr. Merten. Ministers are only men, who think and speak as men, inheriting all the fallibilities of our race. The book, instead of a prosy centenarian, is a volume from the pen of Thomas Dick, whose every word you cherish as grand and inspiring. Now look better natured, I am sure you can get it."

"Prizes are not often secured without effort."

"No great effort will be required to compete with Bell Meags and Mollie Farrar, the only two yet entered."

"Perhaps not. But what shall we write about? Delve to the centre and ladle up some of the molten fluid of this old earth for a subject, or shall we soar above and tell of big Mercury, its nearness to the sun, its dazzling brightness, its swiftness of motion! the bright-eyed Venus, goddess of love, you know. Saturn, with its magnificent ring, encircling it with perpetual light, or Jupiter, with its moons and belts, whirling around at the rate of 26,255 miles an hour; and—and—as that is about all I know, I should stop and listen for the deafening applause, even encore of a delighted audience, which shall fall on my listening ear, sweet as the first spring songs of the redbreast."

"Oh, Annie, why try to be sarcastic or funny, when you don't know how, and never did. Just take something you understand, some moral subject, some question of the day—do your best, and my word for it, you will take the cake."

"Thank you, little sister, but my better judgment tells me it would be wiser for me to stay at home and play jackstraws, than attempt to air my literary talents before the tribunal of judges you have mentioned. Besides, there are real objections to entering a contest conducted with so much partiality. The boys are cited to men who have risen to fame and eminence and told by effort they may be equally successful, and a golden medal held up as an incitement to exertion, while for the best written page the girls are offered a book. I hope it will be new—not half-worn by frequent reading."

"There again, you always have such strange whims. Not another girl in school would question motives, or trace and calculate the bearings of any particular class of words."

Annie and Nina Wilmot were, as we have said, of New England birth, as yet knowing little of the outside world beyond the small village where they had lived with their parents, guarded ever by the jealous eye of love. They were accustomed to all the inconveniences of poverty, the prosperity of early life having been obscured by later privations and want. From the parents the elder child inherited both pride and will, but she loved with fond idolatry her beautiful sister, and seldom turned a deaf ear to her gentle, persuasive voice.

"Yes, Nina," she said after a short pause, "I will write an essay with no thought of winning a branch of the Idumæan palm, nor even a crown of laurel, as the victor's prize, but just to please you."

"Oh, thank you," and kissing her sister, Nina glided from the room, leaving Annie to select her subject and commence the promised essay. It was soon finished, studied and corrected with critical care.

The day came at last and with it the closing scenes, the exercises of speaking and reading of original essays. Annie Wilmot was one of the first to stand before a gazing, listening throng of villagers. A slight trembling of the voice marked the first