

FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS AND HOW THEY GREW

By Margaret Sidney

To the Memory of MY MOTHER;
wise in counsel—tender in judgment, and in all charity
—strengthful in Christian faith and purpose
—I dedicate, with reverence, this simple book.

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A HOME VIEW

The little old kitchen had quieted down from the bustle and confusion of mid-day; and now, with its afternoon manners on, presented a holiday aspect, that as the principal room in the brown house, it was eminently proper it should have. It was just on the edge of the twilight; and the little Peppers, all except Ben, the oldest of the flock, were enjoying a "breathing spell," as their mother called it, which meant some quiet work suitable for the hour. All the "breathing spell" they could remember however, poor things; for times were always hard with them nowadays; and since the father died, when Phronsie was a baby, Mrs. Pepper had had hard work to scrape together money enough to put bread into her children's mouths, and to pay the rent of the little brown house.

But she had met life too bravely to be beaten down now. So with a stout heart and a cheery face, she had worked away day after day at making coats, and tailoring and mending of all descriptions; and she had seen with pride that couldn't be concealed, her noisy, happy brood growing up around her, and filling her heart with comfort, and making the little brown house fairly ring with jollity and fun.

"Poor things!" she would say to herself, "they haven't had any bringing up; they've just scrambled up!" And then she would set her lips together tightly, and fly at her work faster than ever. "I must get schooling for them some way, but I don't see how!"

Once or twice she had thought, "Now the time is coming!" but it never did: for winter shut in very cold, and it took so much more to feed and warm them, that the money went faster than ever. And then, when the way seemed clear again, the store changed hands, so that for a long time she failed to get her usual supply of sacks and coats to make; and that made sad havoc in the quarters and half-dollars laid up as her nest egg. But—"Well, it'll come some time," she would say to herself; "because it must!" And so at it again she would fly, brisker than ever.

“To help mother,” was the great ambition of all the children, older and younger; but in Polly’s and Ben’s souls, the desire grew so overwhelmingly great as to absorb all lesser thoughts. Many and vast were their secret plans, by which they were to astonish her at some future day, which they would only confide—as they did everything else—to one another. For this brother and sister were everything to each other, and stood loyally together through “thick and thin.”

Polly was ten, and Ben one year older; and the younger three of the “Five Little Peppers,” as they were always called, looked up to them with the intensest admiration and love. What they failed to do, couldn’t very well be done by any One!

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Polly as she sat over in the corner by the window helping her mother pull out basting threads from a coat she had just finished, and giving an impatient twitch to the sleeve, “I do wish we could ever have any light—just as much as we want!”

“You don’t need any light to see these threads,” said Mrs. Pepper, winding up hers carefully, as she spoke, on an old spool. “Take care, Polly, you broke that; thread’s dear now.”

“I couldn’t help it,” said Polly, vexedly; “it snapped; everything’s dear now, it seems to me! I wish we could have—oh! ever an’ ever so many candles; as many as we wanted. I’d light ‘em all, so there! and have it light here one night, anyway!”

“Yes, and go dark all the rest of the year, like as anyway,” observed Mrs. Pepper, stopping to untie a knot. “Folks who do so never have any candles,” she added, sententiously.

“How many’d you have, Polly?” asked Joel, curiously, laying down his hammer, and regarding her with the utmost anxiety.

“Oh, two hundred!” said Polly, decidedly. “I’d have two hundred, all in a row!”

“Two hundred candles!” echoed Joel, in amazement. “My whockety! what a lot!”

“Don’t say such dreadful words, Joel,” put in Polly, nervously, stopping to pick up her spool of basting thread that was racing away all by itself; “tishn’t nice.”

“Tishn’t worse than to wish you’d got things you haven’t,” retorted Joel. “I don’t believe you’d light ‘em all at once,” he added, incredulously.

“Yes, I would too!” replied Polly, recklessly; “two hundred of ‘em, if I had a chance; all at once, so there, Joey Pepper!”

“Oh,” said little Davie, drawing a long sigh. “Why, ‘twould be just like heaven, Polly! but wouldn’t it cost money, though!”

“I don’t care,” said Polly, giving a flounce in her chair, which snapped another thread; “oh dear me! I didn’t mean to, mammy; well, I wouldn’t care how much money it cost, we’d have as much light as we wanted, for once; so!”

“Mercy!” said Mrs. Pepper, “you’d have the house afire! Two hundred candles! who ever heard of such a thing!”

“Would they burn?” asked Phronsie, anxiously, getting up from the floor where she was crouching with David, overseeing Joel nail on the cover of an old box; and going to Polly’s side she awaited her answer patiently.

“Burn?” said Polly. “There, that’s done now, mamsie dear!” And she put the coat, with a last little pat, into her mother’s lap. “I guess they would, Phronsie pet.” And Polly caught up the little girl, and spun round and round the old kitchen till they were both glad to stop.

“Then,” said Phronsie, as Polly put her down, and stood breathless after her last glorious spin, “I do so wish we might, Polly; oh, just this very one minute!”

And Phronsie clasped her fat little hands in rapture at the thought.

“Well,” said Polly, giving a look up at the old clock in the corner; “deary me! it’s half-past five; and most time for Ben to come home!”

Away she flew to get supper. So for the next few moments nothing was heard but the pulling out of the old table into the middle of the

floor, the laying the cloth, and all the other bustle attendant upon the being ready for Ben. Polly went skipping around, cutting the bread, and bringing dishes; only stopping long enough to fling some scraps of reassuring nonsense to the two boys, who were thoroughly dismayed at being obliged to remove their traps into a corner.

Phronsie still stood just where Polly left her. Two hundred candles! oh! what could it mean! She gazed up to the old beams overhead, and around the dingy walls, and to the old black stove, with the fire nearly out, and then over everything the kitchen contained, trying to think how it would seem. To have it bright and winsome and warm! to suit Polly—"oh!" she screamed.

"Goodness!" said Polly, taking her head out of the old cupboard in the corner, "how you scared me, Phronsie!"

"Would they ever go out?" asked the child gravely, still standing where Polly left her.

"What?" asked Polly, stopping with a dish of cold potatoes in her hand. "What, Phronsie?"

"Why, the candles," said the child, "the ever-an'-ever so many pretty lights!"

"Oh, my senses!" cried Polly, with a little laugh, "haven't you forgotten that! Yes—no, that is, Phronsie, if we could have 'em at all, we wouldn't ever let 'em go out!"

"Not once?" asked Phronsie, coming up to Polly with a little skip, and nearly upsetting her, potatoes and all—"not once, Polly, truly?"

"No, not forever-an'-ever," said Polly; "take care, Phronsie! there goes a potato; no, we'd keep 'em always!"

"No, you don't want to," said Mrs. Pepper, coming out of the bedroom in time to catch the last words; "they won't be good to-morrow; better have them to-night, Polly."

"Ma'am!" said Polly, setting down her potato-dish on the table, and staring at her mother with all her might—"have what, mother?"

“Why, the potatoes, to be sure,” replied Mrs. Pepper; “didn’t you say you better keep them, child?”

“Twasn’t potatoes—at all,” said Polly, with a little gasp; “twas—dear me! here’s Ben!” For the door opened, and Phronsie, with a scream of delight, bounded into Ben’s arms.

“It’s just jolly,” said Ben, coming in, his chubby face all aglow, and his big blue eyes shining so honest and true; “it’s just jolly to get home! supper ready, Polly?”

“Yes,” said Polly; “that is—all but—” and she dashed off for Phronsie’s eating apron.

“Sometime,” said Phronsie, with her mouth half full, when the meal was nearly over, “we’re going to be awful rich; we are, Ben, truly!”

“No?” said Ben, affecting the most hearty astonishment; “you don’t say so, Chick!”

“Yes,” said Phronsie, shaking her yellow head very wisely at him, and diving down into her cup of very weak milk and water to see if Polly had put any sugar in by mistake—a proceeding always expectantly observed. “Yes, we are really, Bensie, very dreadful rich!”

“I wish we could be rich now, then,” said Ben, taking another generous slice of the brown bread; “in time for mamsie’s birthday,” and he cast a sorrowful glance at Polly.

“I know,” said Polly; “oh dear! if we only could celebrate it!”

“I don’t want any other celebration,” said Mrs. Pepper, beaming on them so that a little flash of sunshine seemed to hop right down on the table, “than to look round on you all; I’m rich now, and that’s a fact!”

“Mamsie don’t mind her five bothers,” cried Polly, jumping up and running to hug her mother; thereby producing a like desire in all the others, who immediately left their seats and followed her example.

“Mother’s rich enough,” ejaculated Mrs. Pepper; her bright, black eyes glistening with delight, as the noisy troop filed back to their

bread and potatoes; “if we can only keep together, dears, and grow up good, so that the little brown house won’t be ashamed of us, that’s all I ask.”

“Well,” said Polly, in a burst of confidence to Ben, after the table had been pushed back against the wall, the dishes nicely washed, wiped, and set up neatly in the cupboard, and all traces of the meal cleared away; “I don’t care; let’s try and get a celebration, somehow, for mamsie!”

“How are you going to do it?” asked Ben, who was of a decidedly practical turn of mind, and thus couldn’t always follow Polly in her flights of imagination.

“I don’t know,” said Polly; “but we must some way.”

“Phoh! that’s no good,” said Ben, disdainfully; then seeing Polly’s face, he added kindly: “let’s think, though; and perhaps there’ll be some way.”

“Oh, I know,” cried Polly, in delight; “I know the very thing, Ben! let’s make her a cake; a big one, you know, and—”

“She’ll see you bake it,” said Ben; “or else she’ll smell it, and that’d be just as bad.”

“No, she won’t either,” replied Polly. “Don’t you know she’s going to help Mrs. Henderson to-morrow; so there!”

“So she is,” said Ben; “good for you, Polly, you always think of everything!”

“And then,” said Polly, with a comfortable little feeling at her heart at Ben’s praise, “why, we can have it all out of the way splendidly, you know, when she comes home—and besides, Grandma Bascom’ll tell me how. You know we’ve only got brown flour, Ben; I mean to go right over and ask her now.”

“Oh, no, you mustn’t,” cried Ben, catching hold of her arm as she was preparing to fly off. “Mammy’ll find it out; better wait till to-morrow; and besides Polly—” And Ben stopped, unwilling to dampen this propitious beginning. “The stove’ll act like everything, to-morrow! I know ‘twill; then what’ll you do!”

“It sha’n’t!” said Polly, running up to look it in the face; “if it does, I’ll shake it; the mean old thing!”

The idea of Polly’s shaking the lumbering old black affair, sent Ben into such a peal of laughter that it brought all the other children running to the spot; and nothing would do but they must one and all, be told the reason. So Polly and Ben took them into confidence, which so elated them that half an hour after, when long past her bedtime, Phronsie declared, “I’m not going to bed! I want to sit up like Polly!”

“Don’t tease her,” whispered Polly to Ben, who thought she ought to go; so she sat straight up on her little stool, winking like everything to keep awake.

At last, as Polly was in the midst of one of her liveliest sallies, over tumbled Phronsie, a sleepy little heap, upon the floor.

“I want—to go—to bed!” she said; “take me—Polly!”

“I thought so,” laughed Polly, and bundled her off into the bedroom.

MAKING HAPPINESS FOR MAMSIE

And so, the minute her mother had departed for the minister's house next morning, and Ben had gone to his day's work, chopping wood for Deacon Blodgett, Polly assembled her force around the old stove, and proceeded to business. She and the children had been up betimes that morning to get through with the work; and now, as they glanced around with a look of pride on the neatly swept floor, the dishes all done, and everything in order, the moment their mother's back was turned they began to implore Polly to hurry and begin.

"It's most 'leven o'clock," said Joel, who, having no work to do outside, that day, was prancing around, wild to help along the festivities; "it's most 'leven o'clock, Polly Pepper! you won't have it done."

"Oh, no; 'tisn't either, Joe;" said Polly, with a very flushed face, and her arms full of kindlings, glancing up at the old clock as she spoke; "tisn't but quarter of nine; there, take care, Phronsie! you can't lift off the cover; do help her, Davie."

"No; let me!" cried Joel, springing forward; "it's my turn; Dave got the shingles; it's my turn, Polly."

"So 'tis," said Polly; "I forgot; there," as she flung in the wood, and poked it all up in a nice little heap coaxingly. "It can't help but burn; what a cake we'll have for mamsie!"

"It'll be so big," cried Phronsie, hopping around on one set of toes, "that mamsie won't know what to do, will she, Polly?"

"No, I don't believe she will," said Polly, gayly, stuffing in more wood; "Oh, dear! there goes Ben's putty; it's all come out!"

"So it has," said Joel, going around back of the stove to explore; and then he added cheerfully, "it's bigger'n ever; oh! it's an awful big hole, Polly!"

"Now, whatever shall we do!" said Polly, in great distress; "that hateful old crack! and Ben's clear off to Deacon Blodgett's!"

"I'll run and get him," cried Joel, briskly; "I'll bring him right home in ten minutes."

"Oh, no, you must not, Joe," cried Polly in alarm; "it wouldn't ever be right to take him off from his work; mamsie wouldn't like it."

"What will you do, then?" asked Joel, pausing on his way to the door.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Polly, getting down on her knees to examine the crack; "I shall have to stuff it with paper, I s'pose."

"'Twon't stay in," said Joel, scornfully; "don't you know you stuffed it before, last week?"

"I know," said Polly, with a small sigh; and sitting down on the floor, she remained quite still for a minute, with her two black hands thrust out straight before her.

"Can't you fix it?" asked Davie, soberly, coming up; "then we can't have the cake."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Polly, springing up quickly; "don't be afraid; we're going to have that cake! There, you ugly old thing, you!" (this to the stove) "see what you've done!" as two big tears flew out of Phronsie's brown eyes at the direful prospect; and the sorrowful faces of the two boys looked up into Polly's own, for comfort. "I can fix it, I most know; do get some paper, Joe, as quick as you can."

"Don't know where there is any," said Joel, rummaging around; "it's all tore up; 'xcept the almanac; can't I take that?"

"Oh dear, no!" cried Polly; "put it right back, Joe; I guess there's some in the wood-shed."

"There isn't either," said little Davie, quickly; "Joel and I took it to make kites with."

"Oh dear," groaned Polly; "I don't know what we shall do; unless," as a bright thought struck her, "you let me have the kites, boys."

"Can't," said Joel; "they're all flew away; and torn up."

“Well, now, children,” said Polly, turning round impressively upon them, the effect of which was heightened by the extremely crocky appearance she had gained in her explorations, “we must have some paper, or something to stop up that old hole with—some way, there!”

“I know,” said little Davie, “where we’ll get it; it’s upstairs;” and without another word he flew out of the room, and in another minute he put into Polly’s hand an old leather boot-top, one of his most treasured possessions. “You can chip it,” he said, “real fine, and then ‘twill go in.”

“So we can,” said Polly; “and you’re a real good boy, Davie, to give it; that’s a splendid present to help celebrate for mamsie!”

“I’d a-given a boot-top,” said Joel, looking grimly at the precious bit of leather which Polly was rapidly stripping into little bits, “if I’d a-hed it; I don’t have anything!”

“I know you would, Joey,” said Polly, kindly; “there now, you’ll stay, I guess!” as with the united efforts of the two boys, cheered on by Phronsie’s enthusiastic little crow of delight, the leather was crowded into place, and the fire began to burn.

“Now, boys,” said Polly, getting up, and drawing a long breath, “I’m going over to Grandma Bascom’s to get her to tell me how to make the cake; and you must stay and keep house.”

“I’m going to nail,” said Joel; “I’ve got lots to do.”

“All right,” said Polly, tying on her hood; “Phronsie’ll love to watch you; I won’t be gone long,” and she was off.

“Grandma Bascom,” wasn’t really the children’s grandmother; only everybody in the village called her so by courtesy. Her cottage was over across the lane, and just a bit around the corner; and Polly flew along and up to the door, fully knowing that now she would be helped out of her difficulty. She didn’t stop to knock, as the old lady was so deaf she knew she wouldn’t hear her, but opened the door and walked in. Grandma was sweeping up the floor, already as neat as a pin; when she saw Polly coming, she stopped, and leaned on her broom.

“How’s your ma?” she asked, when Polly had said “good morning,” and then hesitated.

“Oh, mammy’s pretty well,” shouted Polly into the old lady’s ear; “and to-morrow’s her birthday!”

“To-morrow’ll be a bad day!” said grandma. “Oh, don’t never say that. You mustn’t borrow trouble, child.”

“I didn’t,” said Polly; “I mean—it’s her birthday, grandma!” this last so loud that grandma’s cap-border vibrated perceptibly.

“The land’s sakes ‘tis!” cried Mrs. Bascom, delightedly; “you don’t say so!”

“Yes,” said Polly, skipping around the old lady, and giving her a small hug; “and we’re going to give her a surprise.”

“What is the matter with her eyes?” asked grandma, sharply, turning around and facing her; “she’s been a-sewin’ too stiddy, hain’t she?”

“A surprise!” shouted Polly, standing upon tiptoe, to bring her mouth on a level with the old lady’s ear; “a cake, grandma, a big one!”

“A cake!” exclaimed grandma, dropping the broom to settle her cap, which Polly in her extreme endeavors to carry on the conversation, had knocked slightly awry; “well, that’ll be fine.”

“Yes,” said Polly, picking up the broom, and flinging off her hood at the same time; “and, oh! won’t you please tell me how to make it, grandma!”

“To be sure; to be sure;” cried the old lady, delighted beyond measure to give advice; “I’ve got splendid receipts; I’ll go get ‘em right off,” and she ambled to the door of the pantry.

“And I’ll finish sweeping up,” said Polly, which grandma didn’t hear; so she took up the broom, and sent it energetically, and merrily flying away to the tune of her own happy thoughts.

“Yes, they’re right in here,” said grandma, waddling back with an old tin teapot in her hand;—“goodness, child! what a dust you’ve

kicked up! that ain't the way to sweep." And she took the broom out of Polly's hand, who stood quite still in mortification.

"There," she said, drawing it mildly over the few bits she could scrape together, and gently coaxing them into a little heap; "that's the way; and then they don't go all over the room.

"I'm sorry," began poor Polly.

"Tain't any matter," said Mrs. Bascom kindly, catching sight of Polly's discomfited face; "tain't a mite of matter; you'll sweep better next time; now let's go to the cake;" and putting the broom into the corner, she waddled back again to the table, followed by Polly, and proceeded to turn out the contents of the teapot, in search of just the right "recept."

But the right one didn't seem to appear; not even after the teapot was turned upside down and shaken by both grandma's and Polly's anxious hands. Every other "recept" seemed to tumble out gladly, and stare them in the face—little dingy rolls of yellow paper, with an ancient odor of spice still clinging to them; but all efforts to find this particular one failed utterly.

"Won't some other one do?" asked Polly, in the interval of fruitless searching, when grandma bewailed and lamented, and wondered, "where I could a put it!"

"No, no, child," answered the old lady; "now, where do you s'pose 'tis!" and she clapped both hands to her head, to see if she could possibly remember; "no, no, child," she repeated. "Why, they had it down to my niece Mirandy's weddin'—'twas just elegant! light as a feather; and 'twan't rich either," she added; "no eggs, nor—"

"Oh, I couldn't have eggs;" cried Polly, in amazement at the thought of such luxury; "and we've only brown flour, grandma, you know."

"Well, you can make it of brown," said Mrs. Bascom, kindly; "when the raisins is in 'twill look quite nice."

"Oh, we haven't any raisins," answered Polly.

"Haven't any raisins!" echoed grandma, looking at her over her spectacles; "what are you goin' to put in?"

“Oh—cinnamon,” said Polly, briskly; “we’ve got plenty of that, and— it’ll be good, I guess, grandma!” she finished, anxiously; “anyway, we must have a cake; there isn’t any other way to celebrate mamsie’s birthday.”

“Well, now,” said grandma, bustling around; “I shouldn’t be surprised if you had real good luck, Polly. And your ma’ll set ever so much by it; now, if we only could find that receet!” and returning to the charge she commenced to fumble among her bits of paper again; “I never shall forget how they eat on it; why, there wasn’t a crumb left, Polly!”

“Oh, dear,” said Polly, to whom “Mirandy’s wedding cake” now became the height of her desires; “if you only can find it! can’t I climb up and look on the pantry shelves?”

“Maybe ‘tis there,” said Mrs. Bascom, slowly; “you might try; sometimes I do put things away, so’s to have ‘em safe.”

So Polly got an old wooden chair, according to direction, and then mounted up on it, with grandma below to direct, she handed down bowl after bowl, interspersed at the right intervals with cracked teacups and handleless pitchers. But at the end of these explorations, “Mirandy’s wedding cake” was further off than ever.

“Tain’t a mite o’ use,” at last said the old lady, sinking down in despair, while Polly perched on the top of the chair and looked at her; “I must a-give it away.”

“Can’t I have the next best one, then?” asked Polly, despairingly, feeling sure that “Mirandy’s wedding cake” would have celebrated the day just right; “and I must hurry right home, please,” she added, getting down from the chair, and tying on her hood; “or Phronsie won’t know what to do.”

So another “receet” was looked over, and selected; and with many charges, and bits of advice not to let the oven get too hot, etc., etc., Polly took the precious bit in her hand, and flew over home.

“Now, we’ve got to—” she began, bounding in merrily, with dancing eyes; but her delight had a sudden stop, as she brought up so suddenly at the sight within, that she couldn’t utter another word.

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