

Copy-Cat and Other Stories

by

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The Copy-Cat

THAT affair of Jim Simmons's cats never became known. Two little boys and a little girl can keep a secret -- that is, sometimes. The two little boys had the advantage of the little girl because they could talk over the affair together, and the little girl, Lily Jennings, had no intimate girl friend to tempt her to confidence. She had only little Amelia Wheeler, commonly called by the pupils of Madame's school "The Copy-Cat."

Amelia was an odd little girl -- that is, everybody called her odd. She was that rather unusual creature, a child with a definite ideal; and that ideal was Lily Jennings. However, nobody knew that. If Amelia's mother, who was a woman of strong character, had suspected, she would have taken strenuous measures to prevent such a peculiar state of affairs; the more so because she herself did not in the least approve of Lily Jennings. Mrs. Diantha Wheeler (Amelia's father had died when she was a baby) often remarked to her own mother, Mrs. Stark, and to her mother-in-law, Mrs. Samuel Wheeler, that she did not feel that Mrs. Jennings was bringing up Lily exactly as she should. "That child thinks entirely too much of her looks," said Mrs. Diantha. "When she walks past here she switches those ridiculous frilled frocks of hers as if she were entering a ballroom, and she tosses her head and looks about to see if anybody is watching her. If I were to see Amelia doing such things I should be very firm with her."

"Lily Jennings is a very pretty child," said Mother-in-law Wheeler, with an under-meaning, and Mrs. Diantha flushed. Amelia did not in the least resemble the Wheelers, who were a handsome set. She looked remarkably like her mother, who was a plain woman, only little Amelia did not have a square chin. Her chin was pretty and round, with a little dimple in it. In fact, Amelia's chin was the prettiest feature she had. Her hair was phenomenally straight. It would not even yield to hot curlingirons, which her grandmother Wheeler had tried surreptitiously several times when there was a little girls' party. "I never saw such hair as that poor child has in all my life," she told the other grandmother, Mrs. Stark. "Have the Starks always had such very straight hair?"

Mrs. Stark stiffened her chin. Her own hair was very straight. "I don't know," said she, "that the Starks have had any straighter hair than other people. If Amelia does not have anything worse to contend with than straight hair I rather think she will get along in the world as well as most people."

"It's thin, too," said Grandmother Wheeler, with a sigh, "and it hasn't a mite of color. Oh, well, Amelia is a good child, and beauty isn't everything." Grandmother Wheeler said that as if beauty were a great deal, and Grandmother Stark arose and shook out her black silk skirts. She had money, and loved to dress in rich black silks and laces.

"It is very little, very little indeed," said she, and she eyed Grandmother Wheeler's lovely old face, like a wrinkled old rose as to color, faultless as to feature, and swept about by the loveliest waves of shining silver hair.

Then she went out of the room, and Grandmother Wheeler, left alone, smiled. She knew the worth of beauty for those who possess it and those who do not. She had never been quite reconciled to her son's marrying such a plain girl as Diantha Stark, although she had money. She considered beauty on the whole as a more valuable asset than mere gold. She regretted always that poor little Amelia, her only grandchild, was so very plain-looking. She always knew that Amelia was very plain, and yet sometimes the child puzzled her. She seemed to see reflections of beauty, if not beauty itself, in the little colorless face, in the figure, with its too-large joints and utter absence of curves. She sometimes even wondered privately if some subtle resemblance to the handsome Wheelers might not be in the child and yet appear. But she was mistaken. What she saw was pure mimicry of a beautiful ideal.

Little Amelia tried to stand like Lily Jennings; she tried to walk like her; she tried to smile like her; she made endeavors, very often futile, to dress like her. Mrs. Wheeler did not in the least approve of furbelows for children. Poor little Amelia went clad in severe simplicity; durable woolen frocks in winter, and washable, unfadable, and non-soil-showing frocks in summer. She, although her mother had perhaps more money wherewith to dress her than had any of the other mothers, was the plainest-clad little girl in school. Amelia, moreover, never tore a frock, and, as she did not grow rapidly, one lasted several seasons. Lily Jennings was destructive, although dainty. Her pretty clothes were renewed every year. Amelia was helpless before that problem. For a little girl burning with aspirations to be and look like another little girl who was beautiful and wore beautiful clothes, to be obliged to set forth for Madame's on a lovely spring morning, when thin attire was in evidence, dressed in dark-blue-and-white-checked gingham, which she had worn for three summers, and with sleeves which, even to childish eyes, were anachronisms, was a trial. Then to see Lily flutter in a frock like a perfectly new white flower was torture; not because of jealousy -- Amelia was not jealous; but she so admired the other little girl, and so loved her, and so wanted to be like her.

As for Lily, she hardly ever noticed Amelia. She was not aware that she herself was an object of adoration; for she was a little girl who searched for admiration in the eyes of little boys rather than little girls, although very innocently. She always glanced slyly at Johnny Trumbull when she wore a pretty new frock, to see if he noticed. He never did, and she was sharp enough to know it. She was also child enough not to care a bit, but to take a queer pleasure in the sensation of scorn which she felt in consequence. She would eye Johnny from head to foot, his boy's clothing somewhat spotted, his bulging pockets, his always dusty shoes, and when he twisted uneasily, not understanding why, she had a thrill of purely feminine delight. It was on one such occasion that she first noticed Amelia Wheeler particularly.

It was a lovely warm morning in May, and Lily was a darling to behold -- in a big hat with a wreath of blue flowers, her hair tied with enormous blue silk bows, her short skirts frilled with eyelet embroidery, her slender silk legs, her little white sandals. Madame's maid had not yet struck the Japanese gong, and all the pupils were out on the lawn, Amelia, in her clean, ugly gingham and her serviceable brown sailor hat, hovering near Lily, as usual, like a common, very plain butterfly near a particularly resplendent

blossom. Lily really noticed her. She spoke to her confidentially; she recognized her fully as another of her own sex, and presumably of similar opinions.

"Ain't boys ugly, anyway?" inquired Lily of Amelia, and a wonderful change came over Amelia. Her sallow cheeks bloomed; her eyes showed blue glitters; her little skinny figure became instinct with nervous life. She smiled charmingly, with such eagerness that it smote with pathos and bewitched.

"Oh yes, oh yes," she agreed, in a voice like a quick flute obbligato. "Boys are ugly."

"Such clothes!" said Lily.

"Yes, such clothes!" said Amelia.

"Always spotted," said Lily.

"Always covered all over with spots," said Amelia.

"And their pockets always full of horrid things," said Lily.

"Yes," said Amelia.

Amelia glanced openly at Johnny Trumbull; Lily with a sidewise effect.

Johnny had heard every word. Suddenly he arose to action and knocked down Lee Westminster, and sat on him.

"Lemme up!" said Lee.

Johnny had no quarrel whatever with Lee. He grinned, but he sat still. Lee, the sat-upon, was a sharp little boy. "Showing off before the gals!" he said, in a thin whisper.

"Hush up!" returned Johnny.

"Will you give me a writing-pad -- I lost mine, and mother said I couldn't have another for a week if I did -- if I don't holler?" inquired Lee.

"Yes. Hush up!"

Lee lay still, and Johnny continued to sit upon his prostrate form. Both were out of sight of Madame's windows, behind a clump of the cedars which graced her lawn.

"Always fighting," said Lily, with a fine crescendo of scorn. She lifted her chin high, and also her nose.

"Always fighting," said Amelia, and also lifted her chin and nose. Amelia was a born mimic. She actually looked like Lily, and she spoke like her.

Then Lily did a wonderful thing. She doubled her soft little arm into an inviting loop for Amelia's little claw of a hand.

"Come along, Amelia Wheeler," said she. "We don't want to stay near horrid, fighting boys. We will go by ourselves."

And they went. Madame had a headache that morning, and the Japanese gong did not ring for fifteen minutes longer. During that time Lily and Amelia sat together on a little rustic bench under a twinkling poplar, and they talked, and a sort of miniature sun-and-satellite relation was established between them, although neither was aware of it. Lily, being on the whole a very normal little girl, and not disposed to even a full estimate of herself as compared with others of her own sex, did not dream of Amelia's adoration, and Amelia, being rarely destitute of self-consciousness, did not understand the whole scope of her own sentiments. It was quite sufficient that she was seated close to this wonderful Lily, and agreeing with her to the verge of immolation.

"Of course," said Lily, "girls are pretty, and boys are just as ugly as they can be."

"Oh yes," said Amelia, fervently.

"But," said Lily, thoughtfully, "it is queer how Johnny Trumbull always comes out ahead in a fight, and he is not so very large, either."

"Yes," said Amelia, but she realized a pang of jealousy. "Girls could fight, I suppose," said she.

"Oh yes, and get their clothes all torn and messy," said Lily.

"I shouldn't care," said Amelia. Then she added, with a little toss, "I almost know I could fight." The thought even floated through her wicked little mind that fighting might be a method of wearing out obnoxious and durable clothes.

"You!" said Lily, and the scorn in her voice wilted Amelia.

"Maybe I couldn't," said she.

"Of course you couldn't, and if you could, what a sight you'd be. Of course it wouldn't hurt your clothes as much as some, because your mother dresses you in strong things, but you'd be sure to get black and blue, and what would be the use, anyway? You couldn't be a boy, if you did fight."

"No. I know I couldn't."

"Then what is the use? We are a good deal prettier than boys, and cleaner, and have nicer manners, and we must be satisfied."

"You are prettier," said Amelia, with a look of worshipful admiration at Lily's sweet little face.

"You are prettier," said Lily. Then she added, equivocally, "Even the very homeliest girl is prettier than a boy."

Poor Amelia, it was a good deal for her to be called prettier than a very dusty boy in a fight. She fairly dimpled with delight, and again she smiled charmingly. Lily eyed her critically.

"You aren't so very homely, after all, Amelia," she said. "You needn't think you are."

Amelia smiled again.

"When you look like you do now you are real pretty," said Lily, not knowing or even suspecting the truth, that she was regarding in the face of this little ardent soul her own, as in a mirror.

However, it was after that episode that Amelia Wheeler was called "Copy-Cat." The two little girls entered Madame's select school arm in arm, when the musical gong sounded, and behind them came Lee Westminster and Johnny Trumbull, surreptitiously dusting their garments, and ever after the fact of Amelia's adoration and imitation of Lily Jennings was evident to all. Even Madame became aware of it, and held conferences with two of the under teachers.

"It is not at all healthy for one child to model herself so entirely upon the pattern of another," said Miss Parmalee.

"Most certainly it is not," agreed Miss Acton, the music-teacher.

"Why, that poor little Amelia Wheeler had the rudiments of a fairly good contralto. I had begun to wonder if the poor child might not be able at least to sing a little, and so make up for -- other things; and now she tries to sing high like Lily Jennings, and I simply cannot prevent it. She has heard Lily play, too, and has lost her own touch, and now it is neither one thing nor the other."

"I might speak to her mother," said Madame, thoughtfully. Madame was American born, but she married a French gentleman, long since deceased, and his name sounded well on her circulars. She and her two under teachers were drinking tea in her library.

Miss Parmalee, who was a true lover of her pupils, gasped at Madame's proposition. "Whatever you do, please do not tell that poor child's mother," said she.

"I do not think it would be quite wise, if I may venture to express an opinion," said Miss Acton, who was a timid soul, and always inclined to shy at her own ideas.

"But why?" asked Madame.

"Her mother," said Miss Parmalee, "is a quite remarkable woman, with great strength of character, but she would utterly fail to grasp the situation."

"I must confess," said Madame, sipping her tea, "that I fail to understand it. Why any child not an absolute idiot should so lose her own identity in another's absolutely bewilders me. I never heard of such a case."

Miss Parmalee, who had a sense of humor, laughed a little. "It is bewildering," she admitted. "And now the other children see how it is, and call her 'Copy-Cat' to her face, but she does not mind. I doubt if she understands, and neither does Lily, for that matter. Lily Jennings is full of mischief, but she moves in straight lines; she is not conceited or self-conscious, and she really likes Amelia, without knowing why."

"I fear Lily will lead Amelia into mischief," said Madame, "and Amelia has always been such a good child."

"Lily will never MEAN to lead Amelia into mischief," said loyal Miss Parmalee.

"But she will," said Madame.

"If Lily goes, I cannot answer for Amelia's not following," admitted Miss Parmalee.

"I regret it all very much indeed," sighed Madame, "but it does seem to me still that Amelia's mother --"

"Amelia's mother would not even believe it, in the first place," said Miss Parmalee.

"Well, there is something in that," admitted Madame. "I myself could not even imagine such a situation. I would not know of it now, if you and Miss Acton had not told me."

"There is not the slightest use in telling Amelia not to imitate Lily, because she does not know that she is imitating her," said Miss Parmalee. "If she were to be punished for it, she could never comprehend the reason."

"That is true," said Miss Acton. "I realize that when the poor child squeaks instead of singing. All I could think of this morning was a little mouse caught in a trap which she could not see. She does actually squeak! -- and some of her low notes, although, of course, she is only a child, and has never attempted much, promised to be very good."

"She will have to squeak, for all I can see," said Miss Parmalee. "It looks to me like one of those situations that no human being can change for better or worse."

"I suppose you are right," said Madame, "but it is most unfortunate, and Mrs. Wheeler is such a superior woman, and Amelia is her only child, and this is such a very subtle and regrettable affair. Well, we have to leave a great deal to Providence."

"If," said Miss Parmalee, "she could only get angry when she is called 'Copy-Cat.'" Miss Parmalee laughed, and so did Miss Acton. Then all the ladies had their cups refilled, and left Providence to look out for poor little Amelia Wheeler, in her mad pursuit of her ideal in the shape of another little girl possessed of the exterior graces which she had not.

Meantime the little "Copy-Cat" had never been so happy. She began to improve in her looks also. Her grandmother Wheeler noticed it first, and spoke of it to Grandmother Stark. "That child may not be so plain, after all," said she. "I looked at her this morning when she started for school, and I thought for the first time that there was a little resemblance to the Wheelers."

Grandmother Stark sniffed, but she looked gratified. "I have been noticing it for some time," said she, "but as for looking like the Wheelers, I thought this morning for a minute that I actually saw my poor dear husband looking at me out of that blessed child's eyes."

Grandmother Wheeler smiled her little, aggravating, curved, pink smile.

But even Mrs. Diantha began to notice the change for the better in Amelia. She, however, attributed it to an increase of appetite and a system of deep breathing which she had herself taken up and enjoined Amelia to follow. Amelia was following Lily Jennings instead, but that her mother did not know. Still, she was gratified to see Amelia's little sallow cheeks taking on pretty curves and a soft bloom, and she was more inclined to listen when Grandmother Wheeler ventured to approach the subject of Amelia's attire.

"Amelia would not be so bad-looking if she were better dressed, Diantha," said she.

Diantha lifted her chin, but she paid heed. "Why, does not Amelia dress perfectly well, mother?" she inquired.

"She dresses well enough, but she needs more ribbons and ruffles."

"I do not approve of so many ribbons and ruffles," said Mrs. Diantha. "Amelia has perfectly neat, fresh black or brown ribbons for her hair, and ruffles are not sanitary."

"Ruffles are pretty," said Grandmother Wheeler, "and blue and pink are pretty colors. Now, that Jennings girl looks like a little picture."

But that last speech of Grandmother Wheeler's undid all the previous good. Mrs. Diantha had an unacknowledged -- even to herself -- disapproval of Mrs. Jennings which dated far back in the past, for a reason which was quite unworthy of her and of her strong mind. When she and Lily's mother had been girls, she had seen Mrs. Jennings look like a picture, and had been perfectly well aware that she herself fell far short of an artist's ideal.

Perhaps if Mrs. Stark had believed in ruffles and ribbons, her daughter might have had a different mind when Grandmother Wheeler had finished her little speech.

As it was, Mrs. Diantha surveyed her small, pretty mother-in-law with dignified serenity, which savored only delicately of a snub. "I do not myself approve of the way in which Mrs. Jennings dresses her daughter," said she, "and I do not consider that the child presents to a practical observer as good an appearance as my Amelia."

Grandmother Wheeler had a temper. It was a childish temper and soon over -- still, a temper. "Lord," said she, "if you mean to say that you think your poor little snipe of a daughter, dressed like a little maid-of-all-work, can compare with that lovely little Lily Jennings, who is dressed like a doll! --"

"I do not wish that my daughter should be dressed like a doll," said Mrs. Diantha, coolly.

"Well, she certainly isn't," said Grandmother Wheeler. "Nobody would ever take her for a doll as far as looks or dress are concerned. She may be GOOD enough. I don't deny that Amelia is a good little girl, but her looks could be improved on."

"Looks matter very little," said Mrs. Diantha.

"They matter very much," said Grandmother Wheeler, pugnaciously, her blue eyes taking on a peculiar opaque glint, as always when she lost her temper, "very much indeed. But looks can't be helped. If poor little Amelia wasn't born with pretty looks, she wasn't. But she wasn't born with such ugly clothes. She might be better dressed."

"I dress my daughter as I consider best," said Mrs. Diantha. Then she left the room.

Grandmother Wheeler sat for a few minutes, her blue eyes opaque, her little pink lips a straight line; then suddenly her eyes lit, and she smiled. "Poor Diantha," said she, "I remember how Henry used to like Lily Jennings's mother before he married Diantha. Sour grapes hang high." But Grandmother Wheeler's beautiful old face was quite soft and gentle. From her heart she pitied the reacher after those high-hanging sour grapes, for Mrs. Diantha had been very good to her.

Then Grandmother Wheeler, who had a mild persistency not evident to a casual observer, began to make plans and lay plots. She was resolved, Diantha or not, that her granddaughter, her son's child, should have some fine feathers. The little conference had taken place in her own room, a large, sunny one, with a little storeroom opening from it. Presently Grandmother Wheeler rose, entered the storeroom, and began rummaging in some old trunks. Then followed days of secret work. Grandmother Wheeler had been noted as a fine needlewoman, and her hand had not yet lost its cunning. She had one of Amelia's ugly little gingham, purloined from a closet, for size, and she worked two or three dainty wonders. She took Grandmother Stark into her confidence. Sometimes the two ladies, by reason of their age, found it possible to combine with good results.

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