

# THE SUNDAY BEE

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## The Purple Lady



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*Two Little Children and Some Paper Dolls; Two Big Children, the Rack of Dire Need--and a Mother Who Wouldn't Give Up.*

IT WAS a rainy afternoon, so Joe and Althea were in the attic, cutting fashion ladies out of an old Godey's Lady's Book. That is, Althea cut out the ladies. Joe designed animals on yellow wrapping paper. These, he said, would eat the ladies up. But when the back of Althea's wrist went to her mouth and her eyes, fixed mournfully on him, filled and filled, he said hastily that it was only a few of the animals who were like that. The rest were good and would protect the ladies. Just let him

She had never known the dream to be quite so dreamy before.

The far corners of the attic were a little dimmer than she liked; in particular, the corner where the model of the machine stood, all legs and elbows and long fingers. It had been there ever since she made the acquaintance of Joe's attic (which was the same as always), and though Joe had explained all about it—how it wouldn't go and couldn't hurt anybody—she had never quite liked it. It stood in front of a little black trunk which she had eyed longingly through the machine's sprawling levers. But Joe said the trunk things weren't old-fashioned things you could dress up in, but the machine's things, drawing and models. He had seen them once, and some day, when he was a man, he was to have them and the machine and see if he could find out what it needed to make it go. It was something about printing; he knew that much, and he told Althea what printing was. He was a wise little boy.

Then she looked sharply at the paper lady, but she was flat and dollish. Like—yes, only in the way the hair was done and the big skirt like a flower.—The face was quite different. She put an inquiring-greasy finger on the paper lady's countenance and that person's last claim to beauty vanished.

Althea sat in the largest, most comfortable chair in what had been Mrs. Mack's room, but was now hers. Although there was furnace heat throughout the house, in this room a bit of wood fire also helped to thrust back the January cold. For it was the January of 1918, and a winter storm was raging against the windows.

Mrs. Mack was sitting on an ottoman at Althea's feet—a dowager who had quite resigned her crown, but, who remained—O, yes, remained a power behind the throne of the new queen. Now, in the old queen's face, so long as it was unobserved, was the light of battle; perhaps of desperation.



She was sitting on the floor, and her wide purple skirts made a billowy circle about her.

have his turn at the scissors and she would see. And so, indeed, it proved, for the beasts fought so terribly among themselves that in a short time good and bad alike were nothing but a heap of torn scraps, while the ladies, quite unscathed, still stood along the floor crack. Then Joe said he smelled the cookies being taken out of the oven and went down to see.

Althea was hungry. People at home were sick. People at home, though this she did not know, were nearly at their wits' end. So the kitchen at home was at sixes and sevens, and the little cooking done there was almost incredible in result. Mrs. Mack knew all about it and was terribly sorry, and helped by having Althea over at her house so much that she had begun to feel as if she had a little daughter of her own, as well as that square, blundering, noisy little son. And as she watched the two together, how splendidly they got on, her dreams would sweep foolishly forward to a time when Joe should no longer be so square and blundering, nor Althea so tiny and frail. What a pair they would make if they carried out the fine promise of their babyhood!

Perhaps it was hunger that made Althea's dream feeling so strong that day, for she had come away with even less luncheon than usual, and that after almost no breakfast at all. Now, at the smell of the cookies, giddy and strange, as if the walls were mist, so that she had to but thrust out her hand and put it quite through them. This sensation was nothing new. The first time she had felt it it had frightened her; then it had become rather interesting, for she always felt that almost anything queer might happen. Now if, for example, she could dream these paper ladies dead! There was one of them in a purple gown who had such a sweet smile! Why couldn't she dream this lady round instead of flat, and set her to stepping softly about the floor instead of just pointing one tiny triangle of a slipper toe from her petticoats?

How sweet—how mysteriously sweet—those cookies smelled. Or was it the cookies? For it seemed more like clove pinks, when you put your nose right on the petals and draw them up against your nostrils.

But, of course, now that things turned to dream, the machine was as unsubstantial as the rest, so as she looked at it through half closed eyes Althea was not surprised that it should thin, dissolve, become invisible. O, how lovely! She had done it! She had dreamed the lady real!

Yes, there she was, a real dream lady, lady size, too, not just a doll, and she wore a great braid of yellow hair around the top of her head like a crown.

She was sitting on the floor in front of the trunk, and her wide purple skirts made a billowy circle about her until she was like some great inverted flower. The trunk was open, and it was not just full of drawings and things. She was taking out the loveliest little dresses, just right for a doll, and holding them up and looking at them, then folding them up and putting them away again, the way you do to see if there are moths. Clove pinks! Well, I should think so! There they were at her throat, just where the lacy ruffle made a V, finished at its point with a tiny black velvet bow. As a paper lady she had not been wearing clove pinks. In a number of ways she was not quite like the paper lady—only the way of wearing her hair, and the gown with its lovely wide skirts. The material had a white ground and was all sprigged with tiny flowers and true lovers' knots.

And then, while she held up a tiny white dress between her face and Althea, Althea saw that her eyes were looking at her above the little outthrust dress. Her mouth was hidden, but Althea knew it smiled.

But just as Althea was about to speak Joe had to come storming up, and then there was no lady except the paper one still in her hand and the sprawling machine, as before, stood in front of the trunk.

There were not only cookies and milk, but a plate of sandwiches. It was on account of the sandwiches, Joe explained, that he had been so long. His mother had insisted on his waiting while she put them up, and they must be eaten first, she said.

Althea took her sandwich over to the machine and looked through its bars at the trunk. It was solid enough now.

Only when the young woman's eyes were upon her—then it was calm, confident, reassuring.

"How warm and safe I am—here," said Althea. "When I think of those mothers and babies I feel wicked."

"I know," said Mrs. Mack. "But we are not wicked. We are reserves. Our part is to keep ourselves steady."

"Yes," said Althea, "only when the wind is like that I seem to hear them."

And, indeed, the wind had found a crevice which it could make whimper and wail like a tiny child in trouble.

"But it is the wind," said Althea. "Just only the wind." She turned from the frosted window to Joe's mother.

"How was he when you looked in last?"

"Sleeping, I think. At least he was quiet."

"Well," said Althea confidently, "I can be patient. It isn't as if I couldn't understand why he can't bear the sight of me. 'The world is no place for women,' he said. That tells it all. He never could bear even small cruelties, and he has been seeing things that it almost kills us to read about. We know how he has fought—his medals would tell us, even if he didn't know anyway."

"Yes," said his mother, and her voice was calm. She even bent down and adjusted the logs more precisely. "It is a wound of the spirit, but as honorable a one as the other—or the gas. I have sometimes thought that in this war more than in other wars, the enemy has had power to reach a man's soul. I may be mistaken; yet, even if it is so, such a wound must heal. I do not believe any such wound, even of the soul, can touch the real center. Come, now, we mustn't get too serious. That is a concession to the enemy."

"So you have the little things all a-ting? How sweet and confident they look with the little sleeves spread out! Wait till the arms get in them and begin to flap and wave! Joe wore out everything! I never saw such a baby. He scrubbed through his long dresses just as he did later through his knickers. It's a shame that he didn't leave anything of his wardrobe for his own baby—but they never think of that! He chewed his sleeves and kicked the long