

SISTER ANNE

By Henry Kitchell Webster

The Girl Who Pleases Only Herself Collides With the Girl Who Prefers to Please Others.



There's a tip for the rising generation: Education is a dangerous thing. In ancient, forgotten times it stood for it, and what they meant was reading, 'tilt' and 'Rithmetick. The three letters which would symbolize it were T, R, and R. A useful, but with disconcerting possibilities if it happens to backfire.

The young know a lot more than the old—this we cheerfully concede—but let them beware how they educate us. There's an occasional, harmless Victorian to be found here and there, born away back in the last decade of the last century before the grand old lady died, who is capable, under sufficient stimulation, of taking a leaf out of the new book, Charlotte Blunt, who had been Charlotte Fulton until she married Wilfred—Charlotte, at the ripe old age of 24—proved to be one of those top apt pupils.

Until her sister, Anne, aged 18, came home from school to spend the Easter holidays with her and Wilfred, it had never occurred to Charlotte to think of herself as a victim, let alone a slave or a groveling worm. If asked, she'd have said, in the benighted, unrealistic way which characterized her covetous, that she was an unusually lucky person and fully as happy as it was good for any one to be.

She'd grown up in a roomy, homey, suburban house. Her parents were nice, regular people, well enough off, and seriously enough disposed, to insure that everything they provided for their children should have the sterling mark of conventional approval stamped upon it. Since she was pretty and amiable, and amusing from the time she was a baby, they made something of a domestic pet of her, especially her father. Her mother took her a little more seriously; concerned herself more constantly than Charlotte thought necessary with such details as rubbers, drafts, tooth brushes, slings, Sunday school lessons, hair curling, and so on—but then, that was the way of mothers, wasn't it? These minor drawbacks were magnificently compensated for, anyhow, when on Charlotte's eighth birthday, her mother presented her, miraculously, with a live doll, a baby sister whom they named Anne.

It never occurred to Charlotte to scrutinize any of these people very closely, with the eye of disinterested analysis; to ask herself how admirable they really were, nor to define her own feelings about them. What was there to think about them? They were here, and she loved them. Of course, you loved your own father and mother and sister. Didn't everybody?

I don't mean to say that there never were any free acids of the spiritual sort in Charlotte's thoughts or emotions. She suffered disappointments, occasionally, humiliations, she had to be told now and then to stink; she sometimes lay awake for quite a while, after she'd been sent to bed, feeling exasperatedly sorry for herself; once in a blue moon she got so angry that she cried. But no appalling terminology had, as yet, been applied to these phenomena, and no one took them any more seriously than Charlotte herself. This is old stuff, you see—nineteenth century.

She went on growing up in the regular way. She discovered how nice it was to be pretty and have the boys like you. She learned to dance the Hestiation and the Castle Walk. She was a little girl, and she was getting on, during the first ten minutes of her father's after-dinner cigar; and, being a kind-hearted young thing, she spared her mother occasional bits of knowledge which that estimable lady might have found distressing.

She didn't get her way to the smart finishing school which some of her friends attended, but to a nice private day school a few miles up the shore instead. This was in order not to interfere with her piano lessons. Back in those days, of course, piano playing was still considered seriously a feminine accomplishment, but a little more than that to Charlotte. She had a certain amount of real musical capacity. She practiced at the piano com amore, and by 18 it was the old part of her education that she herself regarded seriously.

She was entertaining a project, as yet coldly received at home, of going to Berlin to study with Mme. Carreno, and then bursting upon the world as a first magnitude concert pianist, when the outbreak of the war, in 1914, knocked all that in the head. Her mother needed a lot of her time, what with all the benefits and drives and relief movements that were springing up on every hand; and her father got to seeming a lot more affectionate and dependent upon her than he'd ever been before.

And then she met Wilfred Blunt and liked him awfully, and pretty soon got to liking him a lot more than that, and they fell into one of those typically suburban, undefinable, perfectly understood relationships which nice young American boys and girls seem to have invented for themselves. He was only two years older than she, and, having nothing to live on beyond what he could earn, he was, according to suburban ideas of the period, no more marriageable during the two years which followed his graduation from a school of architecture, than a school boy.

They didn't call themselves engaged even when he went up to the Sheridan training camp, in the summer of '17. She kept her week ends spent perfectly innocently, and with perfect respect, though they didn't go much farther than they had gone before, abandoned an air, scrupulously maintained up to then, of fortuity; but he didn't ask her to be a war bride, and she, having been born in the last century, hadn't proposed to him—just waited for him like the nice little Victorian she was.

Indeed, the status quo ante bellum might have continued for quite a while after Wilfred emerged from his captain's uniform—quite intact (he had been useful to his country, but not especially glorious)—if it hadn't been for Charlotte's father. He remarked, one Sunday, after a sermon he'd liked and a rather too carnal Sunday dinner, that young Blunt was all right, of course, and for anything he knew to the contrary, talented in his line; and a boy and girl affair was all right, of course, for boys and girls; but, after all, the war was over.

"Wilfred and I are going to be married right after Easter," Charlotte said, bright pink and a little breathless. "I just thought I'd tell you." She was waiting in the hall with her things on for the forenoon afternoon call, took him out for a walk, and told him—without what her father had said, but simply what was going to happen. Which was news to Wilfred.

She'd never realized how rapturously in love with him she was until she saw how he took it, the panic of happiness it threw him into. There was something shy about him, and mysterious, underneath his imperturbable surface, and his thoroughly nice, conventional manners, and she got a faint glimpse of it during that intoxicating afternoon than she'd ever had before.

Her father offered no active opposition to the match. He welcomed his prospective son-in-law with a jocular ferocity which might pass for real affection. He told Charlotte one day—this was the nearest he came to overt disapproval—that he wasn't a rich man; he had an excellent law practice, but in these days of terrible prices he wasn't able to put much of anything by, and if he should die tomorrow Charlotte's immediate share of the estate wouldn't be more than a thousand dollars a year. He was so anxious

make a serious attempt to increase it, but that would mean, of course, cutting down on current expenses.

This was just and reasonable, and it was kind of him, no doubt, to tell her, but it left her chilled a little. Indeed, she was aware, in thinking back, that the rosy aura which had enveloped all their relations since she was 17 had changed to a colder color. She was not sure, though, that this wasn't as much her own fault as her father's, for she was looking at all the family except her mother—at her father, two or three youngish uncles, and Anne—in a manner a little more critically detached since she had begun using Wilfred as a standard of comparison. It occurred to her that they were a little hardboiled, and she was aware that the quality about him which they were inclined to regard contemptuously, an

clownishness which made him shy of trampled paths and platitudes and resonant enthusiasm and pep, was just what she specially adored him for. This was all fine spinning, of course. Really, to the eye of common sense, everything was as jolly and nice as possible.

The night in bed, in the nearest thing to whispers she could reduce him to, Wilfred supplied her with a few. Whispers were necessary, first, because they'd moved the baby in with them, and, second, because Charlotte didn't want Anne, in the next room, to hear even that they were talking, let alone about her.

"She's completely unornamented," Wilfred said. "That's the new thing, I suppose. I don't mean just the way she dresses, nor that she isn't made up. It's mostly her manners. She never smiles unless she's amused. If you're encouraging, she leaves you flat. She doesn't urge you not to do things for her that she knows you're going to do anyway." She heard him give a sleepy little laugh, which was one of the things she adored about him. "She puckers up your mouth," he explained, "like a bite out of a nice, hard, young apple."

Charlotte was up on one elbow, about to lean down and kiss him good night, but instead of doing that she said: "You like her though?" "Sure, I like her. All she needs is a little warming up. We'll have to try to show her a good time."

"We can't spend any money on her, Bill," Charlotte remonstrated. "We simply haven't got it, not for theater tickets or parties—things like that."

He admitted, ruefully, that they couldn't do much. His disclaimer didn't satisfy Charlotte, and it was on her tongue to tell him the things she had been holding back—namely, that the collector had made her second call that day about the piano. The next installment would be due next week and they hadn't paid the last. But she forebore. After all, the collector had agreed to wait, and she had one more string to her bow.

Of course she was a glad Wilfred liked Anne. Let her reflect how miserable she would feel if he didn't; if he regarded the visit as an imposition. She pumped away valiantly at that reflection for 15 minutes before she went to sleep.

Anne didn't seem, next morning, quite the little monster that Charlotte's imaginations during the night had painted her. She turned out for their early breakfast full dressed, and she helped, good-humoredly, with the dishes and the baby afterward. During the morning, while he was having his nap, she told Charlotte a lot about her school. It was thoroughly contemptible, so far as its official activities and curriculum were concerned, but a few of the best girls had got together to correct its more flagrant shortcomings for themselves. They didn't call themselves a club, let alone go in for anything childish, like secrets or symbols or passwords. They had no organization at all. Sometimes they took concerted action, and since they were the flower of the school, usually won the point they had felt it necessary to make. But for the most part they merely talked things over—made up their minds about things individually. They talked each other and themselves over, too. No girl, no matter how prominent or charming or intelligent she might be, could be one of them unless she showed she could endure without flinching the most penetrating comment upon her defects of character, manners or person. After you'd been analyzed a few times in open meeting you learned to do the trick upon yourself. The ability to give a brilliantly ruthless performance of this sort was highly regarded.

Charlotte, expressing approval of this scheme, betrayed a benighted misapprehension of its purpose. It was not, Anne patiently explained, self-improvement. They weren't trying to make their lives sublime, like that silly Psalm of Life which Miss Hood quoted every year at graduation time. The idea was to find out what you were really like, what your motives and weaknesses were, and what you could do; when you knew all that you could act accordingly. You wouldn't start anything you couldn't finish. You could back yourself not to turn soft and sappy at the critical moment and not to wince. You wouldn't whimper over the results you got.

Wilfred was right; there was a charm about it. You were immensely set up when you won one of her rare smiles. You felt an impulse, every now and then, to turn upon her and crumple her up and kiss her. In some respects she was amazingly unlike the type of planner

welcoming a guest, felt her original misgivings grow bigger all the while. Was she, too, going to be described in due time as a poor, fluttery old thing? Anne was getting her goat, but as yet Charlotte didn't see how she could do it. The night in bed, in the nearest thing to whispers she could reduce him to, Wilfred supplied her with a few. Whispers were necessary, first, because they'd moved the baby in with them, and, second, because Charlotte didn't want Anne, in the next room, to hear even that they were talking, let alone about her.

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made familiar by bright stories in the magazines, which Charlotte had dreaded lest she might, during the past year, have degenerated into. There was nothing outrageous about her dress; she managed her skirts she had rather decently. She didn't paint. Charlotte, who had learned to smoke since her marriage, but didn't enjoy it much, had been a little disconcerted when Anne after dinner on the night of her arrival had declined Wilfred's proffered cigars. Her speech was no slanger than Charlotte's own, and she was distinctly more fastidious about it. But when Charlotte ventured a tactful compliment upon these points, citing her authorities for having dreaded something different, she drew forth a startling explanation.

"Of course, I haven't any modesty," Anne said. (She spoke of it precisely as if it were a disease.) "But I don't have to scream it to the world from morning to night, any more than you had to go around telling everybody, in your day, that you were—I wonder what you'd have said, a nice girl or an honest woman? There are some things that can be taken for granted. The trouble with those girls in What's-His-Name's stories—I suppose they really were like that once—was that they had to show people or they wouldn't know that they had legs—and so on; and that they could swear and smoke and were good sports and knew about sex and psycho-analysis. But that's pretty old stuff now. Of course," she added, reflectively, "if ever I want to dress to excite a man, I will. I can do about exciting Wilfred—I don't think I do—so what's the use?"

Charlotte, her blood beginning to run cold, asked whether all the girls in her sister's set felt the same way.

They didn't think exactly alike, of course, Anne told her, but they agreed pretty well on fundamentals.

And did the teachers know, Charlotte inquired, about the existence of the club and the sort of ideas it encouraged?

"It isn't a club at all," Anne explained. "They don't allow clubs in the school. But they can't keep girls who find each other interesting from talking to each other instead of with people they find dull. They can't make us talk the same way with people we don't take seriously and with people we do. There's one English teacher who's a peach. We write real letters for her; put down what we think. The others we fluff along with; not because we're afraid of them—I think most of them are afraid of me."

"Of course, you can't be afraid of people who are afraid of themselves; you treat them like children. All old people are like that, I guess—practically all. Don't dare look 'emself in the eye, afraid something will pop out at them. Pretending to be kind and self-sacrificing when they're just simply afraid to see something through to the end. They're lovely when they know something's rotten; saying 'Hush!' and looking the other way. Of course, if you're pretending, too, and believe all they tell you, they can bully you as much as they like—all for your own good, of course. But, if you don't have to pretend, and they know you don't, they'll let you alone, all right. Unless you go and shout it in their ear, they won't let on they hear you at all."

"Am I an old person?" Charlotte asked, and jumped at the sound of her own voice. She had been thinking the question ever since Anne had begun talking about them, but she hadn't meant to speak; it had slipped out, somehow.

Anne smiled, faintly. "You're an old dear," she said, coming over to Charlotte and kissing her. (Was this "fluff," Charlotte wondered, or real affection?) "Most people hate their sisters, of course, and I thought you were going to be awful. But somehow you aren't. I don't wonder father used to be so spongy about you. You almost pretend the same everything's lovely when Charlotte's attention, she went on to ask whether, by the way, a letter had come for her from dad. She'd written him, to San Francisco, and the answer, if there was one, would be just about due.

annoyance at something commiserating and altogether insufferable which she read in her sister's smile. "I guess you'd better tell me just what you mean," Anne said, looking at her.

Anne smiled broadly into one of unconvincing relief. "Well," she remarked, "it's a chance to find out whether you're old or not. If you're game to take it without frills, I don't mind."

Charlotte laughed. "Go ahead," she commanded, her voice loyally responding with just the shade of casual amusement she felt. "Let's see whether I could get into the set or not."

But this touch of irony didn't decompose Anne a bit. She spoke, when she got ready, reflectively:

"You got a jolt when you found I'd written to father, too. You pretended to be pleased, because you pretended to love him, didn't you? You have to let on to be glad over anything that would please him, as getting a sweet little goody note from me. Really, you were just as glad to hear that I'd written to him as you would be to find a note from some sweetie in one of Wilfred's pockets—it comes to more or less the same thing, of course."

Charlotte managed one more laugh. "Really, Anne," she said, "you're being just as funny as when you used to dress up in mother's clothes and pretend to go calling."

"O, yes," observed the imperturbable child, "that's the way people always try to get out of it when they've had enough. But I don't mind being funny."

"Is there any more?" Charlotte asked. "You've settled it that I don't care for father. What's the next thing? That he doesn't care for me?"

"We can take that next, if you like," said Anne. "He had an awful crush on you for a while. Golly, don't you remember? I can't say about you. You could get anything you wanted out of him. Of course, he got sore when you jilted him for Wilfred. He's been sore ever since, hasn't he? How many presents has he given you—real presents, I mean, not junk? How much has he done for you?"

"We don't want anything done for us," Charlotte said, quietly. "Wilfred wouldn't let me if I did. Father told me before we were married that he was going to try to reduce expenses in order to lay up more for all of us when he died." She added, with a pounce of anger, "I'd like to get into your mind with a broom!"

"Any time you like," said Anne. "Only it's your mind we're talking about now; you're his father's. Why, look here, I can remember—I suppose I must have been 6 or 7—before you got pretty, when you were scrawny and disagreeable and affected. I know I used to think you must have something terrible the matter with you. Well, did father ever make a fuss about you when—holding on in my lap with you, and bring you presents? And wouldn't it have done you more good right then than anything else? It wasn't until you were some body nice to snuggle up to that he began. I was just beginning to get scrawny and unpleasant then myself, so I was in the side lines. But when you jilted him, I took him over."

"I guess that's enough," said Charlotte, getting to her feet. "I don't suppose you're old enough to realize what perfectly nasty things you've been saying."

"O, they're nasty enough," Anne agreed, good humoredly, "only the nastiness isn't in saying them. But I haven't got around yet to why you wrote that letter to father."

Charlotte turned upon her with a gasp of protest, but the girl didn't look up. She clasped one knee in her hands and was staring at it meditatively.

"It wasn't because you're getting sick of Wilfred. You're still crazy about him—I could see that last night. That's one of the real things about you. So you must have written to dad because you wanted more money out of him. Well, I guess there's no reason why you shouldn't. That's what I did. I asked him for \$200—besides my regular allowance, of course. I told him I knew it was an awful lot of money, but I'd simply be heartbroken if I couldn't have it."

Charlotte echoed the amount mechanically, then inquired what the child wanted for it.

"Dancing lessons," she said. And in response to another echo went on to explain: "Not ordinary dancing lessons, nor the regular boarding school gymnastics dancing, either. The school provided that, and it was second rate, like all the rest of their instruction—good enough for profits. But the girl didn't look up. She clasped one knee in her hands and was staring at it meditatively.

"You're a pretty good sport, as well as an old dear," the appalling child observed. "You took that pretty well for the first try. Usually they go into fits, even when they're nowhere near as old as you."

But right here was where young Anne, like Mr. Rabbit in his celebrated experience with the tar baby, broke her molasses jug. She drew a totally unwarranted assumption from the fact that poor old Charlotte didn't visibly have fits, and had a few things yet to learn, and one of these, in point now, was the spiritual application of the law of inertia. She didn't at all realize how much momentum Charlotte had acquired in the past two of her 24 years by the accumulation of a husband and a baby to take care of, a house to keep going, an appearance of respectability to present to the world, a heavy train of cars, in fact, behind her on the rails, which needed a good deal of energy to pull, to be sure, but which, on occasion, had an almost irresistible power to push. Young Anne, running light and making excellent speed toward whatever she wanted, was getting on very satisfactorily so long as there was nothing much in the way, had simply no conception of what a head-on collision with Charlotte would mean.

It's only fair to say that Charlotte hadn't either, nor did she, until a little after 5 o'clock that afternoon, foresee one. Fifteen minutes after Anne had finished her exposition of her sister's character and motives, her own intentions, the two were discussing what they'd have for lunch, and romping with the baby as domesticity as if nothing had disturbed their traditionally sisterly relation. The only time they skirted the morning's battlefield was when Charlotte made a humorous reference to it. This was after lunch, when Anne was setting out for a matinee.

"I suppose, if I were to say I was glad Dick Boyd had invited you and that you were going to see such a good show, you'd tell me that I said it because I'm glad to be rid of you for a while; so I won't. But do have a good time, and don't analyze Dick, because it will be nice to have him back again."

There was a little more good to that than you'd have expected from poor old Charlotte. Looking back upon it, Anne decided that this was the first intimation of her sister's new note.

The new note was unmistakable, when Anne came home from the matinee. She found Charlotte busy at her desk, fending off the baby with one hand while she wrote with the other.

"I'm glad you're back, anyhow," Charlotte said, without rising. "Have a good time? Come and take Jamesie off me, will you? He's just ruined the signature on a perfectly good check. O, I don't care what you do with him. Take him along upstairs and wash him, if you're going. He'll have a grand time with your trunk until you get your things hung up."

"Sure," said Anne, "I'd love to." And then actually caught herself on the edge of an apology for having left her room like that. Half way up the stairs she was sufficiently recovered to stop and say: "That's all right, I thought perhaps if I left 'em you'd think it was your Christian duty to put them away for me."

"You're going to know me a whole lot better before you go back to school," Charlotte called after her.

If what Charlotte meant by this prediction that Anne was going to accumulate a lot of new and unsuspected data about her was verified, as an entelechy, on the other hand, Charlotte day by day became to Anne's bright, hard, young mind more mysterious.

The theory and technique of the jump was a subject in which Anne was professedly expert. Her friends in school she gave lessons in it by precept and example. Any situation, no matter how difficult intrinsically, in which you could manage to get the jump on your rival, or opponent, was far from hopeless. You kept the jump by knowing what you were going to do next, while the other party to the affair was still contemplating the thing you had done last, and then by doing that next thing, or something just as he came up for air. The principal of Anne's school could have borne eloquent and pathetic testimony to the child's talents in this branch of applied psychology; the hair-bobbing episode was but one of a brilliant galaxy.

Well, the thing that Anne's experience enabled her clearly to see, and that she had learned the first 24 hours of her visit to Charlotte was that her elder sister had got the jump on her. How she had got it remained a mystery. Not the first evening and the first morning of the visit the jump had been with Anne, but somehow or other during her absence at the matinee the jump had, of a sudden, shifted. If you want an example, Charlotte's manner of dealing with her father's letter will serve.

When Anne came downstairs with the baby (she'd had a revealing experience with him up there in her room, while she tried to do something entirely at cross purposes with his. She'd never had the chance of a small, irresponsible ruffian like this before except under circumstances in which she could give him her whole attention, and she could adumbrate now what it said for Charlotte's force of character that she wasn't in a sanatorium for nervous wrecks), then she came lugging him, now downstairs, Charlotte got up from her seat, took him away from her, chucked him casually onto theavenport, and said:

"I got a letter from father this afternoon, from the ship just before they sailed. He sent his love to you. I'd show you the letter, but Jamesie got it and chewed it up. They're going to have a grand old time, and mother. She sent her love, too, to both of us."

She had nothing more, it appeared, to volunteer about the contents of the letter, and the crime imputed to Jamesie was certainly plausible enough. An even imperfectly masticated letter wasn't a thing you could ask to have exhibited as a document.

"Did he say anything," Anne asked, after turning the thing over in her mind for a minute, "about having written to me?"

"Not a word," said Charlotte. And she added, with a slightly reflective smile, "of course, there's no reason why he should mention a thing like that—to me."

"Meaning he wouldn't want to make you jealous," Anne commented, in the hope of starting something.

But all she got from Charlotte was, "O, well, that's your idea."

"I suppose he may have sent my letter to the school," Anne reflected.

"Of course," said Charlotte. She was kneeling on theavenport, holding the baby by the feet, and letting him down over the back of it, a proceeding which roused him to such ecstasies of delight that it wasn't easy to hear just what she said. "Of course, people never realize how long it takes a letter to come clear across from San Francisco."

Anne was conscious of a wish that it were practicable to put young Jamesie on the witness stand and learn whether he really had chewed up a letter that afternoon or not. Another thing which she found herself surprisingly concerned to know was whether or not her father had sent any money to Charlotte, but this was a thing which her code wouldn't permit her to ask. People's motives, their hidden impulses and unformulated desires, were fair game in the sort of inquiries she and her friends were in the habit of conducting; but at practical, material facts one drew the line; firm, too, or their simulating analyses would degenerate into precisely the prying sort of gossip which they held themselves so superior to. But did Charlotte understand her immunity? Did she know enough to bank upon it? You could hardly think at all with the baby carrying on like that.

"I hope those poor sumps at the school will know enough to forward it to me here," Anne said. "It would be just like them to hold it for me. If I don't get my allowance, or hold it for me, I don't get my allowance, or hold it for me."

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