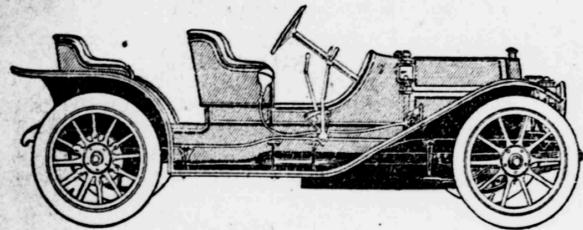


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CHAPTER III.

HE was a skillful architect indeed who first devised the bandbox apartment houses so common now in all parts of New York and must have sat up many nights working out how to extricate the maximum of rent revenue from the area on which he had to fit the structure.

If there were any flats in Harlem of smaller dimensions than the one of four rooms occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Brooks the most experienced and persistent hunter after a place in which to lodge his family with relative economy and some semblance of comfort would have had the time of his or her life finding it. And if other flats there were more luxuriously fitted up, as easily might have been—in fact, certainly must have been—the case, at least there was none, whatever its size, that was kept cleaner or neater or in which more effective use of available material had been made than that over which Mrs. Emma Brooks presided as mistress and factotum.

And Mrs. Brooks herself—how she graced it, altogether unconsciously! As the elder of two daughters of Stanley Harris, who, while not rich, had been well to do, she had been brought up in the comfort of a good home and had enjoyed the advantage of an education at a private seminary. Her father, whose constant companion she had been and whose sense of democracy in the matter of association she had inherited, had adored her, and when she had given her heart to Joseph Brooks, electing him from among numerous suitors, including James Smith, he gave his consent to their union against his own judgment and in face of the strenuous opposition of his wife, esteeming the girl's nappiness superior to all other considerations.

Brooks, who had been in the employ of the Latin-American Steamship company for one year and had been brought into relations with the family by virtue of his selection as secretary to her father, the general manager, had no means whatever of his own, and his salary, then \$60 a month, was a desperately small income on which to begin house-keeping for a girl reared as she had been. But her father helped them, and the young couple counted upon his influence to procure the advancement of his son-in-law to a more remunerative post.

Unfortunately for them, however, Mr. Harris had died a few weeks after their wedding, and they found themselves thrown upon their own resources. Mrs. Harris, a selfish, shallow, unfeeling woman with social pretensions, who regarded her daughter's marriage with the young clerk as a mesalliance and Brooks himself with disdain, left them to shift for themselves and with her other daughter, Beth, who was seven years younger than Emma and shared her mother's views, as she imitated her haughtiness, settled down to the enjoyment of the modest fortune her husband had left her and the indulgence of the ostentation she loved, but which during Mr. Harris' lifetime she had never been able to gratify to the top of her bent. She did not for this, however, withdraw altogether from association with Emma and Brooks and continued on more or less amicable terms with them. Now and then she condescended to call upon them with Beth, but her visits, as a rule, were a good deal of a trial to the young couple, for she regarded Brooks' failure to get on in the steamship company as a vindication of her opinion as to his ability and the judiciousness of their marriage and was prone to condone with her daughter, assume an exasperating I-told-you-so attitude and lament what might have been.

During the four years of their married life Brooks' salary had been raised only \$20 a month, although in addition to his work as accountant, to which he had been assigned after Mr. Harris' death, that of collector had been thrust upon him. It had been a hard, bitter experience for pretty little Mrs. Brooks, this unaccustomed drudgery of housework, this continuous scouring of greasy pots and pans and washing of dishes, which she loathed; this deprivation of comforts and luxuries that she had known all her life; this privation of many personal things considered indispensable by the dainty woman; this necessity of perpetual rigid economizing, which barely sufficed to make both ends meet. She deprived herself of much needed clothing, to say nothing of finery, that Joe might go properly clad to his office, but she never for that reason descended to slovenliness, never "let herself go," as so many women in their own households make the mistake of doing, and never had she allowed one word of complaint, one indication of regret, to escape her. She had married Joe for love, for better or for worse, and resigned herself bravely and cheerfully to the consequences, however hard to bear, hoping for the better times that were so long in coming and encour-

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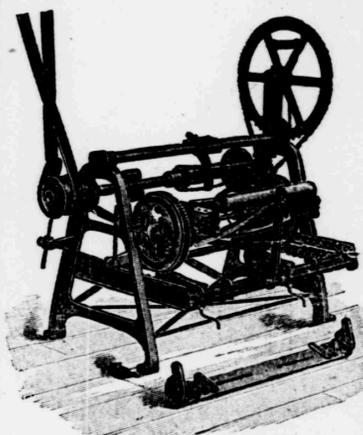
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aging her husband to fight on and win.

Joe, for his part, lacked his wife's grit and energy, and constant disappointment had undermined his fortitude. He loved Emma. He hardly could have done otherwise, though calculation had entered largely into his courting of her. Chivalrously, while the sweet bliss of their early married life held him in its spell, he had done as much of the heavier work of the menage as he could to spare her when time and opportunity afforded, but very naturally he had soon tired of this—where is the man who does not?—and by degrees had left as much of it as he could to her, except when his moods of optimism and affectionate solicitude impelled him to go to her assistance. At such times he wanted to do it all.

On the evening following his outburst at the office he was still resentful and "down in the mouth" when he let himself into his little flat, and the smiles of his wife as she raised her rosy lips to receive his kiss of greeting failed to dispel his gloom.

"You seem out of sorts tonight, dear," she said solicitously. "Anything wrong at the office?"

"Nothing in particular. I'm tired and hungry after slaving all day in this awful heat, that's all."

"Never mind, supper's all ready, so sit down and tuck in."

"What did you get?"

"Chops and potatoes."

Joe turned up his nose, but took his seat at table and began to eat. He answered his wife's questions in monosyllables. His thoughts, it was plain, were not on his meal or Emma's conversation, and, seeing that he was preoccupied and troubled, she ceased to try to engage his attention.

"I paid the gas bill today," he vouchsafed at length. "Ninety cents more than last month."

"Ninety cents more!" she commented with concern. "I'm sure we didn't use half as much. And we owe the butcher four-sixty."

"Every month it costs more to live. I don't know what we are going to do, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, Joe. Goodness knows I try to be as economical as I can."

"I know, but it's all wrong. It's all wrong that you should be spoiling your hands with those beastly greasy pans. They weren't meant for such work. I wish we could afford a hired girl."

"So do I, but we can't, so what's the use of wishing? Didn't you get the raise you asked Captain Williams for?" she inquired.

"No."

He hung his head and lapsed into gloomy silence. She dropped the morsel she was raising to her mouth and rose from the table, filled with dismay, her appetite completely gone. Tears of disappointment followed the realization of what the failure of their plans meant, for neither had doubted that his request would be complied with, and she had built many castles in the air on the strength of it. A few dollars more a week added to their distressingly small income would have meant much to them. But, gazing at her husband sitting there utterly dejected and crushed, her heart went out to him in pity and love, and she moved over to his chair and put her arm consolingly round his neck.

"Never mind, Joe, boy," she urged; "don't look so solemn. We're no worse off than we were before, and you'll win out some day."

She placed her hand under his chin and raised his head to kiss him. He

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