

THE RUBBER STAMP

By Georgia Wood Pangborn

ILLUSTRATIONS BY K. R. WIREMAN



“SEE,” said the nurse, “Martha has the Nancy Dancy books. Did you know I helped to make them? You wouldn’t suspect *me* of having a hand in anything literary or artistic, now, would you?”

Miss Waite’s business concerned only the children of other women, but her face was that of the mother of many. My son was in her cushiony arms at the moment going to sleep over his five-ounce bottle. She pinched his inert hand, whereupon he spread his fingers, increased the slit between his eyelids by a hair’s breadth, and resumed work with a tiny sigh.

“Just fancy!” said the nurse. “*Me* having anything to do with a book.”

She said book with the reverent capitalization bestowed on literature by those who have never tried it.

“They certainly are having a great success,” I said. “It’s so hard to get satisfactory children’s books nowadays. Everything is always eating up something else. The artists seem to love to do dragons and snakes. I suppose because they have nice lines and lend themselves to cheap color processes.”

“Dear me,” said the nurse, “I don’t know anything about that. A picture is a picture to me, though you’d think I might have learned a little being with Mrs. Sterret a whole year.”

“Were you really?” said I. “Do tell me what she is like. One hears so many queer things about famous people. Is she really such a sloven? And is it true that she turns her children over to trained nurses and hardly sees them from one year’s end to another?”

Miss Waite made a ferocious little sound in her throat: “Who says that?”

“Oh,” I said vaguely, “newspapers—everybody.”

My son was asleep invincibly. She spanked him scientifically and tickled his

neck, but he had sunk beyond reach, so she kissed the top of his head resoundingly, avoiding the fontanelle, and cuddled him to her starched white bosom.

“There’s no doctor or head nurse looking,” she muttered guiltily. “Oh, how I *do* wish you belonged to me,” and she brazenly rocked him with her cheek against the warm fuzz of his head.

“As to turning her babies over to nurses,” said she scornfully, “there was never but one nurse, to my knowledge, and I was the one. As to being a sloven, anybody who could do what she did and think about looks—

“When I first saw her I did think she was a crank. She was so thin and sick-looking, and carelessly dressed. And her eyes had a wild look that made me suspicious. She was a sloven if you like, then. The last time I saw her she might have stepped out of a show-window on Fifth Avenue. Her little boy was two months old when I came to her. ‘I’m so afraid of making mistakes in preparing the bottle,’ said she. ‘I am—a—very busy woman, and my husband is not well.’

“We nurses are so used to finding trouble—wickedness too—where you’d least expect it that we take a skeleton in the closet as a matter of course. We know perfectly well that something unpleasant—even horrible—besides the case that brings us there, is always walking around the rooms of every house or flat where a family lives. Some ghost or goblin is sure to grin at us through a crack before we’ve been in a house twenty-four hours.”

“There isn’t one here,” I said indignantly.

Miss Waite said nothing.

I thought a moment and was silent. Miss Waite continued:

“Sometimes it’s rat size—sometimes only mouse. But I’ve seen—well—wolves and tigers. I shouldn’t have said what I did if yours had been bigger than a mouse. We get so we pay no more attention to ’em than

to the family cat; do our business and go as soon as possible.

"To tell the honest truth, I thought at first she was a 'nervous case.' That's a polite word for almost or quite insane, you know. Still, she had been preparing the baby's food for a month all herself and doing it in a way I had to live up to: boric acid for the nipples, bottle brushes, cream dipper, barley-water, milk-sugar, lime-water—everything as exact and clean as a surgeon's tools. And *that* didn't seem like a 'nervous case.'

"I could feel her great black eyes boring through the back of my head when she showed me into this baby's pantry of hers.

"'You see,' said she in a kind of apologetic way, 'I can't intrust this sort of thing to untrained hands. I asked my second girl to put the modified milk into the baby's refrigerator, supposing she would do it at once—and found it standing beside the hot kitchen stove two hours afterward. One has to do those things one's self,' said she; 'or trust them to some one who knows how.' Then, suddenly, as I was beginning to brush the bottles, she ran out of the room, and I heard her trying not to cry. A nurse is hardened—at least accustomed—to people's crying, but this—I knew that it was because of something, because of the Thing I was speaking of that was in the house, and I knew that it must be a big one—tiger-size, or worse.

"Not wickedness. When it's wickedness you know it because you begin to feel wicked and cynical yourself. This was big and cold and heavy, like sewer-gas, or like— Did you ever see a picture of a snake twined about a branch and looking down into a bird's nest?

"'It's fear,' I said.

"And as I set my feedings away, noticing again how beautifully spick and span she had kept everything, I found I was horribly sorry. And that made me cross, for a nurse can't afford to have sympathies. This, I suppose, confused me, so that when I went to have a look at my new baby and take him his bottle I accidentally opened the wrong door. I had never seen a studio before. The light was rather dim so that I didn't see then, what was so plain afterward, that everything was just shadow—hardly more than begun. It looked as if the room

were full of children, all laughing—and fairies—well, you know those fairies in the Nancy Dancy books. But of course the drawings were all ever so much bigger than they show in the books, and mostly in color. They were dear! How could Fear be in the same house with that crowd of laughing babies? Still I heard her sobbing somewhere, and then—but it seemed as if it was all those laughing babies that made me do it—I began to cry myself. I stepped out softly and tried the next door, and there was my baby right enough, bless his heart, with his finger half-way down his throat and his eyes wide open, looking for his bottle. I took away his finger and tucked in the nipple instead, and he swallowed away like a little man, staring hard at my cap.

"It was evening when I came, so my first meal there was breakfast. As I went down I saw a maid taking a tray to the studio door—just coffee. But the coffee they had at that house! It wasn't a beverage; it was a drug. I had to fill my cup two-thirds full of milk and then it was strong. But she took a whole breakfast-cup full—black! "As the door opened she saw me and asked how the baby had slept. You'd have thought from her face that he was desperately ill.

"'Why,' said I, 'he's the wellest, fattest, dearest little thing that ever was! *You're* the patient,' I said. 'Does your doctor know what kind of breakfast you have?' And I pointed to the coffee.

"'That isn't breakfast,' said she. 'I had my breakfast two hours ago, when Anne woke up.' Anne was her little girl. 'This is just to help me about working.' She waved her hand toward the pictures, and now I saw plainly how they were really just ghosts of pictures—all cloudy masses of paint. Yet the night before they had seemed all but alive.

"'I have to get past this stage, you see,' she said to me, just as if I knew about such things, 'and it takes whip and spur to do it. Once past the hill and the rough road, we'll get back to a more normal way of living.'

"She was drinking that terrible coffee while she talked, and by the time it was half gone the color had come into her face and her eyes were bright. I could hardly believe she was the woman I had heard crying the night before.

“I may as well tell you,” said she, “what I am trying to do. You know, my husband is an invalid. Our physician says change of climate might make him well, but we can’t afford that at present. And aside from that our affairs are in a bad way—very bad. We’ve had losses”—she turned white as she mentioned that. I saw it was no small matter—“so that I thought it might be well if I took my talent out of its napkin. We are very ambitious for our children”—she spoke with an odd sort of defiance as though expecting criticism—“and that sort of ambition is as expensive as one can make it. So I thought I could serve them better this way than by being with them all the time. But I had very little training. So I am going to school to myself. Some of

the most successful artists have been self-taught,” said she. “It’s very hard to give my children over to others to care for. Still, when I remember the mothers that leave theirs in a crèche, while they go out to scrub”—she gulped down the rest of her coffee and stood up very straight and bright-eyed. “You see,” said she, “I’ve got to do good work. There is poor work that pays well,

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I understand, but I don’t know how to do it. And it takes so long to learn; and—we are in such a hurry to go South. But you will help me—” She stopped being dignified and put her hands on my shoulders

and looked up into my face—she is a little thing.

“You will stand by, won’t you?” said she. And in spite of her courageous air I saw in her eyes the Fear that had been weeping around the house the night before, the fear of the bird on her nest when she sees the snake.

“So I patted her and said of course I’d ‘stand by,’ only she mustn’t worry and mustn’t take her coffee so strong. She held on to me for a long time, but was so still I didn’t know she had been crying until I found the starch out of my bib where her face had been.

“‘I don’t believe I’ll mind *your* having him,’ she said at last, giving me a little push out of the room. And I heard a funny scratchy noise like something in a terrible hurry. (I learned afterward she was sharpening her charcoal on sand-paper.) Then walking back and forth; a steady tramp for hours, for she never sat down at her work. There wasn’t any model. She said she



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wouldn't let her little girl pose for her, anyway, and that even if she did it would spoil everything because the child would become self-conscious and stiff.

"I have taught my eye to remember," she said, and she was always doing little studies of their heads while she was with them. It was the drawing of an eyelid, she told me, or the curve of a cheek or the squaring of the mouth corners when they laughed that she sketched then. 'I do that when another woman would be sewing. Of course I couldn't depend on that if I were a painter, but it's enough for the simple sort of drawings I'm making. And then I use my camera some, but really you can't get much out of a photograph; it's one way of sketching and sometimes you get an idea, but generally they're all wrong. I didn't know that when I started out. I thought my photographs were lovely and that all I should have to do would be to copy them line for line. But when I began to work from them they seemed to crumble into dust.'

"That's the way she put it. I didn't understand then, and I don't now. She had some of the loveliest photographs of her babies that I've ever seen. But they didn't suit her.

"Her camera was a wonderful little thing and I believe very expensive. She could take snaps in-doors if it was moderately light, and she was always gunning after little Anne's smiles, which were rarer than they might have been, for the child was fretting over her last molars and running a temperature and crying at night. It was better after I got her to come to me—but it took a long time. Queer child. Not everybody liked her. 'It's for my rubber stamp,' Mrs. Sterret explained to me one day after shooting off a dozen exposures at Anne. I noticed she always faced her camera toward the sun, and thought it odd, because the directions tell you not to do that. 'It's prettiest,' said she, 'when they are almost in silhouette with the sun on their hair and drawing a line of light around their profiles. You get an effect of sun that way that you can't in any other.'

"I asked her what she meant by 'rubber stamp.'

"The rubber-stamp artist," said she, 'is the one that makes the most money. You

do a certain kind of picture—one subject done in one way, all the time—enough different so you can tell them apart, that's all. This is the greatest of the rubber-stamp artists,' said she, pulling out a portfolio. She spread out a lot of magazine covers. 'You could almost superimpose one profile on another. All that's different is the hats; the girls all droop their eyelids and part their lips and hold their chins in the air. I'm told he gets three hundred dollars for each of them.'

"It didn't seem possible they could be worth that, but I did think them pretty and to be honest I had to say so, though I could see she didn't.

"Of course you do," said she. 'Everybody thinks so except artists. That's the rubber stamp. Now, here's another portfolio. It's hardly fair to call it rubber-stamp work; at least it's a much better one than the other, and I've learned ever so much from her. Children, you see; and they *are* children. *She* knows how to keep things simple. She uses a clean strong line, and you'd never mistake her work for anybody else's. That's where the stamp comes. But her children are always solemn and quiet. Mine are to be always in sunshine and always laughing and wriggling. That's *my* rubber stamp—that—and—keeping them in flat light grays—not much line.'

"Well, it seemed to me she was getting it; only—it was always one new drawing after another. At first glance you'd think, 'How perfectly lovely!'—then there'd seem to be nothing there. Just nothing at all.

"I'm not ready yet to finish," she said once, reading my look, I suppose. 'It's the hardest part I'm doing now—composition and tone, making maps of the masses of light and shade as we used to do maps of the States at school. Finishing won't be hard once I'm ready.'

"But I couldn't help being uneasy; perhaps because I saw she was uneasy herself. What if the finishing might not be so easy, after all? But then, what did I know? I took the children out and kept them away all day as much as I could, and took them both at night. She had been taking Anne at night, molars and all. I don't know when she had slept. And the baby only two months old! Think of it! No wonder she couldn't nurse him.

"Mr. Sterret? I had to change my opinion of him before I was done. At first I put him down for a hypochondriac. I supposed he was dying. But some people show up best then—and some don't; depending partly on what the case is, but not altogether. I met him several times in the halls and he bowed and spoke pleasantly, but kept a handkerchief smelling of car-

too, and knew how their affairs stood. He called me into an empty room and shut the door.

"Does she still keep up that artistic insanity?" he said, speaking in the angry way that one will use when anxious about a friend.

"She works constantly in her studio," I said. He struck his fist into his open



"She was always gunning after little Anne's smiles."—Page 310.

bolic to his face. He had a room at the top of the house and took his air on the roof and isolated himself with all sorts of necessary and unnecessary precautions. I wanted to do something for him, too, but he seemed to be afraid that I'd somehow carry tuberculosis from him to the children if I did; so when I saw it worried him I kept away. He was almost frantic on the subject and martyred himself almost as much as that poor leper they made such a fuss about.

"But I finally persuaded him it was perfectly safe to bring the baby up to the roof for its airing when he was there, and it did him a world of good. And I told him of all T'b's I had known who got perfectly well and how autopsies almost always show scars on the lungs, so that he brightened up to be almost human after a few days. He had a little insurance, it seemed, so wasn't so worried about his dying as Mrs. Sterret was. She preferred him alive.

"One day I met Mr. Sterret's physician coming down. He was a personal friend,

palm and went to the window, glaring out as though some pet case were going against him. 'How does she eat and sleep?' he asked, without turning around. I told him.

"Don't you think that you, as a woman, might bring Mrs. Sterret to her senses and show her that she is throwing away her husband's life and her children's bread and butter by this madness? That a woman should think of a career under *such* circumstances!' he said.

"Oh,' I said, 'it's *not* that. Oh, how can you think so? She knows the money is going and she hopes to earn enough by her drawings to support them all and to go South before it is too late for her husband.'

"There was enough,' said the physician, 'when she began. Why, she must have spent five hundred on her camera alone in the past year; and now she's got *you*. There's no money in art or writing except at the top. I know a lot of those people and they all say so. And she has had hardly

any training—as training counts nowadays. What does her work look like, anyway?’

“‘Oh,’ I said, ‘it’s lovely! She only needs time to finish—’

“‘He laughed angrily. ‘Other things will be finished first,’ said he. ‘Her husband’s life and every cent they have. I think,’ said he, ‘I’ll have to talk with Mrs. Sterret.’

“‘Oh, don’t,’ I said. ‘Don’t discourage her. I do think she is going to come out all right.’

“‘But he looked at me as doctors look at a nurse who has said too much, and next minute he was knocking at her studio door.

“‘I was so angry with him, though I could see he thought everything of them both! The baby was fretting and I walked with him to keep him quiet. It was an hour before the doctor came out. He was looking as miserable as if he’d lost a patient. He started to pass me without speaking, then reconsidered.

“‘She needs a woman to be good to her, I guess,’ said he. ‘But you can’t see your friends go over Niagara without a word; at least I can’t.’

“‘You don’t need to push them further into the current, though,’ I snapped. He wasn’t offended in the least.

“‘No,’ said he. ‘That would be a terrible pity.’

“‘He gave me some valerian for her and said to try to get her coffee away. Then he took a look at the babies and brightened up a bit. I saw he liked the way I was caring for them.

“‘As soon as the baby was quiet I ran up to Mrs. Sterret, but she answered that she was working and would have her dinner on a tray.

“‘I dare say I shall work late,’ she said. ‘I really must finish something to-night. Then I can send it off to-morrow and we shall see.’ She smiled and looked as bright as a button, but her hand was a lump of ice and her cheeks had two red spots.

“‘He means well. He’s our best friend. And it may be he is right. I’m going to try to prove him wrong to-night. Nobody would be better pleased than he if I proved him wrong.’ That was the way she took it.

“‘I couldn’t sleep that night. The baby was a little restless. I didn’t undress. I took off my cap and dozed a little on the couch, but I felt as if I were alone on night

duty in the hospital, only worse, because there you *can* get help, and there you have only sick people to think about. And in sickness there are things you can do; it’s tangible—but this—well, it was the Beast that I had felt that first night. I drew the curtains tight, for the Thing was so real that I half expected to see a snake face glaring through the black glass. And about once an hour I went and listened outside Mrs. Sterret’s studio door. I could hear her stepping back and forth and her charcoal scratching. Now and then she hummed a little tune. But I was terribly anxious, for I knew what the strain had been, and I had seen nurses collapse and be good for nothing ever afterward. You *can’t*, you know—

“‘Finally—when the windows were turning gray I heard her give a little cry as if she were hurt, and then—

“‘After all!’ said she. ‘After all!’

“‘Then I went in. I thought it was time.

“‘The pictures seemed to have faded and dulled overnight like fire gone to ashes. Some she had rubbed out, some were twisted and distorted. All deformed, ugly, dead, spoiled. I had felt for a week that she was not getting on with them, but she had held her own until the doctor came and talked to her, and now—

“‘She had put out her light and was standing by the window looking out.

“‘See the morning,’ said she. ‘It is like iron—rigid and gray and cold—and over there a little flame of red. I can imagine a great battle beginning on a morning like this. Don’t you see the tents over there—’ It was a ragged line of clouds. ‘Mars and Venus and Juno and Athena camping above the field of Troy.’ She stood among her unfinished canvases, in her trailing wrapper, with her hair all wild, both hands against her head. ‘And I don’t believe any of the great generals fought and thought and suffered more than I—an ignorant and incompetent woman—trying to overcome my ignorance and incompetence so that I can save my babies. . . . I should not have been ignorant and incompetent. No woman has any business to bring children into the world unless she is able to protect them against such a chance as this. . . .’

“‘You go to bed,’ said I.

“‘To bed?’ said she. ‘Why, Troy is burning—tall Troy town—and you tell me

to go to bed! We must take the sick and the children and go. Æneas escaped with Anchises—we will escape, somehow. . . . Troy is burning,' she said again.

her as she fell. She was little, anyway, and so thin that I carried her to her bed like a child. But I wasn't going to send for a doctor—not just yet. She opened her eyes



"I had to give baby his breakfast bottle. . . . Then little Anne began her day."—Page 314.

"I sat down and cried. Then I remembered I had left the baby's bottle heating and ran back to get it. It was too hot, so I had to make another. While I was doing that she came and stood behind me. I didn't dare turn around with my eyes all red like that.

"'Auntie,' said she, 'I'm—not—feeling well,'—and I turned just in time to catch

after a minute and I got her warm and comfortable. She was terribly sub-normal; weak and dull and all played out.

"'I've failed, Auntie,' said she. 'I can't do it, after all. It was foolish to try, as Doctor Kean said, but I loved them so, and I was sure love would teach me. I ought to have tried keeping boarders at the start. Now I've used up all the strength

and money that I might have used to succeed at that. Now Will can't go South, and so he will die—perhaps I'll die, too, Auntie. Mothers do—I thought I couldn't. I was very vainglorious. I thought I loved them too much to die. But now—it's got inside me—as forts are taken. . . . I'll try. . . but—'

"And then I seemed to see the whole thing. 'You *haven't* failed,' I shouted. 'You're all in, but you've really won. It's all in your head and fingers now, just as my training is. All you need is to sleep and eat and rest for twenty-four hours, and you'll see—you'll see! You're not even sick,' I said.

"But I thought I was lying.

"'Auntie,' said she, 'after paying our debts we sha'n't have one penny in the world after the first of the month. I've thrown it all away—all—but I thought I was going to—save us all,' said she. 'But we're going over the falls—Niagara—the babies—'

"'You sleep,' I said. 'Falls—no such thing. *Your* sort don't go over Niagara.'

"I gave her a hypodermic and left her, for the baby was howling blue murder and little Anne was fretting. She was asleep when I looked in next. She slept for twelve hours. Then I heard her get up and go into the studio.

"I knew better than to go near her then. I—well I prayed a little, and vowed I'd drug those babies silly if they dared raise a row before she came out.

"I've seen relatives waiting while an operation was going on, and they made me very cross. It seemed so silly, when they couldn't do anything and all modern science was at work for them, to stand around in the reception-room and try to imagine what was going on—perhaps half a block away. Though as to that I don't know but it makes you still crosser when there aren't any relatives to be anxious, or when those that do exist don't care or are thinking about money—(there's a funny look to the eye that always gives 'em away when they're thinking that, always).

"But my business has been on the inside of the closed door, you see, where I didn't have to wonder and where the patient didn't belong to me. Now I felt that Mrs. Sterret *did* belong to me. People do when they've cried on you—and I was shut out and couldn't help a bit, at least on *her* side of

the door. There she was, with tools as mysterious to me as a surgeon's knives would be to her, concerned in something as important as a major operation, with nothing but a little stick of charcoal and some paper between her and the Beast. Think of working at babies' smiles on paper in such a mood as that! Trying to scare away the snake with a picture of a child laugh!

"I suppose I passed her door fifty times that night, if once, and I haven't scorned the relatives since.

"At about four o'clock I heard her stirring and smelt coffee. Then a great scratching of charcoal until sunrise. Just as the sun came up I heard the fixatif going on, and that made me hope, for it meant that something was finished. After that came the rattle of paper as though she were pinning more sheets to her board, and this time she sang under breath as she worked. Still, I'd known her to do that when things were going against her most.

"By that time I had to give baby his breakfast bottle and I scurried to keep him from talking too loud about it. Then little Anne began *her* day. I had the second girl take her out as soon as she had had her 'gubbum,' which was the word she had invented for breakfast, and then I devoted myself to guarding the studio door and keeping baby quiet. When he took his morning nap I fell asleep myself on a couch that stood in the hall. It was about noon when I awoke, feeling as one does when it is time for a patient's medicine. She was standing beside me dressed for the street.

"'I've just had my luncheon,' she announced calmly, 'and I'm going to take my pictures into town. I dare say I shall be back by four,' and out she went.

"*That*, if you please, after such a night—such a series of nights as she—and I—had spent. She would have had me fooled—I should have thought her as calm as she looked but for one thing. She didn't look at the children or speak of them, though the baby woke up just then with a delicious coo. That showed she couldn't trust herself. I looked out of the window to see that she was really gone, and saw her with the big portfolio standing on the corner waiting for the car. She looked as matter of fact and prosperous and well dressed as if she were going out for a *matinée*. She *could* dress when she chose.

"Then I sneaked into the studio and the first thing I saw was this"—Miss Waite opened the Nancy Dancy book to the figure of a little girl squealing with laughter.

"It was a study she had made for this, I mean. The finished one had gone to town with her. It was on the easel, put there for me to see—to tell me what she couldn't trust herself to talk about. It was life-size—just the face. It was all that the unfinished things had promised. Even I could see that it had been done with as little effort as you or I would write a page of a letter. A few flat tones—sunlight behind the head outlining the dear fluffy hair; a few strong lines that were soft and delicate too; everything about it just right—and under it what do you think she had written? 'The Rubber Stamp.' I have it now in my room at the club where I can see it whenever I wake up. It does put the heart in one so.

"You have the rest of the story in these little books, and you knew before I began that she succeeded. Hardly a magazine comes out now without a drawing of hers in it, and they have a perfectly lovely house in South Carolina for winters and a New England farm for summers, and Mr. Sterret is as brown and strong as any other farmer, even though one lung has to do the work of two. Little Anne rides a pony like a circus performer, with her daddy around the farm overseeing, and the boy was scolding to be allowed to have a horse too when I was there last, and they were wondering whether his legs were long enough; by this time he has one, no doubt.

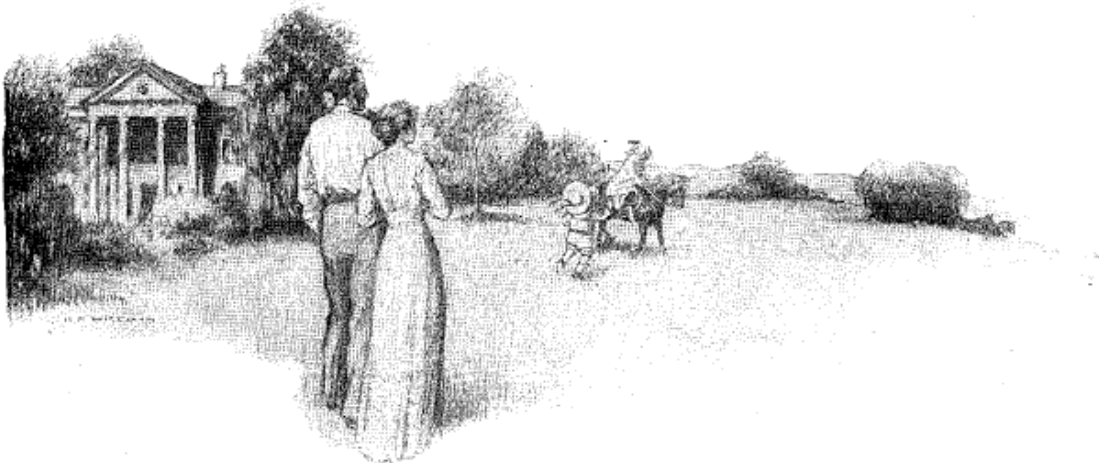
"And that's all I know about women who have what newspapers call 'careers.' She fought herself nearly dead for her husband and babies—and won. She says that the babies did it because she learned all she knew from them. And that is partly true.

"Oh, did I tell you how she acted when she came back with the first big check in her pocket? I saw her coming and I did not meet her for fear I should cry, whatever the news was, and if it should be bad I'd want all the nerve I had, so I went up to the nursery with the children and got the baby to goo-ing and Anne to romping, and let Mrs. Sterret come to find me. I didn't turn around at first when I knew she stood in the door, but Anne rushed and caught her around the knees. 'Oh, Mother, how pretty you are!' said she.

"Then I turned. I had expected her to collapse, victory or defeat—after that strain. Collapse! She looked six inches taller and ten years younger. Younger? No—young people don't look like that. It was the expression you see in those big strong men who do things.

"'Auntie dear,' said she, 'can you get the babies and Daddy ready to go South to-morrow? I shall have to stay here for a fortnight longer to fill an order.'

"Then the iron look in her face melted and she threw up her arms laughing. 'Now I'll tell Will,' said she, and rushed upstairs like a child. 'Will! Will!' I heard her calling all the way—then the door shut on them and I was too busy with the babies to think of anything else."



"Little Anne rides a pony like a circus performer, with her daddy around the farm overseeing."