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[Little Grandmother]

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Hilda Polacheck,

American Folk Stuff.

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Little Grandmother.

She was called Little Grandmother, but she was tall and broad. She had big bones which made her body large. Her name was Katherina Breshkovsky and she was sixty-five years old when she visited Hull-House.

Of the sixty-five years that she had lived, thirty-three had been spent in Siberia. She was a political prisoner. The crime for which she was sent to Siberia consisted of being caught teaching the Russian peasants to read and write.

Katherina Breshkovsky told us that knowing how to read and write opens the gates of the past and points the way to the way to the future. The Czar of Russia did not want the peasants to know anything about the past and he did not want them to think of the future. That is why the Little Grandmother was a criminal.

She had soft kind eyes, that made me feel that she understood everybody. She loved the Russian peasants.

“Some day,” she said, “the people of Russia will be able to read and write just like the people of America.”

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She wanted the American people to know what was happening in Russia. So she told her story at Hull-House. Then she went back to Russia, where she was again sent to Siberia.

The Air is Bad.

Hull-House was attracting the attention of Chicago's wealthy society leaders. They were curious. They wanted to know why anyone who did not have to live on Halsted Street, would choose to do so.

I was standing in front of Hull-House one hot, dusty afternoon, when a shiny carriage, drawn by two spirited horses, stopped. A footman got down and opened the door of the carriage. A tall, overdressed woman stepped out, and I heard her say:

“James, take the horses right home. The air is very bad here.”

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A Prince Comes to Halsted Street.

“I heard her say it. She said she was gonna get the prince.”

Aw, yer daffy! A prince wouldn't come here. A prince never comes to a dirty street!”

“Well, I tell you I was sittin' in the big room and Miss Addams stopped at the desk and said she was gonna get the prince.”

Sarah Goldberg and Maria Molinari were sitting on the railing surrounding the court at Hull-House when the above conversation took place. The two girls were waiting for the other members of “The Jolly Ten Club.” As the members arrived the news of the prince's coming was imparted to them. A variety of questions greeted Sarah:

“A real prince?”

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“Is he tall?”

“Has he blond curly hair like Prince Charming in the play?”

“Will his coat be made of velvet?”

“With golden buttons?”

“Is he going to have diamond buckles on his shoes?”

“Will he come in a golden coach?”

“Will the coach be drawn by six white horses?”

“I tell you what,” said Maria, “let's not have a meeting today. Let's wait here till the prince comes.”

Every child that passed was invited to stay and wait for the prince. Before long, a crowd of children had gathered. They were so excited that they failed to notice the archaic two-wheel 2 vehicle, drawn by a scrawny horse, with the driver on an elevated seat at the back, had stopped. One of the children saw Jane Addams alight. The vehicle was immediately surrounded by the group of children. Wide-eyed, they waited for their prince.

But the prince of their imagination did not come. A short round-shouldered man in a poorly fitting prince-Albert coat, stepped from the vehicle. A shabby black cape hung from his neck. He wore a battered hat. He carried his valise. When he took off his hat, the children saw that he was bald. He had a thick half gray, half black beard. He was just a man!

Keen disappointment was in everybody's eyes!

“Are you a real prince?” one of the boys asked.

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“Children, this is Prince Kropotkin of Russia.” Jane Addams said.

“Where is your crown?” asked a little girl.

“My name is Peter Kropotkin and I have no crown. I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Now children, please let us pass,” said Jane Addams.

“May I carry your bag?” one of the boys asked.

“Yes, certainly.” said Peter Kropotkin.

The children lined up in two rows forming a guard of honor. Ragged, poorly fed children they were. They were future American citizens. It was a fitting guard for the great Russian Democrat. Between this guard Peter Kropotkin and Jane Addams walked into Hull-House.

The Ghost of the Convent.

On West Taylor Street, near Throop Street, stood an abandoned convent. All around this convent lived people. They were Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, Russian, Polish, Bohemian, Greek, French, Swedish, Norwegian people. All these people had children. I was one of the children.

We played all sorts of games on the sidewalks and the street. We were all good friends. Even if my gentile friend called me sheeney in the morning, she was willing to share her candy with me in the afternoon. I plead guilty to calling my Italian friend dago at times, and then offering her a bite of my apple.

One night we were engaged in a stirring game of “run sheep run” when we saw a light in one of the convent windows. The next minute the light was at the next window. The light kept appearing at each window for a few seconds. There were many windows in the convent. We watched the light breathlessly.

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“Ghosts!” said Mary Mc Guire.

“Ghosts!” we all repeated.

“I’m gonna tell my mother about it, said Mary Mc Guire.

We all decided to tell our mothers, and we scurried in all directions to our homes.

The next evening some of our Catholic neighbors came out. Sure enough, there was the ghost again.

This “ghost” produced all kinds of fantastic stories. One old Catholic woman said that the souls of the saints were rambling 2 through the old convent. Another version was that the saints must be dissatisfied with something.

It was about this time that the convent was to be sold to a group of Jewish philanthropists, who planned to house The Chicago Hebrew Institute in the abandoned convent. Then the story was told that the saints were objecting to the building being sold to Jews.

My mother knew the caretaker of the convent so she called on his family one evening.

“Have you heard of the “ghost” story?” my mother asked.

“What Ghost?” asked the caretaker.

“My little girl told me that every night, as soon as it gets dark, a “ghost” appears in every window of the convent.”

“Well, I’m a pretty live ghost,” said the caretaker. “I go from window to window with a candle to make sure that the windows are locked. I must use a candle as the electric lights have been shut off.”