

The Finest House in Town

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The great house was the most beautiful in town—not that it was so grand, but that it was so fine. Its sturdy foundation supported thick walls, expansive porches with turrets and buttresses tiptoeing skyward. Not one room was non-functional, but each had been designed for a specific purpose. Each shingle and each tile of the roof was perfectly constructed, and the house's lathing and arch were cunningly crafted. Truly a Master Builder had been at work here.

Apart from the mortar and brick, the tile and stone, there was an unusual atmosphere surrounding the house, an excitement which said this was a household unlike any other. By night the windows shimmered with light, and by day, when the lanterns inside were dimmed, it seemed as though the lights were still shining. The people who lived in the house were also special. They shared and demonstrated such loving concern for each other, such caring. If one stood by the great gate, music and laughter could be heard coming from inside; and because it was a real house, an angry word might ever so often pierce the atmosphere, but never haranguing or violent ranting.

Even the life growing outside, the shrubbery and flowering bushes, the bending trees, the budding plants seemed finer than the other gardens in town, more content to be about the business of growing. The same storms beat upon these grasses and plants. The same winds blew and tore. The same harsh summer sun burned as on the other gardens in town. But, any damage was cleverly turned to advantage by the gardener who did his pruning with a careful knife and a firm but gentle hand.

Evalyn All was not from such a fine house. She lived in one of the shanties which crowded upon the backwaters. A small wood-burning stove heated the hut in winter—if there was wood—and water was drawn from the brackish stream outside, the conduit for the disposals of the towns and factories up river. Evalyn lived with her older sister and three younger brothers and a mother who disappeared for days, then reappeared without warning.

In her yearning for a better life, Evalyn All would go and watch the fabric of life woven daily around the great house. She would hide behind a bush near the gate and watch and watch, her big eyes observing even the tiniest details. She noted that the clothes of the people were always clean. In summer they dressed in white. The piques and dotted Swisses and organdies of the little girls shone brightly in the sunshine and Evalyn wondered—How do they keep their things so clean?

One day a small boy fell on the gravel way. From her hiding place, Evalyn saw the gardener turn, gently wipe away tears, prepare an herbal salve, then bind the bloodied knee. She turned her back to the fence. The longing beating in her soul was too much to bear.

As the seasons changed, the foliage on the hiding bush fell to the ground. Suddenly Evalyn All discovered that she could be seen by the occupants of the great house and that none of them seemed to mind her presence. When one man smiled cordially and nodded his head in greeting, she took heart and walked to the very gate itself. Since there was no necessity to hide, she mustered enough boldness to walk completely around the iron fence.

The kitchen was in the rear, and if Evalyn All stood by the fence there, she could smell bread baking, its yeasty aroma saturating the air. It filled her nose and lungs and triggered a hungry ache in her empty stomach.

A marvelous fountain bubbled beside the back porch, and she was to discover that even in the coldest of winter it flowed, and frost scarcely iced its edges. Evalyn imagined how wonderful such clear and sparkling water would taste on the tongue, how it would roll over the palate, how its freshness might linger even after being swallowed.

As the days grew colder, the people in the great house exchanged their summer whites for garments of scarlet, warm flowing robes that protected them from winter chills. Evalyn All shivered through her daily pilgrimages. If she could just have one small taste of that fresh bread.

For days Evalyn All was ill. She burned with fever and often cried out something her brothers and sisters couldn't understand, "Please, please let me come in! I'll be so careful. Please let me come in." It was several weeks before she was strong enough to return to the gate by the great house, the finest one in town. She slipped out at night, while her sister was sleeping.

She had never seen the house so beautiful. A fresh snow frosted the cornices and eaves and spread a blanketed shimmer over the garden. The lights of the house shone and glistened in reflection on the winter white. Fires crackled in the fireplaces. The massive front doors were flung wide and men and women walked to and fro, their warm scarlet cloaks protecting them from the cold air. Evidently, the house had been prepared for a great celebration. Evalyn could see garlands festooning the receiving rooms, and bright flags lining the driveway where highly polished carriages traversed, unloading their elegantly attired owners.

Suddenly light-headed, she sank down on a stone and rested her forehead in her hands. The lights in the house blurred and she felt weak.

"You'll be all right," said a voice. Startled, Evalyn All looked into the face of an old man, gnarled and misshapen. "Felt the same way myself, lotsa times. Cold and hungry and too tired to feel a blasted..." He stopped angrily in mid-sentence.

"Do you live..." Evalyn All started, but before the question was finished she knew it was impossible. The man wore clothes like hers, old and dirty.

"O' nuh," came the answer before she could finish. "Nuh, nuh, nuh. There was a time when I hoped, too," and he sighed. "But I'm past hoping. Got ustah and like the way I live. Y'gotta have an invitation, y'know." Evalyn's heart sank, because she'd been hoping too.

"Yessir. gotta getcha an in-vi-ta-tion. Them's the rules." They sat in silence, the melody from the house floating around them, creating longing for dancing, for joy. "Yup, useta come here every day when I see a little guy. Ustah watch and wait and hope somebody'd say, 'Whydoncha come in.' But it never happened. Don't come anymore. Don't even wanna see the place 'cept once in a while, like tonight, for the celebration. But them, the wretches, they haven't lost hope."

“Them?” said Evalyn All. “Who do you mean?”

“Why, them!” shouted the old man. “Them, them, them!” He threw his hand toward the shadows and shades of the darkness. Evalyn peered, her eyes squinting, but she could see nothing in the night. “Come on! I’ll show them to ya,” he cried and impatiently grabbed her arm, dragging her after him.

Evalyn All stumbled in the blackness. The old man was rough, not careful to protect her, as they rushed to the back of the house. The smell of baking bread began to reach her. Her knees buckled, but her companion was relentless in his pursuit. “Them! Them!” he screamed and pointed. “Them’s the ones that’s hungry!” Suddenly, Evalyn All could see. Standing by the iron fence was a group of people, emaciated, starving skin barely stretching over bone. They drooled at the mouth and sniffed at the air as though smelling enough would fill their hollows inside.

The old man grabbed her arm again and they stumbled to another place in the fence. “Them! Them! Them what’s sad!” Evalyn All could see. Hanging on the fence were people with tears streaming down their cheeks. They pushed and shoved trying to get closer to hear the music which seemed to be clearer on this side of the house, like a bell. Oh, how it lifted the heart! If only she could hear it better, but the old man had again clutched at her.

“Them! Them!” he chortled, a shriek rising in his throat. “Look and laugh!” Evalyn All looked. Every inch of the fence was crowded by people. She had never seen anything so mournful in all her life. Nearby a small boy pressed his face between the bars of the iron gate, his tiny fists gripping tightly. “What’s your name?” asked Evalyn All. But, there was no reply. The boy turned his face to her and, in the glow from the house, she could see that he was blind. “Got no tongue neither,” came the grave voice of her guide. “Been mistreated. Happens all the time.”

“Fools!” the old man spat out. His voice narrowed and he whined, “Waiting for an invitation, they are. Never gonna get one.” The narrowness of his voice flattened, widening into indisputable hatred. “Not supposed to be this way. Supposed to invite us in. Supposed to come find us.”

“Who?” asked Evalyn All, numbed by her revelation of misery. “Those what’s in the house, but they don’t even know we’re here.” Evalyn shuddered. How could they not see—how could SHE not see. “Jest too busy in their own house to look. WHYDONCHA LOOK?” he screamed. “Whydoncha look? Whydoncha?”

Remembering Evalyn All, the old man took her hand again and pushed her closer to the iron fence. “Over there. Can you read?” and he pointed to the cornerstone. She shook her head; she had never learned. “Maybe it’s jest as well,” said the wizened guide. “Gots the founder’s name chiseled in the stone. Celebratin’ for him tonight.”

Evalyn All looked at the people standing in the dark shadows of the night. Their faces were turned toward the light. Their silence was overwhelming: She heard a baby cry. “Abandoned,” mumbled the old man to himself. “Yup, ’t happens sometimes.”

Evalyn turned her back and walked away from the light and the music and the aroma of fresh, warm, yeasty bread. She turned from the crackling fireplaces and the bubbling fountain and the laughter and the scarlet garments and went back home, back home, back to the shack by the river. It was many, many years before Evalyn All walked again past the gate of the great house, the most beautiful house in town. When she did, she didn't even turn her head.