

The Importance of People

Myrtle Finn Sugarman

THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE LIKE SARAH

With this issue we introduce Myrtle Finn Sugarman, Denver public schools, who will write The Importance of People department this publication year. Illustrations for this article were done by Alvin E. Sugarman.

SARAH PERKINS had never belonged. At least she had never belonged to the groups with which she wished to be identified.



As a little girl living in a small Colorado town she had longed to be one of the be-flooned and be-curved aristocracy which dominated the Sunday School. These were the offspring of the Chesters, the Thorntons, and the Wards who claimed feudal privileges. Be-

sides controlling local agricultural, commercial, industrial, and all related economic spheres, several of the elder generation of these gentry were "college graduates." The latter distinction was indeed rare and awe-inspiring. Small Sarah, but vaguely sensing the mysteries of social stratification, knew only that to Belong one needed white-topped patent leather shoes and a big hair bow. She got neither. Mr. Perkins was foreman on a railroad section gang and incapable of such display.

In high school it seemed that to Belong one must wear rouge and dance. Sarah had seen the gay programs with tiny pencils as she hovered on the edge of the popular girls' conversation. She scorned the timid overtures of others like herself excluded by poverty and parental prohibitions. Second-rate Belonging was unthinkable.

There was a normal school not far from Sarah's home town. At least she

could dream of being a college graduate and therefore closer to people like the Chesters, the Thorntons, and the Wards. It was not easy. Sarah worked for room and board. She made slightly better than average grades, *but* she had no sorority, no beaded blouses, marcelles, or dates. She could have Belonged to the company of others who spent their time in studying and in the perpetual dreary alchemy of changing dimes to dollars. These reminded her too much of herself—seemed to mirror her frustrations, and made the unattainable minority seem even more attractive.

Sarah's B.A. degree represented almost incredible economic feats. Her picture on page ninety-two of the college annual carried simply her name and her major subject. So she went out to teach, *but* it seemed that being a college graduate was not in itself a magic talisman to Belonging.

At first she changed jobs frequently, hoping with each change that long-deferred hopes would be realized. *But* the barriers remained.

Now that she could wear marcelles and subdued rouge, they were not important. In most towns one must be a Young Married. Or one must go out for sports. *But* Sarah learned that successful playing is not without art. She could now dance without parental restraint, *but* nobody wanted to dance with her. Even in church work she was denied the amiable intimacy of cutting slaw and setting tables for the church supper. Belonging was for matrons only.



Her professional life was prodded occasionally by a bright young principal, briefly pausing on the upward ladder. Momentarily inspired, she would think vaguely of "getting her Master's" or of attending a workshop; *but* there was never money for more than tuition, room, and board. Belonging would undoubtedly depend upon extras which she could not afford.

Then unexpectedly the workshop plans became possible. Newly-widowed Aunt May invited Sarah to spend the summer in a city where a workshop was offered. Sarah winced at the thought of Aunt May's heavy cooking, shrill voice, and lugubrious accounts of Uncle Henry's "passing." Nevertheless, for once she was going to Belong, and minor inconveniences could be borne. Freed from the

demands of necessity she had money for the extras which would assure success.

After consulting fashion magazines, she had her hair-colored hair done in a mistakenly exotic style. She bought too-gay clothes. She experimented boldly with make-up.



It took less than a week to learn "who was who" at the workshop. Years of belonging to the out-group had made Sarah adept at identifying the in-group.

Its center was Jane, a petite extrovert noted for a viper-swift tongue and an incurable love of the spotlight. Her loaded remarks were prompted not so much by malice as by an exhibitionism which, unfortunately, had not diminished with the passing of adolescence.



Sarah concentrated upon attracting Jane's attention, and the girl, sensing a new and untried audience, responded with the quickened interest well known to intimates as a "come-on."

One day Sarah sat in the lounge with Jane's crowd, thrilled to be a part of the most attractive group in the room. Her upswept curls bobbed; her new earrings twinkled. During the conversation she found herself telling them about Mrs. Chester, the dragon of her childhood.

"I know the type," Jane broke in, "battleships inadequately camouflaged by chiffon."

Sarah was delighted by the quip. Mrs. Chester no longer seemed formidable, even in memory. How wonderful to Belong in a circle where laughter could deflate the mighty.



When Sarah left for the library, Jane sighed and said ruefully, "Poor soul, I can't quite decide whether she looks like a super-annuated subdeb or Whistler's Mother gone gay."

Sarah, just outside the door, decided against claiming her forgotten notebook. It seemed that after all she did not Belong.

What does it take? She still wants to know. It's a pity no teacher nor any school helped her find out.

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