

The Nine Cent-Girls.

by H. C. Bunner

Miss Bessie Vaux, of Baltimore, paid a visit to her aunt, the wife of the Commandant at old Fort Starbuck, Montana. She had at her small feet all the garrison and some two dozen young ranch-owners, the flower of the younger sons of the best society of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Thirty-seven notches in the long handle of her parasol told the story of her three months' stay. The thirty-seventh was final. She accepted a measly Second-Lieutenant, and left all the bachelors for thirty miles around the Fort to mourn her and to curse the United States Army. This is the proem.

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Mr. John Winfield, proprietor of the Winfield Ranch, sat a-straddle a chair in front of the fire in his big living room, and tugged at his handsome black beard as he discussed the situation with his foreman, who was also his confidant, his best friend and his old college mate. Mr. Richard Cutter stood with his back to the fire, twirled a very blonde moustache and smoked cigarettes continually while he ministered to his suffering friend, who was sore wounded in his vanity, having been notch No. 36 on Miss Vaux's parasol. Dick had been notch No. 1; but Dick was used to that sort of thing.

"By thunder," said Mr. Winfield, "I'm going to get married this year, if I have to marry a widow with six children. And I guess I'll have to. I've been ten years in this girlless wilderness, and I never did know any girls to speak of, at home. Now *you*, you always everlastingly knew girls. What's that place you lived at in New York State—where there were so many girls?"

"Tusculum," replied Mr. Cutter, in a tone of complacent reminiscence. "Nice old town, plastered so thick with mortgages that you can't grow flowers in the front yard. All the fellows strike for New York as soon as they begin to shave. The crop of girls remains, and they wither on the stem. Why, one Winter they had a hump-backed man for their sole society star in the male line. Nice girls, too. Old families. Pretty, lots of them. Good form, too, for provincials."

“Gad!” said Jack Winfield, “I’d like to live in Tusculum for a year or so.”

“No, you wouldn’t. It’s powerful dull. But the girls were nice. Now, there were the Nine Cent–Girls.”

“The Nine–cent Girls?”

“No, the Nine Cent–Girls. Catch the difference? They were the daughters of old Bailey, the civil engineer. Nine of ’em, ranging from twenty–two, when I was there—that’s ten years ago—down to—oh, I don’t know—a kid in a pinafore. All looked just alike, barring age, and every one had the face of the Indian lady on the little red cent. Do you remember the Indian lady on the little red cent?”

“Hold on,” suggested Jack, rising; “I’ve got one. I’ve had it ever since I came.” He unlocked his desk, rummaged about in its depths, and produced a specimen of the neatest and most artistic coin that the United States government has ever struck.

“That’s it,” said Dick, holding the coppery disk in his palm. “It would do for a picture of any one of ’em—only the Bailey girls didn’t wear feathers in their hair. But there they were, nine of ’em, nice girls, every way, and the whole lot named out of the classics. Old Bailey was strong on the classics. His great–grandfather named Tusculum, and Bailey’s own name was M. Cicero Bailey. So he called all his girls by heathen names, and had a row with the parson every christening. Let me see—there was Euphrosyne, and Clelia, and Lydia, and Flora and Aurora—those were the twins—I was sweet on one of the twins—and Una—and, oh, I can’t remember them all. But they were mighty nice girls.”

“Probably all married by this time,” Jack groaned. “Let me look at that cent.” He held it in the light of the fire, and gazed thoughtfully upon it.

“Not a one,” Dick assured him. “I met a chap from Tusculum last time I was in Butte City, and I asked him. He said there’d been only one wedding in Tusculum in three years, and then the local paper had a wire into the church and got out extras.”

“What sort of girls were they?” Winfield asked, still regarding the coin.

“Just about like that, for looks. Let me see it again.” Dick examined the cent critically, and slipped it into his pocket, in an absent-minded way. “Just about like that. First rate girls. Old man was as poor as a church mouse; but you would never have known it, the way that house was run. Bright girls, too—at least, my twin was. I’ve forgotten which twin it was; but she was too bright for me.”

“And how old did you say they were? How old was the youngest?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Dick, with a bachelor’s vagueness on the question of a child’s age, “five—six—seven, may be. Ten years ago, you know.”

“Just coming in to grass,” observed Mr. Winfield, meditatively.

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Two months after the evening on which this conversation took place, Mr. Richard Cutter walked up one of the quietest and most eminently respectable of the streets of Tusculum.

Mr. Cutter was nervous. He was, for the second time, making up his mind to attempt a difficult and delicate task. He had made up his mind to it, or had had it made up for him; but now he felt himself obliged to go over the whole process in his memory, in order to assure himself that the mind was really made up.

The suggestion had come from Winfield. He remembered with what a dazed incomprehension he had heard his chum’s proposition to induce Mr. Bailey and all his family to migrate to Montana and settle at Starbuck.

“We’ll give the old man all the surveying he wants. And he can have Ashford’s place on the big dam when Ashford goes East in August. Why, the finger of Providence is pointing Bailey straight for Starbuck.”

With a clearer remembrance of Eastern conventionalities than Mr. Winfield, Dick Cutter had suggested various obstacles in the way of

this apparently simple scheme. But Winfield would hear of no opposition, and he joined with him eight other young ranchmen, who entered into the idea with wild Western enthusiasm and an Arcadian simplicity that could see no chance of failure. These energetic youths subscribed a generous fund to defray the expenses of Mr. Cutter as a missionary to Tusculum; and Mr. Cutter had found himself committed to the venture before he knew it.

Now, what had seemed quite feasible in Starbuck's wilds wore a different face in prim and proper Tusculum. It dawned on Mr. Cutter that he was about to make a most radical and somewhat impudent proposition to a conservative old gentleman. The atmosphere of Tusculum weighed heavy on its spirits, which were light and careless enough in his adopted home in Montana.

Therefore Mr. Cutter found his voice very uncertain as he introduced himself to the young lady who opened, at his ring, the front door of one of the most respectable houses in that respectable street of Tusculum.

"Good morning," he said, wondering which one of the Nine Cent-Girls he saw before him; and then, noting a few threads of gray in her hair, he ventured:

"It's Miss—Miss Euphrosyne, isn't it? You don't remember me—Mr. Cutter, Dick Cutter? Used to live on Ovid Street. Can I see your father?"

"My father?" repeated Miss Euphrosyne, looking a little frightened.

"Yes—I just want—"

"Why, Mr. Cutter—I do remember you now—didn't you know that Papa died nine years ago—the year after you left Tusculum?"

Dick Cutter leaned against the door-jamb and stared speechlessly at Euphrosyne. He noted vaguely that she looked much the same as when he had last seen her, except that she looked tired and just a shade sad. When he was able to think, he said that he begged her pardon. Then she smiled, faintly.

“We couldn’t expect you to know,” she said, simply. “Won’t you come in?”

“N–N–No,” stuttered Dick. “I–I–I’ll call later—this evening, if you don’t mind. Ah—ah—*good* day.” And he fled to his hotel, to pull himself together, leaving Miss Euphrosyne smiling.

He sat alone in his room all the afternoon, pondering over the shipwreck of his scheme. What should he tell the boys? What would the boys say? Why had he not thought to write before he came? Why on earth had Bailey taken it into his head to die?

After supper, he resolved to call as he had promised. Mrs. Bailey, he knew, had died a year after the appearance of her ninth daughter. But, he thought, with reviving hope, there might be a male head to the family—an uncle, perhaps.

The door was opened by Clytie, the youngest of the nine. She ushered him at once into a bright little parlor, hung around with dainty things in artistic needlework and decorative painting. A big lamp glowed on a centre-table, and around it sat seven of the sisters, each one engaged in some sort of work, sewing, embroidering or designing. Nearest the lamp sat Euphrosyne, reading Macaulay aloud. She stopped as he entered, and welcomed him in a half-timid but wholly friendly fashion.

Dick sat down, very much embarrassed, in spite of the greeting. It was many years since he had talked to nine ladies at once. And, in truth, a much less embarrassed man might have found himself more or less troubled to carry on a conversation with nine young women who looked exactly like each other, except for the delicate distinctions of age which a masculine stranger might well be afraid to note. Dick looked from one to the other of the placid classic faces, and could not help having an uneasy idea that each new girl that he addressed was only the last one who had slipped around the table and made herself look a year or two older or younger.

But after a while the pleasant, genial, social atmosphere of the room, sweet with a delicate, winning virginity, thawed out his awkward reserve, and Dick began to talk of the West and Western life until the nine pairs of blue eyes, stretched to their widest, fixed upon him as a common focus. It was eleven when he left, with many apologies for

his long call. He found the night and the street uncommonly dark, empty and depressing.

“Just the outfit!” he observed to himself. “And old Bailey dead and the whole scheme busted.”

For he had learned that the Nine Cent-Girls had not a relative in the world. Under these circumstances, it was clearly his duty to take the morning train for the West. And yet, the next evening, he presented himself, shamefaced and apologetic, at the Bailey’s door.

He thought that he wanted to make some sort of explanation to Miss Euphrosyne. But what explanation could he make? There was no earthly reason for his appearance in Tusculum. He talked of the West until eleven o’clock, and then he took a hesitating leave.

The next day he made a weak pretense of casually passing by when he knew that Miss Euphrosyne was working in the garden; but he found it no easier to explain across the front fence. The explanation never would have been made if it had not been for Miss Euphrosyne. A curious nervousness had come over her, too, and suddenly she spoke out.

“Mr. Cutter—excuse me—but what has brought you here? I mean is it any thing that concerns us—or—or—Papa’s affairs! I thought everything was settled—I had hoped—“

There was nothing for it now but to tell the whole story, and Dick told it.

“I suppose you’ll think we’re a pack of barbarians,” he said, when he had come to the end, “and, of course, it’s all impracticable *now*.”

But Miss Euphrosyne did not seem to be offended—only thoughtful.

“Can you call here to-morrow at this time, Mr. Cutter?” she inquired.

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Miss Euphrosyne blushed faintly when Dick presented himself to hear judgement pronounced.

“I suppose you will think it strange,” she said, “but if your plan is feasible, I should wish to carry it out. Frankly, I *do* want to see the girls married. Clelia and Lydia and I are past the time when women think about such things—but Clytie—and the rest. And, you know, I can remember how Papa and Mama lived together, and sometimes it seems cruelly hard that those dear girls should lose all that happiness—I’m sure it’s the best happiness in the world. And it can never be, *here*. Now, if I could get occupation—you know that I’m teaching school, I suppose—and if the rest of the girls could keep up their work for the New York people—why—don’t you know, if I didn’t tell—if I put it on business grounds, you know—I think they would feel that it was best, after all, to leave Tusculum....”

Her voice was choked when she recommenced.

“It seems awful for me to talk to you in this cold-blooded way about such a thing; but—what *can* we do, Mr. Cutter? You don’t know how poor we are. There’s nothing for my little Clytie to do but to be a dressmaker—and you know what *that* means, in Tusculum. Oh, *do* you think I could teach school out in Star—Star—Starbuckle?”

Miss Euphrosyne was crying.

Dick’s census of possible pupils in the neighborhood of Starbuck satisfied Miss Euphrosyne. It troubled Dick’s conscience a bit, as he walked back to the hotel. “But they’ll all be married off before she finds it out, so I guess it’s all right,” he reflected.

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The next week Dick went to New York. This was in pursuance of an idea which he had confided to Winfield, on the eve of his forth-setting.

“Why,” Winfield had said to him, “you are clean left out of this deal, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am,” said Dick. “How am I going to marry a poor girl on a hundred dollars a month?”

“I might set you up for yourself—” began his employer.

“Hold on!” broke in Dick Cutter, with emphasis. “You wouldn’t talk that way if you’d ever been hungry yourself. I ’most starved that last time I tried for myself; and I’d starve next trip, sure. You’ve been a good friend to me, Jack Winfield. Don’t you make a damn fool of yourself and spoil it all.”

“But,” he added, after a pause, “I *have* a little racket of my own. There’s a widow in New York who smiled on yours affectionately once, ere she wed Mammon. I’m going just to see if she feels inclined to divide the late lamented’s pile with a blonde husband.”

So, the business at Tusculum being determined, and preparations for the hegira well under way, Dick went to look after his own speculation.

He reached New York on Tuesday morning, and called on the lady of his hopes that afternoon. She was out. He wrote to her in the evening, asking when he might see her. On Thursday her wedding-cards came to his hotel by special messenger. He cursed his luck, and went cheerfully about attending to a commission which Miss Euphrosyne, after much urging, had given him, trembling at her own audacity. The size of it had somewhat staggered him. She asked him to take an order to a certain large dry-goods house for nine traveling ulsters, (ladies’, medium weight, measurements enclosed,) for which he was to select the materials.

“Men have so much taste,” said Miss Euphrosyne. “Papa *always* knew when we were well dressed.”

Dick had to wait while another customer was served. He stared at her in humble admiration. It was a British actress, recently imported.

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When Mr. Richard Cutter sat on the platform of Tusculum station and saw his nine charges approach, ready for the long trip to the Far West, it struck him that the pinky-dun ulsters with the six-inch-square checks of pale red and blue did not look, on these nine virgins, as they looked on the British actress. It struck him, moreover, that the nine “fore-and-aft,” or “deer-stalker” caps which he had thrown in as Friendship’s Offering only served to more accentuate a costume already accentuated.

But it was too late for retreat. The Baileys had burned their bridges behind them. The old house was sold. Their lot was cast in Montana. He had his misgivings; but he handed them gallantly into the train—it was not a vestibule express, for economy forbade—and they began their journey.

He had an uneasy feeling that they were noticed; that the nine ladies in the ulsters of one pattern—and of the pattern of his choosing—were attracting more attention than any ladies not thus uniformed would have attracted; but he was not seriously disturbed until a loquacious countryman sat down beside him.

“Runnin’ a lady base–ball nine, be ye?” he inquired. “I seen one, wunst, down to Ne’ York. They can’t play ball not to speak of; but it’s kinder fun lookin’ at ’em. Couldn’t ye interdooce me to the pitcher?”

Mr. Cutter made a dignified reply, and withdrew to the smoking–car. There a fat and affable stranger tapped him on the back and talked in his ear from the seat behind.

“It don’t pay, young man,” he said. “I’ve handled ’em. Female minstrels sounds first rate; but they don’t give the show that catches the people. You’ve gotter have reel talent kinder mixed in with them if you want to draw.”

“Them ladies in your comp’ny, where do they show?” inquired the Conductor, as he examined the ten tickets that Dick presented.

“What do you mean?” asked the irritated pioneer.

“If they show in Cleveland, I’d like to go, first rate,” the Conductor explained.

“Those ladies,” Dick thundered, at the end of his patience, “are not actresses!”

“Hmf! What be they then?” asked the Conductor.

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They had arrived at Buffalo. They had gone to the Niagara Hotel, and had been told that there were no rooms for them; and to the Tiff House, where there were no rooms; and to the Genesee, where every room was occupied. Finally they had found quarters in a very queer hotel, where the clerk, as he dealt out the keys, said:

“One for Lily, and one for Daisy and one for Rosie—here, Boss, sort out the flower-bed yourself,” as he handed over the bunch.

Dick was taking a drink in the dingy bar-room, and trying to forget the queer looks that had been cast at his innocent caravan all the day, when the solitary hall-boy brought a message summoning him to Miss Euphrosyne’s room. He went, with his moral tail between his mental legs.

“Mr. Cutter,” said Miss Euphrosyne, firmly, “we have made a mistake.”

“It looks that way,” replied Dick, feebly; “but may be it’s only the—the ulsters.”

“No,” said Miss Euphrosyne. “The ulsters are a part of it; but the whole thing is wrong, Mr. Cutter; and I see it all now. I didn’t realize what it meant. But my eyes have been opened. Nine young unmarried women can not go West with a young man—if you had heard what people were saying all around us in the cars—you don’t know. We’ve got to give up the idea. Oh, but it was awful!”

Miss Euphrosyne, trembling, hid her face in her hands. Her tears trickled out through her thin fingers.

“And the old house is sold! *What shall we do? Where shall we go?*” she cried, forgetting Dick utterly, lost and helpless.

Dick was stalking up and down the room.

“It would be all right,” he demanded, “if there was a married woman to lead the gang, and if—if—if we caught on to something new in the ulster line?”

“It might be different,” Miss Euphrosyne admitted, with a sob. Speaking came hard to her. She was tired: well nigh worn out.

“*THEN*,” said Dick, with tremendous emphasis, “what’s the matter with my marrying one of you?”

“*Why*, Mr. Cutter!” Miss Euphrosyne cried, “I had no idea that you—you—ever—thought of—is it Clytie?”

“No,” said Mr. Cutter, “it isn’t Clytie.”

“Is it—is it—” Miss Euphrosyne’s eyes lit up with hope long since extinguished, “is it Aurora?”

“No!”

Dick Cutter could have been heard three rooms off.

“No!” he said, with all his lungs. “It ain’t Clytie, nor it ain’t Aurora, nor it ain’t Flora, nor Melpomene nor Cybele nor Alveolar Aureole nor none of ’em. It’s *YOU*—Y—O—U! I want to marry *you*, and what’s more, I’m going to!”

“Oh! oh! oh! oh!” said poor Miss Euphrosyne, and hid her face in her hands. She had never thought to be happy, and now she was happy for one moment. That seemed quite enough for her modest soul. And yet more was to come.

For once in his life, Dick Cutter seized the right moment to do the right thing. One hour later, Miss Euphrosyne Bailey was Mrs. Richard Cutter. She did not know quite how it happened. Clytie told her she had been bullied into it. But oh! such sweet bullying!

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“No,” said Mr. Richard Cutter one morning in September of the next year, to Mr. Jack Winfield and his wife, (Miss Aurora Bailey that was,) “I can’t stop a minute. We’re too busy up at the ranch. The Wife has just bought out Wilkinson; and I’ve got to round up all his stock. I’ll see you next month, at Clytie’s wedding. Queer, she should have gone off the last, ain’t it? Euphrosyne and I are going down to Butte City Monday, to buy her a present. Know anybody who wants to pay six per cent. for a thousand?”

