

One Basket

One Basket by Edna Ferber is a collection of short stories that explores themes of love, loss, and human connection, with vivid characters and settings that capture the complexities of life in early 20th-century America.

The Woman Who Tried to Be Good [1913]

Before her attempt to reform, Blanche Devine was a notorious figure in her small town, known for her past as a very bad woman. Despite her attractiveness and expensive attire, she was shunned by the townsfolk. Her ownership of the House with the Closed Shutters and her mysterious, luxurious lifestyle fueled local gossip. However, Blanche decided to change her life, purchasing a white cottage and striving to live like any other respectable woman. This decision shocked the community, igniting a scandal among the morally righteous neighbors.

Blanche's transition was met with suspicion and cold shoulders; her efforts to integrate and perform acts of kindness were rebuffed. Despite this, she endeavored to create a homely environment for herself, joining the church and contributing to the social fabric with her presence and actions. Her house was a beacon of cleanliness and domesticity, contrasting starkly with her past.

A pivotal moment in Blanche's quest for redemption came when she helped the Very Young Wife next door during a crisis with her baby, Snooky. Despite the Young Wife's initial resistance and community-imposed isolation, Blanche's expertise in dealing with croup saved Snooky's life. This act displayed not only her goodwill but also her desire for normalcy and acceptance.

The experience forged a brief connection between Blanche and the Young Wife, transcending societal judgment momentarily. However, under pressure from her husband, the Young Wife was forced to distance herself once again, adhering to the community's unwritten rules.

In the end, Blanche's struggle for acceptance and her acts of kindness painted a complex picture of her character, challenging the town's black-and-white morality. Her journey highlighted the difficulties of overcoming past reputations within small communities and underscored the potential for personal transformation and redemption.

The Gay Old Dog [1917]

Jo Hertz, a fifty-year-old plump and lonely bachelor living in Chicago, finds himself reflecting on his life after observing troops heading to war, which stirs deep-seated emotions about his own missed opportunities for marriage and fatherhood. Despite his current life as a "Loop-hound," indulging in the superficial pleasures of the city and surrounding himself with luxury, a chance encounter with Emily, the woman he once loved, reawakens feelings of what might have been. Emily, now married with a son going off to war, embodies the life of family and purpose that Jo missed out on. His sisters, Eva and Stell, concerned with their brother's seemingly undignified behavior and its impact on their social status, confront him, leading to an explosive revelation of Jo's deep-seated resentment towards them for their role in his lifelong bachelorhood. Feeling responsible for his current solitary state due to their past interference and his promise to their dying mother, Jo lashes out, expressing his longing for the son he never had. The narrative highlights the sorrow of unfulfilled dreams and the realization that it might be too late for Jo to find true happiness and meaning in his

life beyond the temporary distractions of his Loop-hound existence.

That's Marriage [1917]

She gave a little cry, then--half laughter, half sob. She glanced down at the cup beside her plate. It was half full of coffee, cold now, and undrunk. "Orville!" she marveled. "I never knew you noticed things like that! Why, you're almost poetic!"

"Poetic!" He grinned down at her, wryly. "Me!"

Then, more seriously, "Let's hear it, Terry. What's wrong?"

She hesitated a moment, bewildered; then, "Oh, nothing! Nothing's wrong, Orville. Everything's right. I've been an awful fool, Orville. But I'm going to be different. If you'll just be patient and---and help me. Will you, Orville? Will you?"

His answer was a long laugh, full-throated, happy; and then, "Help you! Why, girl, we're going to start all over again. And it isn't going to be. Here, we're off! it's going to be a case of `We're on!'"

"Are you sure, Orville? Really sure? It means----"

"It means that we've been a couple of ninnies, but we're going to be happy. We've got each other. And we've got our home. We've got to fight, Terry, of course. Everybody has to fight--for happiness, and for each other, and for their home. But we'll win out. You bet we'll win out!"

Farmer in the Dell [1919]

Ben Westerveld, a retired and well-to-do farmer from southern Illinois, struggles to adjust to his new life in Chicago with his overbearing wife, Bella. Having moved to the city to "take it easy," Ben finds himself missing the farm life and feeling purposeless amidst the hustle and bustle of urban living. Despite Bella and their children adapting to city life, Ben yearns for the open fields and the satisfying work of farming. A chance encounter on South Water Street with Emma Byers, his one-time love interest who now successfully runs a commission business, rekindles a spark of life in Ben. Emma urges him to return to farming, telling him there's no bigger or more important job in the world. Ben's spirits are momentarily lifted by the thought of returning to farming, but he feels trapped by his current circumstances. However, everything changes with the sudden return of his son, Dike, from World War I. Dike's stories about farming techniques in France reinvigorate Ben, showing him that his extensive farming knowledge and experience still have value. The chapter highlights the themes of longing for purpose, the clash between rural and urban life, and the timeless value of agricultural work.

Un Morso doo Pang [1919]

"Un morso doo pang," repeated Tessie, very carefully and slowly. Angie corrected her pronunciation, and Tessie tried again, her eyes bright with determination. Angie repeated the phrase, and Tessie echoed it, this time with more confidence. There was a moment of silence in which the only sound was the crackling of the fire.

"That's pretty good for a first lesson," Angie said finally, with a smile that was both warm and encouraging.

Tessie nodded, a determined set to her mouth. "I'll learn it," she declared, "and a lot more. So when Chuck comes back, I'll... I'll be different. Smarter. Like those girls he meets."

Angie put down her knitting. "Tessie, learning a new language, or swimming, or playing tennis won't just be for Chuck or to show anyone up. It should be for you, to feel good about yourself, to grow."

"But I do! It's just that—"

"It's okay, Tessie." Old Man Hatton interrupted gently. "What Angie's trying to say is, you've got a chance now to do something for yourself. And we're here to help you with that. Not just with French or sports, but to help you become whatever you want to be."

Tessie looked from Angie to Old Man Hatton, her expression softening. She nodded, slowly, absorbing the weight of their words. "I want that. For me. I just don't know where to start."

"That's why we're here," Angie said, getting up. "We'll start with the basics—French, if you like. And there's more, much more. We'll plan it together." She extended her hand to Tessie, who took it, a tangible sign of acceptance and new beginnings.

Old Man Hatton cleared his throat. "And let's not forget about making this house a place where any girl can come to learn and grow. Tessie, you're just the first of many."

Tessie stood, feeling suddenly as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She was tired, dirty, and emotionally drained, but for the first time in months, she felt hope. A new path was unfolding before her, not just for her own future, but for the future of many others like her. The journey wouldn't be easy, but with Angie and Old Man Hatton's support, Tessie felt ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

As they began to discuss plans, Tessie's mind was a whirl of thoughts and possibilities. She would learn, grow, and perhaps, in her own way, help Chuck and the other soldiers by becoming a person who made a difference in her own right. The future was uncertain, but Tessie Golden, with a piece of bread in one hand and a new sense of purpose in the other, was ready to meet it head on.

Long Distance [1919]

Chet Ball, a former lineman from Chicago's West Side, found himself in an unexpected setting: painting a wooden chicken in an English country estate transformed into Reconstruction Hospital No. 9. This man, who had once dangled from telegraph poles for the Gas, Light & Power Company, now lay among soft pillows, dabbing paint on a toy, a drastic change from his previous life of hazards and high altitudes. The contrast between Chet's burly physique and his delicate task highlighted a man ill-suited by nature to his current, peaceful pastime but forced into it by circumstances.

His current occupation was part of a therapeutic regimen to soothe his shattered nerves, a consequence of his service in France during the war where he, camouflaged as part of a tree, helped the American artillery before being brought down by enemy fire. This experience left him physically and mentally scarred, with a leg that, though healed by modern war surgery, would never again bear the weight of his former labors, and a mind that the doctors described as suffering from "shock". Chet's memory and mental state, described as affected by this shock, were yet to recover to the point where he could resume a normal life.

While painting, a letter arrived from Chicago, likely from a loved one given the affectionate address. Miss Kate, a helper at the hospital, offered to read it to him, revealing in her voice an attempt to bridge the vast distance the war had put between Chet and his old life. The letter, brimming with the mundane yet intimate details of life back home, starkly contrasted Chet's serene but disconnected present.

Before the war, Chet was known for his bravado, part of his identity as a lineman where flirting with danger (and women) was part of the job. However, it was his encounter with Anastasia Rourke that truly marked his pre-war life, culminating in a brief but passionate love story cut short by the war. His current state, focused on the simple task of painting a wooden chicken, symbolizes a life paused, a vivid past waiting to be reconnected with the present through recovery and perhaps, through the words of a letter from home.

The Maternal Feminine [1919]

Sophy seemed calm, her hands folded, her face serene yet expectant.

Marian King was younger than they had thought she would be. She brought with her an atmosphere of briskness, of efficiency softened by a feminine warmth. She greeted them, shook hands. Then she sat down, turned to Flora, and began to speak quietly, simply, recounting Eugene's last days. She told them of his courage, his strength, his will to live. She described his attacks, his struggle for breath, his determination to fight through each crisis. Throughout her narrative, her admiration and deep affection for Eugene were evident.

She spoke of a night when the gas attacks were particularly severe, how Eugene had clung to her, taking comfort from her presence. Despite the doctors' verdict that there was no hope, Eugene had fought. "Then I'll fight for it!" he had declared, sitting upright with a strength that amazed her. For three days, he battled, buoyed by his indomitable spirit, but in the end, the gas had done its damage.

Marian King's voice was steady, but her eyes were bright with unshed tears as she recounted these details. Flora, listening, wept openly now, her sobs filling the room. Baldwin's frown deepened, and he removed the cigar from his mouth, his face showing a mixture of pain and pride. Adele, standing by the window, had turned to listen, her face pale, her lips pressed tightly together.

When Marian King finished, there was a silence, a heavy, charged atmosphere as her words echoed in their minds. Then, quietly, she added that Eugene had mentioned his family in those last days, expressing his love and his regrets. She conveyed his final messages of affection with such tender respect that even Flora's sobs ceased.

Finally, Marian King stood to leave, expressing her hope that her visit had brought some comfort. They thanked her, their voices low, each lost in their own thoughts and memories of Eugene. After she left, the room remained silent, the family sitting together, united in their grief and in their pride for the son and brother who had fought so valiantly.

Aunt Sophy, her calm demeanor intact but her eyes shining with a mixture of sorrow and pride, looked at each member of her family. In her gaze was an unspoken understanding of their loss, but also a reminder of Eugene's bravery and strength. And in that moment, despite their differences and past grievances, they were simply a family mourning their hero, remembering his courage, and beginning to find a way to move forward together.