THE ADMIRAL'S GRANDDAUGHTER

ELIZABETH·LINCOLN·GOULD

"TO YOUR GOOD HEALTH," SAID NANCY

The Admiral's Granddaughter

By

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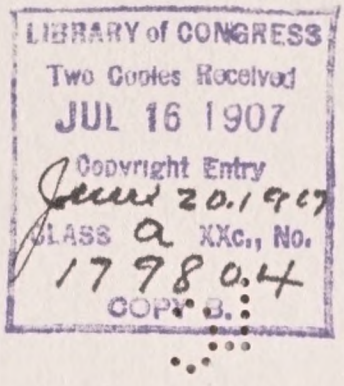

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CHAPTER I

UP BEAUMONT LANE

THE west wind rustled through the branches of the big maple tree that stood guard at the head of Beaumont Lane, and four red leaves floated out into the sunshine and down to the ground ; there they lay still for a moment and then, urged on by the breeze, they scurried briskly along until they reached Aunt Sylvia, half-way down the lane.

Aunt Sylvia put out her foot and set it firmly down on three of the red leaves ; the fourth was suddenly caught up by the breeze and blown quite out of her reach.

"'Pears like dat old maple is bound and 'termined to send out red leaves befo' dere's any 'cessity," grumbled Aunt Sylvia, looking after the truant leaf, and then down at the three captives peeping out from beneath the sole of her broad shoe. "'Tisn't but August yet ; no use hurrying up de fall ob de year so

fast. But de sun's getting low, and it's time my little missy was home. I keep 'specting to hear a roar from de admiral 'most any time now."

Aunt Sylvia put up both hands and pushed back the white sunbonnet which had covered her head, till it fell to her shoulders and hung there held by the tightly knotted string. Her short crisp hair shone almost white above the wrinkled black face.

"Aunt Sylvi-a! Aunt Sylvi-a!" came a gay call from down the lane. "Oh, Aunt Sylvi-a! where are you?"

"Dat's my lamb," breathed the watcher, delight stealing over her face and smoothing out the troubled lines. "Nobody else in dis land's got such a voice as my honey."

In another moment around the turn into sight came a chestnut mare, stepping softly and daintily along over the green carpet of the lane, and on her back sat Nancy Beaumont with cheeks as pink as a wild rose and tumbled yellow curls blown backward as she rode. On the mare's head rested Nancy's best hat, a broad-brimmed white straw trimmed with daisies.

"There, I knew you'd be waiting for me!" cried Nancy as she caught sight of the tall, erect figure in its stiffly starched blue cotton gown. "You never

answer my call, but I always know you'll be here. How do you like Jessie's hat, Aunt Sylvia? The horses in the city have them, and I'm sure no city horse can be as good as Jessie. I only wish I'd had a wet sponge to put in it, to keep her head all the cooler. It was hot coming up the hill."

Aunt Sylvia reached out her long arm and removed the broad-brimmed hat from Jessie's head with small ceremony. Far from taking offense it seemed as if the mare's brown eyes were filled with gratitude, and her ears, relieved of a sliding, slipping, scratchy burden, pricked up at once.

"'Tis a piece o' luck you didn't hab a sponge," said Aunt Sylvia calmly. "I s'pose you'd like to get dis hat so 'twouldn't be fit to wear on Sundays?"

"Oh, I forgot about church," said Nancy, hanging her head, and then tossing her curls as if she tossed regret behind her. "Anyway, I didn't have the sponge, so I couldn't do it. And a hat is such a bother, except for Sundays."

"You know your grandpa doesn't like folks in de village to see my lamb going bareheaded," said the old woman gently. She laid her hand on Jessie's bridle and they began to move slowly along up the lane, Nancy talking to her two companions.

"Keep step with Aunt Sylvia now, Jessie," she said coaxingly. "Why, of course I kept my hat on till we got beyond the last village house, and began to climb the hill. I know how grandfather feels. He wants me to grow to be just like grandmother."

The bright face clouded, and Aunt Sylvia's brows were drawn together, though she kept her eyes straight ahead.

"Little honey can't be like anybody but just her own self," she muttered, but Nancy caught the words, and stooped to lay her hand on Aunt Sylvia's head.

"You spoil me, I'm afraid," she said softly, "but nobody else does, and oh, how I do love it!"

Aunt Sylvia's eyes shone, as she walked along with her head held stiffly lest the little white hand that rested on it should be inconvenienced by her motion.

"The big maple's turning!" cried Nancy as the head of the lane was reached. "Now it will be lovely in a week. It's time, too; this is the very last day of August!"

"When you get to be old as Aunt Sylvy, 'twon't joy you to see de trees change," said the old woman sadly, but Nancy did not hear her, for beyond the big maple at the place where the lane ended and the orchard be-

gan, her quick eyes spied her grandfather, leaning on his walking stick and looking up at the red-cheeked apples on a curiously gnarled and twisted tree.

"My hat, Aunt Sylvia, quick, please!" she whispered, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the daisy-trimmed hat was in its proper place, the tumbled curls were hastily smoothed and Aunt Sylvia, falling meekly behind, watched her darling ride forward and stop Jessie at the foot of the little bridle-path that wound past the orchard, up to the barn.

"Grandfather," she called, and the old man turned quickly at the sound, showing a stern, resolute face with bushy eyebrows which almost met over a pair of fierce eyes. He looked at the little girl in silence and then advanced toward her, leaning heavily on his stick, while his left hand drew into sight a large, old-fashioned watch.

"It's high time you came back," he said abruptly, after a glance at his watch. "Here it is, after five o'clock, and I've been waiting for my cup of tea for over half an hour. In your grandmother's life such a thing could never have happened."

"I'm so sorry, grandfather," said Nancy, her little hands twisting themselves in and out of Jessie's

mane. "But the mail was late, and while I waited I just rode around by the new mills, to see how they looked, and I suppose ——"

"I suppose you forgot all about the time," said her grandfather as she faltered; "well, never mind now, child. Hurry up to the barn and then have the tea ready on the piazza by the time I get there; 'twill be easy enough, for I walk so slowly, and beside I have one more tree to look at; 'Vanus hasn't done any proper pruning for two years. That's always the way; let the master of a place be laid by for awhile and every one takes advantage of it. I should have thought you would have seen to it that your son did not neglect his work, however, knowing how little is required of him."

The last severe words were addressed to Aunt Sylvia, who was courtesying over and over again at the head of the lane. Nancy was already far up the path, almost out of sight.

"He's a trifling, no-'count boy, dat's what he certainly is, sah," said Aunt Sylvia promptly. "I'm all de time t'inking how if dat boy's father had only lived till now, he'd have had de discipline he needs—discipline such as his poor old mudder hasn't got de strength in her arms to 'minister to him. Here, sah,

lean on Aunt Sylvy up dis slope; no 'cessity for a slope to be so steep anyway."

"Aunt Sylvia, I'm getting to be an old man; you needn't find fault with the slope; it was never too steep when I was a boy; but I'll get along without an extra arm, thank you," and he smiled grimly at the old family servant.

His mind was taken away from her son's shortcomings for the time, and that was all Aunt Sylvia had wished or hoped. The two old people, so near each other in age and so far apart in almost every other way, walked slowly up the winding path, Aunt Sylvia a step behind, until the path ended at the driveway; there Admiral Beaumont turned to the left and painfully mounted the broad steps to the piazza, while Aunt Sylvia, on level ground at last, hurried to the barn.

The admiral stood for a moment looking down at the orchard from which he had climbed with so much trouble.

"It will be one while before I try that again," and he sat carefully down in his big armchair, and stretched his right leg out before him. "More years ago than I like to think, I got that miserable little wound," he said, looking down at his outstretched

leg with much disfavor, "and year by year it's stiffened more and more. Bah! Let's see what mail the child has brought. Where has she put it? Nancy! Ah, here it is in my hand; I remember now she gave it to me. Now where are my glasses? Nancy! Oh, here they are in my pocket."

Two newspapers and a single letter made up the admiral's mail. The papers he laid down, but the letter he tore open, his hands seeming not quite steady.

At the first words he thrust out his under lip and brought his fist down with a bang on the arm of his chair.

"No," he shouted. "No, I won't! I said I wouldn't, and I won't. Where's your pride? Where's your sense of honor? Where's my reward for all I've done? Where's my ——"

"Oh, grandfather, here's your tea! I was just as quick as I could be!" came a breathless voice from the doorway, and there was Nancy, bearing a tray on which were sliding about two cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, a cream-pitcher, a saucer of sliced lemon and a plate of wafers; behind her came a maid with a steaming teapot.

"Hey? what? well, it's high time," said the old man testily, as he thrust the letter and its crumpled

envelope into his pocket. "Set the things down here on this table. Lemon? what's that for? This is my afternoon for cream, not lemon. What are those pale things? Take them away and bring me some cookies that look as if they'd once been in the oven. Not you, Nancy,—the girl. You sit here, and begin to pour the tea, and let me have a minute's peace. Sit down, child."

Nancy hurriedly seated herself and began to pour the tea.

"Here, you've put no hot water into the cups," said the admiral. "Where's that girl? No, don't go for her—wait ——"

"There she goes, off like a shot," cried the old man, as Nancy vanished in the doorway—"I believe I'll take the lemon after all."

He poured himself a liberal cup, filled it with cream, dropped in two slices of lemon, and then absently added four pieces of sugar, one after another. He had taken one sip of it when Nancy appeared once more with hot water and a plate of cookies.

"Sit down, and taste your tea, and see what you make of it," commanded her grandfather, pushing his cup toward the little girl. "And don't keep jumping up so, it spoils the tea. And now tell me what you

saw in Potterville—though of all names for a place, that is the most inexcusable I ever knew. And first tell me what you've brought in that pitcher, and when you expect it will be used. All I wish is my tea, if I can ever get it."

Try as hard as she could, Nancy could not quite hide the smile that twitched and tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"The hot water for your tea is in this pitcher, grandfather dear," she quavered; "you asked for it."

The admiral stared blankly at her, and then threw back his head.

"So I did, child, so I did," he cried, "and then forgot it!"

He laughed until the tears came into his eyes and Nancy laughed with him. While he wiped his eyes she quickly poured the contents of the cup into a bowl that had received many such mixtures in its time.

"But I'd had a troublesome letter, that's what upset me," said the old man a few minutes later as he began to sip his tea; "a letter from your brother Jack."

"He isn't ill?" asked Nancy anxiously. "Oh grandfather!"

"No indeed, he's not ill," said the admiral shortly.

"Then nothing else really matters, does it, grandfather?" asked Nancy, contented to have no answer to her question. Jack could always straighten things out and please his grandfather in the end. The admiral muttered something, but Nancy, her hands folded in her lap and her eyes wandering off to the hills, did not try to hear what he said.

"Next week he's coming, and then he'll be here three whole weeks except for two days, before he has to go back to college," she thought happily. "That's so good of him, when so many people with beautiful houses ask him to visit them. Oh, there's nobody like my brother Jack!"

"Your tea will be cold, Nancy," her grandfather's voice called her back to her neglected cup.

Then, although she did not care for tea-drinking, little Nancy Beaumont raised her cup, and her grandfather raised his; the two rims touched.

"To your good health," said Nancy sedately.

"To yours, my dear," said the admiral, and the eldest and youngest Beaumont drank their tea together.

CHAPTER II

THE ADMIRAL

FIFTY years before the tea-drinking on the broad piazza, there had been a little settlement called Beaumont Corners, the centre of which was the old house in which Nancy now lived with her grandfather. In those days there were gay doings in the Beaumont house; money was plenty and Beaumont land stretched far, with meadow and upland, forest and dale.

Then, gradually, but surely, came changes. The son of one of the farmers, after some years of prosperity in the city sixty miles away, returned full of new ideas. There was water power in that region; it should be used; a town must grow; and as old Squire Beaumont, called "Square Beaumont" by his farming neighbors, would sell none of his land, the town must move eastward, where land in plenty could be had, and the river ran strong and broad.

The war came, and with it many changes. When Squire Beaumont heard of the death of his three brave sons, his heart was broken. He died within a few months, and his gentle wife soon followed him. There

remained only one son, the admiral, Nancy's grandfather. He with his wife and their boy had come to live on the old place, staying there the year round save for an occasional visit to Washington which had been their home.

The admiral had all his father's hatred of changes. Country life was hard for him at first, but he took it up with fierce interest as time went on, and fought what he scornfully called "the upstart improvements" with all his might.

He was talking of some of these changes to Nancy a few mornings after the day Jack's letter came. He was in his big chair; Nancy sat on the upper step, her face eagerly upturned to his.

"Please tell me some more, grandfather," she pleaded; "I get so excited watching for Jack, and it makes me forget everything else, when you tell me about my father and mother, and when Jack was a baby—Oh, I wish I could remember my father and mother! But I can't! I've tried and I can't—not the least little bit!"

"Your mother died when you were less than a month old, you know, Nancy," said the admiral with unwonted tenderness. "She was a pretty creature—a pretty creature! And your father, my dear, you

were only two years old when your father died, so you could scarcely remember him. But your grandmother —surely you remember her well, Nancy."

"Oh, yes indeed, grandfather," said Nancy quickly. It might have seemed to an unprejudiced listener that Nancy's recollections were not wholly untinged with an awe that came near being fright. But she had to speak rather loud, for the admiral was deaf, though he did not admit it, and he found nothing amiss in her tone.

"I remember about grandmother of course," said Nancy, for she knew what her grandfather longed to hear; he bent forward in his eagerness till his face was close to hers. "She was very tall, quite as tall as you, grandfather." ("An inch taller," said the admiral half under his breath. "A full inch, on the door-post.") "And she wore caps with ribbon bows that trembled when she talked; and generally a black silk dress that rustled, and carried her handkerchief in her hand by the centre; and it was always just as white! and she never raised her voice, but you could hear it, oh, ever so far!"

Nancy stopped with a little sigh, and her grandfather leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"I can see her, just as if she were here," he said,

"though she's been gone nearly seven years. You were a small child when she died, Nancy; I wish she might have lived to train you—and Jack—how she loved that boy!"

A wave of soft color swept over Nancy's face.

"Everybody loves Jack," she said simply; "they can't help it. And he looks just like my father, doesn't he? You've often said it."

"Just like him at his age," said the grandfather. "As like as—— What's the matter, Nancy? What do you hear?"

"Hoofs,"—said Nancy. "Horse's hoofs, grandfather. But—but the carriage rattles as if there were nobody in it but 'Vanus. Oh, grandfather! Do you suppose Jack hasn't come?"

The old man rose from his chair and stood watching the curve in the driveway around which the carriage must soon appear. When it came into sight, and he saw the single swaying figure in it, and the rueful apologetic face of black Sylvanus, his wrath and disappointment burst forth in words.

"What do you mean by this?" he demanded of the frightened darky. "Where is your young master? I mean where is Mr. Jack? Answer me at once."

The dusky face disappeared as Sylvanus bent double

in his efforts to recover a letter which had slid from the seat beside him to the floor. Picking it up with shaking fingers he handed it to Nancy who had hurried down the steps. As he did this he also tried to make a respectful salute with the old cap which he plucked from his head. The horse, feeling the reins drop, started, galloping, for the barn; Nancy had barely time to escape the wheels as with a wild "Hi you! Stop! Stop!" the carriage and its occupant dashed around the corner of the house and up to the barn.

"What does this mean?" again demanded the admiral as Nancy, all the brightness gone from her face, walked slowly up the steps with the letter. "Addressed to you, is it? Well, read it, child; read it at once."

"Yes, grandfather," said Nancy, her fingers trembling with excitement as she tore open the envelope.

"Dear Nan," she read from the page covered with Jack's bold scrawl, "I know you'll be disappointed at my not coming home, but I have a chance to help a stupid boy in mathematics—my strong point, you know—from now till the twenty-first, and as I've loafed all summer and really need some extra money, I've promised to do it. I know grandfather'll

approve, judging from his last letter. Give him my love and tell him I'm trying to profit by his advice. Keep on growing, and see how much nearer my shoulder you can get by Christmas. I'll be home then and give my small sister some good times.

"Your loving brother,

"JACK."

"Upon my word he takes things with a high hand, that young man!" cried the admiral. "Just like his father for all the world! But he has ability. There's no doubt about that. Why Nancy, child, what's the matter?" for the old man had forgotten disappointment in pride.

Nancy's lips quivered, but she steadied them for her answer, and held her little head high.

"It seems a long time till Christmas, grandfather," she said, her eyes turned away from the admiral, "but I suppose it will go before we know it."

"Of course it will," said her grandfather, laying his hand for a moment on the little girl's shoulder. "It's only a month or two, with days getting shorter all the time. And you know the Beaumont's never make a fuss or cry over disappointments, Nancy."

"No, sir," and the child's blue eyes looked straight up into the stern old face. "But I—grandfather—

you know I'm part Frost, like my mother. I think I'd like to get the almanac, grandfather, and see just how soon Christmas comes."

"Very well, run along," said the admiral, "I'll wait here. You might as well bring out the paper and read it to me. And Nancy—you might as well bring the almanac too; I want to see about the next full moon—and other things," he added truthfully.

"There's a soft streak in me," he muttered as he sat tapping the arms of his chair. "Soft as putty I am, where that boy's concerned. I actually believe I'm in danger of relenting about next year. S–sh, here comes the child back again."

Nancy, in the big, dark hall had waited one moment, almanac in hand, to wipe away an uncomfortable dampness in her eyes.

"When I'm disappointed about important things like Jack's coming home," said Nancy to a portrait that hung over the long sofa, "I'm not Beaumont at all, father; I'm all Frost I guess, every bit of me."

Nancy stole a look out through the doorway; her grandfather was tapping the arms of his chair, and smiling; she could see his face. Softly and quickly she stepped over the threshold of the parlor. There, not among the Beaumont's, but on a wall by itself,

hung a crayon portrait of her mother. Nancy did not like it as well as the photograph she kept up-stairs, first among her treasures, but there was not always time to go up-stairs when Nancy needed her mother.

She stood with the almanac clasped over her heart and her eyes fixed on the gentle face above her.

"You were a Frost, mother, so you know all about it," said Nancy softly. She laid her hand on her lips and then stretched her arm until her finger-tips rested on the glass just above the smiling lips of the portrait.

"Good-bye," said Nancy, and she tiptoed backward out of the room, feeling greatly comforted. She took the "Potterville Clarion" from the long sofa, and stepped out over the threshold just as her grandfather began to be impatient. The old man seized the paper and opened it, but the first words that met his eyes brought an indignant look to his face.

"Look at that!" he cried, pointing to a staring advertisement on the first page. "If your father had lived, he'd have had the arm of the law stretched out to grasp that man! Read it, child! Read it aloud."

"'Don't fail to call at Stone's in the new Beaumont Block,'" read Nancy over her grandfather's shoulder. "'The only place in town where you can get three times the worth of your money. The Ten Cent Store—

Small Wares, Cutlery, Games, Crockery, Tin, Wood, Groceries and Confectionery. Everything you want, at Stone's. Don't forget, Beaumont's Block, Sign of the Crock.'"

There was the hint of a laugh in Nancy's eyes, but the admiral crumpled the paper into a wad and flung it from him with an exclamation of disgust.

"An honored name!" he growled. "A cheap block, and a miserable creaking, rhyming sign to catch the taste of the mill hands of Potterville! It's a disgrace! A disgrace to the country, yes, sir, and to the nation! Nancy, the next time you go to the town I shall send a message by you to that man. I'll not demean myself by writing to him. Nancy, what carriage is that down at the foot of the driveway? It has stopped. Are the people looking this way?"

"Yes, grandfather," said Nancy, "and the driver is pointing out the house. I suppose he's telling them ——"

"Go into the house and shut the door," commanded the admiral. "Time was when respectable families were not subjected to the gaze of strangers."

He rose and stood haughtily gazing down at the offending vehicle. To his amazement and wrath, the driver took off his hat with a wide sweep as he

gathered up the reins, his harangue evidently finished.

When the carriage was well out of sight the admiral threw wide the front door, for Nancy to return. The little girl looked up from her seat on the sofa, her finger carefully held on a page of the almanac.

"And seven are twenty-six, and seven are thirty-three, grandfather," said Nancy, her eyes pleading for a moment's delay. "'Thirty days hath November'—that makes December third, you see—and seven are ten and seven are seventeen and seven are twenty-four—that's five more weeks. Oh, grandfather—just sixteen weeks from to-day it will be!"

"Will it indeed?" said the admiral, endeavoring too late to bring a puzzled look to his face. "I suppose you think I know of what you're speaking, Nancy?"

"Oh, grandfather!" cried Nancy. "Oh, grandfather, I'm sure you do!"

CHAPTER III

NANCY'S ERRAND

It was three days later that the admiral, after an inspection of the clouds, the weather-vane and the thermometer, announced to Nancy his desire to have her go to the town and do some errands which could not be trusted to black Sylvanus.

"There's a storm brewing," said the admiral, "and by to-morrow we shall be housed. So I wish you to go to-day, Nancy. There is Lamson, the newspaper man, for you to see; and Stone, and the livery stable man—I can't recall his name—and Bartley Pearson in the centre village."

"Yes, grandfather," said Nancy. "Do you suppose—do you think I can talk to them the way you'd like to have me?"

"I should hope you could," said the admiral sternly, "you're a Beaumont!" He paused and looked at her with sudden doubt. "I wish you were a little older," he said slowly. "I ought to be able to attend to these matters myself, as there is no one else fitted to do it, except your brother who stays away."

Nancy got up from her chair and ran around the breakfast table to her grandfather's side.

"But we know what Jack is doing, and we wouldn't want him here, now, grandfather, you know we wouldn't," she said coaxing a smile to the grim face. "And I will be just as dignified and Beaumonty as I can be. Look at me, grandfather. This is the way I shall speak to Mr. Lamson. I shall say, 'Sir, my grandfather, Admiral Beaumont, wishes to discontinue his subscription to your paper.'"

The old man looked at the small, erect figure and the delicate face with its uplifted chin, and chuckled.

"I'm afraid you'll not do it just that way when you get there," he said. "But run along, child, for the morning will be gone before you know it. Hours aren't what they were when your grandmother was here. Has that lazy Sylvanus saddled Jessie yet?"

"He's doing it now, grandfather," said the little girl. "I shall be ready by the time he brings her to the door."

Nancy would have liked to start from the barn, but the admiral never allowed it. Fifteen minutes later he stood on the piazza watching his little granddaughter mount her mare with some unnecessary help from Sylvanus. Nancy had on a close-fitting

hat, for the wind was strong, and a pair of heavy gloves; her riding-habit was an old blue serge, and over the waist she wore a short scarlet jacket. She carried no whip, for pretty Jessie never needed the touch of one.

"Good-bye, grandfather," said Nancy gayly, "I'll be home again before noon and I'll do everything as well as I can."

The old man stood looking after her as Jessie cantered down the driveway. A Beaumont might return by the bridle-path, but she must depart with proper state by the driveway and highroad.

For quite a distance along the road there were no houses, and as soon as Nancy had passed out of her grandfather's sight, she slipped from Jessie's back to the ground.

"Here, you dear," she said, fumbling in a big bag which had long tie-strings and many pockets, "you shall have your sugar in just one minute. I know grandfather would think it was silly to give it to you when we start—but I think it encourages you; you don't like the noisy mills and those puffing, whizzing sounds, do you?"

Jessie's head was turned to watch her little mistress and when she saw the lump of sugar, found at last in the

very bottom of the bag, she made a soft champing sound and her ears moved back and forth two or three times.

"Now, gently, dear," said Nancy, extending a rosy palm in the very middle of which lay the lump of sugar.

The mare's long tongue came out, and with it she rolled the tempting lump into her mouth. It lasted only a moment, but Jessie's liquid eyes showed her enjoyment. She rubbed her nose in Nancy's little hand, and Nancy smoothed her "on the forehead and under the chin."

"Though I'm never quite sure, Jessie, exactly where your forehead stops and your nose begins," said Nancy with a final loving pat.

One spring, and she was in the saddle, much more comfortably settled than when Sylvanus had helped her up.

"We don't need anybody to help us, do we, Jessie?" said the little girl as they once more started on their journey. "We are just the very best friends that ever could be. And you don't care so very much for any one else, and I like that. Because you see, grandfather loves me of course, but he has Jack to love best, because he's all Beaumont. And Jack—why Jack loves me a great, great deal, but you know

a young gentleman has to do a great many things, Jessie, away from home. He has to go to college, and to make visits, and so he doesn't have much time to be with anybody that's only just twelve. And my grandfather has to write a good many letters and sleep a good deal and then he's very grown up, you know, Jessie. Oh, see that golden-rod! When we come back, I must pick that biggest stalk for grandfather. He likes to put a plume of it over the general's picture."

The road down the hill, past the scattered farms, was never half long enough for Nancy. She talked to Jessie all the way, and the pretty mare seemed to listen; but at the foot of the hill, before the curve that led around to the "centre village" where the houses were clustered and there was a store and a post-office, Nancy straightened herself, and stopped her conversation.

"This is the place where we begin to be stiff, Jessie," said the little girl demurely, "so you must behave your very best; we've been trusted with serious errands to-day, Jessie—and I wish we hadn't."

Past the village houses stepped pretty Jessie, her little mistress as much at her ease as she would have been on her own slender feet. The villagers were for

the most part out of sight at that hour in the morning, the men off in the fields or elsewhere, the women hard at work in their kitchens; there was a most delicious odor of cooking fruit.

"They're making grape jelly," thought Nancy. "Oh, doesn't it smell good! I wonder if I could learn how to make it. At any rate I'll ask Aunt Sylvia to do some, when I go home."

As Nancy was riding past one of the houses, just before she reached the post-office, she heard a tapping on a window.

"Oh, dear," said the little girl, "there's Mrs. Potter. I suppose I must be polite, and stop."

The door of the house opened and a brisk elderly woman hurried down the gravel walk and came out through the little clicking gate.

"Good-morning, Nancy," said Mrs. Potter. "I feel as if I must speak to you again about your riding that skittish horse. Now don't tell me she isn't skittish, my dear. Haven't I seen her prance and prick up her ears? I wonder your grandfather allows it, but of course he's getting into his dotage, now."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Potter," said Nancy; she had not the slightest idea what a dotage was, but she was of the opinion that it must be some sort of vehicle. "Grand-

father trusts me; he knows Jessie is safe and he'd never think of driving after me even if he were able; but poor dear grandfather's leg is so stiff he doesn't get into anything but a chair now."

"Well, if ever——" began Mrs. Potter, and then she decided that an explanation was really unnecessary. "When is your brother coming home?" she asked abruptly. "Bartley Pearson tells me there have been a good many letters passing back and forth, and that from the postmark of the last one, he judged he was still down on the Cape. Seems strange to me any one should care to sit right out on the salt-water, particularly in the fall o' the year. But I suppose he thinks 'most anything's gayer than home. I understand he's a very lively young man."

"I think I must be going, Mrs. Potter," said Nancy on whose face a deep flush had risen; "I see Mr. Pearson on the post-office steps, and he may be going home."

"When did you say your brother was coming?" persisted Mrs. Potter, her hand clutching Nancy's skirt. "Not till Christmas? Oh, well, I suppose you've got used to having him away, by this time. There's a place on your skirt, Nancy, where the bind-

ing's loose. You'd better have that colored servant of yours see to it."

"Yes, Mrs. Potter," said Nancy, with dignity. "Thank you for telling me, but Aunt Sylvia isn't really a servant."

"Well, what on earth is she?" demanded Mrs. Potter, releasing Nancy's skirt in her surprise.

"Oh, she's—she's just Aunt Sylvia," said Nancy, the very thought of her dear old "mammy" bringing a smile to her face. "Good-bye, Mrs. Potter."

"She talks up pretty pert, considering this town is named for my husband's folks, and my husband is selectman," said Mrs. Potter severely as she returned to her tightly closed domain, "but I don't know what you could expect different, considering her circumstances. Only goes to school during the spring-term!"

Nancy was not a moment too soon, for as she reached the post-office steps, Mr. Pearson was fitting a large key into the lock of the door.

"A minute more and you'd have lost me till afternoon," he announced, turning a placid, moon-shaped face over his shoulder as he heard Nancy's "good-morning." "I'm due for a game of chess over at old Mis' Martin's in half an hour, and I thought I'd start a

little early and step around by the new library building; they don't get on with it as they ought to; they'll waste an hour here and there and there's no bringing back time when once it's fled. That's something for young folks to remember," and Mr. Pearson looked benignly over his spectacles at the little girl. "Well I suppose I've got to unlock this door again. You ought to live nearer the town, Nancy. I gave out to everybody last night that I shouldn't be here after nine-thirty this morning."

"Now, I wonder how grandfather would expect a Beaumont to answer that," thought Nancy. Not being at all sure, she contented herself with a smile, and "I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Pearson."

"'Tisn't any real trouble," said the postmaster as he unlocked the door; "you keep your sitting on that horse and I'll bring out what mail's come since 'Vanus was here yesterday morning. There's a letter from General Compton to the admiral, and one for you from his daughter, and some samples from that Boston store where your grandfather gets his stationery—and a paper or two, and a bulb catalogue. I was real interested in that; the pictures are surprising, I must say."

Mr. Pearson entered the post-office, and in a moment came out bearing the Beaumont mail.

"Now let's see you put it all away safe in your bag," he said, handing it piece by piece to Nancy. "Little folks are apt to lose letters now and then."

His way of speaking made Nancy's task even harder than she had expected, but she could delay it no longer for the postmaster had locked the door and was now ready to leave her.

"Mr. Pearson," she said, speaking fast though she had planned to be slow and calm, "grandfather asked me to say to you that he would rather you didn't tell people about our mail, just what letters we get and ——" Nancy stopped, for the postmaster's hand was uplifted to silence her.

"You tell your grandfather to rest easy," he said reassuringly; "tell him I never hold the letters up to the light to read 'em, and never should. I only tell what I learn from the outsides, postmarks and so on; of course things that come unsealed are different. Your grandfather's known me from a boy, and I'm kind of taken aback that he should suspect otherwise."

There was considerable dignity in Mr. Pearson's tone at the last, and he left Nancy with a nod which made her feel very young and unimportant. She sat perfectly still for a moment after he had gone.

"I'm quite sure I didn't do that right," said Nancy dolefully; then she began to laugh softly to herself. "It was funny, but Mr. Pearson didn't know it," she said, putting her head down close to Jessie's ears. Then she and the pretty mare turned the corner and went along the road that led past the livery stable. She rode down to the stable. Mr. Hobbs, the stable-keeper, was outside, talking with a man in a high-top buggy. Mr. Hobbs touched his hat to Nancy, and after a moment the man in the buggy drove off, and he walked over to the place where Jessie stood, looking in at a line of carriages with what Mrs. Potter would have called a skittish air.

"That's a mighty pretty mare o' yours, Miss Nancy," said Mr. Hobbs, gently stroking Jessie's head; "I like to see a young lady riding; it's such good exercise."

"Why, he thinks I'm almost grown-up," thought Nancy; "it will be easy to talk to him." She smiled at the stable-keeper who was evidently waiting for her to tell her errand.

"Mr. Hobbs," said Nancy eagerly, "my grandfather doesn't like to have people stop at the foot of the driveway and stare up at the house, and have the man tell them about the Beaumont family. It makes him really angry."

Mr. Hobbs looked at her silently for a moment. When he spoke he was still respectful, but Nancy could see that he was displeased.

"Your grandfather is a fine man, but he's reached the time o' life when he likes to have considerable attention paid to him," he said gravely, "and we that are getting on to middle age understand it. I noticed you running into the house that day when I was driving those folks myself. I was sorry to see you felt so proud; they were nice folks from Boston. Your grandfather came and stood right out where they could all get a good look at him, and I waved him a bow. 'Twould have been nice if you'd stood out there with him. Pride often has a fall, you know," said Mr. Hobbs in a tone of warning.

At first poor little Nancy had been too surprised to speak, and as Mr. Hobbs went on, the hot tears sprang to her eyes. She could hardly wait for the stable-keeper to finish his speech.

"Why, Mr. Hobbs," she cried when he stopped, "I didn't care about those people. But grandfather ——"

"Well, well, never mind, Miss Nancy," said the stable-keeper less severely, "you will have better judgment when you're older. Now if you'll excuse me, I must see if the mountain wagons are all right, for the

party from the boarding house. Good-morning, Miss Nancy, and pay my respects to the admiral."

He touched his hat again and turned away, leaving Nancy with cheeks that felt like fire. She wheeled Jessie sharply around, and the mare with her little rider, were quickly out of sight down the road to the mill-village, leaving a cloud of dust behind them. Just before they reached the mills, in the shade of some trees, Nancy put her hot face down once more on Jessie's head.

"Now we must both be brave and all Beaumont," she whispered, "for first I have to see Mr. Lamson, and then Mr. Stone, and I shall have to leave you, tied to that post by the newspaper place. I'll be just as quick as I can, dear, and you can't be any more frightened than I am."

CHAPTER IV

DELIGHTFUL NEWS

JESSIE, tied to the stone post in front of the building where The Potterville Clarion was printed, turned her head with an anxious expression in the eyes that followed her little mistress. There was a great rushing sound from the dam, and the whirring of the machinery was hard to bear; the mill was just opposite; who knew but what some of those dreadful noises might burst out of those brick walls and come even closer to a poor frightened animal tied to a post. Jessie tried to be brave, but it was hard work. She was glad enough when a small boy stopped to talk to her in a friendly way, though she had never seen him before.

Nancy went up the steep wooden stairs that led to the newspaper office; there was a big door behind which was a sound of clanking and clicking, and a smaller door marked "Private."

"I think that must be the right door," said Nancy, and she knocked timidly, just under the black letters. There was no answer, so she knocked again. That

time some one shouted "Come in," and she opened the door.

The room was small and it seemed to Nancy the most untidy place she had ever seen. There were newspapers and papers of every sort on the floor, all over a big table, on a desk where a man sat writing, and on the only spare chair, which was not really a chair, but a stool.

The man did not look up from his writing, but he said, "What is it?" impatiently, so Nancy began her little speech.

"Sir," she said and her throat was dryer than she had hoped it would be, "Mr. Lamson, sir, my grandfather, Admiral Beaumont, wishes to discontinue his subscription to your paper."

The man gave one keen glance at her, and then went on writing, as he talked. He had a quick, decided way of speaking.

"That's all right," he said. "You tell the admiral I know he's a bit hard pushed now. But you tell him the paper will be sent just the same; I consider it an honor to have him on the complimentary list. Never mind, never mind," he said sharply as Nancy tried to speak. "I tell you it's all right; I've been in corners myself before now. Just try the knob and make sure

it's caught, as you go out; sometimes if it isn't tight shut, the door opens and I have to get up and shut it. Good-morning."

Nancy went out, shutting the door tight and trying the knob to see if it were fast. Then she stood perfectly still for a moment in the dark hall.

"It wouldn't be any use to try to talk to him, any more," and Nancy started slowly down the stairs, "for he wouldn't hear me, and I don't believe he would have understood, anyway. But what will grandfather say?"

As she came out of the door the boy who had been talking to Jessie and patting her head, started away, but Nancy called him back.

"It's very kind of you to talk to her," said Nancy smiling at the boy who had a round, freckled face with honest eyes. "I'd be ever so much obliged if you'd do it a minute or two longer. She isn't so afraid when somebody talks to her."

"All right," said the boy good-naturedly. "I'd just as soon's not. You wait a minute till I get through looking after the Beaumont horse, and I'll go with you," he called across the road to a boy with a fishing-rod who had been beckoning to him.

Nancy could not help being glad when she was told

that Mr. Stone, the manager of the mills, had gone away for a few days.

"No, I thank you, I can't do the errand as he is not here," she told the foreman who politely asked if he could help her in any way, and she hurried across the street to Jessie, and released the freckled boy who took off his cap and said "'twasn't anything" when she thanked him.

"He wasn't there, Mr. Stone wasn't there," whispered Nancy as she untied the mare and rubbed her nose before mounting, "so I couldn't say that grandfather thinks they are using too much water and spoiling our brook. And really, it isn't the least speck dryer than it was last year, and I'm afraid Mr. Stone would have laughed. So now we can go home."

The sun had disappeared in a steadily spreading bank of cold gray clouds, and as they went along the winding river road the wind came in gusts, and little showers of leaves came fluttering down from the trees.

"Grandfather's storm won't stay away much longer," thought Nancy; "how fast the clouds are spreading now. And it's growing colder; but Oh, Jessie, I do want to read my letter from Marguerite. Will you go slowly, just for about two minutes, dear?"

Slowly and carefully Jessie stepped along, while Nancy drew her letter from the bag and read it.

At the first words a smile came over her face, and before she had read to the end of the first page she clapped her hands with the letter between them.

"Oh, how splendid! how perfectly splendid!" she cried while Jessie pricked up her ears and took a brisker pace. Nancy hurried through the letter and then folded it and put it in its envelope, but not in the bag again—instead of that she buttoned it inside her little red jacket, right over her heart.

"Marguerite is coming to make a visit to me, while her father visits with grandfather," said Nancy, feeling that Jessie must wish an explanation of her joy. "You know Marguerite's mother is a great, great deal younger than the general, and so Marguerite is only a year older than I. And though we've corresponded for more than a year, we've never seen each other. Oh, Jessie, what fun it will be! Suppose we go a little bit faster, Jessie, so grandfather will have his mail all the sooner."

Jessie was willing to hurry, for the air was growing colder. They flew along the road, the mare happy in the quick motion and because the voice of her little mistress sounded so gay and sweet. They were both

in a glow when they reached the Beaumont barn, and there was still a deep pink color on Nancy's cheeks when she handed the admiral his mail with the letter on top. He had just waked from a refreshing nap, and Nancy had been sitting very still on a chair near him in the library for about ten minutes.

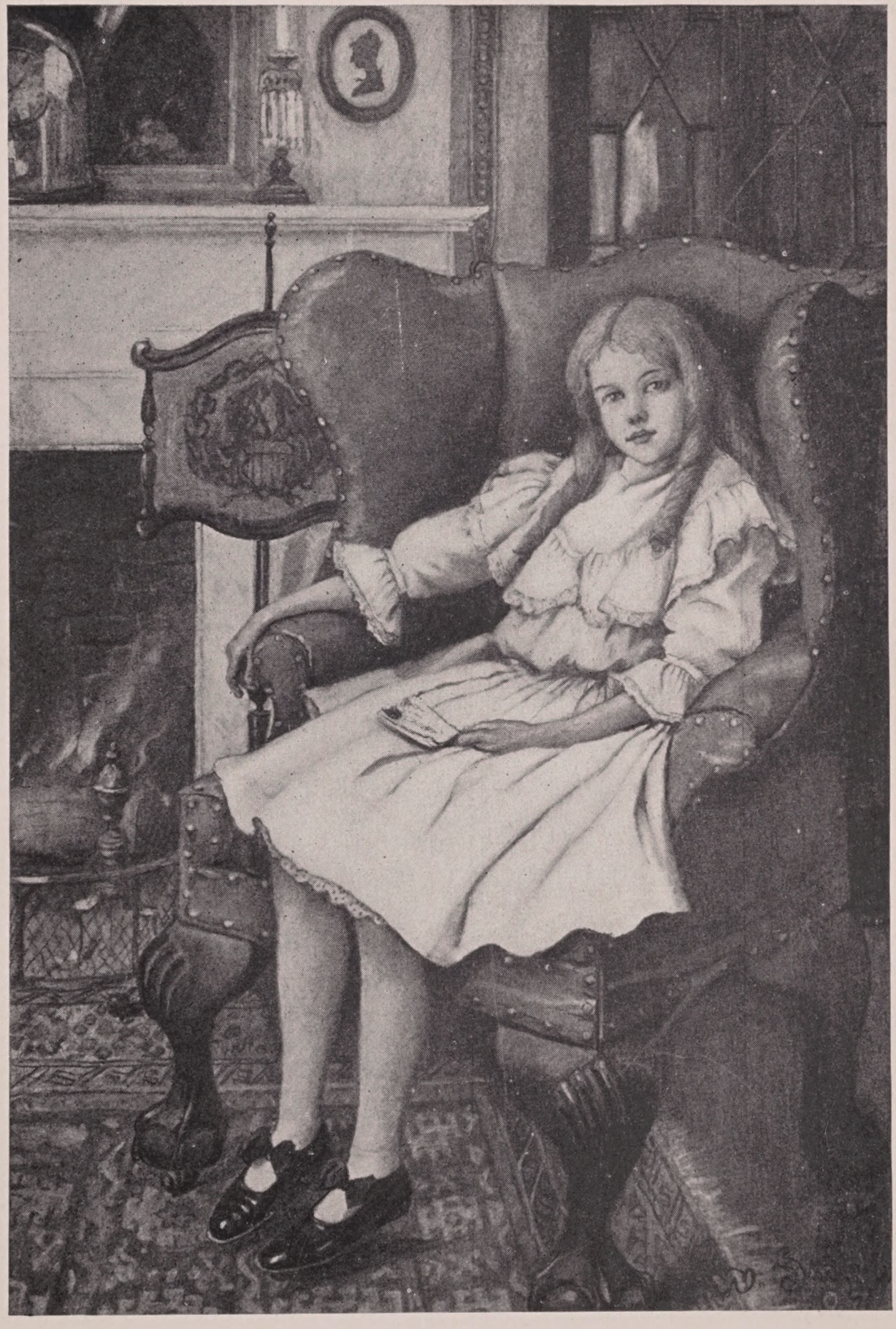
"What's this?" said the admiral, as he rubbed his eyes and looked at the letter. Fortunately his spectacles were close at hand, so that no time was wasted in hunting for them.

"You did your errands, child?" asked the admiral as he carefully opened the letter with his pen-knife.

"Yes, grandfather, as well as I could, but Mr. Stone was away, so ——"

"Another time will do," said the admiral. He had begun to read his letter, and Nancy saw that, as had sometimes happened lately, her grandfather did not quite remember what all her errands had been; by and by he might think of them again, but perhaps he would not.

"A letter from General Compton is always a pleasure," said the admiral when he had read the two closely written pages a second time while Nancy sat waiting; "and this one brings the best of news; but I suppose you know that without my telling you," as he



SHE HAD BEEN SITTING VERY STILL

looked at Nancy's smiling face and the letter on her lap.

"Yes I do, and isn't it lovely, grandfather!" cried Nancy. "Think of their saying, 'if it is convenient,' when they know it is always the very most convenient thing that ever was, to have visitors, when you live in a big house in the country."

"That's the right way to feel, my dear," said the admiral, and Nancy could tell from his tone that she had pleased him. "Your grandmother had the true hospitality, and I am glad to see that you have inherited it."

"Now, grandfather, what shall we do for them?" asked Nancy eagerly. "You know I've never had a little girl to visit me before, and Marguerite says she is in such a hurry to see the country, the real country; she only knows the city and the seashore. Should you think she would probably like horses and cows and hens—and the brook and the pine grove and the cranberry bog and all the other lovely places?"

"Dear, dear, I'm sure I can't tell," said the old man; he had taken off his spectacles and was tapping his letter with them. "But you must make her welcome and happy, however you do it. And Nancy, do you think you could lay your hand on that file of war

papers that belonged to your father? The last time I had them—I can't quite recall where I put them," and the admiral looked with wistful hope at his little companion.

"You put them behind the encyclopedias in the old oil-paper covering, grandfather," said Nancy. "You know you said in case of a fire, we should remember just where they were, and in the desk they might get mixed with less valuable papers."

"That's it," said the admiral, "I knew I put them away in a safe place for excellent reasons. I shall wish to look them over during the general's visit."

He rose stiffly from his chair and began to pace slowly up and down the room, stopping now and then to pound with his stick on the floor and say, "There, he'll like to hear that! I mustn't forget to tell him that story, this time."

Nancy saw that she was not needed, and she longed to slip away to tell Aunt Sylvia her good news.

"Grandfather," she said quickly as he passed by her for the second time, "if you don't care to hear the paper just yet I should like to tell Aunt Sylvia and ask her about the rooms we'd better have for the company."

The admiral stopped short, interrupted in his thoughts, but looking undisturbed in spite of it.

"The paper can wait awhile," he said; "it isn't often we have the pleasure of planning for visitors nowadays, and you and Aunt Sylvia will have many things to do, no doubt. I wish the general to have the room across the hall from mine. But as for the little girl, give her what you choose. I presume you'd like to have her near you."

Aunt Sylvia was sewing in the room that opened from the wide hall up-stairs, at the back of the house. It had two west windows and one on the south, but evidently Aunt Sylvia found no comfort in the view that morning. Her face wore its most solemn look, and from her lips came the words of a mournful hymn. But nothing troubled Nancy that day. Running up the stairs and into the sewing-room, she threw her arms around Aunt Sylvia's neck and settled into her lap, regardless of the sheet her old mammy was hemming.

"Oh, Aunt Sylvia, I'm to have a visitor, all my own!" she said breathlessly. "Just think of that, Aunt Sylvia! And she's a little girl, only a year older than I am; could you guess who it is?"

Aunt Sylvia generally wore on the top of her head when indoors, a pair of iron-bowed spectacles; she had bought them of a mild young man who stopped at the

back door one day, and the admiral insisted that they were nothing more nor less than window glass. However that might be, when she wished to make an impression, Aunt Sylvia drew the spectacles down to her nose and looked through them. She did this now, and drew her eyebrows together as if she were thinking hard.

"Cur'ous t'ing dat I can't tell who'd be coming to visit my lamb," she said. "Now, 'tisn't any ob dose children down in de village? nor—well, Aunt Sylvy'll jes' hab to gib it up, I reckon."

"Oh, you know who it is!" cried Nancy. "You know there's only just one person it could be, and that's Marguerite, my friend. She's coming with the general next Monday and they will stay a whole week, at least. Isn't that lovely?"

"It's good news, dat it is," said Aunt Sylvia heartily. "It's high time my little missy learned how to entertain young lady company. Now, I s'pose you'd like Aunt Sylvy to go and help you 'cide what room Miss Marguerite better hab."

"That's just what I'd like," said Nancy; "there aren't so very many days before Monday, and when we've decided on the room there are things I can do to make her feel at home while she's here."

Aunt Sylvia folded the sheet and laid it in her work-basket, pushed her spectacles up on top of her head and was ready.

The old house had many rambling passages, and rooms which were reached by two or three steps up or down. Nancy's room was the first which opened from a narrow hall running across the width of the main house to the right and left of the sewing-room and just back of the two great square front rooms, the admiral's and the one he designed for his guest. Nancy's room had two large windows and a glass door which led to a little balcony. This balcony came just at the corner of the L, and it could also be reached from the room next Nancy's, which was of irregular shape, and had a charming outlook. It was furnished in a striped blue and white chintz, with tiny roses wandering over it.

Before the door of this room Nancy halted.

"It's not so fine as the yellow room across the hall," said Nancy, "but I think it's prettier; and—don't you believe Mrs. Compton would like to have Marguerite close to me, so she wouldn't be lonesome? You know at home she has her mother, and three brothers and the baby."

Aunt Sylvia had heard all Marguerite's letters, so

she was well aware of everything that Nancy knew. It did not take her a minute to decide.

"'Course she would, honey bunch," she said, crossing the room and pulling up a curtain. "Now de first t'ing is to let de light into dis room. And de next t'ing——" she paused and looked around her, then crossed the room again and closed the door.

"Aunt Sylvy's got a plan for de young lady company's room," she said softly, though there was no one near to overhear her. "See where dat old bureau stands? You go lift de piece o' tapis'ry in your room an' knock on de wall—and see what happens."

As noiselessly as if she had been one of the chief conspirators in a plot, Nancy opened the door, stole out of the room, up two shallow steps and into her own room, closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER V

THE GUESTS ARRIVE

THE storm predicted by the admiral had come and gone before Sunday. Saturday there was an uncertain, whiffling wind, but the next morning, soon after eleven o'clock, the breeze came out strong west and the clouds fled in haste before it.

The admiral surveyed the changing sky with much satisfaction.

"For once the wind has hauled through the south, and there's a good prospect for the next few days," he said to Nancy. "When it backs around through the north I never trust the weather, no matter how fair it may seem; it has never cleared to last."

Nancy nodded and smiled; she had heard this truth so many times that she could scarcely be expected to feel any surprise. Sunday night was beautiful, and after she had gone to her room, she opened the glass door and stepped out on the balcony to look at the stars. She had the photograph of her mother in her hands.

"I love to say good-night to you, out here under

the stars," said Nancy softly. Then she kissed the photograph, and smoothed the pictured hair with her little fingers. "To-morrow my friend is coming," whispered Nancy to the gentle face, "and I'm so happy I don't know what to do!"

Monday was beautiful; the trees were gay in gold and scarlet, oaks and maples in brave array, with the tall old pines for a background of green. Sylvanus in his Sunday suit drove slowly up and down before the Potterville station, his little mistress on the back seat of the old carriage. Sylvanus took great pride in his speech which was quite correct in many ways, but his vanity had prevented his ever learning certain things.

"He has no idea of the proper way to speak to his superiors," the admiral would storm; but Nancy, though she had plenty of childish dignity at times, found Sylvanus' conversation so amusing that she seldom remembered to check the flow of it.

"The train is ten minutes late, Miss Nancy," he announced, drawing out a silver watch to which was attached a brass chain of great length. "Do you suppose it is a possibility that the general and Miss Marguerite have been detained by some accident?"

"Oh, Sylvanus, you know your watch is never right," laughed Nancy; "when did you wind it?"

"I've wound it twice already this morning, Miss Nancy," said Sylvanus with a crestfallen air, "and I always wind it at night. That's enough for any watch, warranted, like mine."

"More than enough, I should think," said Nancy. "Oh, Sylvanus, there comes the train and here we are way up the road!"

"There's plenty of time, Miss Nancy, just you put faith in me," said Sylvanus, flourishing his whip in the air, and sure enough he managed to draw up at the platform, just as the engine stopped and the conductor stepped off.

"Shall I assist you, Miss Nancy?" inquired Sylvanus, but his words fell on empty air, for the little girl had already sprung from the carriage and run toward the train. She looked anxiously past the conductor at the people who were getting off the cars. First came an old lady with a little boy, then a tall young woman, then three young men, then —

"How do you do, Nancy?" called a voice the little girl knew and there was the general, his hat in one hand and a bag in the other, his handsome gray head bared to bow to her; behind him came a merry-faced girl with a small box and an umbrella.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," said Nancy, as she shook hands with the travelers.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" demanded Marguerite. "At any rate I shall kiss you!" and the umbrella and the small box met behind Nancy's back while she received a loving greeting.

"I wanted to, but I didn't know whether you'd want to," said Nancy shyly, as the two little girls separated; then they both laughed and at once felt very well acquainted.

"Ah, Sylvanus, I see you are still the admiral's right hand man," said the general as they went to the carriage after giving the baggage man the checks for two trunks to be sent to the house by the coach. "I shall insist on sitting in front with Sylvanus and hearing the news, while you children share the back seat," he said, and Nancy was of course delighted, while the darky's mouth opened in a wide grin to show two rows of gleaming ivory.

"I was so afraid something would happen, and you wouldn't come," said Nancy, looking with admiration at the bright brown eyes and shining black braids of her guest.

"So was I," said Marguerite. "Friday mother thought Ted had the measles, and if he had, of course

I couldn't have come; but 'twas only a rash; he'd been eating too many apples. I was so thankful! boys are the most careless things!"

"I suppose they are," said Nancy; "but you see I don't know much about them because my brother is ten years older than I am."

"And he's your only brother," said Marguerite, pityingly; "well, there are times when I'd just as soon have one less in our family, on a rainy day for instance; but then, when I think which one would I be willing to lose, and I can't decide on a single one. They all have so many good points."

She spoke so decidedly and so fast that Nancy could only look at her and laugh.

"I'm sure you must know a great deal more than I do," she said at last.

"Perhaps I do about families," said Marguerite, "but about books you are way ahead of me, Nancy. Father has told me some of the things you've studied with your grandfather, and just the names frighten me. Astronomy, for instance. I don't know one single little thing about astronomy except that the sun keeps still and the earth goes whirling around it."

"Oh, but astronomy is an outdoor study," said Nancy quickly; "of course people that live in the city

with brick walls, can't study outdoors much, can they? Oh, Marguerite, look! there's just the beginning of the willow road; some day we'll ride down there. Can you ride?"

"In a trolley car, or a carriage," said Marguerite, "but I'd have to be tied on a horse, I believe. I'd just as soon try, though, any day you like; I'm not a bit afraid, except of rats."

"Oh," said Nancy, "we haven't any rats except sometimes in the barn and then Julia—that's our Maltese cat—catches them."

"I have a cat at home, and his name is Sir Isaac," said Marguerite, "because father thinks he has such an inquiring mind, like Sir Isaac Newton's."

The drive to the house had never seemed so short before, in all the times Nancy had taken it; she and Marguerite had so many things to say. The admiral stood on the threshold to welcome his friend, and he also shook Marguerite's hand with much warmth.

"I hope Nancy will be able to make you enjoy your visit, my dear," he said cordially; "it is many years since we have had the pleasure of a young guest."

"I know I shall have a splendid time," said Marguerite, "and I am so delighted to be here."

"Now come right up-stairs and let me show you

your room," said Nancy, and she led the way through the hall and up the broad staircase, with its white rail and shining brass stair-rods. At the head of the stairs stood Aunt Sylvia in a clean white apron of unusual size, bowing and courtesying.

"This is my dear Aunt Sylvia," said Nancy, and to her delight Marguerite held out her hand to the old woman.

"I shall love you, because Nancy does," she said, and Aunt Sylvia beamed with pride.

"She's quality, dat's what she is," said Aunt Sylvia to herself as the two little girls turned away. "I reckon I know it when I see it, for I was raised down Souf'; she's a young lady, fit to be wid my lamb, so she is."

"Oh, what a darling room!" cried Marguerite when Nancy stopped at an open door and stepped back that her guest might enter first. "Is this to be my room while I am here?"

"All that you see is yours, and I am your will ing servant," said Nancy with a low bow. Those were the words her grandfather had often told her were used by her Grandmother Beaumont on many occasions, so they could not fail to be proper now.

"You dear little quaint thing," said Marguerite giving her arm a squeeze, "I do think we shall have the loveliest time together! Oh, what a tall bureau, Nancy! I shall almost have to stand on a chair to reach the top drawers."

"Do you see that small drawer, next to the top on the left?" asked Nancy. "I mean, of course you see it, but see if you can open it."

Marguerite took the brass handle of the drawer and pulled, first gently, then quite hard. There was no key-hole, so it was not locked, but try as she would, she could not pull it out.

"Why, how mysterious!" she cried, turning to Nancy. "Oh, Nancy, is it a secret drawer?"

"Yes," said Nancy, "it is. Will you stand here a minute, and I'll show you something."

Marguerite stood still, her eyes fastened on the drawer, while Nancy ran out of the room. After a minute she heard a little click, and the drawer shot out half its length. In it lay a bunch of tiny asters tied with a pink ribbon.

"Oh, may I come and see how you do it?" she cried delightedly.

"Yes, indeed," called Nancy's voice from the next room, but when Marguerite reached the door, there

stood Nancy, straightening out the ruffle on her dressing-table.

"Marguerite," said Nancy shyly, "would you—would you just as soon let me keep the secret while you're here, just for fun? I'll tell you before you go home, and—I've never had a mystery before."

"Of course I would," said Marguerite warmly, "but Nancy, if I put something in the drawer, could you get it out, here?"

"Yes," said Nancy laughing, "just as easily. Can't you guess how? You may look anywhere."

Marguerite ran back and forth, tapping the walls, but she could see no place for the secret drawer to hide in Nancy's room; so at last she gave up the search.

"I'll put something in for you," she said, "and then do I shut the drawer?"

"You may shut it whenever you like," said Nancy.

Marguerite ran back to her room; she put the square box which had been in her left hand all the time, in the drawer; then she pushed it gently back; there was a little click just like the one she had heard at first, and the drawer was fast in place. She hurried in to Nancy's room, and there stood her friend with the box in her hand. The tapestry on

Nancy's wall was swaying a little, and Marguerite looked at it suspiciously.

"Go behind it," said Nancy gayly, but when Marguerite lifted it there was nothing to be seen but some white paneling just like the rest of the woodwork, with an old-fashioned paper above it.

"I give it up," cried Marguerite. "Do open your box, Nancy, and tell me if you like what's in it."

Nancy untied the green and gold string, took off the gold-lettered wrapping paper and opened the box. In it lay a pair of tiny gold tongs on a little bed of lace paper.

"I know what's underneath," said Nancy; "it's chocolate candy. My brother Jack bought a box like this for me once for a Christmas present; but then he had to pay a visit on the way home, and he gave the candy to the little girl at that house, for she was lame. He knew I wouldn't want any other Christmas present than just him, of course," said Nancy loyally.

Marguerite thought of the presents she had received on the family Christmas tree ever since she could remember. She put her arm around Nancy.

"You're a pretty nice sister," she said. "May I have one of your chocolates, please?"

Dinner was always served promptly at one o'clock at Beaumont Corners. It was usually rather a stiff meal but that day it went off gayly. The admiral and the general vied with each other in telling stories, and the little girls listened to them all, with great interest. After dinner the two old friends went out on the piazza together and Nancy and her guest were left to do as they liked. Nancy drew Marguerite down beside her on the long sofa in the hall.

"It's only a little bit after two o'clock, Marguerite," she said, "and it's for you to choose what we shall do. I have ever so many places and things to show you; would you rather go to drive or to walk or out in my canoe or see the animals, or the queer things in the house—for there are ever so many queer things—or what?"

Marguerite was a young person who as the oldest of several children, had been accustomed to decide a good many questions with little delay, so her answer was ready.

"I should like to see the animals, please," she said promptly, "for I want to know all your friends, Nancy. Then when I go home again I can imagine everything you are doing, day after day. Doesn't it seem to you as if you heard a cat somewhere?"

Nancy listened, then she sprang from the sofa.

"Come, let's hunt for her," she said, seizing Marguerite's hand. "It's Julia, and she's shut in somewhere, for she never cries until she begins to get hungry. Julia! Julia! where are you?"

There was a faint, distressed mew, from somewhere, but although the little girls hurried back and forth, and up and down stairs, opening closet doors, they could not find the prisoner.

"Cry again, Julia! cry louder!" commanded Nancy, standing in the middle of the hall, and in response there came a loud mew.

Nancy flew to the old oak settle that stood beyond the fireplace, pulled up the lid, and there, comfortably curled on an old carriage rug, was a small Maltese cat. Her mouth was opening for another cry, but as she saw the rescuing party, she changed it to a yawn, and rose, stretching her paws and preparing to leave her bed.

"Why, Julia Frost," said Nancy reproachfully, "you must have clambered in that settle this morning when Sylvanus took out the wrap for grandfather! I am astonished at you." She took the little cat up in her arms, and stroked her back; Julia began to purr. Nancy faced her toward the visitor.

"This is my friend, Marguerite Compton, and you must never scratch her," she said firmly; "and Marguerite, this is Julia Frost, named for my mother's family because there are some things she's afraid of; and now we will go to the barn and see some more friends."

At the word "barn" Julia sprang from Nancy's arms, ran across the hall to a door at the back and stood before it with one paw raised.

"See that," said Nancy, "we must hurry before she begins to scratch the door. Oh, Julia, it was nice of you to show off before the company; it proves she likes you, Marguerite."

"Does it?" said Marguerite, and feeling much flattered she followed her little hostess to the back door where Julia stood waiting.

CHAPTER VI

NANCY'S FRIENDS

As they went along to the barn by a grassy path, Nancy explained things which she wished to have Marguerite understand at once.

"Grandfather says that horses should be kept in a stable and cows in a barn," said Nancy, "but our stable was burned five years ago—I can show you the place where it stood—and we have only three horses now, so there has never been another stable. If Mr. Stone at the mill, would buy some of the land grandfather would like to sell him, or pay some money that grandfather thinks he owes us for water rights, I suppose there would be another stable and perhaps another horse."

Marguerite was a little lady, as Aunt Sylvia had said, but she could not help seeing that many things about the beautiful old place were sadly in need of repair; there had been a hole, exquisitely darned, but large, in the table-cloth near her plate, and the furniture coverings were worn and shabby. She wondered a little, but she asked no questions.

"Here is where the stable stood," said Nancy, "and now it is used for the clothes-yard." She lowered her voice a little. "You can't see it from the piazza where grandfather sits," she said, "and so I help Betty hang out the clothes and take them in, for Aunt Sylvia is getting too old for that sort of work, and Betty has a great deal to do; and beside it keeps her contented when I help her and talk to her; she is pretty lonely sometimes."

"Does she have more than one afternoon a week?" asked Marguerite. Then she had to explain about city servants, for Nancy looked so puzzled.

"She doesn't ever have an afternoon out," said Nancy softly, as they entered the barn; "she wouldn't know what to do with it, for she hasn't any family or friends in Potterville. My brother Jack got her at an office in Boston, when she had just come from New Brunswick; we've had her since last autumn, when Aunt Sylvia began to grow old. Now here is my dear Jessie in this first stall. You saw her this morning, but ——"

There was the sound of a sneeze from the hay-loft above their heads. Nancy's cheeks flushed and she cast a reproachful look in the direction from which the sound came.

"Sylvanus," and her voice was as severe as she could make it, "I thought you were to be off in the corn-field this afternoon. What are you doing up there?"

As Sylvanus came slowly down the narrow stairs from the loft, wisps of straw clinging to his head and his clothes, he wore a shame-faced air, but his tongue was as ready as ever.

"I was just waiting, just a few minutes, Miss Nancy," he said with a low bow to Marguerite, "to see if you'd be wanting me to help in the exhibition with Jessie, as you have in times and occasions past, Miss Nancy."

"How did you know we would come out here?" demanded Nancy, but she had begun to smile and Sylvanus had no fear of her anger.

"I just knew you would, Miss Nancy," he said solemnly. "When a young lady has a mare that she's trained to do tricks, stands to reason she'll pay the company the honor to have an exhibition just as soon as she can. And I'll make up time in the corn-field afterward, honest and true, Miss Nancy," he added seeing a look of hesitation on her face.

Nancy ran into Jessie's stall, giving orders to Sylvanus as she went.

"Turn Ezra and Mary Anne around in their stalls so they can see Jessie," she said, "for you know they are just as proud of her as they can be. Mary Anne is Jessie's aunt, Marguerite, and Ezra works so hard on the farm I love to have him enjoy himself in the barn. He's so glad haying is all over, aren't you, Ezra?"

By that time she had led Jessie out of her stall and the pretty mare rubbed her nose affectionately against the old horse as Sylvanus faced him about with his head toward the centre of the barn.

"You are an old dear," said Nancy patting his side, "and so are you, Mary Anne. Jessie, bow respectfully to your aunt; watch her, Marguerite."

Marguerite watched and was rewarded by seeing Jessie lower her head and toss her mane before Mary Anne who must have been gratified, although it could not truly be said that she smiled.

"Now," said Nancy, "we will have a march. Please whistle 'Marching Through Georgia,' slowly, Sylvanus. Marguerite, will you please sit on the stage—that means the stairs."

Marguerite took her seat half way up the stairs, and Sylvanus stood on the threshold, his eyes fixed on his little mistress who stood facing him at the opposite end of the barn, her hand on Jessie's left leg.

"Whistle," said Nancy and Sylvanus began. Nancy patted the mare's leg in perfect time to the music for the first four bars, then "Now we'll march, Jessie," she whispered.

She stamped her left foot on the barn floor and the mare whose head had been turned toward her brought down with a ringing sound the hoof which had been lifted at the whispered words. Side by side they marched across the barn till they reached Sylvanus.

"Halt!" cried Nancy. "Salute!"

The two marchers turned toward each other. Nancy made a courtesy with her hand over her heart, and Jessie tossed her mane, while Marguerite clapped and cried "Encore!" and Sylvanus indulged in his broadest smile. There was another march and more applause. Then came what Nancy called "an exhibition of courage." She mounted Jessie and they rode back and forth while Sylvanus flourished before the mare at unexpected times various articles such as an old scarecrow, a dilapidated bicycle, a broom-handle tied with rags, and a lantern. At all of these things Jessie would pretend for a moment to be frightened; she would raise her forefeet and prick up her ears, and then at the sound of Nancy's soft voice, she would grow calm again, and go soberly on her way.

The last trial was that with a fluttering scrap of paper which Sylvanus started on its course across the barn floor. It was evident that Jessie really did not like this, but she was brave as became a Beaumont. At last Nancy slipped from her back.

"Kneel!" she cried, raising her right hand with an air of command.

Slowly, her eyes fixed on her little mistress, the mare sank till her knees rested on the barn floor. Then Nancy's hand dropped and she ran to Jessie, putting her arms around the mare's neck and rubbing her soft cheek against Jessie's satin skin.

"Now get up slowly, carefully, so I won't fall," she said, and in a moment more Jessie stood proudly erect, tossing her pretty head at the sound of Marguerite's clapping.

"Oh, that's better than any circus could ever be!" cried Marguerite. "If the boys could see her they'd be perfectly wild, Nancy! How did you ever train her?"

Nancy was feeding Jessie with a particular kind of tassel grass which was kept for rewards. Sylvanus gave a hollow cough, and Nancy knew how much he wished to speak.

"You may tell if you like, Sylvanus," she said, and

he poured out the story of the hours of patient teaching it had taken before Nancy and the mare could give even the simplest exhibition.

"But the mare had gifts and talents," said Sylvanus grandly, "that she certainly had, Miss Compton, otherwise Miss Nancy, though she occupied and engaged so many hours, could never have witnessed the encouragement she now has."

It was hard work for Marguerite to keep from laughing as the large words poured from his lips, but she managed to say, "Thank you, Sylvanus," in a smothered voice and he was quite content. Ezra and Mary Anne were turned about to their ordinary positions, and Jessie was led to her stall after more petting.

"You've seen Julia," said Nancy as they started from the barn, "and I don't know just where her kittens, Spick and Span, are now, for they inherit their mother's love of hiding."

"Oh, Nancy, you are so funny and old-fashioned," said Marguerite; then seeing a look of surprise she put her arm around Nancy's waist; "but it's nice to be old-fashioned," said Marguerite warmly.

"Thank you," said Nancy, "for I don't know how to be anything else, Marguerite. Now here are the

little black pigs, and aren't they cunning? Sylvanus keeps this nice closed-in grassy place for them, and they love it. Grandfather would not allow such dirty pigs as some people have in pens, to stay here. How do you do, little pigs?"

Nancy pitched her voice high as she and Marguerite stood looking over the fence into the enclosure, and the four little pigs squealed back a welcome to her.

"I don't name the pigs," said Nancy as they turned away, "because you see they never stay with us very long, or grow up really; I have known so many pigs. It must be sad to be a little pig," and Nancy looked quite sober at the thought until she joined in Marguerite's laugh.

There was a short walk to the hen-yard where the two friends lingered for some time, while Nancy pointed out her favorites.

"There is Jennie," she said as a stout, motherly Plymouth Rock hen stepped sedately toward them; "she has a lovely disposition; just as unselfish as she can be, and she brings up her children beautifully; we all notice that they never quarrel as some of the others do, and they never try to eat more than their share. There's Lucy; she's as pleasant as she can be,

but Aunt Sylvia and I have decided that she is very untruthful."

"What do you mean?" asked Marguerite.

"Why, just what I say," Nancy answered with wide-open eyes. "Some hens are untruthful, you must have known that. She'll cackle and cackle, and perhaps she's laid an egg and perhaps she hasn't; you can't depend on anything she says, not a single word!"

Marguerite laughed so long that it seemed as if she could not stop. At last, however, she managed to speak.

"Nancy," she said, "if there are any more animals, I think if you don't mind we'll save them till to-morrow; for your animals are all so very remarkable, and I've laughed so hard that I have a pain in my side."

"There is only Carlo, our old dog, left," said Nancy, "and he is way off in the fodder-corn-field with the two hired men, and he won't be back for a long time yet. The hired men live on the farm that joins grandfather's land, and they work for grandfather when he needs them, so they don't really belong to our family, but Carlo has known them a long time and he likes to be with them. I think he likes me too, but he is so dignified I am not sure; so your not seeing him the

first day does not matter, for Carlo and I are not intimate friends."

"Could we go and sit near a brook?" asked Marguerite, as they walked along over the short grass, swinging hands, "unless you meant to go back to the house."

Nancy pulled her gently toward the orchard.

"I should like to live outdoors all the time," she said joyfully, "and I know a place where we can sit right in the middle of the brook. Oh, Marguerite, I'm so glad you've come!"

CHAPTER VII

A RIDING LESSON

THAT afternoon was the first of many delightful times for Nancy and her guest. The sun shone and the air was clear and soft, day after day; nobody could have wished for finer weather. The two little girls roamed over the place together, drove or rode or walked along the roads until Marguerite had learned all Nancy's favorite spots. And two or three times they went up the narrow river in Nancy's canoe.

"I'm afraid I can never sit still long enough," Marguerite had said the first day, but Nancy only laughed at her.

"You won't find it so hard as you think," she said, "and at any rate, Marguerite, this river is so shallow that you could not possibly drown in it, even if you hadn't learned to swim in salt water. The sea must be grand."

"It is," said Marguerite, as she seated herself in the canoe, cautiously, and watched Nancy skilfully push away from the bank; "but I've never been on it, except in a big steamboat, I've only been in it."

The canoe was fitted out with a strip of bright red carpet, comfortable back-rests of polished wood, and half a dozen brightly colored pillows.

"What a little beauty this canoe is," said Marguerite as moved by Nancy's paddle the slender craft glided through the rushes softly but surely.

"Yes, it is Jack's," said Nancy, "but he lets me call it mine now that he is so seldom at home, and he taught me how to paddle. You don't know how splendidly he does everything, Marguerite. I just wish you could see him!"

"I should like to see him," said Marguerite quietly. Her eyes were on some lily-pads, but she was thinking that if she could see Nancy's brother there were some things she would say to him even if he were a grown-up young man. She was inclined to think he might be selfish, and that he did not half appreciate his little sister; but she had to be careful that Nancy should not guess her thoughts.

There were some belated cardinal flowers on a bank and they almost caused an accident.

"Oh, look, what a beautiful red!" Marguerite cried; and forgetting everything that Nancy had told her she leaned so far over that only Nancy's quickness saved them from capsizing.

She leaned the other way and drove her paddle straight down into the pebbly bed of the brook, between two stones; it bent but before it could break Marguerite was back in her place.

"I'm so sorry, Nancy! I won't forget again," she said humbly, and Nancy laughed.

"I fell into the river five times before I could remember to keep still," she said; "you are doing beautifully, Marguerite. I'll paddle closer and then you can stand and get some cardinal flowers."

They took a handful home with them and some plume-like sprays of golden-rod which grew in one of the Beaumont pastures.

"Grandfather likes to keep one of these over your father's picture," said Nancy as they picked the golden-rod, "and he hasn't had any for two weeks. The day I got your letter I had seen some on the road to Potterville and I meant to get it on the way home, and I was so excited I forgot all about it!"

"I was excited, too," said Marguerite. "Mother said I was as uneasy as an eel those last days at home," and then the two friends smiled at each other and thought how pleasant it was to be together.

"I'm having even a better time than I thought I should," said Marguerite as they walked slowly home,

looking at the sunset which glowed through the pine trees.

"So am I," said Nancy, "a great deal better! You are my most intimate friend."

"I shall have you for mine," said Marguerite, "except mother, of course."

"Of course," said Nancy, "I meant except my mother, too, because I tell everything to her picture you know; little bothering things that you wouldn't want to tell even an intimate friend."

"I know," said Marguerite, nodding violently; "fusses and silly things, and worries."

"Yes," said Nancy, drawing a long breath. There was one thing that had been worrying her a little even in the midst of her happiness. Her grandfather had twice spoken of her brother Jack in a way that Nancy could not understand; as if Jack were to blame about something serious. And he had not read her a word of Jack's letter that came two days ago; and there had been three thick envelopes in the same mail which Nancy thought must have held bills from the way her grandfather frowned as he opened the long strips of paper that were inside them. "I wish I knew what was the matter," thought Nancy, but she did not dare to ask. The general and Marguerite had been in the

room at the time, and since then her grandfather had not referred to the letters in any way.

"But he said Jack was well, when I asked him," thought Nancy, "so I guess it will all come out right by and by."

Marguerite's riding had made great fun for both the little girls, from the first time she tried it.

"You must ride Jessie, because she is so gentle," said Nancy. "Ezra used to be a good saddle horse, but now he is not quite sure-footed going down the hills, and if he stepped wrong I could look out for my self better than you—just yet," she added.

"You needn't be so polite," said Marguerite merrily, "I told you I must be tied on, at first; but—has anybody ever ridden Mary Anne? I like her, and she looked so wistful yesterday when Jessie was performing; don't you think I might ride Mary Anne?"

"Why, you could try," said Nancy, "her back is pretty hollow. And I believe she would like it; she has to stay in the barn alone a good deal; and she isn't old exactly; she's only eighteen or nineteen or maybe twenty, Sylvanus thinks."

"Let me give her a lump of sugar and try," said Marguerite; "the admiral and father are in the midst

of the war of 1812 now on the piazza and they won't need us."

"No indeed, we might get in the way of the guns," laughed Nancy, as they ran toward the barn.

Halfway there they met Aunt Sylvia with her apron full of yellow apples.

"Oh, Aunt Sylvia," said Nancy, "come out to the barn with us; Marguerite is going to mount Mary Anne and see if she—if she'd like to ride her."

"You mean see if Mary Anne would like to have me ride her," said Marguerite; "please do come."

With two arms meeting at the bow of her apron-strings, and two coaxing faces close to hers, what could Aunt Sylvia do?

"Sylvanus most prob'ly has a basket in de barn dat dese apples could rest in while Aunt Sylvy 'sists at de mounting," she said slowly; "but yet he might not; and maybe ——"

"Please don't 'maybe,' Aunt Sylvia," begged Nancy, and together the two little girls pulled her toward the barn; it was easy work, for evidently Aunt Sylvia was by no means loth to go.

"Lots to do in de house," she muttered as she poured the apples into a basket Nancy found on a hook in the barn, "but I habn't seen much of my

lamb since de company came, so I'm just going to hab a holiday hour."

"I think you may have to stand on something, Marguerite," said Nancy as she led out the bewildered Mary Anne who had been napping in her stall. "Mary Anne seems pretty high."

"I will stand on the stairs," said Marguerite, "and you back Mary Anne up as close as you can, sideways; then she won't see who it is that's getting on."

Nancy backed Mary Anne along to the stairs and held her head. Aunt Sylvia gave a helping hand to Marguerite, but the minute her skirt touched Mary Anne's back the mare gave a snort of wrath and pulling her bridle away from Nancy's hand, she proceeded to lie down on the barn floor. Marguerite who was not fairly on, slipped safely back into Aunt Sylvia's arm shaking with laughter.

"Oh, Mary Anne, how silly you are," said Nancy severely; "get right up this minute!"

Mary Anne required little urging, but she did rise at last, shaking her head and looking rather sheepish, Nancy thought.

"Now," said Nancy, raising her forefinger and looking straight up in Mary Anne's eyes, "I am going to mount you, and if you lie down, Mary

Anne Beaumont, I shall stay on, and you may break some of my bones. Please don't be a foolish old dear," she added, stroking the white star on Mary Anne's forehead.

The mare gave a soft whinny and stood perfectly quiet while Nancy brought a milking stool close to her side.

"Please stand far enough away so she cannot fall on you," said Nancy to Marguerite and Aunt Sylvia. "Yes, I'll be careful, Aunt Sylvia. Now Mary Anne, I am on the stool; and now I—am—on—your—back!"

Mary Anne's ears quivered, and her nostrils dilated, but she stood perfectly still.

"Why, you dear old Mary Anne," cried Nancy with quick remorse, "you are as still as anybody could be. Will you take me a little ride out through the barn door and around the first pasture?"

Mary Anne's ears quivered still, but her eyes were not so wild; there was a gentle pull at the reins, a soft pressure from Nancy's little shoes, and Mary Anne's hoofs were lifted. She started off at a peculiar loping gait which was not ungraceful, and Nancy sat as if she had ridden the mare all her life.

"Isn't anyt'ing on four legs my lamb couldn't

ride," said Aunt Sylvia with pride as she and Marguerite watched Mary Anne's progress around the pasture. Once Nancy stopped the mare and talked to her for a moment, then on they came toward the barn.

Nancy dismounted with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and led Mary Anne back to her stall.

"I'll explain to Marguerite, and it will be all right," she said, and then she left the mare with a final pat.

"You see it is this way," said Nancy, putting her arm around Marguerite's waist, "Mary Anne is getting a little old, and she doesn't make friends easily, and she is nervous. So if you won't feel hurt, Marguerite, I think I'd better ride her, and give Jessie to you, for Jessie will never make any trouble. I'll just tell her about it, and it will be all right; I've talked to Mary Anne and I think she is pleased."

She was so earnest that Marguerite could not bear to laugh, much as she wished to do so.

"Whatever you like best," she said as soberly as she could, "but I hate to take Jessie away from you."

"Oh, nobody could do that really, because she loves me," said Nancy quickly; "but I'm glad to lend her to you. Jessie!"

The pretty mare turned her head instantly at the sound of her name. Nancy went into the stall and brought her out. Jessie stood, apparently understanding all that was said to her, while the saddle and bridle were arranged. Then Marguerite mounted the milking-stool and from that she reached the saddle in safety.

"Now I will walk in front and we'll go very slowly at first, till you are used to her," said Nancy, and they started, Marguerite clutching the reins, and Nancy and Aunt Sylvia as a body-guard. At the first hint of quicker motion Marguerite began to slip.

"I shall be off in a minute," she cried; "somebody please catch me."

"Stop, Jessie!" called Nancy, and the mare instantly obeyed. Meanwhile Aunt Sylvia had seized the folds of Marguerite's skirt with a firm hand.

"Lean dis way, child o' mortality!" she cried. "Keep yo' balance, Miss Marguerite! One fall makes de next one easy. Hyah! dere now, you won't fall, dis time anyway, if dese gathers hold!"

Sure enough, the gathers held long enough for the rider to right herself without really leaving Jessie's back, though she was flushed and panting with the effort to keep from it.

"You'll have to stay close by me until I've learned to ride," she said to Aunt Sylvia when the morning's trial was over, "and I'm very much obliged to you, Aunt Sylvia, for helping me."

"Aunt Sylvy's got some work and uses left in her yet," said the old woman greatly pleased, "and I know where dere's some nut cakes just waiting for a couple o' young ladies to eat."

"Oh, Aunt Sylvia!" cried Marguerite and Nancy together. Nancy seized the basket of apples, and Marguerite linked her arm in Aunt Sylvia's.

"Now you 'member dat Aunt Sylvy's way 'long somewhere in de nineties or hundreds, nobody knows how old, and can't run like she did when she was in de fifties," came the warning, but Aunt Sylvia was chuckling with delight as the three hurried side by side toward the house, the apples bouncing about in the basket, and she was the first to step up on the kitchen porch.

"You and Miss Marguerite seat yourselves comfortable on de bench," she said as she took the basket from Nancy's hands, "and I'll send dat Betty to fetch you out some nut cakes and a little teenty bit o' cheese; most likely she's been folding her hands all de time I've been gone."

Aunt Sylvia spoke so loud that rosy-cheeked Betty, hard at work in the kitchen, could not have failed to hear her, but she evidently bore no grudge, for when Nancy smiled at her as she took the plate of nut cakes, Betty smiled back in a most good-natured way. Marguerite ate one bite of her nut cake and clasped her hands over the rest of it.

"Nancy Beaumont!" she cried. "I never tasted anything so good in all my life before! If it weren't for my family, I should ask your grandfather if I might stay right on for a year and eat nut cakes every day. I'm gladder and gladder that I came, every minute!"

CHAPTER VIII

FROM GARDEN TO GARRET

THE two weeks of Marguerite's visit went altogether too fast; she and Nancy used every minute of each day, but the hours flew by in spite of all they could do.

"Day after to-morrow, and it seems as if I came yesterday!" mourned Marguerite from her seat close to Nancy on the big flat rock in the middle of the brook, easily reached by short jumps from two smaller stones which made a "dry bridge" from the bank.

The little girls had spent some time almost every day on this big stone; they had often left their shoes and stockings on it while they waded in the brook and returned there to let the bright September sunshine take the place of a towel.

"Think of leaving all this lovely country, and most of all leaving you," said Marguerite, giving Nancy a loving squeeze; "and Jessie! I've grown so fond of her! Do you think she will miss me, Nancy? You've been so good to let me have her all this time."

"Of course she'll miss you," said Nancy warmly. She was certain of it, and yet way down in the very bottom of her heart she knew that the only thing that made her a little bit less sorrowful over Marguerite's home-going than she might have been, was the thought that she could ride her dear Jessie again. Every night before the two girls went up to bed Nancy had stolen out alone for a good-night talk with the mare. She knew Jessie had understood why she rode Mary Anne, but sometimes it had been just a little hard to resist the pleading brown eyes when Nancy and Marguerite were starting for their daily ride.

"Father is so delighted to think I have learned to ride," said Marguerite, "and he has promised to buy me a horse next month when he goes up to Vermont to see his old friend General Lane; father spends a day or two with him every autumn, and he says they raise fine horses on a place not far away. But I've told him I shouldn't be contented unless he found a chestnut mare just like Jessie."

Marguerite was dipping her fingers in a little pool of water that a shower had left in a cranny of the big rock, and she did not look up to see Nancy's startled face. The little girl was glad that Marguerite went on

talking and did not wait for her to speak just then. Suppose the general should offer to buy Jessie? Perhaps her grandfather would not think it was wise to let an excellent chance go; she had heard him say that General Compton was able to pay a large price for anything he wished.

"I'm afraid I couldn't behave like a Beaumont for one single minute if Jessie were sold," she thought, her heart swelling until her throat ached, then she tried to be quiet and listen to what Marguerite was saying.

"You said we'd take a long ride the very last day, and that's to-morrow," said Marguerite, "so that only leaves this afternoon for the garret and the secret drawer. Haven't I been pretty patient, Nancy? Almost two weeks and I haven't asked you once about that drawer, though you've put things in it every morning to surprise me."

Nancy swallowed something which rose in her throat and met Marguerite's glance with a smile.

"You have been just as good as good could be," she said affectionately, "and this afternoon I will tell you all about it, and show you just how it works. Marguerite, have we time for a paddle before we go home for dinner?"

Nancy had no watch, but Marguerite had a charming little one which had been brought her from Switzerland. She looked at it, and showed its face to Nancy.

"Not quite, I'm afraid," she said regretfully, "but Nancy, we have time for the garden, I'm sure."

"The garden is almost the best of anything, isn't it?" said Nancy, and Marguerite agreed with her.

There were round beds of geraniums, and some fine shrubs scattered over the lawn in front of the house, but the real garden stretched out at the side, beginning under Nancy's balcony. There were some roses that started on a trellis and climbed until the topmost ones could nod good-morning to the little girl when they chose.

"Let's go in through the arch," said Marguerite, "that always makes me feel stately and important."

She took Nancy's arm, and they went under the boxwood arch with a mincing step, their heads held on one side like those of some of the grand ladies on the Beaumont walls. The paths of the garden were all edged with boxwood, and a photograph taken from a balloon would have showed something that looked like a maze, the paths wandered in and out and crossed each other in such mysterious ways. In the centre of

the garden was a little fountain that plashed and played from morning till night.

"I wish I could decide on my favorite flower," said Marguerite as they strolled along the paths; "I mean of the old-fashioned ones. Sometimes I think these white hollyhocks are the loveliest, and then sometimes the dahlias look the most beautiful; and I'm sure nothing could be a handsomer color than the larkspur. And then there's the London Pride. What do you like best, Nancy?"

"I love them all," said Nancy, "but this is my favorite, I think; yes, I know it is."

"Why, Nancy Beaumont, it's hardly any color but light green, though it does smell delicious," and Marguerite buried her small nose in the midst of some long drooping sprays of ambrosia. "What makes you love it best?"

"I'll tell you this afternoon, when we are up in the garret," said Nancy; "here's a spray for each of us to take, and now I suppose we must hurry, for I hear Aunt Sylvia calling."

The afternoon was cool, and the big garret warm from the sun which was flooding its western windows, was a delightful place. There were all sorts of dried herbs hanging from the rafters, and there was

"I WISH I COULD DECIDE MY FAVORITE FLOWER"

"enough furniture to fill a small house," Marguerite exclaimed.

"It would be a queer house," laughed Nancy, "three pineapple bedsteads, a crib, four bureaus, one chair, and not a single table; three pitchers without a bowl to match and five spinning wheels. Grandmother always said there might come a time when all these things would be needed, but it hasn't come yet."

"Let's sit on that old trunk over there in the window, and you tell me why you love ambrosia," said Marguerite.

"I must take something out of the trunk first," said Nancy.

She lifted the stout iron hasp and opened the old trunk. There came a strong odor of lavender, and Nancy drew out something flat and square, wrapped in a piece of pale yellow silk. When they were seated on the trunk she carefully unwrapped it and disclosed to Marguerite a cardboard sampler, worked in worsted of many colors.

"Nancy Beaumont!" cried Marguerite, "do you mean to tell me that you made that sampler? The red house with green blinds? and those trees and the man and woman with the little boy between them? and the wheelbarrow, Nancy Beaumont, and the four

alphabets, and the numbers and your name? You couldn't!"

Nancy nodded, with great delight.

"Every bit of it," she said; "but Marguerite, I had a pattern for everything except the wheelbarrow, and grandmother said that was uneven."

Marguerite looked at it critically for a moment.

"It does seem as if there was something a little queer about it," she admitted, "but I should play it was an old wheelbarrow and had warped, Nancy. After counting all those stitches for the other things, I should have wanted something uneven."

"I did," said Nancy. "There were hundreds and hundreds of stitches to count, Marguerite, and I wasn't quite six years old; it was the last year grandmother lived, and my fingers used to get so hot and sticky!"

"Dear me, it tires me just to think of it! What a smart child you must have been, Nancy," and Marguerite groaned in a comical way.

"No," said Nancy, as she wrapped the sampler in the yellow silk again, "I wasn't; I had to take out stitches ever and ever so many times, and how I did hate you!" She shook the sampler as if it could really feel and ought to be sorry. "And that's why

I love ambrosia," she added, and she laid the yellow silk package on the floor.

"What is why?" demanded Marguerite.

"The sampler," said Nancy soberly. "When I had finished my hour's work on it and grandmother had looked at it and said 'Pretty well,' I used to run to Aunt Sylvia and tell her. Then she'd say, 'Honey bunch has got to have a wreath and play queen,' and we would go off to the garden together.

"Aunt Sylvia would pick some sprays of ambrosia and twine them together till she made a wreath; then she put it on my head, and made a curtsey, and said, 'What will my queen have, now?' and I'd say, 'My throne.' Then she always carried me to the seat by the fountain, and put me in it, and stood in front of me, and said, 'What next, my queen?' and I'd say, 'My very best throne, not this one,' and pretend to be cross, and get off the seat and wave my arm; and then Aunt Sylvia would sit down and I would get up in her lap, and she'd sing me 'Blow li'l' breezes,' and I'd go to sleep, and while I was going I could smell the ambrosia. So that's why I love it."

"I don't wonder," said Marguerite, and for a minute the two little girls were quite still.

"When I was six, I just played all day long till I

was so tired I couldn't sit up or stay awake another minute," said Marguerite, "and then mother would tuck me up in bed and—oh, Nancy, I shall never be perfectly happy till you come to make us a visit, and let mother tuck you up and play you are little, because ——" but Marguerite broke off for the second time and put her bright face close to Nancy's wistful one instead of saying another word.

"I don't wish to be too curious," she said a moment later, as she spied a low door in the wall not far from the great chimney, "but Nancy, where does that door lead? You've shown me four closets already."

"Come!" cried Nancy, springing from the trunk and holding out her hand, "as soon as I've put the sampler away, I will show you the most mysterious place you ever saw!"

The sampler was thrust hastily inside the old trunk, and Nancy led the way to the low door which Marguerite had noticed. It had no latch, but one of the panels had a little knob in its centre; Nancy pressed hard on this, and the door flew open, showing a small square space, dimly lighted, and a glimpse of a winding staircase.

"Stoop and enter!" said Nancy in a hoarse whisper, her eyes dancing with fun, and Marguerite promptly

obeyed her. Nancy followed, crouching till they were safely out in the dimly lighted space. Marguerite turned around and around in bewilderment.

"Why where did we come in?" she asked. "Where is the door?"

But there had been a soft sound as Nancy straightened herself, and the doorway had vanished.

CHAPTER IX

THE SECRET STAIRWAY

"It's like the things you read about that you think never could be true," said Marguerite softly; "now I know there was a door, for how else did we get here, but I don't see it. Nancy, are you a witch?"

"The door is there, but it looks just like all the rest of the wall," said Nancy laughing; "as soon as your eyes get used to the light, we'll go down the staircase if you like, and look at the general and grandfather."

Marguerite looked up to see what lighted the large room in which they stood, and saw that at the head of the staircase there was a window of heavy glass, which apparently opened on to the roof.

"Could we go out on the roof?" she asked. "I never saw that window from the ground."

"You couldn't see it because there's a pointed place in the roof on one side and the big chimney on the other, to hide it," said Nancy. "This staircase was built by my great-great-great-grandfather, and it was because he was afraid of Indians, people say. But grandfather says he doesn't believe that of a Beau-

mont; he thinks it was because he found there was waste room, and the real Beaumonts have always been thrifty. It's the Frost part of me that forgets to save strings and pins and things, I suppose."

They laughed softly as they began to go down the stairs. When they had gone a little way they came to another floor and Nancy said they were going past the bedrooms.

"Now we are going under the front hall," she said after a few more turns; "it's getting pretty dark, isn't it, but we're almost there."

There was a smell of earth, and in a minute more they were on the ground in a small square space, three sides of which were solid plaster and the fourth was of iron, with a low hinged door close to the ground.

"That's the door to the underground passage, grandfather says, but it hasn't been opened since he was a little boy," whispered Nancy, "and he thinks the passage must have been choked up long ago; I believe it came out way down near the brook, out of sight of the house."

"Did your ancestor who wasn't afraid of anything think ground was wasted unless he dug under it?" whispered Marguerite, but Nancy shook her finger at her, laughing under her breath.

"Don't you make fun of him," she said. "Look overhead, Marguerite. They're playing chess; in a minute we'll call to them. Grandfather's always pleased when I come down the staircase, because I used to be a little afraid at first, it was so dark and poky."

Marguerite looked up, and saw that above them was the floor of the piazza; there were spaces between the boards, and she could see the broad sole of one of her father's boots, cutting off the light from her. She rose on tiptoe and squinted her eyes to look through another crack.

"Your grandfather isn't very much interested in the game, Nancy," she whispered. "See, he's holding a queen in his hand, but he isn't looking at the chessboard. He's ——"

Suddenly they heard the admiral's voice. He did not speak loud, but as his head was bent, the words were carried to the little girls as if he had spoken to them.

"I haven't the money," said the admiral slowly, "and I will not borrow it. I'm sorry for the boy but he has brought it on himself. I will pay his debts and then——"

For a moment Nancy had stood as if she were

chained to the spot, but before the admiral had finished his sentence, she had seized Marguerite's hand, and pulled her to the stairs.

"Come," she whispered with sudden fright in her eyes, "we mustn't stay here, Marguerite, we must go right away as fast as we can."

She flew so swiftly up the narrow stairs that poor Marguerite, dragged upward after her, fell flat on her face before they had reached the second story.

"Oh, Nancy," she panted, "couldn't we go a little bit slower the rest of the way? We can't hear anything now."

"Excuse me, please," said Nancy humbly; "I—I was so frightened, and I knew we ought not to listen," and she went slowly the rest of the way, till they reached the garret floor.

Nancy's heart was beating, and her face was full of trouble. What should she do? All at once some words she had heard her grandmother say to a visitor came into her mind. The visitor had attempted to sympathize with her grandmother over the loss of a valuable necklace.

"My child," the old lady had said, and Nancy remembered just how severe she had looked, "I thank you, but I was early taught that while we should wel-

come a share in the troubles of a guest, only our joys should be shared with him."

Admiral Beaumont had often referred to the incident, and kept it fresh in Nancy's memory. Now, for the first time in her life, she found it useful. Marguerite was her guest, and this was their last day together. It must not be made unhappy. She would try to forget her trouble till the guest had gone.

"Nancy, are you worried?" asked Marguerite gently, and Nancy managed to smile as she turned to her friend.

"I was, but I won't be now," she said. "I'll show you about the door, and then the secret drawer, Marguerite. See, there is a little rough place in the wall here; that is the spring, though it looks more like a knot in the wood. Press hard on it."

Marguerite pressed and the door flew open, as it had for Nancy. When they were once more in the garret and had shaken off the dust of their journey, they went down-stairs to Nancy's room.

"I suppose your room is covered all over with secret springs, after what I've seen," said Marguerite, as she stood in the middle of the room; "I believe there's one behind that tapestry for that would be on a line with the bureau in my room."

"You have guessed right," said Nancy, "but it isn't exactly a spring this time, Marguerite, at least not like the one up in the garret, and it's the only one in my room. Put your hand on the middle panel and push to the left. There, now what do you see?"

What Marguerite saw was part of the back of the bureau that stood in her room. The surface was smooth except where one drawer stood out a little.

"Put your hand underneath," said Nancy, and Marguerite felt the under side of the projecting drawer with her fingers.

"There's something like the end of a stick," she said, "close to the edge of the bureau."

"Push it up," said Nancy, "and let go quickly."

Marguerite pushed, and hastily withdrew her fingers; none too soon, for as she did it the drawer shot out of sight leaving a square hole, into which she peered.

"I can see the back of it, I think," she said, withdrawing her head and turning to Nancy. "I suppose it's in my room, now."

"Yes," said Nancy, "and it won't come back till you push it in; when you've pushed it just as far as you can, the little stick springs back into place again."

"Did one of your ancestors do that?" asked Marguerite. "The same one that built the secret staircase?"

"Grandfather thinks he must have made the sliding panel," said Nancy, "but the drawer is different. That was made by a young Japanese who was a friend of my father when they were boys."

"How interesting!" cried Marguerite. "Do tell me about him, Nancy."

"He came here to spend a vacation with father, for they were at boarding school together," said Nancy, "and father liked the Japanese boy very much; and the day after they got here, father came down with the measles; he was put in your room and the Japanese boy was here in mine.

"Aunt Sylvia—she's the one who told me all about it—says he was the lonesomest boy she ever knew, and he begged her to give him something to do. It was stormy, and they wouldn't let him go into father's room, and Aunt Sylvia pitied him dreadfully; and father was lonesome too, and uneasy. I guess Aunt Sylvia had a pretty hard time, though she didn't tell me so.

"At any rate, one day she showed him the sliding panel, and said nobody knew what it was for, and he

looked perfectly delighted when he saw the back of the bureau. He asked Aunt Sylvia to go into father's room, and he would knock on the back of the bureau with a stick, so she could find out where he was hitting; and she found he hit just behind the drawer. Then, she said, he thanked her—he was always just as polite, Aunt Sylvia says—and went down-stairs and asked grandfather's permission to cut out the back of the bureau in that place; and nobody could refuse him anything because he was so polite, so of course grandfather said he might.

"And when Aunt Sylvia told father, he was just as excited as could be, and he watched and watched till the drawer disappeared—that was as soon as the hole was cut, you see, and the Japanese boy could pull it out from the back. Then it was the end of the next day before he saw it slide into place again. He went to the bureau—father did—and pulled and pulled, but he couldn't move it. Then he sent Aunt Sylvia to ask what the matter was, for he had been sure the Japanese boy would put something in the drawer, for fun. And while Aunt Sylvia was gone, the drawer shot right out, and in it was a sheet of paper with ladies' faces painted on it!

"That Japanese boy could paint all sorts of won-

derful things, as fast as you could count, and every day after that the drawer would go back and forth ever so many times. Father used to put in all sorts of things he'd whittled, and the Japanese boy would paint pictures, and almost before they knew it father was well, and they could be together again."

"Oh, I wish I could see some of the things he painted," said Marguerite, with a sigh. "That's a lovely story to have connected with a room, Nancy."

"I'll show you all the things he painted," said Nancy; "I've saved them on purpose for to-day. Aunt Sylvia says that father pinned the sheets of paper together as fast as they came, and when he went off to school again, he put them all in the secret drawer."

While she talked Nancy was opening the lower drawer of her bureau. She took from it a square box made of cardboard with faded pink roses on the cover, and edges of faded pink ribbon. She put the box on the bed and the two friends knelt on the floor beside it.

"These are my best treasures," said Nancy, softly, as she untied the loose knot of the old ribbon. "On top is my mother's picture, you see, and here is her wedding handkerchief, and the white bead

bag she made; and here is father's wedding necktie, and two letters he wrote mother, and here at the bottom I keep the Japanese pictures. Aunt Sylvia says that when my mother came here as a bride she made a hole in the top of each sheet,—see, Marguerite —and tied them all together with this ribbon that had been on one of her wedding slippers. She never saw the Japanese boy, you know, because he had gone back to Japan long before that, but he had asked them to go to visit him; he was a real artist, though he never painted pictures for money. I wish I could go to Japan some day and find out where he lives, and see him."

"Wouldn't that be splendid!" cried Marguerite. "Don't you just love to travel, Nancy? I've been to Washington and Baltimore and Philadelphia and Boston and Niagara Falls."

"I've been to Potterville," said Nancy, and then they both laughed, but only for a minute, for when Nancy spread the Japanese picture book on the bed and began to turn the leaves, everything else was forgotten.

There were wonderful birds and flowers; figures of ladies in gay attire holding fans above their heads; children playing with kites; groups of people drinking

tea; queer pagodas and bridges; long-necked cranes and funny broad fish; skies with the moon half hidden by clouds; all sorts of things the Japanese boy had painted, and to Marguerite they all seemed perfect. When the last page was turned and Nancy put the little paper book back in the card-board box, Marguerite gave a sigh of regret.

"Nancy," she said, "I think this has been almost the best time of all. Picture galleries make my neck ache, but this has been a spread-out gallery, and just as beautiful as it could be. And if both of my feet have gone to sleep—and I think they have—I don't care one single bit."

CHAPTER X

ON THE HILL

THE last day was just what Nancy would have chosen it to be, and the two friends had a long, beautiful ride together. They started soon after breakfast, and took a basket full of good things to eat, for they were to have their luncheon on a hill, and not return till afternoon.

"This will be the hardest climb you have had for a long time, Mary Anne dear," said Nancy, as they turned from the road to the little wood-path which led, with many twists, to the top of the hill; "I hope you won't get too tired."

Mary Anne tossed her head, and glanced around at her niece who was close beside her.

"I believe she wishes us to understand that she is young and strong enough for anything," laughed Marguerite.

"She has a great deal of pride," said Nancy, "and she's always been ambitious. I like it in her."

"So do I," said Marguerite, trying to speak in the matter-of-fact tone which Nancy always used when

she talked of her animal friends, "I think it's a fine trait."

Up and up they wound, till they came out in a stony pasture. In the distance far down the opposite slope of the hill they saw some cattle, and Jessie pricked up her ears, as a loud "moo" rose on the air.

"Now, Jessie, don't be foolish; you've known those cows all your life," said Nancy, reaching across to put her hand on the mare's head. "You know they are here every autumn—Mr. Brown's cows. Look at Aunt Mary Anne, Jessie; she isn't paying the least attention to them."

Jessie seemed a little ashamed, and did not turn her head toward the cows again, but went soberly along until they reached the place which Nancy had chosen for the picnic. It was the site of an abandoned farm; the house had been burned twenty years before, and the people who had lived there had not courage to build again in that lonely spot, but chose instead to buy a small farm in the valley.

"Here's the old cellar-hole, you see," said Nancy, as the two girls dismounted and took long breaths of the soft autumn air; "and there is the orchard down beyond it, and there are some splendid Porter apples, just what we need to finish our luncheon."

"Where shall you tie Mary Anne and Jessie?" asked Marguerite. "There's a tall tree that might do."

"Tie them," said Nancy opening her eyes very wide, "why I shan't tie them anywhere. They wouldn't run away for the world, with us up here."

"Please don't look so reproachful, Nancy dear," laughed Marguerite; "I forgot how different Mary Anne and Jessie are from other horses. Shall we feed them with tassel grass for their dinner?"

"Yes, for there's plenty of it here," said Nancy. "We'll just take off the saddles so they'll have a good resting time, and then I'll show you over the place."

Marguerite laughed, but it proved that Nancy had really a good deal to show her. There were beautiful views—of seven little ponds in the valley, from one side of the farm, and of purple hills with a faint background of distant mountains, from the other; there was a sunny wall along which rioted a grape-vine bearing delicious grapes, just in the state to be eaten; there was a natural swing formed by the long interlocked branches of two apple trees; there was a miniature pine-grove with an enormous ant-hill like a small mountain in the middle of it; there was an old, old toad which hopped out from under the door-stone when

Nancy rattled a rusty tin pan that lay near by and called to him.

"I would never have believed there could be so many things to see in a deserted place like this," said Marguerite thoughtfully as she munched some winter-green leaves while Nancy opened the luncheon basket.

"Oh, there are always so many more things to see than we have time for," said Nancy as she spread a big, snowy napkin on the door-stone, which was to serve for a table. "I think Aunt Sylvia gave us a pretty nice luncheon, Marguerite, don't you?"

"I should call it a dinner," said Marguerite solemnly. "Cold chicken and cold ham and bread and butter and pickles and sponge cake and cookies, Nancy Beaumont, are what I call a dinner; I should call it a Turkish dinner, on account of the way we are sitting."

"Let's twist our handkerchiefs around our heads for turbans," said Nancy, "and that will make it seem more real."

So they ate their luncheon, sitting Turk fashion on the ground with handkerchief turbans on their heads, and the wrinkled old toad eyeing them wistfully from a respectful distance.

"You may be a fairy prince changed into a toad,"

said Nancy, "so we will give you all our crumbs and that will make a nice dinner for you."

She put the crumbs on the bottom of the inverted tin pan, and the fairy prince ate them with evident pleasure. Then Nancy and Marguerite fed Mary Anne and Jessie with tassel grass and other dainties, ending with a lump of sugar for each.

"Just see, Jessie takes it from my hand as prettily as if it were yours," said Marguerite; "I really think she's a little bit fond of me, Nancy, don't you?"

"Of course she is," said Nancy quickly, but as she rubbed and patted Mary Anne there was an uncomfortable feeling in her throat and eyes.

"Oh, dear me, I'm afraid I'm jealous," thought poor little Nancy. "I almost know I am. And wouldn't you think I'd be ashamed when Marguerite is my intimate friend, and I have Jessie for my own all the time!"

"Nancy," said Marguerite, "don't you think it would be fun for us to have rings of Mary Anne's and Jessie's hair, and wear them always till we see each other again, and think of each other whenever we look at them? I'm sure they could each spare a few hairs from their tails."

"Of course they could," said Nancy eagerly, "and

I have my big knife in my pocket, so I can cut them off very carefully; and you must make my ring, Marguerite, and I'll make yours."

It was harder work to make the rings than either of the little girls had thought it would be; the long hairs were stiff and not easy to manage, but at last the rings were done, the ends tied in safe square knots, and trimmed close with Nancy's knife.

"Now you wish mine on and I'll wish yours on," said Marguerite, "and neither of us must know what the other wishes, of course. Hold out your finger, Nancy; my wish is all ready."

Nancy held out the third finger of her left hand and Marguerite, with puckered brow and pursed lips, put it on. But Nancy was not so quick about Marguerite's ring; she held it in her fingers and her breath came fast.

"My finger is going to sleep," said Marguerite, who had held it out stiffly, waiting for the ring, "please hurry, Nancy."

"I'm trying to," said Nancy, but it was another minute or two before she put the ring on Marguerite's finger.

"I hope you'd think it was a good wish," she said wistfully. "I mean it for one."

"Why, of course it's good if you made it," said Marguerite, "and oh, Nancy, look at that sun! We'll have to be going home in just a little while. I never saw anything like the way the time flies here."

That night at the tea-table the general looked at Nancy with a smile.

"If ever you decide to sell that mare of yours, young lady, you let me know," he said. "Between leaving you and leaving Jessie it looks to me as if I might have a very tearful daughter on my hands."

"Father, you know I wouldn't cry," said Marguerite indignantly, "no matter how much I might wish to."

The general laughed.

"We'll see," he said, "but I mean it, about the mare, Nancy. Your grandfather says she's yours, and if ever you get tired of her, you let me know."

"Yes, sir," said Nancy with scarlet cheeks. She did not dare trust herself to say another word for several minutes.

"I don't see how Marguerite can be sure she wouldn't cry," thought Nancy as she swallowed her biscuit and something else that was harder to manage. "I guess if Jessie belonged to her it would be different, if she kept hearing about people that wanted her; I guess maybe she wouldn't be so sure."

CHAPTER XI

A TEST FOR A BEAUMONT

WHEN the time for parting came next day the two little girls were quite brave and smiling.

"You are doing well," said the general as he looked from one face to the other while the group stood waiting for the train to steam up to the Potterville station. "I believe you've grown so tired of each other, you're really glad to say good-bye," and the general laughed heartily at his joke.

"Father," said Marguerite, snuggling close to him when the train had rounded a curve, and she could no longer see the little white flutter that was Marguerite's handkerchief, "father, you know of course I am crazy to get home, though I've had such a good time, but Nancy will miss me dreadfully, and she is such a dear!"

"She'll miss you, certainly;" the general pinched his little daughter's cheek affectionately, "but she's a Beaumont, you must remember; she'll stand it."

"She's part Frost, you know, father," said Marguerite, "and that makes a great difference."

"So she—so she is," admitted the general. "I

hadn't thought about that; and the admiral's grown old; he's dull company for a little girl most of the time. We must have them both for a visit this winter, or Nancy alone, if the admiral won't come. Might have her in the holidays when her brother's there to keep him company."

"Oh, she wouldn't come then," said Marguerite. "She just adores her brother."

"I hope he may be worth it," said the general dryly. "Now look out of the window, my dear, while I close my eyes for a few minutes."

"It's lonely when you've had company and they go away, isn't it, grandfather?" asked Nancy that evening as they sat together before the fire. It was long past Nancy's usual bedtime, but she felt excited, and as if she would like to sit up all night.

"Yes, child, it is lonely," answered the admiral, rousing himself from a revery. "And yet there are worse things than loneliness, Nancy, much worse."

"Yes, indeed," said Nancy, "you mean real troubles, grandfather."

"Real troubles," echoed the admiral, "that's it; real troubles!" Then he turned in his chair and looked sharply at Nancy.

"What should a child like you know of real troubles?" he asked. "Look at that clock, Nancy, and then kiss me good-night, and off with you to bed and to sleep. That's what children can do."

"Not always," said Nancy to herself an hour or two later, when the house was dark and still. She had been asleep, but an uncomfortable dream had waked her. A dream in which Jessie looked at her with reproachful eyes, and said, "I could help you if you'd let me. I know I could!"

When she had tossed and turned for what seemed to her a long time, Nancy crept out of bed, and slipped on warm shoes and a thick wrapper. She was shivering a little, though not with cold.

"It must be very late," said Nancy to herself, "and grandfather has gone to bed long ago. I'll just take my candle and go down-stairs for a minute. I want to see exactly how Jack looks, and then it will seem almost as if he were here."

Very softly she crept down the broad stairs which never creaked under her light weight, her candle held carefully so that it would not drip. The library was not as dark as Nancy had expected to find it; on a small table in the centre of the room flared a candle, like her own, and by its light she saw her grandfather

standing, hands clasped behind him, staring up at the portrait of Jack.

She stood for a moment, uncertain what to do, and in that moment she heard a voice which was her grandfather's and yet not like the voice she knew, it was so sad and tender.

"I'd give all I own, to you, boy," said this sad old voice, "but I can't make money where there isn't any. They cheat me of my rights, and it's all I can do to keep the home. There's the child to be thought of, you know, and ——"

Nancy made a quick step forward, hesitated, then setting her candle on the nearest chair, she ran to her grandfather and clasped her hands about his arm.

"Oh, please don't be angry with me," she pleaded as the admiral looked down at her with amazement. "I couldn't sleep, grandfather, any more than you, and I came down just to talk to Jack a little. Won't you tell me what the matter is?"

With surprising gentleness the admiral put his hand over the little hot fingers which clutched his sleeve.

"You'd have to know very soon, my dear," he said, "and perhaps I might as well tell you now. Your brother cannot have this last year at college, for there is no money to pay for it. He has been"—the old

man hesitated, and then softened his words so that they need bring no added trouble to the eager face upturned to his—"he has been too generous in spending his money, I presume," the admiral finished his sentence. "I have extra bills to pay, and one of my investments will yield no dividend this autumn. Jack must go into business, and earn his way now."

Nancy knew the Beaumont history and traditions, and a look of distress overspread her face.

"But—but every Beaumont goes through college, grandfather, and then takes up his profession," she said anxiously. "You've always told me that."

"Yes," said the admiral, bitterly, "and I've reminded your brother of it many times. He forgot that anything depended on him, and now the end has come."

"But can't we get the money, any way?" asked Nancy, eagerly, and as she said the words, her dream flashed back to her.

"No," said the admiral slowly, "there is no way to get it. No way that I should consider for a moment," he added louder, as if to strengthen himself against temptation.

Nancy's fingers loosened their clasp of his sleeve, and she stepped back; her face was pale with a sud-

den resolve, but her eyes were shining, and for a moment they drew her grandfather's gaze and held it.

"I will sell Jessie," she said firmly. "You said she was mine, grandfather, you told the general so. And I will ask him if when Jack has earned a great deal of money, we may buy Jessie back again. She would be pretty old, perhaps, but I should love her just as much."

"No," thundered the admiral. "I tell you, I won't have you do it, child! The boy has taken no thought of us, in his selfishness. Let him work his way now."

Once more the hot fingers clutched his sleeve.

"Grandfather," said Nancy, and it seemed to him that for once the Beaumont eyes shone out from the little Frost face, "you know Jack is all we have for our family, you and I. Jessie is a darling, but you know we could neither of us bear to look at her, and think we put her before Jack. He mustn't know she is to be sold, for he'd never let me do it, grandfather. And when he does know it, why he'll work so hard with his studies, grandfather—you know he will! I will write General Compton to-morrow morning, the very first thing. So now it's all settled, isn't it? Why, I'm so proud to think I can help Jack."

She unclasped her hands, and moved a little distance away from the admiral.

"Please say it is all settled, grandfather," begged Nancy, and it seemed to the old man who stood looking at her, as if she had grown suddenly taller and graver.

The admiral lifted his hand to his head in a long unused gesture of respect.

"My dear," he said, "I am not sure that I'm doing right. I think in all probability, I am doing wrong, but I cannot find it in my heart to deny you. I only hope your brother may be worthy of his sister, some day. Now will you go to bed again, to please an old man?"

Nancy ran to him, and he stooped so that she could put her arms around his neck.

"Oh, thank you, grandfather," she said earnestly; "thank you for letting me help; of course I know Jack is worthy of anybody, just as you do. He's only too generous, as you said. And—shall you go to bed pretty soon, to please a little girl?"

"Soon, very soon," said the admiral; but it was more than an hour after Nancy left him that he slowly and painfully ascended the stairs, and went to his room to lie awake till morning.

"It isn't right," he muttered, as the first streak of light found its way through his window-pane; "it isn't right, but it may be the making of Jack. It may turn the boy into a man. It may ——"

And at last the admiral fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII

AN UNWELCOME CALLER

WHEN Nancy woke next morning, she could not think, for a moment, what trouble it was that lay heavily underneath her pleasure in the bright leaves and the strip of sky she could see from her bed. Then, all at once, it came back to her, and she caught her breath.

"I mustn't think about it," she said, as she jumped out of bed, "I must just do it, as fast as I can. Then, when it's all done, and I'm back here, I shall cry—perhaps I shall cry a good deal; 'twouldn't surprise me a bit if I did," and Nancy began to brush her curls with great energy. "But it won't make a bit of difference if I do, as long as I'm Beaumonty till Jessie is safe in her new home."

At the breakfast table Nancy broached the subject as boldly as she could. By daylight the admiral looked older and more feeble even than the night before.

"You know, grandfather," she began, as she looked

across the table with a bright smile, "of course I shall have to go with Jessie, because she'd be so frightened alone, and I wondered if you could spare Aunt Sylvia to go with me. We'll have to go in the freight car with Jessie, you see. I shall have to get permission, the way Jack did once. I feel pretty important, grandfather."

The admiral set down the cup of coffee which Nancy had been making for him, as she talked, and stared at her in silence for a moment.

"You seem to have made your plans over night in a remarkable way," he said sternly, and then his face relaxed. "You had to make them, poor child," he added. "You knew a decrepit old man need not be taken into consideration at a time like this. But suppose the general has changed his mind?"

Nancy shook her curls vigorously.

"He told me he would give me one thousand dollars for Jessie any time within the next six months," she said, bringing out the words with much emphasis. "He told me that in private, grandfather, because he said sometimes money was more necessary than a horse. I didn't think it could be true, grandfather, ever, but now it is. But when you speak about decrepit old men, Admiral Beaumont, I do not know

any," and Nancy made her face so solemn and disapproving that in spite of himself the admiral laughed.

"Ah well," he said a moment later, with a sigh, "write your letter, child, and send it off this morning. We—we have not much time to lose if the money is to serve its purpose."

The writing of that letter took Nancy a long time, though it was but a short letter when finished. First Nancy read it aloud to herself, and then she gave it to the admiral to read to himself.

"Now play you are General Compton, grandfather," she warned him, as he began to read, "and that I'm not your grandchild, and you can't see my fingers all covered with ink, or the desk spread with the pieces of paper I've practiced my letter on—please be very lenient, grandfather."

"Dear General Compton," read the admiral, "I have found out that we need that money ever so much more than we need Jessie, though of course money is not generally nearly as nice as a horse. But if you would like to buy Jessie, I should like to sell her, right away, and I would take her in the freight car myself, so she wouldn't be frightened or lonely. And some day, when my brother Jack is rich, if you would please let us buy back Jessie, so she could end her days in her old home as a horse would love to do. If it would not be too much trouble, will you write me just as soon as

you can, so I can start? And perhaps I seem changing, but it is circumstances. With love to Marguerite.

"Respectfully and affectionately,

"NANCY BEAUMONT."

When the admiral had finished his slow reading of the letter, he looked across at Nancy with one of his rare and gentle smiles, then sat in silence, tapping the arm of his chair with his glasses.

"I was afraid perhaps it was not right, after all," ventured Nancy, encouraged by the smile; she had watched her grandfather's face with eagerness while he read.

"It is a good letter—as it had to be written," answered the admiral, slowly. "It would have pleased your grandmother, I feel sure. For a child of your age—it is simple and to the point, and it is not without dignity," the admiral ended, while Nancy flushed with pride.

"Then I'll direct the envelope and seal it this minute," and she ran once more to the old writing desk at which she had sat so long, and inscribed the address in her most careful handwriting.

Half an hour later she was on her way to Potterville with Sylvanus.

"Isn't it pretty soon for you to be writing the

general?" inquired Mr. Pearson, weighing in his hand the letter Nancy had just passed under the little slats of his window. "Did they forget something? It's customary for the folks that have been visiting to write first, they tell me."

"It was necessary for me to write," said Nancy, repeating the formula with which the admiral had provided her for such occasions. "It's a pleasant day, isn't it, Mr. Pearson?"

The postmaster gazed searchingly at her through the slats for a moment.

"It is, for those that have time to look at it," he replied briefly. "I suppose you'll be expecting the answer to this by to-morrow or next day?"

"I hope so," admitted Nancy, and then she hurried out of the post-office without giving Mr. Pearson a chance to ask any more questions, leaving him with an injured expression on his large, moon-shaped face.

It would have been hard to say whether Nancy or the admiral was in the greater state of excitement for the next twenty-four hours. They both spent a good deal of time looking out of the windows, and very little in sleep.

"We don't seem to care much for our tea, grandfather, do we?" asked Nancy the next afternoon.

"Does it sound to you as if you heard hoofs coming up the lane? Of course there couldn't be—but——"

Without doubt there was a sound of hoofs, and the rattle of a light wagon, as well. Nancy hurried to the window, and looked out into the dusk.

"Why, it looks like Mr. Pearson's old open buggy, grandfather," she exclaimed, "and the Pearsons' old mare, too. I didn't think she could climb as much of a hill nowadays; she's a great deal older than Mary Anne. Oh, grandfather, it is Mr. Pearson himself, getting out of the buggy! Shall I——"

"You may go to the door, Nancy;" the admiral's voice shook a little as he spoke. "I think I saw a yellow envelope in his hand."

Nancy needed no second bidding, for she had flown to the door before the admiral finished his sentence.

"I'll step inside," said Mr. Pearson as the door was opened, removing his hat with an air of much dignity. "There's a matter here you will wish to attend to at once. I left all business to come up here; the telegram arrived just after Sylvanus had left with the mail. I presume you can explain it, but it's blind to me, as yet."

"Will you take a seat, Mr. Pearson," quavered

Nancy as she took the yellow envelope in her hot fingers, and turned toward the library.

"I'll step in here for a few words with the admiral," said Mr. Pearson, following close at Nancy's heels, and advancing with outstretched hand to his unwilling host. "It isn't often I get as far as this, and you'll be glad to hear some o' the town news, most likely," he said, shaking the admiral's hand with great vigor. "I set all aside to come right up with that telegram. Cool weather, isn't it?" and Mr. Pearson dropped into the nearest chair and looked calmly from the admiral to Nancy, and back again to the admiral who was torn between the rules of hospitality and a desire to rid himself of this inquisitive messenger.

"You might as well read your telegram, Nancy," he said as calmly as he could under the circumstances. "Mr. Pearson doubtless wishes to know if there is to be an answer."

"That was my idea in coming up," and the postmaster settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "But don't you feel hurried; take your time to think it over, and talk it over. Don't mind me; I've put the Holland boy in charge of the office, and he'll do all right, as there's nothing for him to do. And as for talking before me, a postmaster gets to know most

everything there is in a town; there aren't any real secrets from him," said Mr. Pearson with a cheerful smile.

"We will step across into the parlor, Nancy," said the admiral with a sudden determination, "if our guest will pardon us for a few moments, and make himself comfortable."

"Well, I swan, that's cool!" muttered Mr. Pearson as he looked after the two figures. "Furniture coverings are worn pretty thin here an' there—most everywhere in fact," he added. "Things look pretty shabby here for all their high an' mighty ways. But I presume they don't mean any harm," and turning in his chair, he strained his ears in the hope of catching some stray remark from the room across the hall.

"Read it, child," the admiral commanded. "Tell me what it says."

"'Deliver goods at earliest convenience,'" read Nancy in a breathless voice. "'Wire me at time of starting.' Oh grandfather, it's all right, you see! Aren't you glad?"

"I'm not sure whether it's all right or not," said the admiral, smoothing the yellow slip in his thin hands and looking down at Nancy as if he were assailed by sudden doubt of her ability to carry out her plans;

"but—yes, child, I'm glad, whether or no; I can't help being glad."

"I can't, either," said Nancy with dancing eyes. Then she stood on tiptoe to reach her grandfather's ear.

"What shall we tell Mr. Pearson?" she whispered. "We'll have to tell him something, of course."

"I suppose we must," and the admiral looked so helpless and yet indignant that Nancy almost laughed.

"Shall I just say that we thank him very much for bringing the telegram, and that I shall send the answer as soon as possible?" suggested Nancy.

The admiral pondered for a moment and then shook his head.

"That won't satisfy him," he said slowly, "and he'll know all about it within a day or two, at the latest. I think, my dear, it would be better to tell him the whole truth—not necessarily the reasons for what you are going to do."

"That would be easiest," and Nancy gave a little sigh of relief. "Shall we go now, grandfather?"

They found Mr. Pearson seated on the edge of his chair, with his eyes apparently fastened on the darkening landscape to be seen through the nearest

window, but he had the air of one who has sat down in great haste.

"Mr. Pearson," Nancy began in as calm a tone as she could manage to get, "the telegram you so kindly brought us is about Jessie, our, my mare—I—we—grandfather is allowing me to sell her to General Compton, because we—I—wish the money for something else."

Mr. Pearson rose to his feet with a spring.

"That's a good move as ever you folks made," he said with great cordiality. "There you've been riding round on that skittish critter for the last three years, an' the most of Potterville has had its heart right up in its mouth seeing you. She'll bring a fair price, I dare say"— Mr. Pearson made an inquiring pause, but no one filled it, so he continued, "she'll bring a fair price no doubt, and they'll have her tamed down by those autymobiles and what-all, in no time, whilst you'll have that money for a nest egg to put in the bank, and travel off visiting with, whenever you like. I call it a good move."

There was no response except a faint smile from Nancy. It was quite evident that the admiral felt it was now time for the visitor to depart; but Mr. Pearson had thought of another question.

"How are you intending to send the mare?" he inquired, standing with his hand holding the top buttonhole of his coat, ready to receive the corresponding button. "Freight, I suppose. She'll be scared, I reckon."

"I am going with her," said Nancy quietly; "and Aunt Sylvia is going with me. I shall go to Potterville to-morrow to see about it."

"For the land's sake!" cried Mr. Pearson, loosing the buttonhole in his surprise. "I know your brother did that once; but do you realize you're only a little girl, and you've got to be shut up in a place 'most as black as the hole of Calcutty, and perhaps get sidetracked an' shunted off an'——"

The admiral's voice broke in on this harangue, with chilly dignity.

"My granddaughter is a Beaumont," he said with his stern glance bent on the excited postmaster. "She has no reason to fear the dark, or slight delays on her journey."

Mr. Pearson's mouth opened wide, then closed with a snap, then opened again.

"Well—I—I'll bid you good-day," he said with surprising meekness, "and I hope it'll turn out all right for the little girl; for she is a little girl, and that's all

she is!" he added turning a gaze of much disapproval on the admiral; and without another word he departed, reaching the outer door before Nancy, and opening and closing it with considerable vigor.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BARN AT NIGHT

"I THINK he wasn't very pleased, grandfather," said Nancy when the sound of wheels and hoofs had died away, "but he'll have a splendid time telling everybody the news, and perhaps guessing at a little more to go with it."

"I could see that," and the admiral indulged in a grim smile; "you will probably know a good deal more about your own plans by the time you get to Potterville station to-morrow morning than you do when you start."

There fell a silence, as the old man and the little girl sat looking into the fire. The admiral's mind wandered into the past, he forgot his present troubles and anxieties, even forgot Nancy sitting so quietly beside him. At last she stirred, with a sound that brought her grandfather quickly back to the present.

"I want to go up-stairs and tell Aunt Sylvia that it is all settled, because she only half knows about it," Nancy's soft voice had a curiously strained sound to the admiral's ears, "and then I am going out to Jessie to explain everything to her."

The admiral had never been blessed with a vivid imagination, but there was something about Nancy's earnestness and firm belief in the understanding of her dumb friends that always impressed him, in spite of himself. As he had admitted several times to General Compton he could not prove that Nancy's ideas were mistaken; and proof was what the admiral's sense of justice always demanded. Now, after a short, bewildered glance at the eager little face, he returned to his study of the fire.

"Very well, child," he said wearily. "Do as you like."

Aunt Sylvia was in the sewing-room, rocking, with folded hands, without so much as the glimmer of a candle. She was crooning a lullaby as she rocked, and Nancy ran to her and flung herself into the old arms that had never failed her.

"It's—it's all right, Aunt Sylvia, we are going—you and I and Jessie," whispered Nancy. "Probably day after to-morrow."

"So be it;" Aunt Sylvia's voice had a solemn sound, as she looked through the darkness over the head of her lamb, held tightly to her breast. "De sooner de better, long as we's gwine to go, honey. I'll hab to get out yo' furs, I reckon. It'll be mighty

cold in dat car, supposing de wind comes up like it gen'lly does to'd night. We'll be in de car all night, won't we?"

"Yes, Aunt Sylvia, all afternoon, and all night, and a little piece of next morning," Nancy announced bravely. "But there'll be three of us together and we can take some candles. Grandfather says he is sure we may have candles."

"Bress de Lawd!" said Aunt Sylvia. "An' I don't s'pose dere'll be any mices prowling round in dat car; dat's one good t'ing."

Nancy laughed gayly. Aunt Sylvia's fear of mice was something she had never shared.

"I'll make sure there isn't even the least bit of a mouse that ever lived, before we start;" she gave Aunt Sylvia a good hug to emphasize her words. "I'm sure Jessie would not like mice when she's traveling, for Sylvanus says she is as nervous as a witch sometimes if she hears one in the barn. So I shall look out for both of you."

Aunt Sylvia rocked back and forth silently for a moment, and then brought the chair to a sudden stand.

"If dat boy don' 'preciate what my lamb's doing for him, it's de las' word Aunt Sylvy 'll ebber speak

to him!" she said fiercely, and would have said much more but for the soft little fingers laid over her lips.

"You guessed it was for Jack, Aunt Sylvy," whispered Nancy. "You are right—but aren't we so lucky to have Jack to do things for? even if they are pretty hard things, or would be, if you stopped to think about them."

Aunt Sylvia's withered hand drew the soft fingers gently but firmly from her lips and held them.

"Aunt Sylvy loves dat boy," she said, "more'n tongue can tell, but t'ings has come too easy to him, all his life; 'pears like he's mighty near being spoiled, dat boy is. An' you—what's gwine take de place ob Jessie when my lamb comes back home, an' dat mare is way off down in de city? He better spend some o' his spare time t'inking ob dat!"

"Oh, but, Aunt Sylvia," Nancy spoke in great excitement, "Jack isn't to know where the money comes from until after it's all over, probably not till he comes home for Christmas; he'd never let me do it, if he knew. He's so generous!"

"M-m," Aunt Sylvia muttered under her breath, but as Nancy gave her a little loving shake, her face softened.

"Dat's de truf," she admitted. "He's generous,

dat boy, only he's pow'ful thoughtless. Maybe dis will be de making ob him; maybe 'twill."

Nancy lay quietly for a few minutes with her head on Aunt Sylvia's shoulder and the old hands smoothing her bright hair; then she straightened herself with a little sigh.

"Now I must go out to explain everything to Jessie," she said with a little catch in her voice which made Aunt Sylvia mutter again. "Would you like to go with me, Aunt Sylvia? I will take the big lantern, and that would scare away the mice if there should happen to be any in the barn."

"Somet'ing bigger dan mices in dat barn nights," said Aunt Sylvia darkly; "somet'ing wid longer tails an' bigger whiskers dan any mices got. Dat Julia Frost she don' half do her work, anyway;" but even as she spoke, Aunt Sylvia rose, and taking a knitted scarf from the table, began to wind it about her head and shoulders.

A few minutes later two figures with a swaying lantern between them entered the barn, having rolled the big door just far enough open to admit them. The three horses moved in their stalls; Mary Anne and Jessie gave whinnies of pleasure, while Ezra regarded the visitors with a calm but hospitable gaze.

"I'll sit hyar on dis milking stool," said Aunt Sylvia, drawing her chosen seat well into the middle of the barn floor, and setting the lantern beside it; "den I can keep watch o' what's running round," and she sat down, tucking her skirt tightly about her and holding her feet up from the floor.

"Oh, Aunt Sylvia, you'll get the cramp, sitting that way!" cried Nancy merrily, but her old nurse shook her finger in pretended wrath.

"You go right along an' do yo' explaining talk," she commanded, "an' if I get de cramp, dat 'll be my lookout."

She turned her back on the horses and began to sing. Nancy caught her breath and went into Jessie's stall. The mare put her head down lovingly, and Nancy stroked it with her soft hand for a little while before she spoke.

"Jessie," she whispered at last, her mouth close to the mare's sensitive ear, "we have to be very, very brave and Beaumonty now, you and I, for probably day after to-morrow we shall take a journey and then at the end of it we must say good-bye to each other for a long, long time."

Jessie's ear quivered; she did not really enjoy whispers, but for the sake of her little mistress she

bore them as quietly as possible, particularly when the fingers whose touch she loved so well were stroking her satin skin.

"You will be Marguerite's, not mine, any longer," the whisper went on, "so it will not be as if you went to a stranger, Jessie; of course I couldn't have let you do that."

"'Roll, Jordan, roll!'" sang Aunt Sylvia in a loud, clear tone. "'Roll, Jordan, roll!' Beats eberyt'ing how my voice comes back to me when I get in a big high place like dis barn. Seems as if I had de same strength I had in de ole camp-meeting times. You jess turn yo' head back whar it b'longs, Ezra, an' don' you keep yo' ears working like dat. 'Roll, Jordan, roll!'"

The whispering had gone steadily on while Aunt Sylvia talked and sang. Just how much of what was said to Jessie, the mare understood, no one will ever know, but Nancy felt sure that she understood it all, and the little girl was greatly comforted by her talk.

"You must keep well, Jessie," she said at last, "so you'll live to be very, very old; for then we can be together again when Jack has made a great deal of money and can buy you back. Perhaps my hair will be all gray—I don't know how old people have to be

before their hair turns gray—but we shall love each other just as dearly as ever, shan't we? Now good-night, dear!"

Nancy stopped for a word with Mary Anne, as "Roll, Jordan, roll!" came to a triumphant close.

"You'll have to think of what a great help you're being to the family, through your niece, Mary Anne," said Nancy gravely; "and I hope it will be a comfort to you to remember that, when she's gone. And I shall be twice as fond of you as ever, because you are making a sacrifice."

Mary Anne looked attentive, but a little sleepy. Nancy turned from her to Ezra who was regarding her with a watchful eye.

"You'll be the one to take us down to the Potterville station to-morrow, Ezra," said Nancy softly. "We have to make all the arrangements about the journey, and I shouldn't want Jessie to hear things talked over; it might make her nervous, and then it would be harder than ever to travel."

"'Bout time my lamb was ready to go back to de house," suggested Aunt Sylvia as Nancy stood for a moment in the middle of the barn floor as if she did not know where to go. "Getting pretty cold in dis barn, honey."

"I'm ready," said Nancy quickly. "Let's go this minute, Aunt Sylvia," and she tugged at the big door until it rolled far enough back to allow Aunt Sylvia's ample figure to squeeze through.

Once outside, with the door shut again, Nancy clasped her little hands around Aunt Sylvia's arm and pressed close to her as they hurried back to the house.

"Now I've really told Jessie, it won't be so hard," said Nancy. "The hardest part of my good-bye is over, Aunt Sylvia; you can see that, can't you? You don't think it'll be any worse when I leave her with Marguerite, do you, Aunt Sylvia? Please say it won't!"

"My little lamb," Aunt Sylvia's voice was low and gentle, as she patted the soft hands clasped on her arm, "it's de beginnings ob t'ings dat's most always de hardest, an' you done finish de beginning out in de barn. I reckon dere's good coming out o' dis some way, an' meanwhile what you an' Aunt Sylvy's got to do is to get rested up an' quieted down for what's befo' us in de way ob journeyings. Now you mind what I say, an' don't let me hear o' you staying awake half de night, planning for to-morrow; to-morrow come soon enough, anyway."

"I'm sure I shall sleep," said Nancy, as they separated in the hall. "I'm so tired, Aunt Sylvia."

"I'll come tuck you in an' sing you off de way I used to when you were a mite ob a chile," announced Aunt Sylvia with decision. "Den I'll know dere's no foolishness going on."

She kept her word, and two hours later she rocked slower and slower in Nancy's room.

"'Blow, li'l' breezes, blow,'" she sang, under her breath at last. The rocking stopped for a moment, began again slowly, and then stopped for good.

"I's done one good piece ob work," said Aunt Sylvia, when she had reached the hall in safety without waking her lamb, "an' now I's gwine to rub liniment on all de j'ints in dis pore rheumaticky ole body o' mine, an' get limbered up for de journeying dat's coming to me."

CHAPTER XIV

PLANS FOR THE JOURNEY

WHEN Nancy reached the Potterville station the next morning it was plainly to be seen that Mr. Pearson had made the most of the time given him to spread his news. Nancy had never seen so many people at the little station before, and although they all apparently had errands which took them there, it was evident that her arrival was no surprise.

"I somewhat expected to see you to-day, Miss Nancy," said Mr. Lord, the station agent, shaking hands with her most cordially, over a baggage truck. "Mr. Pearson happened to mention that you were likely to come, when he was down this morning to get one of the new time-tables."

Nancy smiled, and stepping around the truck to her side, Mr. Lord continued in a lower tone:

"I had occasion to wire the freight agent on a little matter of business an hour or so ago, before most of these folks got here, and I mentioned to him that there might be a young lady who'd want a permit to go in a freight car to-morrow, along with a horse, and

he said, 'Go ahead, Bill, it'll be all right,' and he's to send a kind of a pass he makes out, down by to-night's mail, so it'll be all ready for you."

"You're just as kind as you can be, Mr. Lord," said Nancy, heartily. "I suppose Mr. Pearson told you."

"I guess about all he knew leaked out," and the station-master smiled broadly. "Bartley isn't one to hoard up anything that's come to him—but he means well, and this morning it came out all the better for you, for I can't always connect with the freight agent in a hurry, he roves around so; I'm not criticising him, only it does try my temper when I can't get hold of him. Want to see the car you'll go in? standing right over there, 'tis."

He pointed to a car which stood on the short side track, and turning to look at it, Nancy saw that Mrs. Potter and several other women were standing near, and gazing at it as if they had never seen a freight car before.

"I suppose perhaps I'd better," said Nancy, after a minute's hesitation, and she followed Mr. Lord across the tracks to the car.

"This is good news," said Mrs. Potter eagerly, as Nancy reached her side; "I declare I shall breathe a good deal freer when I know you won't go cantering

over the country any more, but will be safe and sound on the seat of a carriage when you aren't on your two feet! If only the mare doesn't trample you to death on the way down. Oh don't look like that, child, I've no doubt she's fond of you in her way, but that isn't going to keep her from getting scared."

Nancy's color was high, but she was careful to answer Mrs. Potter quietly.

"I shall try not to let her be frightened," she said. "I shall stay close to her."

"There, you step in here," said Mr. Lord, who had opened the car and jumped up into it, holding down his hands to Nancy. "I guess you'd better not try it," he added to Mrs. Potter, who was preparing to follow; "you're kind of hefty and I haven't anything to brace against, and if I let you go you'd get an awful scraping on your knee-pans if 'twasn't anything worse. I'm going to roll the door shut now, and let Miss Nancy see how it'll be to-morrow."

The last words were scarcely off his lips before the car was closed, and Mrs. Potter and her friends were left staring indignantly and open-mouthed at the black letters and figures which announced the capacity of the car.

"You've got to draw the line somewhere," said Mr.

Lord with decision, "and beside that there was a little something I had here I wanted to show you, and have the fun of it by myself, even Bartley Pearson isn't knowing to this contrivance. I've only had it," and the station master was clicking something he had taken from his pocket, "I've only had it about two days; came from my cousin in New York. Now how does that strike you?"

"Oh, how cunning!" cried Nancy. "It's a little electric light, isn't it, Mr. Lord, and yet it's like a candle."

"The wonders of electricity are more and more beyond me," said the station master solemnly, "but this seems to be the complete thing for you to take with you to-morrow, and you're a-going to take it. Now I don't want any ifs, ands, or buts," as Nancy tried to speak; "there won't a thing happen to it, and I'll be proud to have you take it. Burns or glows or whatever you call it more'n long enough to last you; and then if you felt disposed to have the general fill her up again, he'd know where it could be done, so I'd have it just to show off to the neighbors a little. Nobody's seen it yet, for I was waiting for my wife to come home; but she'll agree with me this was a good opportunity."

Nancy looked from the little, softly glowing light to the kind, eager face of the station master, and back to the light; then she put her hand to her throat with a gesture which Aunt Sylvia had learned to know, but which neither the admiral nor Jack had ever seen.

"You are so good it hurts me, here," said Nancy simply, and she held out her hand to Mr. Lord who shook it and then held it cautiously as if it were something precious.

"Well, well," he said. "If my little girl had lived, she'd have liked that candle, I guess, if she'd been starting off, same as you are; that's all there is about it. Now I'll open up the car, soon as I've put that little contrivance out o' sight, so's to surprise 'em tomorrow. I expect they've borne about all they can, by this time. You can give them a sight of it tomorrow, when you start, if you're willing. My wife's coming home to-night."

"I hope there'll be a good many of my friends here to see me off," said Nancy as Mr. Lord began to roll the door; she suddenly felt that they were all her friends, these kind, warm-hearted, curious people of whom the admiral was so intolerant. "It will make me happy to have them," she added.

Mr. Lord patted her on the shoulder.

"That's the way I like to hear you talk," he said. 'The folks here think you've been brought up to sort of stand off from them, but I tell them 'tisn't so; the admiral's an old man now, and life's been hard to him; 'tisn't to be expected he'd neighbor with everybody; but you've got all before you. Take my advice and make friends wherever you are; take the best of everybody, and let the rest go; that's the way you'll have to do with me," and he smiled with real affection at Nancy as he landed her safely on the ground.

"I hope you'll come to see me off to-morrow, Mrs. Potter," said Nancy to that energetic woman who had retreated to the platform but kept her gaze fastened on the freight car. "Mr. Lord had a surprise for me—something to make my journey pleasant—and Mrs. Lord will show it to you to-morrow—to all of you," she added, smiling shyly at the rest of the group, some of whom she knew only by sight.

"We'll be pleased to come," and Mrs. Potter's face took on a much pleasanter expression. "Let's see, what time does your train go? I don't know as I've ever had anybody I was acquainted with travel by freight before."

"Her train will be coming through about half-past

two," announced Mr. Lord, "and she'll have to be in the car, all shut up, ready to be coupled on to the rest, before that time. I should say, get here pretty soon after two," he counseled Nancy, who promised to do so.

"I hope you'll have good weather," called Mrs. Potter as Nancy said good-bye and started toward the carriage in which Sylvanus sat impatiently awaiting her; "that car looks as if it might let in considerable wet."

"No such thing;" Mr. Lord's tone was quite indignant. "It's tight as a drum," he called after Nancy, who smiled confidently back at him over her shoulder.

"Well, Miss Nancy," ventured Sylvanus, as he guided Ezra through the town traffic, when the station was left far behind, "I suppose the arrangements for your journey are all conclusively accomplished now."

"I suppose they are, Sylvanus," and Nancy had grown so sober that she scarcely smiled at the darky's high-sounding speech. "I'm tired, Sylvanus," she said a moment later; "do you think perhaps Ezra could go a little faster?"

CHAPTER XV

THE ADMIRAL SAYS "GOOD-BYE"

It was still dark the next morning when Nancy awoke, but as she lay in bed she heard some one stirring in the hall, and muttering.

"Poor Aunt Sylvia is up already," thought Nancy, "she'll be so tired before night! I wonder what she is doing."

"I jess take a look at dis whole house befo' anybody else is up," muttered Aunt Sylvia, who with a candle in her hand was making a circuit of the rambling old mansion, clad in a wonderful red and yellow plaid wrapper. "Nobody but de Lord knows if I'll ever see it again. When folks starts a traveling, dere's no way ob telling if dey'll come back to where dey went from. Oh, dear, dear!"

Nancy could not hear the words of Aunt Sylvia's plaint as the old woman went along, softly opening doors and peering into unoccupied rooms, but she knew there was no joy in Aunt Sylvia's heart over the journey.

"But she'll like to tell about it, afterward," Nancy

comforted herself; "it will give her pleasure that way, even if she does get frightened."

There was no more sleep for Nancy; she got up and dressed herself as soon as there was light enough for her to see. Then there was nothing to do until breakfast time which was still a long way off. She looked out of her window with eyes that had an uncomfortable way of growing a little moist and dim so that the trees in the early morning light seemed to waver and shift in their places.

"I must not cry now," Nancy told herself severely. "I'll—let me think what I'll do. I will go down-stairs and find Julia Frost, and cuddle her for awhile. And, Oh, I know! I'll write a letter to grandfather to have at his plate to-morrow morning at breakfast, when he'll be all alone, and I think most probably he will miss me."

She tiptoed down-stairs and fortunately found the cat seated on the big rug in the hall, washing her face. She stopped her work and looked up at Nancy with a soft "miaow" of satisfaction, as the little girl stooped to her.

"Oh, Julia Frost, you are a real comfort when I don't feel Beaumonty!" said Nancy, gathering the cat into her arms, and putting her face down against the furry

head. "If I could, I'd love to take you on the journey with us, for you would be so cuddley at night! But I can't take you, Julia, so you must not get shut into anything while I am away, for they might not hunt for you, the way I do."

Julia purred loudly and settled her claws firmly on Nancy's shoulder.

"This is indeed pleasant," she seemed to be saying, "and so unexpected at this hour in the morning!"

She sat quietly in Nancy's lap while the letter was written, and then she condescended to play with an empty spool dangled at the end of a thread. Nancy thought of a number of games which she and Julia had enjoyed in times past, and it seemed a good opportunity to try them all. She had not Aunt Sylvia's fear of accidents, but she had a queer feeling that she might be away for a long time.

"It's just because I'm not used to journeyings," she wisely told herself. "Now, Julia, jump for the ball once more, and then it will be breakfast time for both of us, for I hear grandfather on the stairs."

The admiral was not a cheerful companion that morning. All his doubts as to the wisdom of Nancy's undertaking were crowding to the front, and while he had made up his mind not to express them

the effort to keep them out of sight made him irritable and unreasonable about little things.

"My stars," breathed Aunt Sylvia as she heard her lamb taken to task for the seventh time for "running about the house, doing nothing," "I don' expect to hab any pleasure out o' dis journey, nor I don' feel like I'll get home safe again, but de sooner we go de less ob sech cantankersness we got to hear; an' I jess wish 'twas time to start!"

There was an early luncheon, and then, very soon, the time came. At the last the admiral's irritability left him, and he was gentle enough to please even Aunt Sylvia when he bade Nancy good-bye as she stood in her old riding skirt, ready to mount Jessie.

Sylvanus appeared, leading the mare whose coat had been rubbed until it shone like satin, and who held her pretty head high as she stepped daintily along, delighted at the prospect of a jaunt with Nancy. Sylvanus was clad in a black suit, a gift from the general. It hung off the young darky's shoulders in a peculiar way, and the trousers which had been none too long for the general were flapping about Sylvanus's ankles, but any one could see how proud he felt.

"She certainly is in the most eminent condition this

afternoon, Jessie is, Miss Nancy," he said as Nancy put out her hand to stroke the mare.

"Don't talk so much, boy," said the admiral sharply; "see if that saddle is all right, and then go and help your mother get Miss Nancy's things into the carriage."

"Certainly, admiral, sir, at once!" it seemed as if Sylvanus would lose his balance with the deep bow he made before turning to run to his mother's assistance.

Aunt Sylvia's voice could be heard from the hall, issuing orders to Betty the maid, and to her son.

"Don't you go to forget de admiral's tea, nor to lock up all de doors, nor his hot water in de morning," she said over and over again; "I 'spec's you'll forget, spite ob all I say. An' you, Sylvanus, you jess keep your mouf tight shut, an' work eb'ry minute. Don' you let me hear ob you hanging roun' de pos'-office while I'm gone. Hyah, take dis bag, an' dis bundle an' de shawl, an' de catch-all, an' dis jacket an' dose furs. Cyant you hold more'n one t'ing at a time? My land, I wish yo' pore father was hyah!"

Her voice died away as she went out of the hall and on to the barn. It was very still out on the veranda where the admiral and Nancy stood. The little girl

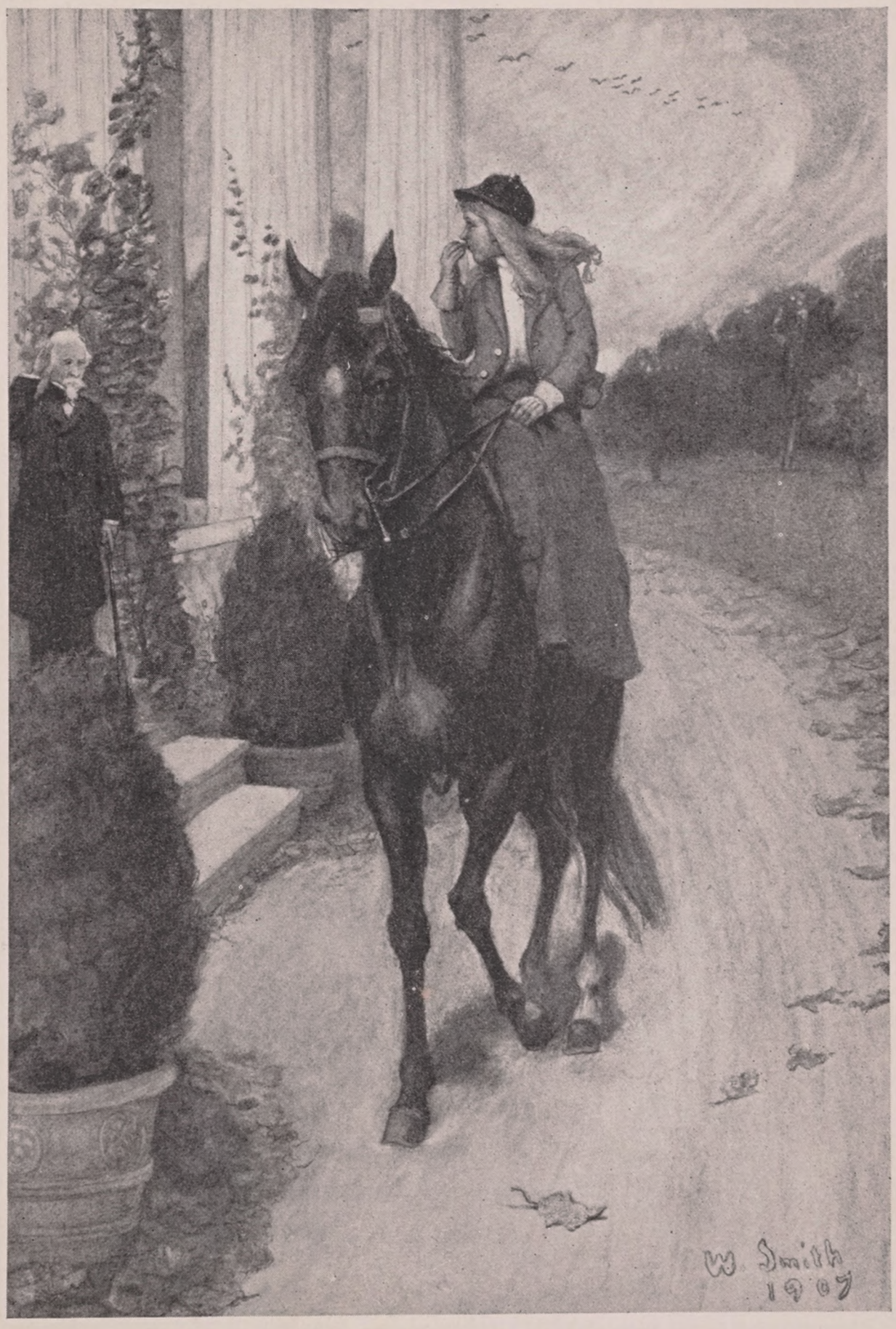
turned and reached up to clasp her arms around the admiral's neck, and the keen eyes were kind and soft as the old man smoothed the bright hair that curled out from under the little riding cap.

"My proper things to wear for traveling are all in the bag, grandfather," said Nancy, keeping her voice very steady. "You don't mind my having this last ride with Jessie, do you? I thought you wouldn't; and beside, she likes it so much better than being harnessed into a carriage, and we want her to start in good spirits."

"No—no—I don't mind anything," answered the admiral when Nancy repeated her question with some anxiety. "I was only thinking—wondering what your father would say to me for letting you do this thing—and your mother; I believe I was thinking most about your mother."

"Why mother would say you were good to let me do it, grandfather!" Nancy ventured to look straight into the stern old face then, and suddenly her own expression changed. She unclasped her arms, and taking one of the admiral's coat lapels in her left hand she held up her little index finger and shook it at him warningly.

"You are not to worry about me one single bit,



"TO VICTORY, ADMIRAL!" CRIED NANCY

Admiral Beaumont," she charged him. "I am feeling quite old, and very, very brave to-day; and I expect to have a fine journey and come back to you day after to-morrow, and find you've had a beautiful resting time without me."

The admiral took the two little hands in his own, and stooping, kissed Nancy once more, on her forehead.

"You'll be looked after, I've no doubt," he said, "and I'll do the best I can to behave while you're gone. Now it's time you went—high time."

With a spring Nancy was on the mare's back, and with a gay "good-bye" and a wave of her hand she started. As she turned in the saddle for a last look there stood her grandfather, bare-headed, with his hand raised, in the attitude of one saluting a superior officer.

"To victory, admiral!" cried Nancy, and from her finger tips she blew a kiss to him.

CHAPTER XVI

A WONDERFUL FREIGHT CAR

ONCE a military hero who had been visiting relatives in a town not far from Potterville had taken the train which passed through the little station; as his comings and goings had been announced in the local paper a large number of "Potterville's prominent citizens" stood on the station platform and gallantly waved hats and handkerchiefs at him as he gazed at them from the window of the car.

Nancy was only a little girl, starting off for a short journey in a freight car, but the news of her going had spread and spread till in all Potterville there was scarcely a man, woman or child who did not know of it, and wish her well.

"Let's go down and see the little Beaumont girl start off," many Potterville neighbors said to each other. "She's taking that mare of hers off to the city to sell—they need the money I guess; I thought I'd take the children down, too."

When Nancy, flushed from her brisk ride in the autumn air, drew rein at the station, she could hardly

believe her eyes. There was no passenger train due at Potterville at that hour of the day; it must be that all these smiling, bowing people had come to see her off! In spite of her friendliness toward all of them, Nancy wished for a minute there had not been quite so many, as she slipped from Jessie's back and stood looking about her rather shyly. Mr. Lord hurried out from the station to greet her, and at the same minute the round, freckle-faced boy who had talked to Jessie on the day that Nancy went to the office of the "Potterville Clarion" stepped up to her.

"I thought you'd wish to send that telegram you spoke of, now," said Mr. Lord. "There are plenty of boys here to hold ——"

"I'll 'tend to the horse," broke in the freckle-faced boy, eagerly, "for I've done it before, haven't I? She won't be afraid with me. See, she knows me, don't you, Jessie?" and he put out a stubby hand toward the mare, who held her head down so that he might stroke it.

"Thank you," said Nancy heartily. "I remember you, and so does Jessie. And if you'll look after her I'll be ever so much obliged."

"I've talked to Jessie a good many times," said the boy, who had become suddenly a person of great im-

portance in the eyes of his friends. "She didn't know it," he jerked his thumb toward Nancy who had followed Mr. Lord into the waiting-room; "but a good many mornings down at the post-office and other places, I've talked to her; she knows me all right; I like horses. Now don't you boys crowd up too close, or she'll get scared, and I'm responsible."

The telegram to General Compton was quickly written, and carefully placed by Mr. Lord on his desk.

"I'll send it off the minute your train pulls out," he said. "Now I think we'd better step over to the car before your carriage gets here. I believe you'll be sort of surprised and maybe pleased with what you'll see."

"Just a few minutes more, Jessie," Nancy said to the mare, as she followed Mr. Lord; "you'll look after her, won't you?" she asked the boy with a smile.

"Sure," he said with great emphasis. "I've had one look at the car already, and I can take another when you're going to start."

After Nancy followed Mrs. Potter with a large paper parcel held carefully in her right hand, and after Mrs. Potter trailed a line of women and children, with half a dozen men bringing up the rear.

"As 'twas rather an unusual occasion," said Mr. Lord, facing about as they reached the car, up to the door of which a broad plank had been placed, "a few of us got together last night to see what we could do to make it seem a little more homelike. First of all," and he waved his hand toward the end of the line, "Mr. Hobbs made a good suggestion. He offered to kind of fit up one part of the car for Jessie; stall her in a little, provide hay and enough oats to make her comfortable; and we all thought 'twas a first-rate idea."

He beamed on Nancy, who looked first at him, and then down the wavering line to Mr. Hobbs.

"Oh, thank you!" said Nancy. "I don't know how to thank you enough!"

"Don't speak of it," said Mr. Hobbs. "A young lady that I've seen grow up, as I've seen you, 'twas only a pleasure."

"You step in and look," suggested Mr. Lord, and Nancy went up the broad plank and entered the car, followed by the station-master, while the line of friends closed up into a group, pressed around the door.

"Why, it isn't like the same place!" cried Nancy, and indeed the bare old car seemed transformed.

Across one end, taking nearly half the car, there were laid boards, which made of the end a stall; the floor was thickly strewn with hay and on the side of the car was securely fastened a large box in which was more food than Jessie could possibly eat during the journey.

"He was pretty liberal, wasn't he?" commented Mr. Lord, pointing to this supply. "But it's a good fault, I tell him, and none too many have it. Now you cast your eyes over in that corner."

Nancy did as he requested and saw a small shelf, securely fastened to the car, and on it stood the little electric candle.

"That's Mr. Potter's work," said Mr. Lord, "and it's complete, now isn't it? Candle's all clamped in, so there can't a thing move it, and you'll have all the light you'll need. That easy-chair and the cot bed are the gift of Mr. Lamson of the 'Potterville Clarion.' He seemed to know all about you when I mentioned your going; said you'd been to see him on a little matter of business not long ago, and he was real interested to hear about your trip. He said those two things had been knocking about his rooms for he didn't know how long, and he wanted to get rid of 'em. And when you got to the city you could give

'em away to anybody in the train yard that would take 'em."

Nancy looked out of the car and not far away she saw Mr. Lamson standing with his hands in his pockets, whistling. He smiled good-naturedly and lifted his hat to Nancy as she caught his eye.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Lamson," she cried, "and Mrs. Potter, please thank Mr. Potter for the shelf. Why, I feel as if I were going to travel in a room instead of a freight car!"

Mrs. Potter and a number of other women who had been close to the car now came up the plank and in at the door, until there was scarcely room left to turn around.

"The men folks did the carpentering," began Mrs. Potter briskly, "but there were some things they couldn't do. Everybody knows how hungry you get when you're traveling, and there isn't anything much heartier or that'll stay by you better than my rye drop-cakes. I made a batch this morning and there's a dozen in this parcel, each one wrapped up separate, for they are a mite greasy—that's their nature, you know."

"Oh, thank you, thank you ever so much," said Nancy as she received the paper parcel and put it

carefully down in the easy-chair. "And are all these presents for me?" she asked, as half a dozen more parcels were piled beside Mrs. Potter's.

"Mr. Lord said he couldn't just tell where you'd be able to get out for a breath o' fresh air, if at all," said another of the women eagerly, "so I brought you a little balsam pillow to smell of, and my little girl fetched along a bottle of our spring water; she said maybe you'd forget about being thirsty; she's a great hand for drinking water on the cars."

"Why, of course I'd forgotten how thirsty I should get." Nancy held out her hand to clasp the little fingers that had been clutching the big bottle so tightly. "I shall need every drop of it, I'm sure."

"Here comes your Aunt Sylvy," piped a shrill voice from the edge of the group outside the car. "They've tied the horse up beyond the station, and she and Sylvanus are coming, all loaded up with things."

"We'd better get right out of here," said the energetic Mrs. Potter taking things into her own hands, and firmly pushing her neighbors toward the door and down the plank. "They'll want all the room they can have now, and that skitti—that mare's got to come aboard. Time's going fast, isn't it, Mr. Lord?"

"It's getting pretty close on toward the hour," ad-

mitted Mr. Lord, reluctantly, for he had enjoyed the unusual excitement. "I guess perhaps it would be well for Miss Nancy to get the mare into her stall."

Aunt Sylvia, attended by her son, approached the car with as much dignity as was possible under the circumstances. She held her head high and apparently did not see any of the people who were in her path, though her skirts swung against them as she passed.

"Hyah I am, honey," she said as she mounted to the car, her back stiffer than ever; "dat Ezry was slower dan slow, but I's got hyah at de las'. 'Vanus, you jess drap all dose contraptions an' clo'es on dat bed, an' go get Jessie. Is dis de way freight cars looks?"

"Not any other freight car but this, Aunt Sylvia," Nancy told her quickly, as Sylvanus hurried after the mare. "It's just a bare place like a great box, always. But all these things have been put in by our friends; think of it, Aunt Sylvia, they've been so kind, when I hardly know some of them!"

Aunt Sylvia looked about the car, and then she stepped to the door.

"You suttinly hab done yo'selves proud," she said, addressing the group, the long black veil which she wore on state occasions, fluttering with the violent nods of her head. "I 'spec' Miss Nancy's done thank

you, and I done thank you now, too. I wish you all many happy returns."

Mr. Lamson clapped his hands and there was a round of applause for Aunt Sylvia's speech, while Nancy stood flushed and smiling beside her. Sylvanus, leading Jessie, was closely followed by the freckle-faced boy who wished one more look at the car.

Jessie's ears showed that she was far from calm when she reached the car. At first she planted her hoofs firmly and refused to think of stepping on the plank, in spite of many urgings. But when Nancy, from the doorway, held out her hand with a lump of sugar plainly to be seen on the palm, the mare's fears left her for a moment—and in that moment she had mounted the short incline and was safe, beside her little mistress.

"See your beautiful traveling stall, Jessie," and Nancy led her to the part of the car arranged for her. "Isn't that almost as nice as home?"

Jessie tossed her head, but she allowed Nancy to persuade her to try her new quarters, and as soon as the saddle had been slipped from her back she proceeded to test the quality of the oats Mr. Hobbs had provided.

"You certainly are situated most grand for travel-

ing, Miss Nancy," said Sylvanus, whose eyes were roving over the car while his mouth was set in a broad smile. "We didn't really have the necessity of providing anything ourselves, if ——"

"Uh-h, stop yo' talking, boy," and Aunt Sylvia gave him a determined shove toward the door. "You start right off for home soon as you see us dragged out on de tracks, an' yo' gib yo' whole mind, all you've got—'twon't be any too much—to looking after de admiral while we's gone. Don' I hyah de train coming now?"

"Here she comes," cried Mr. Lord, "and here comes Bart Pearson too, looking pretty well winded. I thought 'twas strange he hadn't arrived."

Mr. Pearson's large face was flushed to a dark red and he was panting for breath as he came half running across the tracks. In his hands were a number of small white paper bags. Just before he reached the car he stumbled on a rail, and although he recovered his balance one of the little bags flew from his grasp and there was a shower of gum-drops, yellow, pink and green.

"There," said Mr. Pearson as he reached the goal, and stretched up his hands to Nancy, "you take these quick, before they shut ye in. It beats all the way that candy man comes late when I'm in a hurry for

him. I'm sorry the gum-drops have gone—though I see they won't be wasted"—with a backward glance at the freckle-faced boy who, with his friends, was rapidly gathering the scattered treasures; "but here's peppermints, chocolates, nut-bars, marsh-mallows, and juice-drops—quite a variety you see; I thought they'd be tasty on your trip, and I recalled your favorites."

"Oh, everybody is too good to me." Nancy shook Mr. Pearson's hand warmly when she had given the little bags to Aunt Sylvia's care. "Thank you very, very much, Mr. Pearson."

"I understand the telegram's to be sent from here," said the postmaster. "I could just as well take ——"

"Arrangements are all made, Bart," broke in Mr. Lord's voice. "Now Miss Nancy, any last words before I shut you in?"

"Nothing but to thank everybody again," said Nancy; she stood waving her handkerchief as the door slid across and hid her from the little crowd of watchers.

"Give a good hard tunk on the door when I get it shut to let me know everything's all right, and the candle does its work," requested Mr. Lord, as he nodded a cheery good-bye through the narrowing space.

"Hyah, you let me gib it wid my ole umbrell'," said Aunt Sylvia, as the door shut tight, and standing well away she aimed a good blow at the wood with the stout handle of her cotton umbrella which nothing could have induced her to leave at home.

"We heard ye!" called Mr. Lord. "Now let's give three cheers for Miss Nancy—all together—one, two, three, and let her go!"

CHAPTER XVII

A HALT ON THE WAY

THE little electric candle was a wonderful help, without doubt, but the light in which Nancy and her old nurse stood looking at each other for a moment seemed rather dim after the September sunshine.

"When we get hitched on an' started, I's gwine to take dat light an' jess look around in de corners a little," announced Aunt Sylvia, as the freight train came close with much puffing, and many calls from strange voices. "Who is all dese men, honey, dat's gwine to fetch us down to de city? I'd be mighty pleased if 'twas folks dat knew us."

"Mr. Lord and Sammy Green, our freight hand, know them all," Nancy reassured her. "I asked about it yesterday, and Mr. Lord said, 'They're as fine a lot as ever you'd meet in the business,' so you see they'll look out for us well."

"Mussy sakes alive, is dis de way we's gwine to be looked after!" cried Aunt Sylvia, as there came a great bump which threw her against the side of the car. "I reckon we better sit right down on de flo'

an' brace our feet against de wall, honey, if we don' want our bones all broken to pieces. Look at dat Jessie, how her ears rises up!"

"It will be different when we really start," said Nancy; "Mr. Lord told me it would be jouncey till we were coupled on—I think that's what they call it."

"Dis is de onliest safe place for me," announced Aunt Sylvia, as she seated herself on the floor of the car, and Nancy was glad to drop beside her.

"Might's well laugh as cry," said Aunt Sylvia as they swayed back and forth with the jolting of the car while the mare from her stall made unmistakable sounds of displeasure and restlessness.

"Just wait a minute, Jessie, dear," Nancy called to her, "then it will be quite smooth and I will come over and talk to you."

It is doubtful whether to a critical traveler the motion of the freight car would have seemed smooth at the best, but to Nancy and Aunt Sylvia it was comfortable enough when the train was under way; and even Jessie found no more fault, but devoted herself again to the oats and other good things provided by Mr. Hobbs.

"Where do you suppose we are now, Aunt Sylvia?" asked Nancy, an hour later. "Don't you

think that hollow sound must have meant we were going over a bridge?"

Aunt Sylvia looked up from an illustrated paper which Mr. Lamson had given, and shook her head.

"I ain' gwine spend any time in my mind conjurin' up what we's gwine over—or under, honey," she said firmly. "I's gwine fix my mind right on what's in dis cyar, and keep myself calm. But you jess let me know by yo' clock when it's time for supper. I cyan't tell 'bout time, libin' in de darkness ob night."

"We can't open the door, Aunt Sylvia, even if we could move it, you know," said Nancy. "If we hadn't a special permit, we'd be all sealed up on the outside. But Mr. Lord said he'd arranged to have them open the car for us just a little bit at some junction that we reach about dark—so we can get a breath of real air."

"Seems 'most like being in a tomb," said Aunt Sylvia darkly, and then she brightened again at the sight of Nancy's face. "Dat's only my ole foolish talk," she said gaily. "I reckon dere's a pile o' folks would gib 'most all dey's got to be in my place, an' hab dis 'sperience."

She had made Nancy take the easy chair and sat herself on a pile of shawls which she declared were

more comfortable than any chair. Nancy watching her, saw the paper in her hands slip lower and lower and at last slide, unheeded from her fingers, and the old head droop till it touched her breast. With a gentle, deft touch Nancy drew one shawl up so that it made a pillow, and in another minute with a sidewise movement, Aunt Sylvia settled herself to sleep.

"I'm so glad," said Nancy to herself. "Dear Aunt Sylvia has been awake so much, and I believe Jessie is sleepy too. They've both been pretty excited; so many things have happened."

Nancy clasped her hands behind her head, and as she did it, the little hair-ring, Marguerite's gift, rubbed against her fingers. She put her hands in her lap, and sat twisting the ring back and forth.

"I think I shan't ever wish with rings again;" she looked sorrowfully at the little circle of hair, as she said it, under her breath. "I don't know what Marguerite wished, of course, but mine for her isn't coming true; perhaps it's coming better than true for her; I suppose she'll like it better than what I wished for her; I almost know she will," and with a final twist of the little ring, Nancy clasped her hands behind her head again.

As she sat there in the dim car, thinking how

strange it was that she should be there, so like a dream, and yet so surely true, she heard a new sound from the world outside. At first she could not believe her ears; then she sat up very still and straight and listened again.

"It is rain, hard rain," she thought; "but the sun was shining so in Potterville, I don't see how it can be; though I remember Aunt Sylvia said her bones felt like rain; and we haven't had the big storm that always comes in September. Oh, dear, I hope it won't be so very bad before we get there."

Her courage failed her at the thought of arriving in the great freight yard of a strange place with her difficult cargo. General Compton had written that his Swedish coachman, John Arlssen, would be at the freight yard early in the morning to await Nancy's coming, and that he himself and Marguerite would be within quick call. Nancy would never know how much influence the general had used to insure her safe and speedy arrival in the city. Mr. Lord might have told her something about it if the general had not charged him to be silent.

"I suppose it's a great deal bigger place than Potterville," thought Nancy, drowsily. The steady sound of rain was beginning to soothe her, in spite of

her cares, as she sat, leaning back in the old easy chair. "That man, John Arlssen, must be used to horses, so he'd know just how to manage Jessie. I shall say good-bye to her before he takes her out of the car. Then I wish—oh, I do wish Aunt Sylvia and I could go right home! I'm going to shut my eyes tight now, and play I've never come away."

Her eyes were more than half shut already. For a few minutes her thoughts held her between waking and sleeping; then the little hands dropped to her lap, and she was back in her old home, far from all her troubles, with Julia Frost cuddled under her chin.

When she awoke it was to find Aunt Sylvia sitting up and staring about her with startled eyes.

"Fo' de land's sake!" she cried as she met Nancy's gaze, "I's glad you's waked up, honey! Such swashin's and swishin's ob rain as is gwine on outside dis cyar, I nebber heard befo'! 'Pears like de whole sky is broke up an' de water's jess a-pourin' down t'rough de cracks! We's stopping now, so you can get de sound. Listen now! You's had a sweet sleep, honey, an' I's been a-watching you. I drapped off myse'f fo' jess a minute, one time."

Nancy smiled, but did not correct Aunt Sylvia's

statement. Instead she rubbed her eyes and listened to the beat of the rain.

"It's a great storm, Aunt Sylvia, isn't it?" she said. Her fears had vanished with her sleep. "It's raining so hard it will probably be all over before morning," she said hopefully.

"Um-m," said Aunt Sylvia. "We don't 'pear to be getting anywhere jess now, honey. Is you supposing dis is de place whar we get de fresh air? What's dat on de flo'? dat slip o' paper? 'Twa'n't dere when I went to—'twa'n't dere de las' time I looked 'round de room. Somebody's done shoved dat under de do'. I reckoned I heard some talkin' out dere jess now."

She looked with suspicion at the scrap of paper which, as she said, had evidently been slipped under the door; but Nancy picked it up and read the words written on it with red chalk.

"We guess you'd better keep dry than have the air, as Bill Lord told us. The rain and wind are fierce.

"Res'p'y,

"SILAS POND,
"HENRY MATHEWS."

She read the note aloud to Aunt Sylvia as soon as she had made it out, and they agreed that their unseen friends were wise.

"Probably we shall start again in a few minutes," said Nancy; "and we have to eat our supper, Aunt Sylvia, and then talk awhile, and perhaps you'll sing to me. Then I'm sure we shall sleep all night, and before we know it, morning will be here. Jessie dear, how are you feeling, now?" and she ran over to the mare who put down her head and nozzled the little hand with her cushiony lip.

"Don' seem to be any table in dis 'stablishment," said Aunt Sylvia as she began to open baskets and bundles, "but I's gwine spread a whole mess o' clean papers on dat cot bed and serve de food from dat. You jess move yo' chair a teeny bit, honey, while I lay de cloth. No, you ain' gwine help; you's gwine play lady, same as you is."

She began to spread the food on her brown-paper table-cloth, making free comments as she did so.

"Doughnuts—look well 'nuff, but de one's I lef' behin' fo' de admiral is superior, dey is so; rye drop-cakes—dey looks tasty; co'n muffins an' graham muffins—my stars! I hope dey's pigeons in dat freight-yard we's gwine to! Col' ham an' col' co'n-beef—wonder if dey t'ought we's gwine starve 'less'n dey brung us food! Apple jell, ras'berry jell, currant jell, my land!"

"What was in our own basket, Aunt Sylvia?" asked Nancy.

"Fresh bread 'n' butter, col' chick'n, grape jell, nut-cakes, ginger cookies an' toasted cheese-crackers, an' a bottle ob tea," said Aunt Sylvia, checking off the articles on her fingers. "An' 'twould been plenty, too."

"Yes, indeed," said Nancy heartily, "but I suppose we must taste all these things, Aunt Sylvia, so we can tell the people who brought them how good they were. Perhaps we'd better do that to-night, and then have our things for breakfast."

"I 'spects dat's de way we'll hab to do," said Aunt Sylvia. "But we'll divide 'em up, honey—you take de rye drop-cakes, de graham muffins, de col' ham an' de apple jell, and I'll taste all de rest ob 'em, 'less'n you choose a few kinds ob cake fo' yo' share. Den we' fill de two biggest paper bags an' hab a feast ready fo' de pigeons, or any hungry two-legged animals dat comes in de freight-yard."

Nancy sat laughing at Aunt Sylvia's solemn face as she set the table, and then stood off looking at it, shaking her head.

"You'd better begin right away dis minute, honey," she counseled, "fo' when dis cyar starts t'ings will go

bouncing, bouncing all 'round. I's selected my food, an' I's gwine sit right down on de flo' again, an' eat it, whar I know whar I is."

Nancy turned her seat so that she faced Aunt Sylvia, and the meal went merrily on until Nancy declared she could not eat another mouthful.

"Aunt Sylvia," she said hesitatingly when the remnants of the meal had been gathered in the two big bags, "doesn't it seem to you we are staying here a long time? Why," she looked at her little watch, "it's more than two hours, Aunt Sylvia, that we've stayed right in this place. Do you suppose anything has happened?"

"Most anyt'ing might happen, on de railroads in dis kind ob storm," said Aunt Sylvia, "but it ain' happening to us, honey, so we better keep ca'm. Listen to dat pow'ful rain now! We's got a dry roof, an' I reckon dat's a good cause fo' thankfulness. What's dat noise? Sounds like a great lot o' men shouting."

"So it does," said Nancy breathlessly. "Oh, Aunt Sylvia, what do you suppose it is? Don't you wish we could see?"

"Whateber 'tis, it's coming nearer," announced Aunt Sylvia, and as they listened the sound of shout-

ing voices came so close that they could distinguish some words.

"It's about a bridge, Aunt Sylvia," whispered Nancy. "They keep saying, 'The bridge! the bridge!'"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

MINGLED with the sound of shouting voices came another sound, the long shrill whistle from the engine of an approaching train.

"Cyant be de bridge is rained away," said Aunt Sylvia, "or else how would dat train come rushing in like dat?"

Nancy laughed in spite of her fears.

"Oh, Aunt Sylvia," she said, "there are ever and ever so many different tracks at this junction; Jack has told me about it; he says trains come here from all over the world, but of course that's only his fun! Let's listen again to hear what they say, if we can. Why, Aunt Sylvia, did you hear that man? Oh!"

"Well, I declare," a hearty voice was saying, not far from the car, "if this don't seem like a dealing of Providence. Ten years I've run this freight, and never saw anything queerer. I suppose you recollect me, Mr. Jack Beaumont?"

"Of course I do," said a voice that brought Nancy's hand to her throat and made Aunt Sylvia start and mutter, "Fo' de land's sake, how come dat boy hyah?"

"Of course I do," the gay voice repeated; "you're Eben Locke, who told me such splendid train stories on the way up to Potterville when I was taking up some valuable freight. I never forget anybody's face. But what is there so queer about my coming here now? Our train was delayed, and I don't seem to see anything headed toward Potterville on these tracks. I don't relish the idea of spending the night here, for I'm in a particular hurry to get home. I only have two days to spend before college begins, and I have a little sister up there with my grandfather."

"No, you haven't," said Mr. Locke shortly, "that's just the point."

"What do you mean?" demanded Nancy's brother.

"Just what I say;" the voice was lowered, but Nancy's ears were strained to catch the words. "She's right in here in this car, with her old mammy and her mare, and when I saw you coming toward me I was just trying to make up my mind how to break it to her that the bridge has been carried away—part of it—and I don't know how soon we can go on."

It was evident that his listener could scarcely wait for him to finish.

"Nancy—little Nancy in that old car!" there was

HER HAND STRETCHED TOWARD HIM

no gaiety in the voice now. "And Aunt Sylvia, and Jessie! what does it mean? I must see them this minute!"

"This whole enterprise has been carried on contrary to the ordinary rules," remarked Mr. Locke in a resigned tone, "and I guess I might as well let you in as to keep you standing here, both of us getting soaking wet. As to what it means, that's more'n I can tell you. I had my instructions to look after them from Bill Lord, and he got his from headquarters, I take it. It's this next car. Here, you help me shove on the door; it's getting pretty well swelled with this rain. There she goes—and here's your family all safe and sound and bright as buttons. How d'you do, miss?"

As the door rolled back Jack Beaumont saw a tableau which he never forgot. In the centre of the car stood Aunt Sylvia, her arms folded, and a look of mingled longing and reproach on her worn old face. Beyond her, in the shadowy corner, stood Nancy, one hand on Jessie's head and the other stretched toward him, her little face flushed and anxious and her lips trembling with excitement.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried. "Jack! It's all right! Don't look at me that way! It's all right; grandfather let me come!"

"I'll just run this door across," said Mr. Locke, to himself, for nobody was listening, "and step along about my other business. I reckon I shan't be missed here."

"What does it mean, Nancy?" asked Jack as quietly as he could.

With a word of greeting to Aunt Sylvia he had gone past her to his little sister, and putting his arm about her drew her gently over to the big chair.

"Tell me all about it, Nancy," he said again. "Is this what grandfather meant in the letter I had last night saying the money was ready for my last year, after all? And I had just written him that I did not need it. I have a chance to pay my own way by coaching. Tell me, Nancy."

He knelt on the floor in front of his little sister, and framed the pretty, flushed face in his strong hands.

"Oh, Jack," Nancy half-whispered the words. "It was the only way—and the general had offered to buy Jessie for Marguerite—and we did so want you to have your last year. And I knew you would buy Jessie back for me when you had earned enough money. And of course, though I love Jessie dearly, a horse isn't like a brother!"

"No," said Jack Beaumont with decision, "a horse is about a hundred times better than such a brother as I've been, Nancy. I shall never forgive myself for this—never!"

He rose and began to stride back and forth in the narrow limits of the car until Aunt Sylvia spoke to him.

"Dis yer isn't a cage, boy," she said sharply, "nor we isn't wild animiles. You's done step on my skirt four times now, an' you's tromped on one ob de pigeon bags, too. Now sit down on dat cot bed and plan out what we's gwine do next."

"I've thought what I shall do next, Aunt Sylvia," and Jack smiled down at the reproachful old face. "I shall shut this car door tight behind me and go over to the station to see if I can get General Compton by long distance telephone. He'll be at home probably, and I'll have a good talk with him."

"Oh, but Jack, there's Marguerite," cried Nancy. "I've promised, you see!"

Jack Beaumont's chin took on a look which his grandfather knew and admired in spite of himself.

"Miss Marguerite Compton is a young lady who has a great many good things," he said, stroking his little sister's hair; "she doesn't need Jessie—and you do.

I know the general will agree with me. You see if he doesn't. By the way, this seems quite a parlor, this car of yours; I never saw anything like it before."

"Nobody ever did," said Nancy eagerly. "Everybody almost in Potterville did something to make it homelike for Aunt Sylvia and me."

"'Tisn't much dey had me in mind," said Aunt Sylvia quickly, "but dere isn't anybody in Potterville but what loves my lamb." She looked up at Jack, challenging him proudly. "Dey know she's de bes' kind o' quality dere is, an' dey 'preciates her," she added. "Sometimes folks outside 'preciates better dan folks dat belongs."

"Don't, Aunt Sylvia!" begged the young man, his eyes dancing in spite of his tone of humility. "I know you mean me, just the way you always did when I was a naughty boy. But I've begun to appreciate her, and I shan't ever stop. Say you forgive me, at least part, Aunt Sylvia, before I go out into the rain."

"Go along," commanded Aunt Sylvia with pretended severity. "You is de actingest boy dat ever lived!"

"Now you jess come here to me, my lamb," said Aunt Sylvia when once more they were alone, "an' if

you want to cry good an' hard you is got plenty time while dat boy's gone, an' it won't hurt anybody."

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Sylvia," said Nancy with shining eyes, "but I believe I don't want to cry—I just want to talk to Jessie a minute."

She ran to the mare and drew the long head down close to her own and laid her hot cheek against it.

"Jessie," she said softly, "we aren't to be separated after all! I haven't got to wait till you're old to have you for my own again! Just think of that!"

Although Nancy had said she did not want to cry, there was a little damp spot on Jessie's satin forehead, and feeling it the mare's liquid eyes turned anxiously to the face pressed so close to her, and she stood very still and apparently listened to every word.

"Jack will attend to it," said Nancy happily, lifting her head and giving the mare a final loving stroke, "all we have to do, Jessie, you and I, is to be grateful."

"Uh-h," muttered Aunt Sylvia. "It's getting pow'ful cold in dis cyar; dat's what's happening, an' my ole bones is beginning to complain."

"Here, Aunt Sylvia, put on all these things," said Nancy, running to the old woman who had begun to shiver. "No wonder you're cold."

She wrapped shawls and a long cloak around Aunt Sylvia, who protested, and then settled down into the easy chair when Nancy insisted, and soon announced that she was "as warm as toast" again.

They were just beginning to wonder if Jack would come soon, when the door of the car slid open, and Eben Locke appeared.

"Don't you be scared, miss," he said to Nancy with a broad smile, "that brother o' yours wants me to fetch you across these tracks to the telephone station; seems there's a young lady somewhere that wants to speak to you. You clap on the warmest shawl you've got with you, and I'll carry you right over dry shod."

Aunt Sylvia's cold was instantly forgotten as she helped Nancy. When the little girl was well wrapped up, Mr. Locke bent his broad shoulders.

"You put your two arms round my neck, tight," he said to Nancy. "Sho! you aren't any heft to speak of! I've carried barrels of sugar before now. Here we go, Jim, you shut the door to, and stand here till I come back."

Aunt Sylvia went close to the door, and as it slid across she said warningly:

"Ebery minute or two I's gwine call out t'rough dis wood, and say 'Is you dar?' An' if you don't say

'Yes' mighty quick, dere's gwine be trouble when my lamb comes back. Now—is you dar?"

"Yes, marm, I am," roared Jim, and even Aunt Sylvia felt that she had ample protection in a person with such a voice.

"Here, Nancy," said Jack, when Eben Locke had safely landed the little girl beside him, "you take the receiver and listen with all your might."

"Nancy!" came a voice that seemed so near the little girl could scarcely believe it was Marguerite, so many miles away. "Oh, Nancy, you dear! I don't want Jessie. I'd a thousand times rather she'd stay with you!"

"You're only saying that, Marguerite," quavered Nancy; "just because Jack can keep her for me!"

"Nancy Beaumont, listen to me!" the voice at the other end of the line had a tone that convinced Nancy in spite of her fears. "Father had found a horse for me. I saw him just a few hours before your letter came—a darling little black horse, Nancy, and I'd truly and honestly a little rather have him than Jessie, though of course you wouldn't like him as well. And father has gone to telephone about him now, since we heard from your brother."

"Oh, I'm so glad." Nancy's feet would scarcely

stay on the floor. "Everything is all right again. Marguerite—would you like to know what I wished for you, even if it isn't time yet?"

"Yes," said Marguerite, "and quick, Nancy, for mother says we can't talk much longer."

"I wished you might have a horse of your own—not Jessie—and be perfectly satisfied," said Nancy.

"You dear!" came the answer. "And I wished you to come and make me a visit this winter, and you're coming—your brother has promised me. And Nancy—I think you have a pretty fine brother—after all."

"'After all!'" echoed Nancy, but in return she heard only Marguerite's gurgling laugh, and then a "Good-night and good-bye! I'll write you to-morrow!"

"Well?" questioned Jack who had watched her face as she talked and listened. "How is it now, little sister? Do you feel better about it?"

For answer Nancy threw herself into his arms and clung to him tightly.

"Oh, Jack," she said breathlessly. "Isn't this a beautiful world, and aren't there lovely people in it?"

CHAPTER XIX

BACK TO BEAUMONT LANE

THERE was not much sleep in the freight car that night, although both Nancy and Aunt Sylvia tried to take naps. Jessie was uneasy, and at last, in the pouring rain, Jack led her away to a livery stable near the station, and there spent the rest of the night himself.

"These are the queerest goings on that ever I took part in," said Mr. Locke as he viewed Jessie's departure. "But when there's a man like William Lord at one end o' the line, and a general at the other and telephone wires used as freely as if they were free, I don't know what you're going to do about it. I reckon I shall call that my 'gilt-edged freight,' that car."

The storm, after doing all the damage it could in a few hours, was wildly swept on by the gale, and when morning came patches of blue sky showed between the ragged edges of great torn clouds, and every little while a stray sunbeam danced on the surface of the pools of water standing between the railroad tracks.

"Betwixt the rain and the wind there's hardly a leaf on one of the trees," said Eben Locke, pointing out a row of maples which stood near the station, to Jack Beaumont, as he came across the tracks. "I reckon your folks are stirring in there," he added, jerking his thumb toward the car. "I heard that little sister of yours laughing awhile ago; sounded pretty, coming out o' that old car. What are you planning to do this morning? Are you going on to Potterville, and they down to the city, or what?"

"I shall have to use that telephone again as soon as I've seen them," said Jack, "and then my plan is to take Jessie, the mare, back in that remarkable freight car, and send Nancy and Aunt Sylvia home by train. I think I can get the necessary permission."

"You seem to have been able to get everything so far," and Eben Locke smiled broadly at the young man. "So here's good luck to you for the rest of the way. I expect the road will be clear up toward Potterville, and there's some freight got to start up that way in a couple of hours that your car could be hitched on to all right; I'll help see to it if you can get the word."

"Thank you," said Jack, and he gave Mr. Locke's hard palm a good clasp as he turned to the car.

"I've come to breakfast," he said gayly as the door slid open; "I believe I was invited. Why, what a spread, Aunt Sylvia! Can it wait a few minutes while I telephone to the freight agent or—no, I believe I'd better eat a few mouthfuls first."

"Dat's de bes' way," counseled Aunt Sylvia. Her eyes shone brightly in her dusky face. Aunt Sylvia was tired but her heart was lighter than for many a day before.

As for Nancy, her face was aglow with joy.

"Everything looks as if it had been washed clean!" she cried, taking her first view of the outside world. "The storm has gone! Everything bad has gone, hasn't it, Jack? And are we all going home together?"

She found it a little hard at first to be content with Jack's plan for the home-going, but in the end she was glad, for Aunt Sylvia's sake.

"Jessie and I will get on splendidly, and poor Aunt Sylvia needs a comfortable ride, Nancy, after all this excitement," said Jack, knowing well Nancy's warm heart would help him. "And we shall get to Potterville a few hours after you, surely this afternoon, for Eben Locke says the freight will go right through, and you will have the fun of driving up in one of

Mr. Hobbs's carryalls to surprise grandfather. Think of that!"

"I don't know what grandfather will say," and Nancy's face was clouded for a moment. "He doesn't like surprises," she added.

"He'll like this one," Jack told her decidedly, and on the whole Nancy thought he was not mistaken.

She had plenty of time to think while the train was carrying her back to Potterville, for Aunt Sylvia, worn out, fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the back of the seat.

"So much can happen in such a little time!" thought Nancy wonderingly as she looked out of the car window at the flying landscape. "I can hardly believe I'm myself—and yet I know I'm not anybody else," with a little sigh of contentment.

When the train arrived at Potterville the conductor helped Nancy and Aunt Sylvia off with quite a flourish and a wave of his hand toward Mr. Lord, who stood in the door of the station.

Mr. Lord shaded his eyes with his hand, then darted across the tracks with a ringing call of welcome for the returned travelers.

"My land!" he cried. "This beats all. Here's the

admiral been down here twice already this morning to get me to communicate with the end o' the line and find out whether your car had arrived. I couldn't seem to make connections, and he's been hopping mad with me—no offense, but that's what he's been, and is—hopping mad."

"Grandfather, down here!" cried Nancy. "Why, he hasn't been in the carriage for more than two years."

"That's what he said," Mr. Lord smiled grimly as he piloted Nancy and Aunt Sylvia across to the platform, gallantly carrying their extra wraps. "He told me that—and a number of other things. It's never been my privilege to hear him talk much before—he has a great command of language, the admiral. But where's your car, Miss Nancy, and the mare? I hope they weren't lost in that deluge that came on us so sudden and fierce. I never knew the beat of the way it rained and blew for a few hours—just as if there'd never be another chance to do it!"

There were no loungers about the little station that morning and Nancy told her story to Mr. Lord without any other listeners; even Aunt Sylvia did not hear it, for leaning against the wall of the waiting-room she promptly fell asleep once more.

"Tired out, I reckon," said Mr. Lord, and Nancy nodded, with an affectionate look at her old nurse.

"Do you think grandfather really will come here again?" asked Nancy when her story was finished. "Because if you don't I'd better go to Mr. Hobbs right away, and ask him to drive us home."

"He'll come," said Mr. Lord without a shadow of doubt. "In fact—he's coming now. I can hear that Sylvanus of yours."

"Yes, sir, I certainly will, sir!" came a loud voice as the Beaumont carriage spattered with mud and drawn by Mary Anne who was coming at her most rapid gait, lurched around the corner and stopped at the side door of the station.

"See that you do, then," cried the admiral. "You've nearly tipped me over twice with your careless driving. Don't do it again!"

"No, sir, certainly not, sir," and then the mouth of Sylvanus dropped wide open as he saw Nancy, and his mother, roused by his voice and rubbing her eyes, in the doorway, while Mr. Lord behind them, bowed low to the admiral.

"You see I've done the best I could for you," Mr. Lord said cheerfully; but the admiral seemed not to hear him. The old man looked at Nancy, hesitating

in the doorway, and held out his hands toward her, his face working strangely.

"Come here!" he cried. "Come here and let me feel of you, little Nancy! Such dreams as I had last night! No matter about Jessie or anything. You can tell me all that later. All I want now is to have my faithful little girl back again."

"Why, grandfather!" Nancy nestled into his arms and patted his cheeks with her loving little hands. "You did miss me, didn't you?"

"Miss you!" groaned the admiral. "I haven't done anything but miss you, and blame myself since you went away."

"I've got to see about those new tickets," said Mr. Lord, bustling into the waiting-room. "Good-bye all, and good luck," and he shut the door, smiling at his own tact.

"You move along an' let me get in dere, side ob you," commanded Aunt Sylvia, when the admiral at last told her son to start for home. "I reckon I can manage t'ings so you won't lift ebery puddle in de road right on to dis kerridge, boy."

"Grandfather," Nancy looked across the table at the admiral that noon when everything had been explained, with a smile of confidence, "grandfather, don't

you suppose Mary Anne would like to go down to meet her niece this afternoon?"

The admiral was paying for his morning drive with much pain, but he smiled valiantly at his granddaughter nevertheless.

"I should think she'd be delighted," he said cordially. "And mind you, Nancy, you tell Jack for me that he is to thank William Lord for all he and the other friends did for my little girl, and tell them that we shall be glad to see any of them, at any time. You'll remember? I'm afraid I may not have expressed my—er—thanks very clearly this morning."

The sun was low when the Beaumont carriage drove briskly along the main street of Potterville that afternoon. There were many faces at the windows to see it pass, and Jack Beaumont's hat was lifted again and again in response to a smile and nod from a friendly watcher. He drove, while Sylvanus sat proudly beside him, arms folded and chin raised. The back seat of the carriage was piled high with the wraps and bags from the freight car.

Beside the carriage, accommodating her steps as well as she could to those of her elderly aunt, came Jessie, with Nancy riding, her cheeks pink and her

eyes dancing. Only once they were halted in their progress; that was when a sharp thimble tap sounded on Mrs. Potter's window and she came hurrying down to her gate.

"Look here," she said to Nancy, after a brisk nod to Jack, "I want to tell you something right now. I'm one that likes to own to a mistake soon as I find it out. When you'd started off yesterday I got to thinking about you and that mare of yours, and I said to myself, 'wouldn't I miss her if I was in that child's place?' and the answer was 'yes.' So I want to tell you I'm glad you have her back, and she don't look as skittish to me as she did, someway. And as I told Mr. Hobbs, it did seem a pity to lose the only equestrienne we had in town."

She gave her little compliment with much emphasis and pride, dwelling on the word borrowed from Mr. Hobbs, to be sure Nancy did not miss it.

"Good-bye," she said, loosing her hold on Nancy's skirt. "I've no doubt your grandfather is in a hurry to see you, Mr. Jack," she added graciously.

"Good-bye and thank you," said Nancy, and Jack gave his most sweeping bow to Mrs. Potter as she turned away.

"And now for home as soon as Mary Anne can get

there," he said as they left the last village house behind them.

"For home and grandfather," said Nancy softly. "Oh, Jack, I'm so glad we all have each other and everything is right again."

THE END