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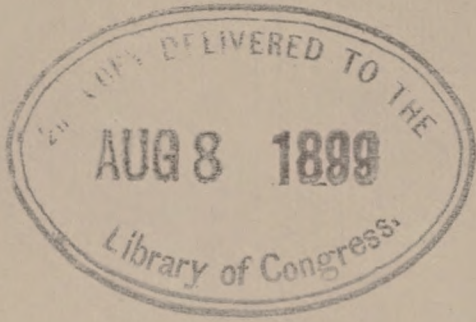
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THE LITTLE ANIMAL SPRANG TO THE EXTENDED HAND

MY LADY BAREFOOT

A Story for Girls

BY

MRS. EVELYN RAYMOND

Author of "The Little Lady of the Horse," "Among the
Lindens," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY IDA WAUGH



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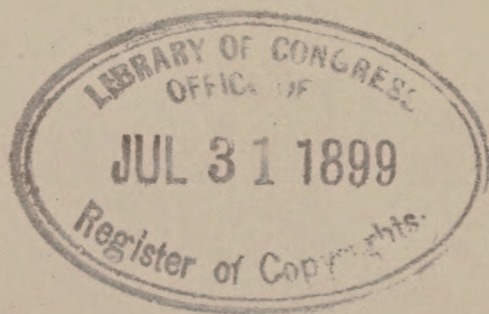
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MY LADY BAREFOOT

CHAPTER I

OLD ISRAEL AND JEAN

“JEANIE!”

There came no response to the querulous, really feeble summons which floated out of the cabin doorway to waste itself upon the stiff October gale, then blowing through the mountain pass.

“Jean! Jean-nie!”

A faint echo of this second cry did penetrate to the glen where the girl who had been called was gathering nuts and making, by the tossing of the dead leaves upon the ground, sufficient noise to drown her grandfather's voice; even without the additional racket of the wind which blew, at that moment, as if all the fury of a

dozen storms had been concentrated in this one outburst.

“Hark! Whisk, he’s calling us! Come!”

Hastily gathering the neck of her canvas bag in one hand, Jean Wilder held out the other for the red squirrel who had been sitting on the limb of a tree above her head and watching her operations with his bright, intelligent eyes. The little animal now sprang to the extended hand and raising her pet to her lips the nut-gatherer bestowed upon the dainty little head a fond caress; then darted forward toward the cabin at a pace almost as fleet as Whisk’s own might have been.

“Oh, Grandfather? Did the door blow open? How sorry I am! Are you cold? Are you—” But a peculiar look about the wrinkled old face upon the poor pillow of the hard pallet startled her and she ceased speaking to advance on tip-toe to the old man’s side.

“Grand—fath—er!” she called, slowly, frightened almost speechless by the sight she beheld. The eyes had rolled upward and backward into their sockets, the lips were purple, and the jaw fallen, the hands clenched in the rigidity of a spasm, and the whole appearance

of the figure upon the couch would have told a more experienced person than Jean that this eighty-year-old recluse was at the extremity of life.

But Jean knew nothing of death; and she had often seen her aged relative in some such plight as this; though never had he looked so awfully ashen and terrible. She flew to the little cupboard on the wall and took from thence a small vial containing what her grandfather called his "heart mixture," and poured out a small quantity into the broken tumbler which had held the vial, then hurried to hold it to the old sufferer's lips.

"Grandfather! Oh, Grandfather! Can't you—won't you take it? Do—do! It will ease the terrible pain! It will—it must! Please try!"

The flying about the room of the squirrel, Whisk, was the only sound which came in answer. Then instinct taught the girl what to do. Raising the motionless head upon her arm she dropped the medicine, bit by bit, down the already stiffening throat, and so powerful was it that in a few seconds the set muscles relaxed, and the weak heart made one more effort to resume its work.

“There, there! Dear Grandfather! You are better! I see it, I know it! Oh, how glad I am! And so sorry, so sorry that I went away at all. But, you see, I thought we should need the nuts before spring, and if I left them, the bad village boys would have them all. And the fallen leaves and the wind—”

Bang! went the rickety shutter, wrenched at last from its broken fastening and thrown violently to the rocks before the cabin door.

“My, how it does blow!” cried poor Jean, for almost the first time in her life feeling an oppression of fear which she could not understand.

But the noise of the falling shutter outdid that of the gale, and it roused the sick man to a sense of his surroundings. His feeble mind began to work at exactly the point where it had ceased when he swooned, and he called again, in fretful, broken tones, “Jean! Jean!”

“Here am I, dear Grandfather! Are you better? Can I help you?”

The long, claw-like hand was raised in protest. “Hush! I—I—there is something—

The key—oh, my head! What is it I want to say, eh! Jean, child?”

“Is it something about a key, Grandfather? What key is it? Where is it? Do you want it?”

A strange, cynical look rose in old Israel Wilder's face. The word “key,” which he had been the first to speak, conveyed to him, from the lips of another, but one idea—his treasure! whereof the “key” held the secret. “No, no!” he exclaimed, with an energy that seemed more astonishing by contrast with his former lifelessness. “No, I want no keys—I! Do you think I am dying, Jean? Who told you I was dying, girl? Answer me that. It is not so!”

“Why—nobody, Grandfather! Why should you think anybody did?” cried the other, finding the unrecognized fear of her own heart thus put into words by the threatened man himself.

“Nobody! Nobody, child! I dreamed it. The elixir, the heart-mixture, it outwits even the old Spectre himself. Eh, Jean? I—what are you staring at?”

“Staring, dear, was I? I did not mean it!”

and instantly this lonely, strangely neglected girl began to talk of her outing in the glen and to withdraw her relative's disordered mind from dwelling upon a subject which always made him wild. Nobody had taught her this, but the quick, womanly sympathy of her noble nature had led her to wisdom. Gradually the fierce light died from the faded eyes of the old man, a faint flush of returning vitality dyed his yellow cheeks, and he moved restlessly upon his hard pillow as if he had again become conscious of his uncomfortable surroundings, and fretted by them.

“Wait, dear; I'll fix it for you! Let me see; what can I find to put under it to make it higher? Oh, I know! Soft pine boughs. They're just the very thing. Since I've been sleeping on them I have rested so well. I'll bring a fresh lot in a jiffy,” and out into the wind she ran again, her torn, thin frock letting its cutting breath nip her delicate limbs blue with cold. But she paid no attention to that every-day matter, and in five minutes returned to the poor abode with her arms full of spicy boughs. These she put beneath the one print-covered pillow, and the altered position appeared to give Mr.

Wilder considerable ease. His faint breathing grew gradually stronger and stronger, till at the end of another half-hour he was able to sit up on the edge of his straw-filled pallet and lean his back against the prop of pine boughs which Jean's deft fingers arranged for him.

"A capable child you are, granddaughter. And a good thing for you. Those who have wit need little money. Let it be the rule of your life, Jean Wilder, to use as little money as will suffice the plainest needs. Money—money—money—is—is everything! Is everything, child!" The advice ended in a shrill cry that set the girl's heart beating with fresh anxiety. She had never seen her grandfather just like this.

"Yes, dear," she said, soothingly. "You have been telling me that all my life, and I am not apt to forget it. Anyway I do not like the stuff. You say it is that which makes all the trouble, too, as well as does all the good in the world. Why, then, should I desire it? What need have I of it here in the forest? If there is just enough to buy food for you and a little meal for my own porridge—what more can I want?" And in her brown bare feet this strange maiden

began to skip about as gayly upon the rough floor of the cabin as though her nimble toes were encased in silken shoes.

Old man Wilder laughed. The most self-controlled person may have still his weakness somewhere, and the odd weakness of this old miser had been his love of grace and beauty.

“Ah, step it lively, lass! Do your best! Yet never one in all the great city could pass the handsome Beau Wilder, once, when these old legs were young! But—food. You mentioned food, my dear. Bring it to me. Bring it at once!”

Jean paused suddenly, and a look of perplexity overspread her merry face. “What must it be, Grandfather? Will a bit of meal-porridge do?”

“Meal-porridge, indeed! No, it will not do. I must have flesh—flesh—flesh—to feed my wasting flesh! You know that, Jean Wilder; yet you ask me if ‘porridge’ will answer! Porridge is for babes—” then suddenly recollecting himself, he added—“and for slips of girls who do nothing all day but trifle in the forest, trapping birds and other wild things.

Flesh, I tell you! Flesh—the more the better.”

By accident, or design, the old man's eye fixed itself upon the playful Whisk, gambolling about the narrow cabin as contentedly and looking as well-fed as if he had been reared in a palace—Whisk, Jean's one beloved play-fellow.

With an indignant flash of her dark eyes, and a nimbleness which matched Whisk's own, she darted forward, caught up the little red squirrel and hid him in the bosom of her ragged frock. Then she turned fiercely upon her grandfather, looking for the moment like anybody rather than the hitherto gentle-faced girl who had been so solicitous about the old man's welfare.

“No! You need not look at him like that, Grandfather Wilder! I am willing to go hungry myself, but don't you dare to touch my Whisk! I catch and trap, indeed, but not for idleness! To sell the poor, caged creatures whose hearts I break that you may eat the detested 'flesh' you crave so much. Now, I will look in the cupboard once more, but I know beforehand that all your own food is gone.

You were eating the last of it yesterday, you know, and I was going down into the village for more, when you heard men hunting in the wood and dared not let me leave you. There is porridge, as I told you; a little bit. And—”

“Flesh—flesh—I must have flesh! Go—go at once!”

“Will you give me some of the money to buy it with?”

“Money? I have no money, child! Why do you think an old recluse like me can have that one precious thing—money?” whined the invalid.

“Because when I sell the birds and squirrels I know how much I get for them. I never spend anything except what you command me to pay for your food, and so I reckon how much there must be left. If you will give me some of that I brought back last week I need not wait to try to sell anything to-day.”

“Hm—m. I know what that means. A longer life for the silly things you have captured. Well, I can expect nothing different. Ingratitude is the return I have always met and always shall. Though I took you and have brought you up, when you just might as well

have gone to the poor-house and cost me nothing. Nothing! And now you care more for the animals in the wood than for your poor old grandfather!"

Jean waited to hear no more. She was by no means faultless, and she had never been taught that one need ever control anger. All that she had acquired of wisdom had come to her by sorrowful experience; and she ran out of the cabin, now, as fast as she could go, though her bright eyes filled with tears and she clasped her two hands with loving pressure upon the little squirrel nestling within the torn gown.

"You know as well as I do, Whisker dear, that when my grandfather begins on that subject there is no use in waiting for him to finish. What have I cost him, I should like to know! But—no use! The pretty pair of woodpeckers must go! Let's be as quick as we can about it and get it over with. Besides, if he doesn't have his horrible 'flesh—flesh' soon he'll be wild and terrible again. Dear Whisk! He shall never have you! Never—never—never!"

As if he understood and wished to assure her that he did, the gentle little animal who had

resigned freedom for captivity and Jean's affection, crept up under her chin and settled himself to go to sleep.

“Not this time, small sir! I dare not take you with me any more down there among those dreadful village boys. Don't you remember that the last time I did they nearly caught you? No; into your safe, safe nest here in the rocks, where nobody can ever find you, I will put you till I come back! In with you, dear! And good-by for a little while!”

Into a cosy nest made in the hollow of a great boulder Whisker was accordingly thrust, then the opening secured, and Jean turned sorrowfully away to perform her hateful task.

CHAPTER II

AN AFTERNOON'S FUN

“Here she comes! Here comes my ‘Lady Barefoot!’ Now let’s have some fun!”

So cried the leader of the “bad set” among the village lads, as Jean appeared at the entrance to the town, carrying her home-made wicker cages of woodland captives.

“Oh, let her alone, for once, fellows! What’s the use of tormenting even a girl, forever!”

“Hi! Jim Saxton, turned coward all of a sudden?”

“No. But I read a story the other day that set me thinking. I—”

“Quit it! No preaching!”

“Who wants to preach? Preaching yourself every time you get a chance!”

“Say that again and I’ll lick you!”

“Can’t do it!”

“What’ll you bet?”

“Ain’t betting nowadays. Just try it; that’s all the odds I ask!”

At which Jerry Jones responded with such a scientific blow that Jim’s fighting blood rose in a minute. At it they went, rough-and-tumble, through the dust which a long drought had made several inches deep, and over the railing of the little foot-bridge into the bed of the stream that was now dry but rock-strewn enough to make a fall thereon perilous.

Who thought of that? Not these two valiant heroes of a hundred battles, till Jim’s head struck with a sharper crack than common upon one of the keen-edged stones, and lay there so still that Jerry had an excellent opportunity to give the promised “licking” without even a slight return of hostilities. Jerry had almost exhausted his wrath when it occurred to him that this was an unusual state of things.

“Hi, Jim! Why don’t you hit back? Who’s a coward now?”

No reply forthcoming, not even the smothered growl which a belligerent boy gives when his mouth is in the dirt, Jerry sprang up and regarded his fallen foe dubiously. “Call that a

fight? That's a reg'lar give in and knock under. I ain't built to do my business that way. Get up and come back into the road; I'll give you first odds!"

Even these mingled taunts and cajolings failed to rouse the prostrate victim, and Jerry stooped down and turned Jim over on his back. Then an outcry arose that echoed far down the highway, and brought more than one anxious mother hurrying to her door to see if it were her especial "hopeful" who had come to grief.

The other boys, a half-dozen in number, bounded into the creek-bed and stooped above poor Jim, who, despite his occasional lapses into "preachiness," was a great favorite.

"My eye, Red-top! You've killed him!"

"Oh, my scissors! Jerry Jones, I wouldn't be in your shoes for a gold mine! He's as dead as 'old Gunner!' You'll swing for this—you bet!"

"Aint dead, either!" retorted poor, terrified Jerry, as firmly as his trembling lips would let him, but agonized beyond expression at sight of that familiar face so white under the blood stains, and the ugly-looking little pool which

had settled under the injured boy's temple, about the cruel rock that had gashed it.

Jean had paused also at her first glimpse of her tormentors, who regularly persecuted her on account of her caged birds and squirrels whenever she came into the village to dispose of them, and who envied her the regular market she had found in the penchant which rich Mr. Disney had for these same pretty creatures.

“Oh, dear! I suppose it is of no use ever trying to escape them! How I do hate a boy! And I don't see as they are a bit better when they are men! Grandfather, now—there it goes! ‘Lady Barefoot!’ Oh, why won't they let me alone!”

Thus much had flashed through the girl's troubled mind when she saw the advancing crowd halt to gaze upon what was even more interesting to the boyish sight than squirrels—the fight between the two “jays,” or “J's,” as Jim and Jerry were denominated.

But now again that natural womanliness of hers made her quicker to see the peril of the boy on the creek-bed than his comrades had been, and before they knew it she, also, had leaped down among the startled youngsters, and

was flinging them right and left with her strong young arms.

“Out of the way, here! Now you’ve about killed him—don’t try to finish him by smothering! Water! Bring it quick—quick! In somebody’s hat!”

Every boy flew to obey, and they consequently tumbled over each other as much as possible, thereby delaying the draught which might save life. Meanwhile Jean had looked frantically about her own person for something with which to bandage the injured lad’s temple. Alas! So poor a garb as “Lady Barefoot’s” had nothing to spare, even for such a need as this.

Hold! Has it not! Or if not her own clothing, perhaps, yet the stout strap which supported her cages upon her shoulders would be just the thing!

“Here! Some of you lend me a knife. Or cut the strap yourselves! We must bind up his head right away!”

Instantly all the lads returned from their confused search after water, and proceeded with equal zeal and as little discretion to hinder each other in cutting the strap. Several fingers

were gashed during the operation, but nobody thought of that.

“Now—the water! Where is it?”

Oh—the water—who had it?

Nobody.

Up sprang Jean, with a defiant look of intensest scorn, and seized the hat of the first boy with whose head her indignant fingers came in contact. Off she ran, and in a brief space was back with a capful of the precious fluid, which her keen eye had observed where her duller-witted assistants had seen none.

Somebody, a trifle less obtuse than the rest, cried: “I say, ‘Lady Barefoot!’ Your own foot’s bleeding awful!”

“What of it?”

“Why—why—I thought, maybe, you didn’t know it!”

“I didn’t. I don’t care. He’s breathing again. See?”

Every boyish head dropped at one and the same instant to gaze upon the slowly-opening eyes of their fallen comrade, and collided in one hard bunch—ker-thump! Then they rebounded, with equal suddenness, and Jean laughed.

Such a laugh! There was no resisting its influence, and even the maddest boy of the whole lot gradually relaxed the severity of his would-be-dignified countenance and joined in the peal with all his might.

“Well, boy; you’re better, aren’t you? I reckon the next time you fight it won’t be on the edge of a bridge!” exclaimed Jean, pleased to see her patient regaining his senses.

Jim smiled, and tried to sit up; but a dreadful dizziness overcame him, and he would have dropped back upon the rock once more if his late assailant had not interposed one grimy jacket-sleeve between the injured head and the stony pillow.

“I wouldn’t ha’ pounded you so hard, but I thought you was ’fraid, and didn’t dast to fight back,” explained the remorseful Jerry, who, mischievous though he was, had a pretty good heart of his own. “Hope you’ll give me another chance to lick you—on the square.”

“I—I guess I’m licked enough,” replied Jim. “But next time you torment anybody what can’t help himself, even if she is an old, barefoot girl out of a shanty, I’ll be ready for

you! So, there!" Though beaten, Jim was warlike still.

"Sh-h-h!"

"Sh-h-h, yourselves! What's the matter with you?"

"She's here. The girl you fought for."

"Didn't fight for no girl. Fought for the princerule o' the thing. Hate all girls. Hate 'em like poison. Hate that old 'Barefooter' worse 'an any of 'em, 'cause she catches every squirrel there is in the woods here. Wish she'd die or clear out. Still, I think it's mighty small potatoes to yell at her and scare the life out of her that way, like we've been doin', 'cause I heard somethin' about her the other day that makes me think if she'd only been a boy she'd 'a' been a brick."

Jean had retreated beyond the range of Jim's vision, but not beyond the sound of his voice, and with some curiosity had waited to hear how he would talk when he came to himself. Anger now made her forget her fear; and she advanced among the lads from whom she had not shrunk when they were in trouble, but who again seemed enemies, now that the trouble was past.

"You did, did you? You mean, contemptible boy! What did you hear about me? Tell me that!"

Jean's sudden appearance startled Jim so that for a moment his ready tongue failed to answer at his command; but he quickly regained his assurance.

"I heard you sold birds and things to buy food for your stingy old grandfather. And so I'm sorry I ever hooted you."

This was a handsome apology; and Jean hesitated between gratitude for it and indignation at the aspersion of her guardian.

"Humph! Well—but—I won't be afraid of you any more, then; and, say, you're as pale as a ghost, yet. You'd better go home, if you have a home. Where do you live?"

"With my father, of course. How do I look?"

"Yaller an' bloody!" responded one of the lads, with unflattering frankness.

"Oh—h! Will I scare my mother?"

"You'd scare me if I were your mother," said the girl.

Some of the boys laughed at that, and Jean turned upon them promptly.

“You’d better help him to her, then, instead of teasing me.”

“Didn’t mean to tease you; not that time. How do you make your cages? Does the old man really make you sell the creatures you catch? How you going to carry ’em now you’ve used up your strap?”

“I’ll make out some way. Grandfather has to eat, does he not? Oh, dear! I forgot. He was awful sick, and I was to make all the haste I could!”

“Well?”

“Take that hurt boy up first. I want to see if he can walk. I saw a man once, a wood-chopper, jammed up in the pass, and the others made a bed of branches and put him on it, and carried him down to the village that way. You might do it, too, if he can’t walk.”

“Hurrah! Just the checker! Come on, fellows! Let’s rig up the ambulance! Those big trees in old Dutton’s yard are the very things we need.”

Few the incidents or accidents which could not furnish amusement for these young idlers, a comrade’s misfortune as good as another. All along the brook-side grew native cedars in

abundance, but nothing would suffice save the choice old spruce which, for half a century, had been the delight of a childless couple, neither of whom was at home to prevent the desecration.

Out came jack-knives once more, and each lad of the party, save Jim, fell upon one of the great boughs with a vigor that soon brought it to the ground, and ruined forever the once perfect pyramid of green. Never a branch or twig had been cut before, but these young vandals did not care for that, nor pause to ask what the reckoning might be.

“There! I guess that will be enough. Let's drag 'em to the bridge and lace 'em together there.”

Ingenuity in accomplishing mischief aided the robbers, and a really very comfortable litter was soon prepared, upon which the shaky-kneed Jim was placed, amid the cheers of his mates.

“First class! Couldn't have done it better myself!” remarked the hero of the occasion, with grateful patronage. “And, I say, just put the Barefooter's cages up here, too. Then she won't have so much trouble with 'em. You know I have her strap.”

“All right! Here they go!” and before Jean could protest, her three “chippies” and the pair of woodpeckers, in their rude cages, had been seized from her arms and tossed upon the “ambulance.”

“Hello! Let’s play Jim’s a ‘conquering hero,’ bound for the royal palace. We’re his brave generals, and ‘Lady Barefoot’ is a captive queen. Hitch her on behind somewhere. That’ll make the thing complete!”

Evidently, Jim was not in any dangerous condition of body, for he leaned eagerly over the edge of his “royal” litter, which rested upon the shoulders of four of his “generals,” while the remainder of them attempted to put the last scheme into effect; and his chivalry had suddenly vanished at the prospect of fresh “fun.”

“You shall not! I will not be tied! Take that string off my wrist! Let me go—you hateful, hateful boys! Give me back my birds and squirrels! I’m not a captive! I won’t be! I’ll scream if you don’t stop! Please, please don’t!”

“All right! Scream away! That’s the correct thing for a captive queen to do. Jingo!

Aint this fun?" retorted Jerry, binding the wrists of poor Jean behind her back with the fish-line another "general's" pocket had furnished.

"Oh! I wish I had let your hurt boy alone! I'll never do a single thing for any of you—never, never, never! I was going to show you where the chestnuts are thick—but I—I—" The captive's entreaties were cut short by a second astonishing move on the part of her tormentors, for she was suddenly whirled around, and with another fish-line thong, which, also, was fastened to the waists of the hindmost "bearers," led backwards at the rear of this triumphal procession of evil-doers.

Her bare, bruised feet stumbled as she was forcibly dragged along, and the prickly needles of the spruce boughs stung her head and thinly covered shoulders so that she had to bend nearly double to avoid them. She opened her lips to scream, as she had threatened, then suddenly remembered that this was exactly what they had wished her to do, so refrained. "No, I'll not even moan—no matter; I can die. If Grandfather is dying, too, I shall be glad. I wouldn't care only for Whisker, the darling.

He'd starve to death in that place where I shut him."

The thought nerved the tortured girl to new strength, and she became ominously silent, so silent that one of the "generals" returned to the rear to see what had befallen their "prisoner of war," and he had but just stooped to peer into the bent and angry face of "My Lady Barefoot," when she gathered all her forces together, made an obstinate halt, and threw herself, face downward, into the dust of the street they were now traversing.

"Glory!" "Ow-ouch-wow-wow!" "Jingo!" "What—what's this?"

Each boy uttered his own individual yell, as Jean's strategem succeeded, and she pulled the bearers over backward, while the litter collapsed in the midst, when followed a general mingling of boys and branches, cracked skulls and chaos!

True, Jean herself had fallen beneath the whole pile, but anything had seemed better to her angry spirit than the posture she had been compelled to take, and she alone, of all the medley, had now not a word to say.

"Hello, here! What's all this row?"

Cuff—slap—blow—push—thump!

One doughty “brave” was extricated from the jumble and tossed this way, another that, and, finally, the litter was removed from the figure of the prostrate captive by no less a personage than the irate Squire Dutton himself.

“What wickedness is this, you young rascals? Can't you find harm enough in your idle days without tormenting a poor, neglected little girl like old Wilder's grandchild? Thank Heaven—I never had a boy!”

Then the old man stooped down, and, despite the stiffness of seventy-odd years, managed to lift the motionless Jean in his arms and look critically at her dust-covered face.

“Well, young sirs! I reckon you've out-done yourselves this time! You've stunned—or killed—the child! See there!”

They waited just long enough to see the Squire cut the thongs which bound “Lady Barefoot's” wrists, and to observe how limply and uselessly her arms dropped to her sides; to notice that her eyes were closed, as Jim's had been, when he struck the sharp stone, and then—they fled.

Even Jim's knees forgot their shakiness, and

only the two unfortunates, who were fastened by the unlucky fish-line attachment to the waist of their victims, remained to enjoy the full result of their afternoon's entertainment.

“So, ho! That's it, is it? Tied her so she couldn't help herself? Lucky for her that I happened to be going home just now, or she'd have suffered even more. Here! Don't you scallawags stir foot to run! I'll have you arrested for assault! I'm the Squire, I suppose you know. Lend a hand. This fine stretcher of yours is just the thing. I wonder how you made anything so shipshape! Help me lift the child on it. Steady, now—she's fainted; for the first time in her life, most likely. Now, towards my house. Start along!”

The retribution had come swiftly. The two boys, whom fate had thrown into Squire Dutton's power, were made to help him carry the unconscious little mountaineer toward the old house at the head of the street. And now that they were in his actual presence, they remembered with fear and trembling the great store set by the Squire upon the old trees they had despoiled.

But little did he realize that he was handling

his own beloved spruce boughs till the party halted at his gate and the Squire lifted his eyes toward the house.

Then one glance told him the whole story, and his amazement was so great that he nearly dropped his end of the litter. Yet the first feeling was rather grief than anger, and he turned upon the culprits with the cry: "You little scoundrels! Is nothing sacred to you? Neither the poor and innocent—nor even the helpless trees which an old man loves?"

But the anger followed swiftly on the grief. "Forward! Into the house with you! We'll get this child into some woman's hands—and then—look out for yourselves!"

Not a man grown, in all Chelsea village, but would have feared that ambiguous threat, hurled against him from the lips of the fierce-tempered, influential and vindictive old magnate. As for the pair of guilty boys, their feet seemed rooted to the floor in very terror.

"Look out for yourselves! I will punish you, and all who were connected with you, to the fullest extent of the law!"

CHAPTER III

A MISHAP

As the party of boys scattered, after Squire Dutton appeared among them, another gentleman came upon the scene. This was Doctor Disney, Jean's patron, and a retired physician, whose love of natural history had converted his spacious grounds into a home for all sorts of living creatures—not human. He lived alone with a few old servants, and spent all his time observing and writing about his four-footed, winged, and creeping favorites.

Leisurely driving along in his old phaeton, drawn by a sleepy horse who was used to his master's ways and to standing for interminable lengths at any spot in the field or wood, while the naturalist busied himself in long searches, the keen eye of the Doctor spied the overturned

and deserted cages of squirrels and woodpeckers lying by the roadside.

“Heigho! What’s this? Whoa, Nan!”

Nan obediently stopped and her owner clambered out of the vehicle.

“Hm—m! From the looks of the dust, there must have been some sort of upset or skirmish here! But these cages were never fashioned by any other fingers than those of my little mountain lass! That I know. Softly, you poor frightened beauties! You have fallen into good hands—fortunately for you. I tremble to think what would have been your fate if you had been seen by any rough and careless lads. I’m bound you were on the way to pay me a visit, anyhow; so I’ll just take you along with me. But where can Jean be? I fancy I’d better follow this ‘trail’ in the dust and see to what it leads!”

Which he did and arrived at Squire Dutton’s house but a few moments after Jean had been carried into it. An intimate of the place, Doctor Disney walked through the open doorway without stopping to knock, and directly to the room where the frightened lads had been left with their victim while the master of the house

went to summon some woman of the neighborhood.

“Hurrah, here! What’s this? Why, my poor little friend!”

Down knelt the doctor and began to examine the motionless girl who still rested upon the litter of boughs.

“A faint! Water—bring it, somebody!”

“I—I—dassent!”

“Why not? then—I will!” Away sped the gentleman, and returned so soon that the wild idea of flight which had entered into the heads of the culprit-guardians was effectually banished. “Hm—m! This looks like mischief, worse than ordinary. But—there; she’s coming to. Well, my dear, here you are! Right with your old friend, the squirrel-man! Ah! Feel better? That’s good! That’s as it should be!”

“Wh—at—what—has—happened?” asked Jean, feebly.

“Humph! That’s exactly what I should like to know! Here I come to pay a neighborly call and find you lying on a bit of your own green wood! But, no matter; you’re all right now and the cages are safe in my carriage,

too. Now, young gentlemen, what does this mean?"

Strange how stern even a friendly voice can become sometimes! Doctor Disney was the friend and confidant of all the young folks in Chelsea; but Doctor Disney's tones at that moment were not encouraging to the frightened lads before him.

"It means that I've caught two members of the worst gang of young roughs in all this country!" answered a deep bass voice, and wheeling about the Doctor confronted the frowning countenance of his old friend, the Squire. Between the two gentlemen, while Jean recovered her strength and composure, all the incidents of the afternoon were fully elicited, and when the two captives saw that not only their own names but those of all their comrades who had run away, were written down upon a legal-looking document, they trembled still more.

"Now, you scamps can go home. I will attend to your case later. March!"

Away hurried the boys to spread the direful tidings of punishment to come. But one good result of their escapade had been the better introduction of poor Lady Barefoot

to a new and powerful friend. It was an old saying in the village that whom the Squire persecuted he did to the end, and that whom he befriended had found a tireless champion. The gentleman turned to the girl as soon as his prisoners departed, and asked her a few quiet questions about her life with her grandfather, learning by her straightforward replies more of the old miser's habits than he had ever known before.

“So the money you obtain from the sale of such creatures as you can tame, keeps you in food, does it?”

“Yes, sir. Mostly it does. Sometimes I pick berries in their season, but few people care for the wild ones who have gardens like the Chelsea folks do. But I do sell some now and again. Then Grandfather lets me keep that money to buy myself a frock, or a pair of shoes for winter. Oh, we do very well, sir. We do, indeed. And please, may I go now? I have been so long—so long! And he was so dreadfully ill. Hungry, too. Please, may I go?”

“Go, child? Of course you may, as soon as you are able. I have no anger against you, poor thing! It is all against your wretched little tor-

menters. But I reckon you'll have the 'freedom of the town' after this, and nobody dare molest you," answered the Squire, setting his jaws grimly.

"But, Jean, I will take you home in the phaeton. That is, as near to your home as we can drive. I have found the cages and have them in the vehicle; so, as soon as you feel able, we will start," said Doctor Disney, kindly.

"Oh, I'm able, right away, now!" cried the girl eagerly. Young folks' fainting-fits are not often serious matters, and though she felt a bit queerly, she did not think of minding that. "I—I never rode in a carriage in my life!"

"Did you not? Then it is high time you began! Stand up and see if you can walk."

"I—oh, yes—I guess so!" answered the girl, a bit doubtfully, for when she came to use her feet she found them not quite as obedient to her will as common. "I—I'm a little wobbly, somehow, but I'll be over it as soon as I can get out of doors. But—I can't ride, either! For I must go to the market for a piece of meat. That is what I came down for, only so much happened, I forgot. That is—if—if—" She hesitated, and blushed painfully.

She had never been obliged to ask the Doctor to pay for her birds and squirrels before. He had always seemed to think of that himself, and now he did not offer.

“If what, my dear?”

“If you—want to keep the ones I brought—and can—”

“Pay for them? Of course, of course! I was going to do so before, but it slipped my mind. And, by the way, child, I think I have been giving you too little for those you have furnished me. I have made up my mind to double the price. How does that suit you?”

“I would rather you did not,” replied Jean, very earnestly.

“Zounds! I should like to know. You’re the first human being I ever met who didn’t want more!”

“You’ve been so kind, Doctor Disney, I couldn’t; I really could not. Besides—”

“Besides what?”

“I would rather not tell.”

“Jean, does your grandfather ever give you any of the solid food you buy for him—of the meat, I mean?” asked the good Doctor, suddenly.

“Oh, no, sir! But I wouldn't eat it if he did. I couldn't. It would choke me. I do not need it.”

“What do you eat?”

“Porridge.”

“What sort?”

“Is there more than one sort? I make it with Indian meal and water and a little salt. It is very good.”

“And that is all?”

“All, sir.”

“Do you never have anything else? Vegetables or bread—pies or cakes—anything which a healthy, hungry young thing like you would enjoy?”

“Why, no, sir; not often,” answered Jean, simply. “But I am not hungry, as you say—not always. If Grandfather were not ill, I should not mind anything. But sometimes he frightens me. He is—he doesn't talk like you and this other gentleman, sir.”

“Humph! Say, Squire, just take this child into your dining-room, won't you, and fill her up with anything in the world you can find in the pantry. I'll answer to my old friend, your good lady, for the foraging when I meet her.

And I'll just drive down to the market and get the meat Jean was after, then take her home as fast as old Nan-lady can travel, which is at pretty considerable of a pace when I whisper to her that it is on a good errand she goes. I'll be back in a jiffy. Meanwhile, my little Jean, eat every blessed thing you can swallow. Just see how it feels to have a full stomach for once in your life. This is a day of unique experiences for you, my Bright Eyes, isn't it? And I'll wager a box of candy that having a good dinner will suit you better than being either a 'captive queen' or a romantic 'faint-awayer!'"

And with that the kindly, jolly Doctor took himself off to the market, and the astonished Jean tottered after her new friend, the Squire, into his comfortable dining-room.

Half an hour later, feeling very much refreshed, and as if she had eaten enough to last her a long time, Jean rode along beside Doctor Disney toward the cabin which was her poor home. Here she had lived, ever since the death of her parents, with her miserly old grandfather, who treated her kindly, according to his own ideas, but most neglectfully according to those of her two new friends.

“It is a strange wild place,” commented the Doctor, as they came to the end of the road which either he or Nan considered trustworthy. “This great pass between the mountains looks as if a mighty river had flowed through here ages ago. I have seen nothing like this valley save the great cañons of the West. The cabin stands on a little hill, raised right out of the bed of the valley or the river, doesn’t it? The dry river, I mean, of my imagination.”

“Yes, but it is a real enough one sometimes.”

“When the freshets, or the heavy rains come?”

“Yes, sir. Sometimes we are shut in there, cut off from the road to the village and every place, for days together. Grandfather says there was a foot-bridge once, but it has fallen long ago. Do you think you can climb down this steep place and up the other bank? It is the nearest way to the house, but the other longer one is easier.”

“Yes, indeed. I’m a pretty fair climber for an old man. Here, Nan, you wait till I come back. Lead on, my dear; I’ll follow if I can.”

Down one bank and up the other hurried the girl, trying to forget the wounded foot which

she had hurt by jumping to the succor of the ungrateful Jim, and wondering at the brilliant light which shone through the open door of the log cabin.

“What can it mean? It isn’t quite dark yet, and Grandfather never burns a candle when we have a fire of boughs. What—what!”

On the threshold of the abode she paused, rooted to the spot in terrified astonishment. A great roaring flame of pine boughs filled the wide, old-fashioned chimney, and before it the old man whom she had left ill on the pallet was now standing and waving his hands in the wildest and most fantastic fashion. His haggard face and white hair were lighted by the red glare, his unsteady limbs whirled madly about as if animated by electricity, and his thin hands waved high above his head the still bleeding fragments of a red squirrel’s body.

“Flesh—flesh—and blood! Who says flesh and blood? I will have none but this—this—the warm meat that gives life to an old man’s veins!” With a frantic gesture the dancer thrust a portion of the horrid food he had obtained into his mouth, then, reeling forward, he fell into the midst of the flames.

CHAPTER IV

THE END OF A LIFE

“GRANDFATHER! Grandfather!” shrieked Jean, awaking at last from the spell of horror which had chained her feet to the threshold. With the strength of excitement she lifted the poor old man from the hearth, and half-closing her eyes lest she should see the scorched face, she wrapped him hastily, if blindly, in her own poor cotton frock, torn off in the moment of fright.

Then a firm, kindly hand put her gently aside.

“Let me. Bring water and—but water first.”

Jean hurried to the ledge outside the door where a bucket of water was usually kept, thankfully remembering that she had paused to fill it before she went down into the village.

“Now, bandages—any sort—the softer the better. And oil. Have you any oil?”

“No. Oh, sir! Is he dead?”

“I think not. The bandages—quick.”

“Will the calico on this bed answer? It is all—”

“Nothing white? The skin must not be poisoned.” As he spoke Doctor Disney cast a hasty glance about the poor apartment. Such abject distress and barrenness as it displayed it had never been his lot to witness before, and he shuddered as he thought of the girl who had been shut up here with a man—insane!

That was the swift interpretation which the physician had put upon the terrible scene he had witnessed. “Crazy as a loon. That is what has made him so unlike other people and hard to his poor grandchild.”

“Oh, Doctor Disney, I have nothing, nothing but the brown coverlet and my frock. My petticoat—yes. But it is so old and torn.”

“Never mind. Here, have you a candle, if not oil?”

“There is a piece of one.”

“Bring it.”

Jean obeyed.

“Now go out doors a moment.”

When she was recalled she found that the good Doctor had taken off his own fine white shirt and was tearing it into shreds. “Here, child, roll these so—tight, while the bit of candle melts. Put it in a dish before the fire.”

Jean brought the basin in which she made her porridge. It was clean and scoured bright with the sand of the water-bed of the pass. “Oh, will you not suffer without your clothing, dear Doctor Disney?”

“Humph! I reckon not. I ought to, if I do, for letting human beings live like this while I wasted my sympathy on animals who didn’t want it. No, don’t worry; my underwear is thick and heavy. But you—have you no other frock?”

“No—sir.”

“Wrap that coverlet about you, then.”

“He will need it.”

“He will need nothing more.”

“Why not?”

“Because—because I shall not let him. There, he is not so badly burned, after all. Bring me a tumbler; I mean—anything. I want to give him some medicine.”

“He has his own, sir. I’ll show you. He takes it often, very often!” cried poor Jean, eager to have one thing that was required, already in the house. She ran to the little cupboard and brought the vial of dark liquid and the broken cup in which her grandfather measured his doses.

“Does he take this, as you say, often?”

“Every day, whenever he feels the ‘spells’ coming on. He told me once it was his heart.”

“No wonder! He has been killing himself with that poison. Throw it away and rinse out the cup, then bring it to me.”

Again Lady Barefoot’s obedience was prompt, as far as rinsing the medicine-cup went; but she did not throw away the precious vial, whose contents had cost so much that her grandfather never ceased regretting the “terrible price.” She dared not obey, indeed, for she trembled to think what her old companion would suffer should he happen to awake and call for his “drops” and not have them at hand.

“Doctor Disney doesn’t know about that. If he did, he would not have told me to waste them. Queer! He carries medicine, too. I wonder if all men do! I saw the Squire take

a bottle out of his pocket with some little white things in it, and eat some, while I was drinking my milk in his dining-room. He saw me looking and said: 'It is only pills, my dear—for the dyspepsia. I'd give a fortune to have your digestion!' How funny it seems that I could have anything anybody else would want!"

"Jean!"

She hurried back into the cabin.

"Jean, would you be afraid to stay here for a little while, alone with your grandfather? I will drive back to the village, if you are not, and bring some things to make him comfortable? Also, a nurse, if I can." Doctor Disney looked searchingly into the troubled young face before him as he asked the question.

"No—o, I am not afraid. I mean, I should not be—unless he should become violent again. Will he do that, sir? I thought it was so awful!"

"He will not be able to rise for a long time, I am afraid. Did you throw the medicine away?"

"No, sir."

"I told you to!" impatiently.

"I understood you, and would have minded,

had I dared. But I did not. He would—would beat me, if he woke and I could not give it to him when he asked.”

“Beat you, poor child? Did he, often?”

“Oh, no, sir! Never, except the ‘spell’ was on him.”

“You need not fear. I think he will be perfectly quiet, else I would not leave you alone with him, even to save his life. But he may rouse and want a drink of water. You can give him this solution when he does, and as much pure water as he craves. I will come back as soon as I can. Good-by! Keep up a good fire for yourself. The night is going to be cold. If—if anything should happen—if he should wake up violent—you had better run away. Come to the village after me—though I will make all the speed I can. Good-by, again, and courage!”

By the fast-fading daylight Jean watched the kind physician, who had long since ceased to practice for hire, but who was now putting all his habits aside for the warm interest he was beginning to take in her humble affairs, as he passed out of sight down the steep bank and up on the opposite one, where the wood engulfed

him in its shadows. Then she returned within the cabin, and for the first time her eyes fell upon the torn fragments of the little animal on which her frenzied grandparent had made his supper.

“Oh, you poor little creature! Where did he get you? I thought all the cages were safe behind the great rock in the old spring-house. How can a human being eat such innocent, harmless things?” Casting her eye anxiously toward the pallet where the unconscious old man lay with his face swathed in whiter clothes than had touched his body for many a day, she stooped and gently lifted the mutilated remains of what was once a living embodiment of grace, and carried them out of doors to hide them under some fallen leaves.

Then she remembered Whisker. “The dear little fellow! He must think I am unkind to leave him so long. And he will be wanting his supper, the little gourmand. I wonder—” A dreadful suspicion made her pause and turn sick with fear, then speed forward swiftly, forgetful of all else save the one little living thing which loved her. Her hands trembled so that as she knelt before the secret hiding-place of her play-

mates she rattled the wire bars in their sockets. But a rustling, joyful sound within the tiny prison reassured her, and thrusting in her hand she drew her favorite forth, more thankful for the touch of his warm, soft fur than she had ever been for anything in her young life.

“Oh, Whisker, Whisker, darling! For a moment—one horrid, black moment—I thought it had been you. But no, and I am so glad—so glad!”

Then she flew back into the cabin, piled fresh heaps of branches which her own arms had dragged hither from the forest, and sat down to watch.

“Chitter—chatter—chitter,” said Whisker, perched on one palm while he cracked and ate the nuts she held out toward him on the other. “Chitter—chatter,” as plain almost as human speech to his little mistress, and far fuller of sympathy to her ears.

Once in a while the figure on the pallet stirred uneasily, and a moan escaped the parted lips, but Jean was too ignorant to feel anywise but grateful for his quietness and too accustomed to her grandfather's restless sleeps to watch him

more closely than from her safe distance across the little room.

By and by she felt drowsy. "Dear me! I wish the Doctor would come back, since he promised, though I don't see why he need. But how queer Grandfather does look. All wrapped up like that. It was a wonder he did not burn to death. What if we had not come just as we did?"

With a shudder the girl turned her face away and leaned her head against the wall, and in five minutes more she was sound asleep.

Five hours later she awoke. The room was cold and dark, save where a few moonbeams struggled through the few pieces of glass left in the rag-stuffed window-frame. She had the feeling of one called out of a dream, yet had heard no voice, nor at first could she realize where she was.

Then there came once more the sound which had roused her. "Jean, come here!"

"Yes, oh, yes, Grandfather. Have you wanted me and I did not hear? I am so sorry."

"Hush! the time is short; I—am—dying."

"Oh, no! It cannot be! You only think so. Soon the good Doctor will be back and bring

everything to make you comfortable. Cheer up and wait."

"Too late! The key—I must tell—you—while I can—the key, I say."

"Where? Let me make a light of fresh boughs on the coals; I cannot see, nor you."

She ran swiftly to the pile of brushwood she had collected, bit by bit, for their winter use and brought an armful of the branches, which, heaped upon the few coals left on the hearth, soon sprang into a brilliant blaze.

"Jean! Jean!" Again that querulous, faint, impatient cry.

"Yes, Grandfather," responded the girl, kneeling beside the pallet and taking the old man's hand in hers. But she was startled by its coldness, and bent further forward to look into the glassy eyes, almost the only portion of the face which the bandages left uncovered.

"Hark! In the hole in the wall—between the two top logs—find a leather bag; bring it."

Jean sprang up obediently, but to which of the four sides of the room to direct her steps she did not know. "Which side, Grandfather; which wall?"

The miser raised one white-bound hand and

pointed unsteadily. He seemed conscious of no suffering beyond that mental unrest which banished sleep.

Jean seized a brand from the fire and carried it to the wall, keeping her eyes fixed upon her guardian's face, to learn if she were on the right track. Finally the pointing finger paused above a bunch of dried herbs, and gently moving these aside the girl discovered a deep depression in the whitewashed plaster.

“Is this the hole you meant?”

“Yes.”

Thrusting her slim fingers into the break, Jean felt them touch a bit of leather. In another instant she had drawn out a small pouch made of “chipmunk” skin and containing a large, rudely-fashioned key. This she laid in her grandfather's hand, but he was powerless to hold it, and it fell to the floor with a sharp resound.

“Ah! Take care—take care! Let nobody hear that—or ever see it. The key—my precious key!”

“Yes, dear. Shall I put it back?”

“Never. Put it about your neck. There is a string.”

Reluctantly the girl obeyed. The touch of the cold steel through the worn pouch sent a shiver through her flesh, but it was half a superstitious fear. Why did her grandfather set such store by that bit of metal? What had he or she worth locking out of sight?

“There. It is well. I can die now.”

“Oh, Grandfather! And leave me alone?”

“Better so. There is a letter in the hole, also.”

She found a folded paper and drew it forth. It was folded in a bit of the rough brown paper which had once wrapped a piece of the “butcher’s meat” which she had bought for the old man’s use. The writing on the big, rough envelope was coarse and black, as if it had been done with a charred twig. She could not read, though her grandfather had been an educated man, and from him she had acquired the use of good language only.

“What does it say, Grandfather? On the wrapper?”

“Time enough for that. When I am dead—it will be soon—take the letter to Squire Dutton. He is a hard man, but a just one. He will read the letter and advise you. But do not dare to

part with the key for one single minute; either to friend or foe, until its task is done. Else an old man's curse will rest upon you. Promise me that, child!" All this said brokenly, with great effort.

"I will not—if I can help it."

"No, no! Promise!"

The excitement which suddenly possessed the dying man gave him strength to half rise and clutch his grandchild's shoulder.

"Promise!" Then there came a strange, rattling sound in Mr. Wilder's throat, a swift relaxation of the grip upon the girl's arm, an utter collapse of the whole wasted frame, and all that was mortal of an unhappy man fell back upon the pallet, silent for evermore.

CHAPTER V

WHY THE DOCTOR DID NOT COME

“To the land sake! Here comes old Nan, dragging the phaeton, all broke to smash! Where’s master? Some dreadful thing has happened!” So cried old Hannah, the Doctor’s housekeeper, as, shutting up her poultry-houses for the night, she saw the faithful Nan pace solemnly into the stableyard.

“Jeremiah! Jer—e—miah! Where can that fellow be? I say—Jeremiah—Rideout! Where be ye?”

“What on airth’s the matter with ye, woman alive? Yellin’ fit ter roust the dead! If ye’ve got anything to say, why carn’t ye say it civil an’ easy, not split yer lungs a-screechin?” retorted a voice from the hay-loft.

“Have ye finished? Can a poor, down-trod

female have her say?" asked Hannah, sarcastically.

"Every female ever I knowed would have it whether or no. So, fire ahead. 'What's the use o' askin' permission?"

"Hem! Well, then, I reckon master's hurt."

"What? What do ye say?"

"I say, here's old Nan, and what remains o' the phaeton, but no Doctor Disney. Looks like there'd been an upset or somethin'," remarked Hannah, with exasperating quietness.

"What? 'Remains of the phaeton'? Woman alive, why didn't ye tell me quicker? Whatever makes ye stan' there an drawl yer words out slow as molasses in the winter-time, while all the while the best master 'at ever lived may be a-lyin' dead by the roadside?" grumbled Jeremiah, climbing down from the loft as fast as seventy years and the rheumatism would let him, yet still with a slowness that gave ample time for the reproof of his wife.

"Well, I thought mebbe I'd please ye better that-a-way. Howsomever, don't let us stan' still an' quarrel when master is—nobody knows

what! Say, old Nan, carn't ye tell us a word? What befell ye to come mopin' home in this style, I'd like to know?"

Faithful old Nan bowed her head slowly up and down, as if she would speak if she could, then stood patiently while Hannah herself began to unharness the mare and take her from the broken shafts of the vehicle.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah had caught up his hat, shouted for his son, Peterkin, to leave his supper eating and follow, and had started off up the street at a really rapid pace, considering all things. Peterkin, a big, lumbering fellow—a doting mother's overgrown baby—finished his plate of wheat-cakes, drank a goodly mug of cider, and pushed back from the table at a most leisurely rate.

“What's Pop hollerin' for? Can't a body even eat what he wants without bein' set to doin' somethin' else! Halloo, Ma, what's the row with Pop?”

“Oh, Peterkin, my boy, somethin's happened to master!”

“What sort o' somethin'?” coolly inquired the youthful Rideout, as his mother entered the kitchen in a burst of excitement.

“How do I know? Go an’ see—go an’ see! as quick as you can, that’s a dear.”

“Ain’t he old enough to take care o’ hisself?”

“Pe-ter-kin!”

“Well, ain’t he? What’ll ye give me?”

“A big piece o’ plum cake. Now, hurry, do!”

“Honest? Won’t put me off when I fetch him back?”

“No, no, no! You shall have two pieces if you’ll go right straight off.”

“Which way?”

“Any way! Only find him. He’s been bound to kill hisself a-drivin’ inter the most outlandish places a huntin’ up squirr’ls an’ other trash! What does a man in his forty-nine senses care for the critters, anyway? But there he’d set an’ watch their antics by the hour, jest as if they had some use in livin’; But hurry, hurry, dear, dear Peterkin! Do—if—if—he should be—all squashed—somewheres!”

Peterkin laughed gayly. His slow wit began at last to rouse to a sense of the affair, and he departed with more speed than he often used in the hope of seeing some sort of “show,” even if it happened to be the misfortune of his own kind master.

Jeremiah had hurried up into the village square, eagerly demanding of all whom he met: "Seen anything o' the Doctor?"

"No. Anything happened?"

"Dunno." On he flew, coat-skirts flapping in the wind, hair full of hay seed, cane wrong side up, spectacles upon his hat-brim—a sight in himself to excite the curiosity and alarm of all good Chelsea folks.

"Better try the Squire's," suggested somebody. "Saw the Doctor driving that way just before sunset."

And to the Squire's Jeremiah went, ringing the bell with such force as to pull it from its socket and frightening good Mrs. Dutton out of her after-supper nap.

"Doctor Disney here, ma'am? Beg parding, but—good evenin'—is the Doctor here?"

"No. He was here this afternoon, husband said, but he went away before sundown. Why? What's happened?"

"Dunno, where's the Squire?"

"In his office. I'll call him."

But when that gentleman answered to the summons he could give no further information than that his old friend had left the house to

carry the "squirrel girl" home to the mountain.

"That's it! That's what has happened, then!" cried old Jerry, with conviction. "He's gone up there and been murdered. Yes, sir, depend upon it; he's as dead as a door nail by this time. That ever I should have lived to see this day!"

"Oh, you simpleton! Just because my friend's horse comes home without him, you jump to the conclusion that he has been murdered! Into my stable with you and harness up my nag; I'll get a few things together and we'll drive to the mountain. More than probable he has stayed there longer than he intended and Nan has got tired and come home alone."

"What smashed the phaeton, then?" demanded Jeremiah, fiercely. His sluggish mind had leaped to the idea of foul play and refused to relinquish it for any other more reasonable notion.

"Bosh! Harness, I tell you! Here, wife, please; just put me up some restoratives while I get a blanket and some other things together, then we'll be off. If people come asking questions don't let them hear what rubbish Jerry

has spoken!" The Squire smiled brightly upon gentle Mrs. Dutton, whose heart was still heavy over the disfigurement of her cherished trees, and left her laughing at Jeremiah's "childish notion;" but so potent is the influence of an evil suspicion that the two men had not driven a hundred rods before the Squire began to entertain the same horrible thought.

"The Doctor—the gentle, kindly Doctor, of all men—to be waylaid and murdered! Impossible!"

"Stranger things has happened, Squire!"

"You persistent old fool! My friend hadn't an enemy in the world."

"It aint the first time an innercent man has suffered for somebody else's fault."

"Whose?"

"I dunno, but I do believe that I shan't never look upon the face o' my old master alive ag'in in this world."

"Drive on!" ordered the Squire testily, and vouchsafed no further speech. But this did not hinder his watching the road over which they traveled and casting the searchlight of his great lantern into all the nooks and crannies which the rising moon did not illumine.

The sounds of others following annoyed the Squire also. "Why couldn't you keep still when you came through the village? Half the community is after us! What do they expect to find? And how do you think your master will like to be made the gazing stock of all the loafers in town? He, who practised the gospel of 'mind your own business,' if ever anybody did."

"I dunno," replied Jerry, stoically as ever, and said no more.

When they came to the end of the road leading toward Jean's home, and the spot where the Doctor had left his horse, they paused.

"He couldn't drive beyond this. Not unless he went over the bank into the creek bottom."

Jerry got out and hitched the nag he had driven to the nearest tree.

"Lend me your lantern, Squire."

"Confound you, man! what for? Don't tell me you see anything!" exclaimed the old lawyer, protestingly.

"Mebbe I don't. I hope by all that's sacred 'at I don't. But—it's borne in on me 'at I do. Lend me the lantern, won't ye?"

The Squire gave it to him, then turned upon

the crowd of villagers who had followed their slow progress.

“What do all you men want here? What do you expect to see?”

There was no response, but an abashed muttering, and the Squire strode away in disgust.

“Here, Jerry. I’m going across this ravine to the house yonder. Ten chances to one the Doctor is there.”

“Hold on, Squire. Jeremiah’s found something.”

The gleam of the lantern approaching arrested the lawyer’s steps.

“Well?”

“This was his’n,” said the old servant, with trembling lips, holding up an old white hat.

“Hm—m! If it was, it doesn’t prove anything but that we are on the right track, as I knew all along. Here, all of you followers! Spread yourselves about and search this ravine. Doctor Disney has met with a runaway accident, probably. Don’t waste a second. Search. His life may depend upon your speed.”

The villagers dispersed with a will, and swarmed over the sides of the gulch to pry into

its darkest recesses, too interested to speak or make any sound save the crashing of their feet upon the sparse undergrowth. But the Squire climbed out of the gorge on the further side and hurried to the miser's cottage.

The firelight streamed through the broken window-panes, and peeping in he saw by its clear light what seemed to him a most peaceful scene. Old Mr. Wilder sleeping on his pallet in the shadowed corner, and tired little Jean dozing against the further wall.

“Hm—m! Poor little thing! A pity to wake and disturb her. And if the Doctor did come home with her, it is evident he did not stay. I haven't the heart to wake her up. But what a desolate place! I'll take her case in hand tomorrow, after I find out what has happened to Disney, and she shall have a taste of comfort for once, or my name isn't Dutton!”

Then he stole quietly away again, and Jean was left alone to keep her watch with Death.

At the foot of the gorge, as he descended from his examination of the cabin, a knot of men met him. They were bareheaded, holding their hats in their hands, and their faces were white in the moonlight.

“Well?” questioned the Squire, already guessing at the evil news they brought.

“We’ve found him. That’s all.”

“Where? How is he?”

“Dead. In the bottom of the gully. In a hole he never could have fallen into—where we never should have seen him, but for his white hair glistening in the moonshine.”

“Good heavens! It cannot be!”

“True. Dead—murdered! With a scar across his forehead—and—and—the best man in all old Chelsea! Oh, Squire! Why should such a thing be?”

CHAPTER VI

TWO STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

“OH, how late I have slept!” was the first thought which darted through Jean Wilder’s mind on the morning after her grandfather’s death, as she woke to find the sun shining full in her face, the fire out, the room cold, and little Whisker skipping about as merrily as if no such thing as death and sorrow ever visited the world.

“I wonder if Grandfather has wanted anything! Oh, I—remember.”

For the second thought had been of the last words the old man had spoken, and with an incredulous horror of the trouble that had come upon her, she sped across the room and knelt down by the silent figure upon the narrow bed.

“Grandfather! Dear, dear Grandfather!

Speak to me! Tell me that it isn't true! You are only sleeping—are you not? Oh, don't lie so still! My only friend—Grandfather!”

Forgotten were all the harsh, impatient words that had once tortured her heart; forgotten the life of hard privation, the hunger, cold, neglect. Only a desolate, terrible loneliness remained, to which all that had gone before had been bright by comparison.

But the silent lips were white now almost as the fresh, clean bandages with which a kindly hand had covered the scars of the fire; the thin fingers hung limply down till they rested on the floor, and the spare old frame had taken on that terrible rigidity which means but one thing.

“Dead! He is dead! And I am alone—alone!” With a cry like that of some hurt wild thing of the forest, the untutored girl threw herself passionately down upon the hard floor and lay there weeping silently. Whisker ceased his gambols and sprang to her shoulder, but even his merry chatter in her ear did not reach the dulled sense, and it was not until a heavy step upon the threshold roused her that Jean

sprang up again and turned eagerly toward the door.

“The good Doctor! I am not quite alone, then! I forgot him—he was so late in coming!” Then she flew to open the door and found herself face to face with a person as unlike her friend, the naturalist, as evil is unlike good.

“Oh! Who are you? I thought—”

The man retreated as naturally as did the girl. He had come expecting to find the cabin empty, and the surprise was not pleasant. “What is that to you? What are you doing here?”

“I? Why—I—live here. What do you want?”

From his position on the little rickety porch the visitor could not see within the room, but he was suspicious of another surprise, and he answered cautiously: “What do I want? Why, just a word with you, my dear, outside the house. A secret for your ear alone, my pretty one. A message from the master of this place. He was your—”

“Grandfather,” answered innocent Jean, falling readily into the trap set for her words. “How can that be, seeing—he—is—” Recollections

of the terrible night overcame her and she dropped her face upon her hands to hide her tears.

“Is—what?” demanded the stranger roughly.

“Is—dead!” wailed the orphaned girl.

A sinister gleam, which Jean did not see, lighted the other's face and he stepped forward boldly, seizing her shoulders with a grip of steel. “You know it then? Well, out with the secret, miss, before I send you after him! Where does he keep his money?”

Jean looked up swiftly, and struggled to free herself from the man's grasp. “He has no money. What are his affairs to you? Let me go!”

“Presently. When you have told me all you know. You lie—you know it. The man was rich. A miser. He has gold—gold in plenty, but hidden. You must know where. Tell me before I lose my patience. It would be a shame to hurt so pretty a child. I have a mind to spare you. Tell me where the gold is stored, and you are free.”

“He has no gold, I tell you. We are poor, poor, so poor—see here. Does this old frock look as if he had been rich, as you say? True, there

was a little left over from the sale of the animals, after we bought his food and medicine, and his few books. For he loved his books so much. Grandfather, Grandfather!”

“Shut up! Hold your silly tongue. What if somebody should hear you? Tell me—waste no more words—where is the money?” As he spoke the ruffian shook his victim fiercely, and the baleful light of his great black eyes seemed to scorch her as lightning sears.

For an instant she stood trembling, fascinated with terror, powerless to move. In another she had wrenched herself free and had darted down the path from the cabin at a speed which her tormenter could not hope to equal. He wheeled about and stared after her incredulously, not understanding how she had escaped him; then glanced down at his still clenched fingers, and at something which, in tearing herself loose from it, she had left within his grasp.

“What, a key? Did I scare it out of her, then? Well, well! Luck has seldom so prospered me. First the easy—but no matter. Best to forget all that went on last night. And I’m obliged to you, my pretty Bright Eyes, for the good turn you served me. The key, indeed.

That means that the treasure is mine. Well, I must get to work before the runaway rouses the whole village and sets them after me. I'm glad now I did not come into the place in the night. Daylight is better and safer. He that toils by candlelight reveals himself to others, but blinds his own eyes. Hurrah! This is the easiest job I've had in many a day." At that moment, Whisker, who had been perched above the door, made a spring forward and downward, and lighted upon the intruder's head, then was off and away after his young mistress, before the astonished stranger could recover from the fright into which the gay little squirrel's onslaught had thrown him. "My soul! Is the place haunted? Seemed like a spirit touched me on the head and vanished! However, I've no time for spirits at this juncture in my life, when fortune smiles upon me as she does this morning."

The unexpected guest entered the cabin gayly and lightly, with a debonair recklessness of bearing that foreboded no ill. But he had scarcely set foot upon the worn flooring when a terrible sight met his startled eyes.

The corpse of old Israel Wilder had lain

perilously near the edge of his narrow pallet, and in Jean's passionate grief and clasping of the body, she had unconsciously drawn it still further forward. The law of gravitation is a fixed law. It makes no exceptions even for the most rudely shocked nerves, and as the dark-faced fellow in the blue knit jerkin bowed his tall head beneath the low portal, the inert mass, which had once been animated by a soul, slipped heavily downward and fell to the boards with a thud.

“Caramba! Santa Maria, defend! What—who—another?”

It was too late for retreat. If he had found two human beings where he had looked for none, so much the worse for them! With a yell that would have intimidated any human ears, the foreigner leaped forward and fell upon this new opponent of his will.

“Take that! How can I help it if—” He dealt the man upon the floor a cruel blow with his clenched fist, then drew back in horror. The flesh that he had touched had a strange feel; the hand that he seized—

“My soul! Have I gone mad? This hand—is—the hand of the dead!”

With one terrified spring backward, the ruffian cleared the threshold once more, turned, and disappeared up the mountain more swiftly, if that might be, than Jean had rushed down its side.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE

JEAN'S rapid flight was checked only long enough and at rare intervals, for her to recover her spent breath, then up and on again as if pursued by an evil spirit. She had but one conscious thought—to find her old friend, the Doctor, and pour into his kindly ear the news of her grandfather's death, and of the ruffian's visit in the morning.

“The dear, good, kind Doctor Disney will surely tell me what to do. They bury people who die, bury them in the ground; I know that, but how shall I do even that much for poor Grandfather? Well, I'll ask the Doctor. He'll help me. I have one friend, I believe; though I shall be so awfully, awfully lonely without Grandfather.”

Over and over these thoughts ran through

the girl's mind, and she was half way down the village street toward the naturalist's house before she observed the knots of curious and excited persons gathered on corners and in doorways, discussing some matter most earnestly. Each group became silent as she approached, and every eye followed her progress.

"Why, how queer! I wonder what has happened? Is it a holiday of some sort, that so many are idle this morning? I'll ask the Doctor, if I don't forget, when I have told him that which I have to tell. Oh, I can't bear to think of that horrid black-browed fellow in that room alone with—him! Dead though he is."

And seeing nothing after that but the white lips and stiffened frame of her aged relative, absorbed in her own imagination, Jean entered at last the well-kept grounds of the Disney mansion.

"Hello! For the land's sake, here is the girl herself!"

Arrested by this exclamation, Jean looked up and found herself the centre of an excited throng. People, people everywhere! The yard was full of them. Even the porches and the outbuildings held their quota of startled citizens, collected in morbid curiosity to gather

scraps of information about the dreadful event of the past night.

“The girl herself! Maybe she can tell us something. Say, Lady Barefoot, did you see the murder yourself? Where did you hide? Who did it?”

“You look as if you felt bad, too. They do say that he about kept you and the old man, buying the squirrels and birds you sold him. A pity! A pity!”

“The very best and kindest man in all Chelsea village! We could have spared many another better!”

Jean paused, with her foot upon the step of the little study porch, the familiar way by which she had been accustomed to enter the house.

“I don't understand you,” she said. “Did you all know my grandfather? And are you so sorry that he is dead?”

“What? Hear her?”

“Is it not Grandfather of whom you speak? He is dead—alas!—but he was not murdered. He fell into the fire, but he was ill, so ill he knew no better. Where is Doctor Disney? Will somebody call him, if you will not let me go to the door for myself?”

“Sakes alive! Has the girl gone daft with the fright of it? She must have seen the whole thing! Say, who did it?”

“Nobody did it, I tell you. He died of some terrible illness. Doctor Disney said it was his heart and his head. He was crazy at the last, else he never would have fallen as he did. But he is at rest now. Only—oh, please, somebody, move and let me to the door! I must see the good Doctor right away. I dare not stay—I—please!”

In utter astonishment the crowd upon the porch parted ever so little, but still enough for Jean's slender form to pass between the ranks of men and women who gazed upon her as one gazes at an unknown creature.

“I shouldn't think she could bear to ever look at him!” cried one voice in the midst. But the girl had already pressed through the well-filled doorway, and turned into the study on the right.

“Doctor! Oh, dear, kind Doctor! Why didn't you come? He is dead—dead! And alone with the man—”

What was that? Why did the old Squire rise so suddenly from the chair where he had

been sitting with head bowed over something on the lounge, and come to lay his hand upon her eagerly?

“You—here? Did you see it done? Who did it? Quick!”

“I—do—not—understand!” responded Jean, trembling at the rough grasp and the fierce look of the old man who had befriended her but the afternoon before.

He pushed her firmly forward and retained his clutch of her shoulder as her eyes fell upon that terrible “something” which he had been watching, while in an adjoining room the usual “inquest” was going forward.

“Girl, do you know anything about this? When did you part with this man, who was kind to you?”

Jean's eyes were big with wonder and grief. She did not heed, for she scarcely heard the Squire's question. Her heart had almost stopped beating at this new and dreadful trouble.

“Why,—is he—dead, too? Is everybody going to die?”

“Yes, he is dead. The best man and the oldest friend I knew! But you are wanted in there—yonder, where the coroner awaits

your coming. The messenger must have been swift."

"What messenger?" asked Lady Barefoot, absently, still failing to comprehend that this second death could be a fact.

"The messenger sent for you. Did you not see him?"

"No, sir. I saw nobody but—that dreadful man, with the wicked eyes."

"Who? When? Where?"

"Now—this morning. He came and knocked at the door, and I opened it, thinking it was the Doctor, who had promised to come back. But it was a man I never saw before, and he frightened me so that I ran away to ask the Doctor to go back with me. Because Grandfather is dead, too, and I am afraid. I don't know what to do. How can I bury him? And I suppose he must be buried, for all dead people are."

The Squire's grasp upon Jean's shoulder relaxed its severity and a great pity filled his mind. He began to believe that she had witnessed the murder of his own old friend, and that the sight had turned her brain. "Sit down, dear. Now tell me all you know. Wait a moment, gentlemen. You shall have your turn in

a moment, but I will let the child have a chance to recover herself a bit first." And with that the Squire motioned those who had followed Jean into the study to leave the room, and, closing the door, turned the key in the lock.

The coroner was shut out with the rest, and his bustling self-importance was offended; but still—it was just as well to think twice before finding fault with so powerful a personage in the community as Squire Dutton, and so he waited as patiently as he could for the result of the interview between the richest and the poorest citizens of all Chelsea—the millionaire Squire, and the pauper, Jean Wilder, taking place in that solemn presence of the murdered dead.

Jean's composure returned in some measure after all those gaping, curious eyes were shut off from staring at her, and she answered the Squire's questions simply and promptly, though all the while the tears were streaming down her thin cheeks for this second loss which had made her wholly bankrupt of friends.

"Where did you last see Doctor Disney?"

"In my grandfather's house. He bade me good-by at the door, and told me he would come back with some things to make Grandfather

comfortable, and, maybe, he would bring a nurse,—though we did not need that. Grandfather had some dreadful thing wrong with his head and his heart. He used to take medicine and the Doctor saw the bottle and he said it was poison. He said, too, that Grandfather was insane, because when we got up to the cottage last night he was standing before the fire and waving his hands till he grew dizzy and fell into the coals. He was dreadfully burned, and the dear, kind Doctor tore his own shirt into bandages to wrap the hurt places in, because we hadn't any right kind of cloth in the house. Then Doctor Disney didn't come back, and in the night Grandfather died. I was alone with him. I wasn't sure that he was dead, and somehow I was very, very sleepy. I couldn't keep awake. This morning I saw it was all true. Then I ran away—after the black-eyed man came—to find this gentleman, the only one I knew who would be kind to me, and to ask him what I should do. Now—I—oh, sir! It can't be true that he is dead, too!"

“There, there! Don't give way; your story is a strange one. It throws no light upon this terrible thing. But you will have to answer

the coroner's questions, and, perhaps, he can draw out from you more than you have told me. I do not suspect you, child, of having a hand in the matter, but—you were the last person seen with him during his lifetime; you will have to answer many questions. Think carefully before you speak; every word you utter is weighted with terrible importance for good or ill. Now come."

The Squire opened the closed door between the smaller study and the great sitting-room, where a hastily-summoned jury had been convened.

Jean followed him quietly. She had not at all understood the significance of his final address to her, nor did she dream of the new horror which her fellow-townsmen were preparing for her lonely heart. She took the seat provided, gazed curiously but not timidly about her, and answered every inquiry made with a directness and minuteness which convinced most of those present that she was telling "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

When the inquest was over the decision was reached that "Doctor Walford Disney had met

his death at the hands of some person or persons unknown," and that the authorities would make instant and persistent efforts to find and bring the murderer or murderers to justice.

"In addition to any reward the State may see fit to offer, I will give one thousand dollars of my own money to any person who will bring me any information leading to the capture or identification of the guilty person or persons," cried the Squire, as the meeting was adjourned, and then promptly cleared the house of all intruders.

When they found themselves quite alone, Jean asked: "What did it mean that you promised to be responsible for my appearance, sir?"

"Oh, you are an important witness, that's all. Though, after all, you seem to know really very little. Now, tell me about your grandfather. What were you going to ask my poor friend to do for him?"

"I thought he could have helped me bury him. I did not know who else to ask."

"Humph! The town will have to do it, then. Now—stay, though. Have you had anything to eat this morning?"

“No, sir. But I am not hungry. You gave me so much yesterday.”

“Well, well! Are you in the habit of eating up ahead of time, so that you go over regular meal hours without knowing it?” demanded the hearty Squire, distracted for a moment from the anxiety which perplexed him.

“I don't care for anything to eat, but, sir, would you please read this for me?” Jean took from the bosom of her frock a paper which she had pinned there for safe-keeping, when she had received it at her grandfather's hand. Fortunately it had been too large to go inside the leathern bag with the strange, old key, or it would have shared the same fate as that.

The Squire looked toward the letter and saw a big, bulky, legal-looking paper, which would take time to peruse. Just then he could not bear to waste a moment till he had set detectives on the track of the unknown criminal who had brought sorrow and disgrace upon the pretty town of Chelsea.

“Yes, some time. Not now; I'm too busy. Go into the kitchen and tell Hannah to give you a breakfast.”

Jean watched the old man catch up his hat and depart, but she did not ask for the breakfast she had been bidden to seek. A sudden overpowering sense of her own desolate position in life made her bury her face in her hands and cry bitterly.

“Say, girl; did you do it?”

Jean looked up swiftly, recalled by the touch upon her shoulder to a sense of her surroundings. The face bent above her was that of a youth of nineteen or twenty, who looked stupid, yet crafty. There was something in his expression that reminded Lady Barefoot of the intruder of the morning, and she shrunk from the questioner as if a snake had touched her, but she asked, quietly: “Did I do what?”

“You know. There’s a big reward offered, and I mean to have it. I believe you—murdered him, and I’ll make you answer for it, too!”

The speaker was Peterkin Rideout, whom Jean recognized as the “Doctor’s workman,” though there was a strange, dreadful look about him that made him seem a stranger, and his words had a low, ominous sound that terrified her afresh.

She gave one frightened glance toward him, and then, before he could speak again, she darted out of the house and out of the grounds, leaving her tormenter stupefied with the promptness of her flight, and settled by it in the conviction of his slow, suspicious mind.

CHAPTER VIII

ANGELIA PARTHENIA TODD

“CHITTER—chatter!” A whisk through the air, a sudden streak of something reddish and furry—a something which, in that desolate moment, seemed to poor Lady Barefoot like a sunbeam gone astray, and Whisker, the loving and faithful, was on Jean’s shoulder, his sharp little voice apparently expostulating with her for her unkind desertion of him an hour or two before.

“You darling! Have you followed me all this way, and waited till I came out of that horrid place? Then one thing loves me—is left to me.”

Jean scarcely checked her flying footsteps, though, even for this unexpected proof of Whisker’s intelligent affection. She but clasped his lithe little body tenderly to his favorite

resting-place between her cheek and her shoulder, and ran onward as fast as her already wearied feet would carry her.

“How strange it seems! As if I must go on and on and on forever! As if I travel fast and far enough I may forget that dreadful thing the workman said to me. But everywhere I shall be afraid. Oh, my foot! The place I bruised so yesterday when I jumped on the jagged stone, hurts awfully. But—I must not stop! I must not stop! He asked me did I hurt him. The only friend I had, except Grandfather. Oh, how—what will become of him, now? All alone in the cabin; or is the dreadful man there still.” The thoughts chased one another through the girl’s tortured brain with a fresh torment in each, and coming to a sudden bend in the road she had blindly followed, she dashed down a leafy ravine, to rest a moment and shape her future course.

“Hello, here! What naiad of the sylvan dell is this?” demanded a high-pitched, girlish voice, as Jean’s reckless progress was rudely terminated by her stumbling over a leaf-covered stone, and falling headlong into the very lap of the questioner. “By my soul, but thou

art an impulsive maiden—fair though thou art.”

Jean scrambled to her feet and gazed with astonishment upon the girl she had bombarded so unexpectedly. “I—beg your pardon. I didn’t know—”

“Don’t mention it,” said the other, with a melodramatic wave of her hand. “Between gentlefolk a word is sufficient. But why such needless haste, may I ask, and can I assist you? Your foot seems hurt and bleeding.” The words were absurdly lofty, and the manner affected, but the tone was kindly, and looking more critically upon the stranger, Lady Barefoot beheld a girl of about her own age, with a mass of brilliant colored hair, and very fine eyes; but with a plain face, bountifully bedecked with freckles, and a general appearance of poverty almost as great as her own.

The stranger did not resent the hasty scrutiny of her person and returned it in kind. “Well, I trust we should not mistake one another should we meet again amid the surging crowds which fill these mighty forests!” exclaimed the miss of the auburn locks, and again Jean gazed about in amazement.



“—AMID THE SURGING CROWDS WHICH FILL THESE MIGHTY FORESTS—”

“Crowds! Mighty forests! I do not understand.”

“I see that you do not. Be seated—upon the divan yonder—in other terms, sit down upon that ‘stun’ and I will tell you who I am,—leaving it to your royal highness to do a like favor to me or no, as seemeth good unto thee!”

Jean put her hands to her forehead. She began to think that she and all the world had gone crazy together.

“Nay, tremble not, sweet maiden. I am perfectly sane and too, too physically sound! I am Angelia Parthenia Todd. I am ‘bound-out’ girl to Farmer Wilkins. I was born in a poor-house, but I will die in a palace. I am studying—for the public platform! I will be a famous impersonator, reader, elocutionist!” (Impossible to give the full effect of these high-flown aspirations in cold English.) “That’s what I mean to be. At present I am planning the first step toward success. I am running away. That is, I have been running till I got tired and sought this secluded nook to muse awhile and plan the next step—onward and upward! I have thrown myself upon your mercy. I have trusted you—now betray me if you will!” cried the strange

Angelia in tones which made Jean shiver, and might have thrilled a far more critical audience.

“Running away! For good?” she asked, breathlessly.

“For good. The ill I have left behind me. Look at these hands! Degraded by milking of the kine, reaping of the fields, washing of the soiled clothing of a mercenary man and woman! I have lived with them three years. They have sent me to school, for which I thank them. That opened the key to a higher life for me. That and an old copy of Shakespeare, which a summer boarder left behind her on her flitting. If I had remained with Farmer Wilkins three years longer I should have had a hundred dollars and a new frock. For six years of toil! But I deserted. I will never, never, never return till I drive up to their door in a coach drawn by four black horses, with velvet on my shoulders and diamonds in my hair. I have vowed it! and what Angelia Parthenia Todd has vowed she will fulfill. Unless,” she added in a very different tone, “you should be mean enough to tell them where I am, and then they’ll catch me and make me go back.”

“I shall not tell,” said Jean, earnestly. “I

couldn't, because I don't know them, and because—because—”

“Because what?”

“I—I am running away—myself!”

“So? ‘There’s sympathy!’ as old Falstaff hath it! Your hand, sister in adventure! Let us, two friendless damsels, unite our fortunes, and vow eternal friendship!” And the queer creature held out her labor-hardened hand with a heartiness and friendliness smiling from her wonderful eyes that entirely captivated the sorrowful Jean.

“Do you mean it? Shall we be—friends—like you said? Or is that part of your reciting? ‘Cause I know about Shakespeare. My grandfather had the book and used to read it, day in and day out.”

“Your grandfather was a sensible man. And I do mean it! Poor child, I feel as if I were ages older than you, and sent into the world expressly to take care of you!”

“Do you?” cried Lady Barefoot, clasping her hands, ecstatically.

“I do—I do. I promise you!”

“Chitter—chatter.” Jean looked up into the tree above her head. There sat her

beloved squirrel, eating his breakfast complacently.

“Whisker, too? He’s my squirrel.”

“You, and all belonging to you. Even a base-born squirrel. Will you trust me?”

“Yes,” answered Jean, impulsively, “with all my heart.”

CHAPTER IX

READING THE LETTER

“You tell me all about yourself now,” said Angelia Parthenia Todd, as soon as they had exchanged the warm caress which sympathy in sorrow had provoked. “Then I shall know just how and what to do.”

The romantic girl had quite dropped her affected tone and now spoke with as simple a good will as Jean herself could have done; and the latter found the change most agreeable. She had formed a sudden affection for the prospective “performer,” but it was founded upon the evidence of a kind heart, not great talent; and without any hesitation Lady Barefoot now related the few facts of her short life, with the more astonishing and terrible events of the past twenty-four hours.

When she had finished Angelia asked:
“Where is that letter?”

“Here. In my frock. But what good will it do? I dare not go back to ask the Squire to read it. Say, what do they do with people who murder other people?”

“Hang 'em,” responded Angelia Parthenia, with prompt composure.

“Oh—h!” groaned Jean.

“Well, they'd ought to, hadn't they?”

“I—I suppose so. But death is so—so—awful—dreadful!”

“Well, then, folks shouldn't go 'round murdering. I hope they will catch the man that came to your house and hang him 'as high as Haman.' I believe he was the very villain that killed Doctor Disney.”

Jean shuddered afresh.

“What you shivering for? Are you cold?”

“Yes, but it wasn't that. The dreadful Peterkin said—he believed it was—I. Don't you remember?”

“I remember, yes. But it wasn't, was it?”

“You know it wasn't!”

“So will everybody else that has a grain of sense. As for Peterkin—he's crazy!”

“Is he? Do you know him?”

“Don’t I?” asked Angelia, which was a non-committal manner of answering a too-plain question. Her present intention was to comfort Jean, and though she was too truthful a girl to tell a falsehood, she did not see any harm in letting her new friend conclude that she not only knew Peterkin, but all his tribe.

“As for Doctor Disney, he was a gentleman. I saw him time and again.” This was literally correct, for Angelia had seen the honored physician just twice, when he had come to Farmer Wilkins’ house to buy poultry.

“I did love him!” said Jean.

“So did I. That is—I should if he had been as good to me as he was to you. But owing to the jealousy of my employers, I was generally kept in the background when notable persons called at the domicile. However, their day of reckoning will come. One day of it will come along about Thanksgiving, when all the Wilkinses, big and little, will hie them to their ancestral hall-bedrooms, there to partake of the fatted turkeys and the mince-pies, all of which for three weary years have been prepared by the skillful fingers of the missing

Miss Todd. They generally gave me one of the drumsticks and as much of the pie as the grandchildren left on their plates. But that is past—all, all is past. Give me the letter. I will read it and learn what was your grandfather's will concerning you."

"Can you read writing? Really?" asked Jean, with unbounded admiration.

"Yes, indeed. And I think it's queer if you can't, with a relative who believed in Shakespeare!"

"Grandfather said that learning was not meant for women; and when I asked him to teach me, he would frown and say that reading made a girl discontented. But I do not believe it would have made me so."

"The miserable old wretch!"

"Of whom are you speaking?" demanded Lady Barefoot hotly.

"At this moment I am thinking of Farmer Wilkins," answered Angelia with a sudden mental movement which made this the truth—when she uttered it. "However, since you are to be under my care henceforward, the first thing I shall do is to teach you all I know."

"Oh, you dear, good, kind girl!"

“Hm-m, I mean to be all that, anyway. Now let me take the letter, if you trust me.”

“You know I do trust you with all my heart. Here it is; big, and sealed and everything. What does it say on the outside?”

“To ‘Squire Dutton, in charge for Jean Montgomery Wilder.’ My, haven’t you got a nice name?”

“Have I? I am glad. But I didn’t know it. The boys in the village used to laugh at me and call me ‘Lady Barefoot.’ I used to be afraid of them. But their hatefulness doesn’t seem like anything now—since this big, big trouble has come. Ought we to break that seal?”

“Certainly we ought. How else shall we learn what your deceased relative wanted you to know? Here, you shiver all the time, take my shawl and put it on. It’s thin and ragged, but some time I will lend you a cloak of silken sheen. You see if I don’t.”

“I hope you’ll have one like it for yourself if you want it. But I cannot bear to take your shawl, you’ll be cold then, and I’m used to it. I can’t remember when I was not cold out of doors after the leaves began to fall. We had a good fire in the cabin, because the woodmen were

always good to me, and would leave great heaps of branches where I could get them and drag them home to keep us warm. So I didn't mind as much when I went outside. But read if you can, then I want to go on. I'm so afraid somebody will follow and find me. That Peterkin."

"Let Peterkin go hang!" cried Angelia Parthenia, heartlessly. "I hope he'll be punished for every pang he has made you suffer. But let Peterkin go. We can afford to be—mag—nani—mous." She enunciated this polysyllable with all the power of which she was capable, and Jean shuddered as if she had heard a terrible threat. "Now the letter; watch me break the seal. It really is like a drama. Here we are in the forest; two runaways from tyranny and distress; we have met and found our souls congenial; we have united our fortunes forever. For life or death, I stick to J. Montgomery Wilder! Ditto, J. Montgomery, aforesaid, by A. Parthenia Todd. Now is the hour of Fate, with a capital F. For weal or woe—crick-crack goes the seal."

Jean forgot that she was cold in the intensity of her eagerness, as her companion unfolded the long piece of paper and read the absurdly brief

letter which was written therein, and which ran thus :

TO THE FAMILY OF MONTGOMERY,

No. 333 Palatial Avenue, New York :

The bearer of this letter is your niece and cousin, Jean, the daughter of that Jean Montgomery who married Harold Wilder, son of Israel Wilder, late of ——— Beacon Street, Boston, but deceased at Chelsea, in the State of New York. I have left her, Jean Montgomery Wilder, all my worldly possessions, and what is far better, a mind absolutely free from prejudice of every sort. She has grown up in the woods on top of a mountain, and she knows neither good nor bad. Take her from my hands, and as you treat her, so shall she treat you in the day of reckoning. The key which I have given her is the key to the fortune I bequeath her. When that is discovered there will also be found my last will and testament, duly drawn and witnessed, of which this intimates the purport.

Written to be delivered to the aforesaid Jean Montgomery Wilder on the day when I shall anticipate my own death.

(Signed) ISRAEL WILDER.

Dated, October 1st, 18—.

For a moment after Angelia's clear voice had finished the reading, neither girl spoke. Then

Jean cried softly: "Niece and cousin! Then I am not friendless—as I thought!"

The other did not speak. Romantic to extravagance in all her untrained notions, she had accepted the meeting as but the first step in the public career which she had marked out for herself, and of which she was so profoundly ignorant. And this revelation of what must mean happiness to her new friend made the "bound-out" girl feel more desolate than she had felt when, sitting in the glen alone, before Jean's appearance at her side, she had realized how rash an act she had committed by cutting herself loose, even from an uncongenial household, where she was, at least, warmed and fed, to face the world alone and penniless.

"Aren't you glad, dear Angelia Parthenia?"

"For you—I am." But the fine eyes were filled with tears, and the freckled face had grown pale.

"But for yourself, too? Because, if they take me and love me, they will you, too. Haven't we promised to stick together? Why, you seem just like you were my very own, some way; like you were Grandfather's girl, too. Of course, you'll be glad, won't you?"

“Oh, yes, indeed! If it’s to be that way. But just for a minute, I thought I’d found you only to let you go again. And—well, that settles our plans for us, without any trouble to ourselves. We must go and find Number 333 Palatial Avenue. That’s in my original line, too, for it was to New York I was bound, to seek my new career. So let’s be off!” Up jumped the active, healthy girl with such prompt readiness that she inspired Jean also with fresh courage; though the latter had begun to remember how long she had halted in such dangerous proximity to Chelsea and Peterkin, her enemy.

“All right. Only—do you suppose anybody will bury Grandfather, if I don’t go back?”

“Ye—es. Of course they will.” But Miss Todd’s voice had not the confident ring of the previous moment.

“I see. You think they will, ’cause they’ll have to. But they wouldn’t do it as I would, for being sorry. Would they?”

“No—o. I don’t—believe—they would. From what you tell me of him—I guess Mr. Wilder didn’t make many acquaintances.”

“No. Nobody ever came to the house. Only once in a while the woodmen or a stranger passing through. Strangers always seemed a little afraid of my grandfather, though; and he liked best to be alone.”

“What makes you rub your foot like that? Does it hurt you so bad?”

“It does pain, terribly.”

“Here. Let me see. One thing I learned of Mother Wilkins was what she calls ‘yarbs.’ There is something grows for almost every disease. I mean a cure for it. I’ll pick some of those plantain leaves yonder, and bind them on. Then you must put on my shoes. Your feet are so small they will not feel the shoe hurt the bruise, and the wound will be ever so much better by to-morrow.”

“I’m afraid to stay here any longer. What if that bad workman should come?”

“He’ll not. There’ll be too much excitement around home for him to tear himself away at present. Besides, I don’t doubt he thinks he can hunt you up any time. That is, if he ever thinks at all, which I can hardly believe. He doesn’t know anything, does Peterkin Rideout!”

Ten minutes later Jean’s injured foot had

been bathed and bandaged with a strip from Angelia Parthenia's apron, clothed in that kindly damsel's own foot-gear, and made to feel, as Angelia herself expressed it, "like a new foot." Then they returned to the subject of their flight, and the more they discussed it the more determined Jean became to return and do what she could for her grandfather's fitting burial, no matter how great the risk to herself.

"Well, if you will, you will! and I'll go, too, to help you. But I think we had better leave it until night. It will be moonlight and we can see what we need to, and there will be less danger of interruption. Most folks are scared of a dead person, and there won't be anybody call at the cabin after dark. Not unless I'm greatly mistaken," remarked the shrewd Angelia, who had learned considerable worldly wisdom of the despised Mrs. Wilkins, along with the preparation of substantial cookery.

"But where can we go for all day?"

"I know an old barn not far from here. I had intended to sleep there to-night if I didn't get a chance to get clear of the neighborhood to-day. I calculate that the Wilkinses will raise

hue and cry after me soon as they find out I didn't go to the store as they sent me,—though I have played truant once in a while before, so I reckoned they'd give me a little time first, to come back of my own accord. We can go there, maybe. But we'll have to keep in the shadow of the brush, else we'll be seen."

"Very well. I will do all you say that I can, and I wouldn't be so determined about Grandfather—only—"

"That's what they call natural affection, I suppose. I often heard Mrs. Wilkins tell her husband he didn't have 'nateral 'fection' when he wouldn't give his tipsy son all the money that hopeful young man desired. 'Bub' was his mother's darling—great lout that he was. And—wait a minute! Have you had anything to eat to-day?"

"No. I'm not hungry."

"My goodness gracious! Not hungry? A fine grown girl like you! Then there is something wrong somewhere. Now, I—I'm always hungry. That was the most frequent bone of contention between Mother Wilkins and yours truly. I never could get enough, and she always thought I was overfed. It was the rock

on which we split. But Angelia Parthenia Todd was not the person to set out for fortune's house upon an empty stomach. See here!"

Swiftly, yet cautiously, the strange girl ran to a pile of loose stones near, and moving one of them revealed a big bundle, or rather a canvas bag, such as farmers use for carrying potatoes to market, and opening it, displayed therein more food than Jean Wilder had ever seen at one time in her life.

"Why, Angelia! Where did you get it?"

"Took it in exchange for the wages I didn't take, but to which I am justly entitled. There, my dear comrade, is the result of three years' hard toil. Let's 'tick' it off. One ham, boiled out in the meadow behind the poultry house after my employers were asleep; one pair of fat chickens, roasted while Pa and Ma Wilder had 'driv inter town ter meetin'; as fine a batch of doughnuts as Angelia Parthenia ever touched hand to make; bread—two fine fresh loaves; butter, a cute little glass barrel—used to hold mustard—full; a cup, a plate, a knife, a fork, a box of matches, a candle, and—a Testament, and my beloved 'Will Shakespeare.'"

"Why, isn't it stealing? Are you sure you

did right? And what is the 'Testament'? Isn't that what Grandfather's letter spoke about?"

"What a girl to ask questions! First, I am perfectly sure I am right. I have not been treated to much purple or fine linen during the three years in which I have faithfully toiled for the Wilkineses, big and little. I take these things, but I left a letter in their place explaining why; and that I intend some time to ride back, as I told you, when I will return them with interest. The Testament is not the sort your grandfather left. This is a book that I love. It is the only book I ever owned besides the Shakespeare I bought. It was given to me by a nice old minister who came to the farm one winter a 'missionizing,' and who thought that a 'bound-out' girl had a soul to save, which was a new idea to the Wilkineses. No; I know I am not doing wrong, and when I get to New York I'm going to hunt up the missionary and tell him everything. But we'll have lots of time to talk, so we had best be moving. Do you think you could carry one end of this bag? It was awful heavy—strong as I am."

"I could carry it alone!" cried Jean, her cheerful nature already restored to its ordinary

condition by the meeting with Angelia Parthenia and its friendly results. So, limping along on her lame foot, yet still smiling brightly and quite forgetful for the time being of any dark sorrow, Lady Barefoot assumed her share of their comfortable burden and crept after her guide to the deserted barn the latter had in mind.

There they remained all day, feasting, exchanging confidences, sometimes dozing; but when the night had really settled over the earth, they left their hiding-place and hurried to the cabin which had been poor Jean's home.

"Let me go first," said Angelia, ready then as ever afterward to take the hardest and most dangerous part of any experience for the love of the beautiful girl who had become her charge, and adopted "little sister."

CHAPTER X

A MIDNIGHT BURIAL

“ARE you sure you are not afraid?”

“Angelia Parthenia Todd is not afraid of anything but wrong doing,” responded that remarkable young person, loftily. “Follow me. I will protect you against powers natural and supernatural. Have confidence.”

Jean was silent. She could not always follow the flights of imagination which Angelia displayed, and even the excellent English which her grandfather had been used to speak, seemed, somehow, a tame and every-day sort of language by comparison with that of her new friend.

Angelia's vocabulary was, indeed, a mixed assortment of Scriptural, Shakespearean, and illiterate phrases, picked up from the two volumes which had formed her sole library, and from the speech of the farmer folk with whom she had

lived. The truth was that "Miss Todd" always believed herself to be descended from some illustrious family, although "Fate" had decreed that she should open her eyes first in an humble poorhouse, and she was constantly holding herself up to a fitting condition of mind to take her "rightful place in society" whenever that society should be willing to receive her.

The two girls now advanced into the bare apartment from which Jean had that morning fled in such fear. It was evident at the first glance that nobody had cared enough for the poor old "miser" to look after his proper burial, and Angelia's lip curled in scorn as she observed the motionless figure lying on the floor where it had fallen when the black-eyed visitor of the morning had set his foot on the threshold.

"Humph! I told you so. And I am glad, after all, that we came back. But how strange that he should die, lying in such a position!" exclaimed she.

"What? Let me see!" All Jean's grief and regret had returned, and she now forgot her fear. Then she pressed forward before her companion, only to pause with a cry of dismay at the sight which met her loving eyes. "Oh, how

dreadful! Poor, poor Grandfather! Who could have thrown him there?"

"Why? Was he not there all the time?"

"No, no! He lay upon the pallet as if he were asleep. I could not think but that he was—only he was so cold and still."

"Hm—m. I guess it was this way. That man who came here must have been a robber; he must have searched Mr. Wilder's clothing to find whatever money he might have had about him. But, no matter. It is just the same. The poor old gentleman could not have suffered from his fall, and we have no time to lose. There, there! Don't cry, dear, though I'm sure I feel like doing it myself. I suppose I had a grandfather once. I wonder who he was? Now, can you tell me where to find the shovel you spoke about. I want to dig the grave."

Jean shuddered; but she put a restraint upon herself and tried to emulate Angelia's courage and activity, though the tears blinded her eyes so that she could hardly see.

"This way; it is in the little shed where we kept the branches to use after snow fell." She led the way to the place and found the broken, rickety tool she had mentioned earlier in the

day as one that they could use for their gruesome task.

“And the spot behind the rock, where the earth is soft—show me that,” said the bound-out girl, as cheerfully as if she were going to assist farmer Wilkins dig potatoes. The truth was that her own nerves were sorely tried by the experiences of the day, and the task upon which she had entered seemed too terrible for her to accomplish. Still, not a hint of this would she allow to escape her lest she should break down utterly the last bit of courage which poor little Jean was able to retain.

Besides, she had been doing considerable thinking during the day; and upon these sober “second thoughts” she began to attach more importance to Peterkin Rideout’s horrid suspicion than she would have liked Lady Barefoot to know. Her short taste of life, as a “bound-out,” had not tended to exalt humanity in Angelia Parthenia’s clever eyes, and she knew that a thousand dollars, to such a person as Peterkin, would outweigh a good many scruples of conscience or kindness. And, though the aforesaid young man might

be crazy, as she had promptly decided, even a crazy person is able to infect other, and more sensible people, with evil notions.

“There’s nothing most folks enjoy so much as making trouble,” remarked Miss Todd to herself, and she hurried the preparations for Israel’s simple burial as much as she could.

“Is there anything else we could dig with?” asked she, after she had found the place which Jean pointed out and had removed a few shovel-fuls of earth.

“There’s a little bit of shovel, besides. We used it to take up the ashes when they made too big a pile on the hearth, and to pull the potatoes out from them when we had roasted them. We did have potatoes sometimes.”

“Bring it. It won’t hurt you half so much to help as it will to stand and watch and tremble at every sound.”

Jean obeyed, though she dreaded to enter the cabin alone, now it was tenanted only by what had once been life. Yet, as soon as her eyes fell once more upon her grandfather’s form, a sudden memory of all his few kindnesses to her returned to soften her mood and to turn her fear to tenderness.

“Poor dear! I’m glad I did come back. I should never have been able to think of you in peace, if I had not. You shall lie as comfortably as we can fix you, dear,” she said, patting softly the unresponsive shoulder, and smoothing the few locks which had escaped the fire.

“Jean, are you coming?” anxiously.

“Yes.” And though Angelia scrutinized her friend’s face with anxiety she was relieved to find that it had lost its former look of terror and was now only sad and gentle.

“Let’s dig as fast as we can. Let’s count a hundred and see which throws out a hundred spadesful first.”

“But your shovel is the bigger. You are doing the most of the work!” expostulated Jean, “and it should be I, instead, that should do that.”

“Ten!” cried Angelia. “Work—eleven—don’t talk—or—twelve. I’m glad the earth is soft here. Queer it should be, when—thirteen—there are so many—fourteen—rocks all around.”

“I don’t know how to count. Not more than one twenty-five cents or so. Though, if it were all given to me in quarter dollars I could count

a great deal of money. As much as Doctor Disney ever gave me for the animals.”

“Never mind, then, I’ll count for both. And I’ll begin your education to-morrow. You’ve been shamefully neglected. Now I, as poor as you are, maybe a great deal poorer, can do a sum in addition up as high as carrying one. Twenty-five! We’re getting along. What did you say made it soft?”

“It was our garden. We raised some things sometimes. Not often. But Grandfather had some cabbages grow here this last summer. He used to come out here and spade and spade. He did it for exercise, ’cause he wouldn’t ever go to the village if he could help it. He hated people.”

“Forty! It’s quite deep already.”

“How deep must we make it?”

“I’ll tell you when to stop. And the only way I know how to measure it is for one of us to lie down in the hole when we think it is big enough, and see. It would have to be a little bigger for a man, though he isn’t a very big man.”

After that nothing was said, till finally Angelia became exhausted by her hard labor,

which she had never intermitted even for a moment, and paused to recover her spent breath.

“Oh, Angelia! I—I can’t—any more! It seems—awful, doesn’t it! But don’t folks have coffins when they are buried?”

“Rich folks do, but they don’t sleep any better for that. I guess it’s deep enough. It isn’t a very good shape, but he knows, if he now does know anything, that we’re two poor little girls, and are doing the very best we can. I’ll measure it, and you tell if it suits you.” Without any hesitation the helpful creature sprang down into the rude excavation they had made, and to her satisfaction found it more than broad and deep enough for their necessity.

“Now, we will bring him, and I will say a prayer and a verse out of my Testament. I know some by heart—lots of them. Then we’ll go. Come. I’m glad we came back, and I know the poor old gentleman will sleep as well here as the Queen of England will in her big tomb of gold and silver. I’d rather have the earth about me, anyway. It always smells so nice and sweet.”

Reverently, and now without any fear, so

deeply had they become absorbed in their humane task, the two girls re-entered the cabin.

“We can wrap him in the coverlet. It is the best we have.”

“Yes. He was always warm enough in it, while he lived.”

“Now, let us take that fallen shutter for a bier. We can carry him best that way.”

So they did. Placing the wasted, slender body of the recluse, already tenderly wrapped about with the only covering the house afforded, they bore him slowly toward his humble grave. Angelia walked in front, and Jean followed weeping, but for all that, her hold of the shutter did not loosen nor did her heart fail her for courage.

When they had laid him to rest Angelia offered her simple prayer, and repeated the texts which she had been selecting as most appropriate, while she toiled at the spade, and then they gently covered with the loosened earth all that had once been one of Boston's proudest citizens.

“I'd like to put some bright leaves over it,” said Jean, reaching to pluck a branch from the tree nearest the grave.

“Be quick, then! I—I thought I heard something.”

“What?”

There was a moment's pause before Angelia replied in a whisper, and pointing towards the ravine, which was now flooded by the moonlight. “There are some men; they are coming here! At such an hour as this—the visit means—mischief! Let's get the bag of food—quick! Come! Not an instant to waste!”

Jean's eyes had followed her friend's startled gesture, and two approaching figures were distinctly seen. For a second she stood rooted to the spot in terror; the next she was herself urging her companion forward frantically. “It's Peterkin Rideout and somebody else! Up the mountain is the safest way!”

But she did not know that “up the mountain” had been the very route taken by her ugly visitor of the morning before.

CHAPTER XI

PETERKIN AND HIS CRYPTOGRAM

JEAN'S eyes had told her correctly. It was old Jeremiah Rideout and his son who now clambered across the deep ravine that separated the island-like hill on which the Wilder cabin stood from the surrounding mountains, and their errand boded no good to Lady Barefoot, had she been found where they supposed she would be.

“I tell ye, Pop, a thousan' dollars is a powerful big pile o' cash! It's more'n any o' our folks ever had to one time in their endurin' lives, aint it?”

“Yes. But this 'ere is a wild goose chase, sure's you live. Betwixt you an' your ma, you can hatch up silly ideas enough ter drive a man crazy.”

“What ye come fer, then, if ye 'low I'm

crazy a thinkin' that there skittish gal don't know more'n she's willin' ter tell 'bout the Doctor's takin' off?"

Jeremiah was prudently silent. He was avaricious, but he was not altogether wanting in sense, as he sometimes believed his only son to be. He had, as Angelia Parthenia Todd surmised people would be, become infected with the notion which Peterkin had whispered into his ear at odd times during the day past, and between the sorrowful duties it had been his to perform for the dead master of Disney Farm. But after awhile, and when Peterkin had repeated his question with even more of insolent assurance, the old servant replied, "Well! What if I come along ter keep ye from scarin' an inner-cent little creeter, like that there squirrel-gal out of a year's growth? Stranger things 'an that has—happened, sir, as I'd have you ter know! But, aint this a rough road? 'Twas long about here, some'res we found—it."

"No call to talk 'bout such things, as I knows on!" remonstrated Peterkin, looking timidly backward over his shoulder. "Folks does say that the 'haunts' o' them 'at dies—like Doctor done—does most gen' ally walk the airth o'

moonlight nights. But I dunno as they begin so soon afterwards. I never heerd that discussed either way."

"Shet up! I feel as if I was a cheatin' the poor old Doctor, a comin' here ter question the purty little critter he used to be so good to. I s'pose he paid her twice as much as them animals o' her'n was wuth, an' I never could reason it out, anyhow, why a sensible man could want the pesky live stock around. The more because they couldn't neither give good milk nor lay eggs to eat. But every man's silly 'bout some-thin', an' I 'low my silliness has took shape in my gallivantin' up here at this time o' night stidder goin' ter bed as a respectable citizen should!" remarked Jeremiah, with some asperity.

"A thousan' dollars! A hull—one—thousan' dollars! Besides that what the gov'ment 'ill offer!" murmured Peterkin, musingly.

Jeremiah became silent, nor did he speak again until they had reached the deserted cabin and stood upon the threshold of the door which its last visitors had left wide open.

Then he burst forth: "What did I tell ye! There ain't a livin' soul here! I might a-knowed

there wouldn't be, if I hadn't took clean leave of what little sense I had left after goin' through what I have this terrible day! Now, all we have to do is to pike hum ag'in, like a passel o' whipped curs! Ever ketch me a listenin' ter any o' your silliness in the futur' ter come—an' I'll gin ye leave ter sass me all you like! Come on. I'm a goin' back."

"What's yer hurry, Pop? If the girl ain't here mebbe sunthin' else is. They do say 'at old man Wilder was a miser, an' powerful rich."

"An' what a village full o' gossips say, must be so, I s'pose! Looks like he'd been rollin' in wealth, don't it?" and Jeremiah pointed sarcastically about the bare room. "More 'an that, how do you know that the old feller is dead? You hain't nothin' ter go by but that there girl's word, an' if she's bad enough ter do what you think she is, she wouldn't halt foot at lyin', I reckon. Mebbe she was sent down inter town for a blind; ter start a cock-an'-bull story 'bout her grandpa's dyin', too, jest ter throw folks off the track. What d'ye say ter that?"

"I dunno. I don't say nothin'. But I hain't clumb all this way two nights hand runnin' ter go hum ag'in 'ithout findin' out all the secrets

an' hidingses of this shanty. To-morrer'll be too late. By that time the ossifers of the law 'll take a hand in this ere business. They ain't nobody goin' ter let that thousan' dollar offer lie 'round 'ithout bein' took up, less my name ain't Peterkin John Rideout!"

Every time he saw his father's patience begin to wane this astute youth would mention the reward, and he was not such a simpleton after all, but that he had a pretty fair understanding of the Rideout character.

"Have you got any matches, Petey?" asked the father in an altered tone. "Cause I'd ruther have a light if it's all the same to you."

"Where ye goin' ter get it? I can see right well by this moonshine."

"Your eyes is younger 'an your daddy's Peterkin, my boy, and I fetched a candle along in my pocket. I thought it might come in handy. Have you got any? It won't do ye no good ter say no, 'cause them there ciggeretty things 'at your ma finds in your room has give ye away, my boy; so jest hand me a match, if ye're a mind ter."

Laughing as if he had been detected in a remarkably smart thing, Peterkin pulled out a

box of "Lucifers," and offering some to his father, thrust the remainder back into his pocket. Jeremiah soon had the candle lighted, and by its aid to the moonlight the worthy pair proceeded to search every nook and cranny of the poor abode.

"Wall, there aint nobody ner nothin' here. A'n't stuff enough in the hull consarn ter bring a sixpence if it was sold ter the highest bidder. Well, I swan! I'm tired! An' bein' as there don't 'pear ter be nothin' ter hender, I'm going ter stop an' rest a spell an' get my breath afore I go down to the village ag'in. It's a terrible hard ja'nt up here, and I'm clean tuckered out."

"All right, Pop. You set an' rest an' I'll poke round a spell. I know they must be sunthin' hid hereabouts worth findin', an' I'm boun' ter find it." And saying that, Peterkin took the candle from his father's hand and proceeded to inspect the small cupboard on the wall. It contained nothing now, save the poor little supply of indian meal, from which Jean had been accustomed to make her porridge, and the few books and scraps of paper on which Israel Wilder had spent so much of his time.

Peterkin passed over the books without curi-

osity, and shoved the dish of meal aside with the contempt his well-served appetite made natural; but over the scraps of paper, with their strange marks and figures, he paused a long time. Once Peterkin Rideout had read a book. A whole book; every page and word. It had been an infinite labor, and such toil would certainly never have been expended upon any volume worthy to be read. But this tale had been one of most atrocious character, and had represented the worthless hero as living in the lap of luxury and of sin at the same time. Never had this morbid creation of some author's brain desired the death of an enemy but he immediately died; never had he wished for wealth but wealth was given him and in the most astonishing manner—of course wholly without labor on the hero's part. At one time this fictitious person had found a mine of gold and precious stones; and Peterkin had laid the book down with a covetous sigh. Since then he had been looking for his "gold mine" until the idea had become a term of derision, even on his doting mother's lips.

But the evil fruit of that wretched volume remained. As far as so weak-brained a fellow

could determine, Peterkin John Rideout had determined that he would become rich by some such "find" as had fallen to his cherished hero, and as no man in real life does become rich—without honest toil of some sort.

Poor silly Peterkin! He had been searching for some "cryptogram" which would be intelligible to his dull eyes as a guide to some secret treasure, and he had made the good Doctor with whom he lived no end of trouble by these senseless rummages of his among that gentleman's well-ordered papers. Now, he believed, fate had served him royally. Here were papers without limit, and all of them crossed by peculiar lines and dotted with strange hieroglyphics. It was—it must be the key to the hidden wealth of Miser Wilder!

A snore from the opposite side of the room nearly scared the searcher out of his little sense, but a glance across to his father convinced him that there was nothing supernatural about that snore. It was a snore wholly indigenous to the big Rideout nose, and it merely announced that the honest Jeremiah was asleep, after a day of unusual disturbance and toil.

"Good! Sleep ahead, old feller, an' if you

carn't stay awake long enough ter share in my good fortune I dunno as I'll have any call ter tell ye 'bout it when you do wake up. Now, Petey, my boy, yer fortune's made! This here must be a map o'—a map o'—sunthin' or other! I wonder what? Mebbe it's the floor. Mebbe it's the groun' round the house. Mebbe—whatever can it be a map of, anyway?"

Alas for the restrictions of the Rideout intellect! The more Peterkin twisted and turned the papers, the more confused he became. Generally, had he been wise enough to understand it, he had them upside down, but in any case they would have been all one to Peterkin John, and of no earthly value to any human being.

"I 'low it's the floor. That there is the corner next the chimbley. An' that—an' that—I dunno, but I'm a-goin' ter start from that chimbley-corner an' foller the crack o' the board 'at looks nighest like this here drawn line an' see what comes on't. But I'll go ter work soft. I'd hate to have Pop wake up now an' spile the hull job with his raspin' common sense 'at he always makes sech a talk about. But I 'low I've got ahead o' him for once, an' he carn't never larf at me ag'in after comin'

away up here in the dead o' night a-lookin' fer a little bit o' girl 'at we hain't found, though they say she's older'n she 'pears, only kinder small an' delicate shaped like, though strong, too! Strong enough ter do everything fer herself an' that stingy grandfather o' her'n. I sorter hate ter do her any harm—but a thousan' dollars! A hull—one thousan'—dollars! That ain't ter be sneezed at!"

As if to contradict this sensible statement, Jeremiah, at that very instant, gave a most prodigious sneeze. It was unpremeditated on Jeremiah's part, but that worthy old man was not accustomed to taking naps in the full draft from a wide open door on a late October night, and when he was moist with perspiration after unusual exertion. But nevertheless, that sneeze nearly scared the mystery-probing Peterkin into a fit, from which he recovered slowly.

"Gr-r-r-eat goodness! Wh—at ai—ls Pop!" he murmured, his teeth chattering as if with ague. "If—he—do—es—th—at—ag'in, I'll—I'll—anyhow I guess I'd better take off my shoes. I'd ruther have all I find myself!" thought this ungenerous son, and had squatted "Turk fashion" to remove his heavy "brogans"

when he felt himself suddenly clasped about the waist with a vice-like grip, and saw a dark head lean forward over his shoulder to blow out the tell-tale candle.

“Wh—at—in—” began Peterkin John; but got no further before the one romance of his life was nipped in the bud, so to speak, by his being knocked senseless upon the floor he had set out to “search” for a key to the supposed “cryptogram.”

CHAPTER XII

THE MEETING BY THE BOWLDERS

MEANWHILE, after Jean and Angelia Parthenia had discovered the approach of the Rideout father and son, they had sped upward along the wood-road which led to the top of the mountain behind the Wilder home, as fast as their encumbered state would allow them.

For the prudent and chronically-hungry bound-out girl had no notion of leaving behind her the bag of provisions which it had cost her so much labor to procure, however strongly her companion might protest against the hindrance its carrying was to them.

“No, Jean. We’ll trust to the darkness and the shadows of the trees to help us; but as for leaving that ham and those chickens—no, ma’am! So you may as well not urge it. I know what is good for you, as well as for my-

self, if you don't, and that is plenty of tasty, wholesome victuals, such as yours truly knows just how to prepare. Besides, if those Ride-outs are like most farmer folks they are not going to hurt themselves running. But the impudence of them! Coming to your house in the dead of night!"

"I'm so thankful they didn't come before we had finished what we had to do for Grandfather. Else—" Jean shivered afresh.

"We should have done it anyway," returned Angelia confidently. "I can always find a way to do what's right, I guess. And all is, we would have had to wait until after they went away and then have gone to work again. But 'all's well that ends well,' and we are as wise to move on now as if we hadn't been frightened into it. We can sleep to-morrow."

"Where?"

"Don't ask too many questions, miss. I don't know where yet, but I know we shall sleep. That is a law of nature which two such healthy girls as we cannot break if we would."

"I only hope, then, it will be in some safe place!" cried Jean, speaking for the first time in a natural tone; for as long as they had re-

mained within close proximity to their midnight visitors they had conversed only in a whisper.

“I shall take care about that. Yet, still, why should we act as if we had done something wrong? I hate this moving about like guilty people. I did no wrong in running away, for I had endured all the ill-treatment I could, and I had nobody to help me to a better life. So I just helped myself, that’s all. There are plenty of more girls in the poor-house, where I came from, so the Wilkins family need not suffer for help long. Poor wretch! I wonder who she will be that will take my place. As for you, if ever there was an innocent creature on the face of the earth it is your sweet self. I’m not going to have you run about in hiding like this another minute. Come, let us go down this way. That little valley between the peaks looks safe and comfortable. It looks fairly safe enough for us to take a short nap in.”

“Do you think so; really think so?”

“Are you so tired, dear? Your voice sounds so faint and weak.”

“I’m awfully tired, and my foot hurts and

my heart aches, and I am afraid of every shadow that falls across the path. If it were not for you I should die. I know I should!" And utterly overcome for the moment with the forlornness of their situation, Jean dropped her head upon her companion's shoulder and began to cry softly.

Angelia Parthenia was much disturbed. She understood, as has been said, and far better than her new friend understood, the perils which beset Lady Barefoot's path, but she had also some fears on her own account, of which she had never spoken seriously to the other homeless girl. She had jestingly referred to a "hue and cry" that might be raised when her flight was discovered by the Wilkins family; but in secret she wondered anxiously how far the "law" would hold her under their power, and if her liberal preparation of food for a long journey might not be what Jean had suggested, really "stealing." Altogether, Angelia Parthenia felt that she should be much more at ease when the runaways had put a greater distance between themselves and the homes they had known, and it was trying to have Jean give out thus early on the trip.

“However, what can’t be cured must be endured,” reasoned the philosophical embryo actress, and resolutely put her fears behind her. “All right, my dear, cry your cry out; then you’ll feel better. I am not much for crying myself; I’ve had too many hard knocks to have many tears left; but I’ve seen Ma Wilkins cry over almost everything from a spoiled baking of bread to the death of a grandchild, and it always appeared to do her good. I suppose it is in some natures to be kind of weak around the eyes, but, thank fortune! it isn’t in mine. However, that’s neither here nor there. But a good nap is right just here. Let us wrap our martial courage around us, even if we haven’t any ‘martial cloak’ with which to cover ourselves, and go to sleep. Then we’ll take an early breakfast and start on afresh. I wonder how far New York is, anyway?”

Diverted by a thought of a brighter future, with the readiness of youth they fell to discussing the next stages of their journey, cuddled down together behind the friendly shelter of a pile of bowlders, and with their bag of food at their feet went sound asleep in one another’s arms.

But scarcely had their prolonged silence and regular breathing given proof that they had found in slumber a cure for present ills than out of the shadow of those same rocks stole a wild looking figure.

“I must not wake them,” it muttered, “but I must—I must have that food—if I have to kill them both. Well, a few more or less—what matter? But what makes me tremble so? They are nothing but girls; I could crush either of them with these hands that have learned heavy strokes in those accursed mines! Yet—”

The man stole nearer; his thoughts almost taking audible form in his eagerness. There is nothing that so transforms a man of low instincts as hunger. Let him be threatened with starvation, as this creature was, and he becomes a ravenous animal.

“Oh! What it cost me to see them open that bag and take out that blessed food and eat it before my very eyes, while I dared not stir hand or foot to stop them!”

Nearer and nearer he moved, always stealthily, always in abject fear—of what? A phantom, that would leave him never again. A mocking terrible phantom of a gentle old man with a

flowing white beard and silver locks. Back, phantom! The animal in this human being is hungry! Drive him not mad with thy pleading eyes, else he do these other innocent creatures some terrible harm.

“Ah! I smell it now! How good—how good!”

The crouching figure had quite reached the coveted treasure—the most valuable in this world to him now—the bag upon the closely-tied neck of which Angelia had rested her foot in protection.

On going to sleep she had said: “You see, dear, if any hungry dog or other animal comes, he cannot touch our stock in life without first awaking me. And there are no wild beasts about, in these woods, you know; only a stray dog, now and then, roaming about among the farmers’ sheep-folds. It’s just as well to be careful.”

It was not until he had stretched out his hand to take the sack in his silent eagerness that the crouching thief perceived this ruse of the wise Angelia, and it startled him for a moment as if he had been struck.

“Pshaw! How nervous and afraid I have become! Since—since last night. I used to

be afraid of the lash, down there in the mines—but here! Why can't I forget that white-faced ghost? And—I must—I will—have that food! If I die for it the next minute!”

With that he reached forth his grimy hand once more and firmly but gently seized the bag of food. Then he began to draw it lightly, cautiously backward toward himself, and as he did so, Angelia stirred.

For the space of a moment thereafter neither robber nor victim moved. It was so still that a leaf falling to the ground made a distinct and, to the starving human being, a startling sound.

Then he drew the sack toward him once more, and its passage over the dried herbage was like the roar of a thunderbolt in his ears. But he had passed beyond heeding that in another instant, for the rich aroma of the store beneath his very fingers then, had filled his nostrils and deadened every other sense.

“Ha! It is good! It is good!” He did not utter the words aloud, but he had become wholly reckless and indifferent by then, as he tore limb from limb the daintily-prepared poultry and scarcely waited to swallow one portion before he had stuffed his capacious mouth with another.

How long he ate he did not know, perhaps for but a few moments, but there was little left within the canvas sack when he suddenly raised his eyes and beheld the clear eyes of Angelia Parthenia gleaming upon him out of the shadow where she lay.

If the silence had been intense before, while the thief had waited for his victim to awake, it was doubly profound now, while these two human beings gazed into each other's eyes with an earnestness of inquiry that would sound the depths of either soul.

"Will you betray me?" the great black orbs of the hiding convict seemed to ask.

"Will you do us any harm?" returned Angelia's courageous glance.

Then an answer equally silent seemed to pass between them. Angelia turned her head for a moment and gazed upon the sleeping innocent girl beside her, the first human being whom she had ever had the right to love. She felt as if she were compounding a felony. She knew that if she chose she could arouse those who would capture and destroy this other being whom she instantly believed to be the same that had frightened Jean in the morning, and, what was

worse, had murdered Doctor Disney. She was fleet and strong, and right was right. Down there in the cabin that seemed so near were the Rideouts; whatever their errand at old Israel's abode, they would not hesitate to take this man in hand—if she aroused them.

But—there was Jean.

With a self-repression wonderful in one so young, the bound-out girl measured the situation and accepted it. As quietly as if she had not seen what she had seen, she closed her eyes once more, threw her arm sleepily over her companion's shoulder, and awaited the other's decision.

She knew perfectly well that she was as much in his power as he in hers. It would be only a question of speed and endurance should they measure wills; but she did not tremble, she scarcely even breathed as she thus shut her eyes upon a scene which had revealed to her all the truth of the circumstance which had so startled Chelsea town, and left the murderer to follow his own course.

He rose at once, yet without haste. "Thou art a brave lass," he whispered with the distinctness of a hiss. "Thy courage hath saved

thee. Farewell, and pleasant dreams, my pretty. I'll takes this and be off."

She could hear his every movement and word, but she did not herself move or speak till he had gone quite far away down the hillside. Then she sat up slowly in her place and burst into a fit of uncontrollable weeping. Yet weeping so silent that it did not at all disturb the peaceful slumber of the worn-out girl beside her.

But Angelia Parthenia Todd slept no more that night, nor did she care ever to repeat this terrible experience of her first day's journey toward "Fortune's house."

The man passed onward, downward with his bag, for he had been careful not to leave aught that might serve him at another need, besides, the sack was strong, and might be of infinite service when he came to find that treasure of the old dead miser of which he had heard the few days before about the bar of the village inn.

"For why should I be afraid of the dead? I know not which was the miser, he whom I met in the ravine or he whom I found dead in the house, though both are dead now, and dead men tell no tales. So I will even return and find

that of which the living are in need—but the dead no more. Once more to fortune, and this time, thanks to my sleeping beauty, I journey thither in comfort and plenty.”

However, as he approached the cabin the robber was once more startled by the unexpected, but his courage had been refreshed and he did not hesitate to advance cautiously as far as the broken window and watch through it the operations going on within. Thus he distinctly saw Peterkin Rideout's remarkable preparations to secure the same booty which he himself had in mind to gain, and after watching as long as he thought wise, he muttered softly: “The stupid idiot! Does he think I'll stand outside forever to watch him poke about a wooden floor when I hold the key to the treasure? Not by Our Lady, no!”

With a bound he leaped through the doorway, blew out the candle, and struck Peterkin Rideout prostrate upon the very top of his misleading “cryptograms.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRICE OF A BREAKFAST

WITH the first faint rays of the coming daylight Angelia Parthenia, who had sat perfectly motionless and intently watchful ever since the departure of the thief with her bag of food, rose and stretched her cold, stiffened limbs.

“ Oh, I’m almost frozen ! This must not happen again. To sleep out of doors in midsummer, and to try the same thing at this time of year, are, I find, two very different matters. And what a night it was ! I’ll just walk up and down for a bit till I stir my blood to a little more warmth and then I’ll wake Jean. Poor child ! What will she say when I tell her that there is no breakfast ? ”

But the girl was too thankful, on her own part, for their escape from greater injury to care much for the provisions she had lost, and she

paced cheerfully about for some moments, but always with watchful eyes lest she should have an unpleasant surprise of some sort, until her healthy blood had resumed its natural flow through the chilled limbs; and with returning warmth, courage for any fate also returned.

“Now for my darling! She has already become that. The one, only human being I ever loved. She seems exactly as I fancy a little sister might to me. And to think that I, homely Angelia Parthenia Todd, bound-out girl from the poor-house, am already better educated than this dainty little beauty, whose grandfather was a wise man, and who—despite all her present poverty—has aristocratic blood in her veins, or I’m no judge of what’s what!”

Stooping down the noble-natured creature laid one toil-hardened hand gently upon the sunny curls of the unconscious Jean. “Come, dearie, wake up! Do you know that it must be after five o’clock? and you and I have a long day’s travel before us. Ah, you pretty thing! Your blue eyes are as big and innocent as a baby’s, and your cheeks are as pink as sweet-brier blossoms. But, all the same, you must wake up! Leave your couch of down and throw aside your

silken coverlet, my little Lady Barefoot, and—give me a kiss!”

Jean sat up laughing. “What a ridiculous girl you are, Angelia. But you cannot tease me by calling me ‘pretty,’ for I know better. And I don’t care, anyway. But—how cold it is! And, oh, my dear, have I kept your shawl all night, and have you slept without anything to keep you warm? How selfish and dreadful of me! But I didn’t know it. I was so tired and sleepy that I knew nothing at all, and—I’m hungry, too. I never used to be so hungry till I knew you, and I never had such good stuff to eat. I think it is that makes me feel so. When are we to have our breakfast, Angelia?”

“Run about first and get up your appetite,” answered the other, smiling as merrily as if she would be able to produce at a moment’s notice, everything which two hungry young girls might desire.

“I do not need to do that; but I’ll run and warm myself. Oh, isn’t it cold?”

“Yes. Still, if we are to do any running, suppose we go in a direction that will help us forward on ‘Fortune’s path.’ I don’t believe in wasted energy.”

“All right. Which way lies this fair ‘Fortune’ of ours; can you guess?”

“I can guess that over the peak of this hill we shall see a road to somewhere; and on a road there is almost always a house or more; and at a house there are people; and people eat breakfast; and we will join the people. Therefore we also shall breakfast, but not upon ‘cold victuals.’ I have a mind for a cup of hot coffee this morning.”

“How will you get it?”

“I don’t know—yet, all the same I mean to have it; and if I, then you will, too. Come, let us make haste. Farmer folks rise early, and they will be all farmers that live so far from any village.”

“But, dear, you have forgotten the bag. Where did you put it?”

“Sure enough—the bag!” exclaimed Angelia Parthenia, looking about her as if she had suddenly discovered its loss. “Where can it be?”

“What? Didn’t you hide it?”

“No. I certainly did not. Do you not remember? I went to sleep with my foot resting upon it, for its safe keeping, so that if any

dog or hungry animal came prowling after it I should wake and know it."

"And—it has gone!"

"It seems so," answered Angelia, with a coolness that might have aroused suspicion in one less innocent and trustful than Jean Wilder.

"Why—where? Did you see the dog? Do you know it was a dog that took it?" cried the hungry Lady Barefoot, with anxiety.

"I did not see any dog."

"But it must have been one. I have lived on these mountains all my life and there are no other creatures that could steal such a heavy thing as that precious bag was. Do you suppose he ate it all?"

Miss Todd shut her lips grimly. "I suppose that anything hungry enough to steal from two homeless girls would be hungry enough to devour twice the amount of food we had. It is too bad! Too mean and—and—dreadful for anything! But I have been awake for some time and I believe that we have been robbed! Probably the animal that stole our breakfast dragged the bag off with him. Anyway, you can see for yourself, as I have for mine, that our precious stock is gone!"

“I—I think you take it very quietly, dear Angelia! It wasn’t my food, and I have no right to feel so bad—but still—I—I think it is perfectly terrible. We shall starve to death—I’m afraid.”

“My dear little ‘sister,’ you had just as much right to the food we have lost as I had. And if I take it ‘coolly,’ as you think, maybe that is because I have been awake and have known the trouble longer. I am thankful it is no worse. The world is a big place, and there is plenty of food in it. I mean to get a good breakfast for us both, but there is no use in lamenting what can’t be helped. Come on. Wrap the shawl snug about you, take hold of my hand—and here goes! To breakfast, and to fortune!”

“Oh, how stiff I am! I feel as—as poor Grandfather used to say he did, as if all my joints had grown rusty!”

“Never mind! One — two — three—off! That’s the best way to limber up. See which can get to the top of the mountain first!”

Jean caught the cheerfulness of her helpful friend’s spirit, and set off at a pace which even Angelia could not equal, and in a few moments, breathless, but warm and happy with excite-

ment, the wanderers reached the topmost peak of the hill, and paused to refresh themselves and "take their bearings."

"Ah, ha! Down in that little hollow—see there? A tiny house and some smoke coming out of the chimney?"

"Yes."

"I invite you to breakfast there with me."

"Angelia!"

"Yes'm, that's my name. Come on!" Seizing Jean's hand, the elder girl set off down the further slope of the mountain at a rate of speed which made all effort at conversation useless, and thus silenced any remonstrance which the less bold Lady Barefoot might have made. They brought their mad descent to an end in the very dooryard of the little cabin, and before the astonished eyes of its mistress who had come to the door to get fresh fuel for her newly-lighted fire.

"Good morning, ma'am. Have you any work for two hungry girls to do that will pay for their breakfasts?" asked the bound-out runaway, promptly, and with a pleasant smile.

"To goodness sake! Who are you? Where did you come from? Why should you want a

breakfast?" asked the farmer's wife, breathlessly.

"We want a breakfast because we are hungry, and have had our own stolen by—by something—while we were asleep. We came from over the hill, and the country beyond, and we are on our way to New York where this young girl's relatives live. We are poor, but we can work. We will do anything you have to do to pay for our breakfasts if you will sell them to us on that condition."

Angelia Parthenia delivered herself of this explanation not as if she were asking, but conferring a favor, and Jean listened in surprise, fully expecting a refusal, and trembling lest this strange woman should have heard about Doctor Disney's death and the dreadful suspicion which Peterkin Rideout had whispered concerning herself.

"Well, I always did believe in the leading of Providence," responded the house-mistress, readily and piously. "And now, if you mean what you say I am convinced afresh. Can you milk?"

"I have been accustomed to milking ten cows every night and morning."

“I have five that must be milked, and my man has been gone all night. I’ve all the wood-cutters to get breakfast for—they have to start early—my man’s a builder and has a heavy contract on hand. I dare not hinder any of them to help me, and I am a poor milker myself. Husband always does it. If you can milk the cows—dry and good—I’ll give you both all the cakes and sausage you can eat, besides a good cup of coffee to wash the rest down with. Are you sure you can do it?”

“Try me. My first touch of the animal will prove to you that I was brought up on a milking stool,” returned Angelia gayly.

“This way, then. Can you milk, as well as your sister?” said the woman to Jean.

“No ma’am; I never touched a cow in my life,” answered the other truthfully.

The hurried farm mistress had already taken two shining tin pails in her hand, but she now paused in astonishment.

Miss Todd interposed, “That’s all right, ma’am; I never lived with my ‘sister’ till lately. She lived with her grandfather, but I worked out. I’m telling you the truth. Give me the

pails, and I will prove my promise by its fulfillment."

The woman obeyed. She was impressed by Angelia Parthenia's manner, which was as if that young person already felt herself to be the great "tragedienne" she aspired to have the world consider her.

But facts speak louder than words, and the first movement of the bound-out girl after she seated herself upon the milking-stool, was evidence sufficient to the farm mistress that the task of milking was a familiar if not congenial one to her new assistant.

"Now, you other girl, come into the house with me; if you can't milk, I suppose you can tend a baby. I hear mine waking up, and if you'll just look after him a bit I'll get the breakfast on the sooner."

"Oh, may I really touch him? I never handled a baby in my life, but I always longed to. They look so soft and cunning," responded Jean eagerly, and quite won the mother's heart by the tender way in which she lifted the rosy child from its cradle and gathered it in her arms.

It was an hour later that, all the woodmen

having left the cottage, the mistress of it sat with her two unexpected guests beside the table where they had all three just made a liberal meal, when a shadow darkened the doorway and the master of the place looked in.

“Hello, wife! How did you manage? I stayed over night to help catch a murderer. Awful doings over to Chelsea town. Doctor Disney killed—a couple of rewards offered—thousand dollars each—one by the Squire and one by the town—to the man that catches the murderer. I thought I’d give a night to the chance, and—Jehuwhitaker!”

The farmer’s eyes had fallen upon the face of Lady Barefoot, which was perfectly familiar to him, and he paused suddenly and significantly.

On Jean’s part the recognition had been also instant. This was one of the woodmen who had given her dead branches to burn, and a smile of pleasure lighted her thin but pretty face.

“Oh, sir! Is there any news?”

“News, girl! If I stood in your shoes I wouldn’t stay in this neighborhood long enough to ask that question. But I didn’t think I’d be the one to catch you—so quick!”

By gracious! It's luck—but I can't believe it—hardly—”

“Believe what?” asked Jean, paling under the farmer's stern gaze.

“That a child like you could see such a deed done—and keep your senses. Much less take a hand in it yourself. Poor thing! Poor thing!” He made a step forward as he spoke, but when he laid his hand upon the chair where Lady Barefoot had sat, it was empty.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TELL-TALE MARK

AT about the same hour when Jean and her friend Angelia called at the woodman's cottage in pursuit of breakfast, the Rideouts, father and son, entered Squire Dutton's front hall. They had walked in without ringing and their manner was full of haste and importance, though their appearance was that of men who had not slept in many hours.

A servant, lighting the fire in the dining-room beyond, almost screamed out in terror at their sudden, unannounced appearance, but then the nerves of all Chelsea folk had suffered from the excitement of the recent murder, and her outcry penetrated the near-by sleeping-room where the good Squire had lain awake all night considering the death of his old friend, and roused him more readily than a customary

summons would have done. In a moment he appeared in the hallway and demanded: "Well? What is it? Have you brought any news?"

"Law, Squire! I reckon we have! We've b'en about killed ourselves a-obtainin' of it!"

"How? What's that? Is there really news? Of importance?"

"We've seen the murderer. One on 'em."

"What do you mean?"

"Would you object ter my takin' a chair, Squire? I'm 'bout beat out. But then I always was a faithful hired man ter him that's gone where no traveler returns," said Jeremiah, dolefully. He said this not only because he was, in reality, very weary in body, but because, brought face to face with the alert, practical man of business, the story he had to tell began to assume different proportions in his mind from those it had exhibited hitherto.

"Certainly not. I should have offered it. Sit down, Peter, also. Now—the news? What is it?"

"Well, you see, Petey an' me, we couldn't rest. We always did think a powerful sight o' him that's—"

“Yes, yes. We’ll take that on trust. Have you any news? Something out of common must have sent you here at this hour.”

“I’m a comin’ to it, Jedge. Only, it’s the truth, my wits is kinder bewitched with all this trouble, an’—”

“Let Peter tell. What is it, boy?”

“Look a there, Squire? See that lump side o’ my head?”

“Certainly. Looks as if you had been in a fight. A rowdy always comes to grief, as I’ve told you before.”

“Well, I may have sowed a few wild oats, but this aint none on ’em. That there bump was give me by—by—”

“By whom?”

“Let me tell it, Squire. Petey, he’s kinder upsot, too, an’ no wonder. The poor boy’s been almost murdered as well.”

“Well?”

“You see, we thought we’d go up to the house where old Wilder lived. We had our reasons. We—”

The Squire sat down and composed himself to listen. He perceived that if he were ever to learn what these people had come to tell him he

must let them impart their information in their own way.

Jeremiah regained confidence as he saw the justice become thus patient, and proceeded in his roundabout fashion to describe the last night's events. Only he ascribed a far different reason than the true one for his ascent of the mountain and the examination of the Wilder cabin.

“You, see, I had my suspicions that this here job hain't b'en the work o' no one man. I 'lowed to myself, says I, 'Old man Wilder's ter the bottom on't, but he's only one of a gang.' That's what I told Petey, here, an' I coaxed him ter go along up there with me an' see if we couldn't ketch some on 'em. I reckoned they'd be back at night, even if they'd slunk out o' sight in the daytime. I was afeerd they was layin' out ter come ter Disney Farm an' steal what the dead man had left, an' I thought I'd like ter watch out fer 'em a little. Well, sir, we got up there, an' they wasn't hide ner hair o' nobody round anyw'eres.”

“Only a fool would expect there would be!”

“I dunno, Jedge. I dunno. That there little girl may be a decoy. That's my notion,

an' if she didn't take a hand in the job she knows fast enough who did. I reckoned she might be left there to blind folkses' eyes, an' I 'lowed I'd scare the truth out of her if I ketched her. But she was too sharp for honest folks. She ketched me, stidder my ketchin' her."

"Me, Pop! It was me—what got the worst on't. You ferget you run like a painter the minute the—whoever it was—knocked me flat."

"Well! Didn't expect I'd stay ter be killed, too, did ye?"

"Let me talk! Pop, he was awful tired. He set down in the cabin an' went ter sleep, but I went searchin' round fer anybody what was a-hidin'. If I'd a-found that murderer—man or girl—afore he or she found me, I'd a settled their fish fer 'em! I would that!" said Peterkin.

"Yes, I'll admit your bravery—for the sake of argument. But I think we'll get at the real facts sooner if I ask questions and you answer them. Time is important to me. Were you two at Israel Wilder's cabin last night?"

"We was. Both on us."

"Why did you go there?"

"Well, we want ter—ter—see—"

“Exactly. Did you see anybody?”

“One on us did. And one on us felt him. The one that felt him didn’t see him, an’ the one that saw him didn’t feel him.”

“W-h-a-t? Do you know what you are saying, or have you been drinking?”

“I’m a Prohibitionist, Squire. I should think you’d recollect that,” answered Jeremiah reproachfully.

“All right; but explain your curious statement. Which one saw ‘him’? Who was ‘he’?”

“I saw him with my own mortail eyes. I, Jeremiah Rideout. I should know him ag’in if I saw him ag’in; but I dunno his name. Petey here, he felt him. He didn’t see him, ’cause when I went back, after everything got still ag’in, an’ peeked in the winder, Peterkin was jest arousin’ up after his knock-down.”

“Did you go there to take a nap, Jeremiah?”

“I didn’t go ter do it a purpose; but I done it. It was all still as the grave in the cabin, an’ when Petey began rummaging round I laid down on the lounge like they was there, an’ fust I knowed I didn’t know anything; I was asleep.”

“How did you see anybody then?”

“When he knocked Petey over on the floor it made a considerable of a noise, an’ it roused me. That’s what I mean. Petey was a-settin’ down a-lookin’ at some picters er suntin’ ’at he’d found, while I dropped off. Fust I knowed I heered a terrible bang, an’ there lay Petey on the floor an’ somebody a-standin’ over him a-flourishin’ his arms like he was crazy. I didn’t tarry long then, ’cause I ’lowed Petey’s cur’osity had been his ruin an’ he was killed a’ready. But I didn’t go fur. I hid in the brush till after awhile I saw somebody come out o’ the house an’ I was ’bout done scared ter death when I saw it was Peterkin John. It ’peared same as the dead comin’ ter life ag’in.”

“Humph! What became of your son’s assailant?”

“I dunno. We don’t neither on us know. That’s what we come ter tell ye ’bout. I didn’t see him come out o’ the cabin, though I watched the door till a’most daybreak. The fust one ’at did come out on’t was my boy, that I had been mournin’ fer all night, in the brush, as dead. It took my heart clean up inter my mouth; I was that dumberfoun’ by it. An’ that man I saw an’ he felt must be a-hidin in the Wilder cabin now.

I 'low he thinks it's a safe place ter stay, an' more's likely we shall have some other damages done o' the same nater as the Doctor's takin' off."

"Jeremiah, did you not go to the mountain for any other reason than anxiety about your late master? I wish to give you credit for a sincere attachment to him and his memory, but 'they say' that you or Peterkin have made some strong statements. One of these is, that you saw Israel Wilder's grandchild and extracted a confession from her that she was implicated in the dreadful affair. Is this true?"

"Well, I ain't obleeged ter answer you now, be I, Squire? Not 'ithout witnesses?"

"As you like," responded the old gentleman, shrugging his shoulders.

"An' I ain't a-committin' o' myself when I say that I know more'n I'd like ter tell?"

"Perhaps not. Do you hope to win the reward?"

The suddenness of this question almost staggered Jeremiah. All day before he had assumed that his only wish to find the guilty person was to avenge his employer's death; that he would not touch a cent of any offered "re-

ward," for he should feel as if he were "taking blood money;" yet the Squire believed him to have been working for the thousand dollars only; and not hesitating to implicate a young and innocent girl in the dreadful crime.

Squire Dutton himself believed that old Israel had known something about the Doctor's death, and he did not believe that Israel was dead. He had therefore made no haste to go or send to the mountain, for he reflected that a man capable of murder, as Wilder had probably been, would be quite capable of feigning death and deceiving his grandchild; and through her deceiving the rest of the world until he had had time to make good his own escape. That the miser had taken advantage of his heart trouble to simulate death when Jean had gone to the village for help was the Squire's theory; and that any effort made to capture the guilty man would result in success. He had therefore offered a large reward, and the town authorities had supplemented this by another; and that "reward" had been the motive which lured Jeremiah and Peterkin mountainward at the dead of night was as plain to his judgment

as the goodly sized nose on the elder Rideout's face.

But Squire Dutton was in no such hurry now as he had been in the first impulse of his grief; and he realized how sad for an already friendless girl would be the result of the search. He had taken a great liking to Jean, and he had regretted ever since that he had refused to read the paper she had wished him to do on the morning before. He intended, during the day just opened, to hunt her up and assure her of his sympathy and protection, even though she were the grandchild of his best friend's murderer.

Meanwhile, he had a little rod in pickle for Peterkin, whom he did not like; and for whom a little scare would be a good thing.

"By the way, Peter. What do you suppose was the weapon used on this occasion—the instrument of death?"

"Do you mean what the Doctor was killed with?"

"Yes. You have handled tools. I thought, perhaps, you would know."

Peterkin John Rideout swelled with importance. To have a man of Squire Dutton's calibre consult with him—Peterkin—was cause for

pride, indeed. "Well, Squire, since you want my opine, I'm willin' ter give it. I've b'en a-studyin' on this here case, an' it's my opine that Doctor Disney come ter his death by the use of a steel er iron weepion in the hands o'—"

"No matter whose hands. What was the weapon?"

"A axe. Er a hatchet. Might a be'n a hatchet."

"A woodchopper's hatchet?"

"Yes. I 'low so."

"You should know, you are a woodchopper yourself—when you are anything but a loafer."

"Don't be hard on a feller, Jedge. I sha'n't get fetched up afore you ag'in very soon; this here affair has sobered me some."

"I should think it might. As kind and indulgent a master as ever paid a worthless servant good wages. Do all woodchoppers know their own axes or hatchets?"

"Yes. Every man on us has our own mark. 'N'ess we'd get a sharp tool changed for a dull one an' no tellin' who's a cheatin'. I have a cur'us kind o' mark fer mine. Don't nobody git ahead o' Peterkin John Rideout, 'n'ess he gits up purty early in the mornin'. No, sir!"

“Well, would you know the tools of your fellow-workmen if you saw them?”

“Yes, indeed. I would!”

“Why?” asked Jeremiah, with sudden interest.

“Because an axe, or rather a large hatchet has been found near the scene of the murder. It is distinctly marked, but each of the workmen who has happened to see it disclaims the mark as his own. Nor will they tell me whose it is. I hope you will have more regard to justice than to keep silence if, when I show this instrument to you, you do recognize it as belonging to any Chelsea woodcutter. Can I rely upon you?”

“Jedge—you can!”

Squire Dutton stepped quietly to a closet of the room and, with an air of great secrecy, unlocked its door. Thence he took a weapon carefully wrapped in soft cloths, and, though his hands hated contact with it, he laid it deliberately down upon the table. Then he motioned Jeremiah and Peterkin to approach. They did so with awe, an awe which was not lessened by the profound gravity of the Squire's manner.

“There!” said that gentleman, tossing aside

the last wrapping which covered the hatchet's handle, "did you ever see that before?"

"Wh—wh—wha—at! What does—it—mean?" stammered old Jeremiah, while his hopeful son's knees shook so that he was forced to cling to the table for support.

"It means that this weapon bears the private mark of Peterkin John Rideout; that it was found within a few feet of the man whom it killed, and that the base insinuation which its owner made against an innocent and helpless girl has, like most evil things, 'come home to roost.'"

CHAPTER XV

AN UNLUCKY JEST

So sudden had been Lady Barefoot's flight from the contractor's cottage that he scarcely realized she had really escaped him until his wife turned upon him with a grave reproof. "Husband, I'm ashamed of you! You—a great, strong, healthy man—to scare the senses out of a poor beggar child like that! I'm glad she's gone! I hope she will thus outwit all her enemies! As for you, I think you could be better employed than in turning detective at your time of life."

"Hush, wife. A thousand dollars—two thousand—do not grow on every bush. It would have put you and baby in comfort for the rest of your lives."

"It would bring misfortune upon us. If all the wise lawyers in all the world should stand

together and tell me that that sweet-faced child could do an evil thing I wouldn't believe them!" cried the house-mistress, warmly. "I never took such a notion to anybody in my life, and as for baby, he jest crept to her as if she were his own sister. Needn't tell me there's anything wrong about anybody a baby likes!"

"A woman always judges by her feelings. The circumstances point strongly to that girl as a witness of the murder of Doctor Disney, if not a conspirator in the crime. In any case she will be wanted for the trial, and if I could have scared her into telling me the truth I would have earned more than wood-selling will bring me in many a long day."

"Thank Heaven you did not succeed! And now, let's have no more wasted time. Honest labor for honest folks is Heaven's own way to make them happy. Get you to your trees again and I will mold out my bread. The poor girls have done me a good turn this morning, and I hope with all my heart that happiness and prosperity will follow them and change their sorry fortunes. As for you, Will, don't ever let me know of your mixing yourself up

in any such wickedness again. Not if you love baby and me!"

When a good and true wife "scolds" in such a wise and gentle fashion a good man generally listens. The woodman was already ashamed of his over-night's greed, and kissed his cheerful home-mate in a shamefaced sort of way. "Maybe you are right, Maggie. You mostly are, and I guess, after all, it would be as you say: If I had earned the money I should not have enjoyed it. I'm off now, and good-by."

But poor Jean, flying down the mountain side toward a distant wood, which promised hiding place, did not know how completely and suddenly the attitude of the woodcutter's mind had been changed toward her, and the terror which possessed her almost killed her. She had but one thought, and that was—hiding. A place where she could hide and die—die naturally, of starvation—was the one idea which filled her throbbing brain.

Suddenly her bare foot touched a rolling-stone and she was thrown headlong to the ground with such force that it seemed as if her last wish had come true.

"Oh, my dear! Has it killed her?" cried poor

Angelia, who had left the cottage almost as promptly and swiftly as Jean, but who, fleet though she was, could hardly keep the terrified fugitive in sight, as she saw from a distance the stumble and the fall. "Oh, if there is any justice in this world it cannot be that such an innocent should suffer so for long."

Then she gained the side of prostrate Lady Barefoot and raised the slight form tenderly in her strong arms.

"It has—it has killed her! She is dead, and that man yonder is now a murderer himself. Oh, can such things be?"

She did not for a moment believe that there was any use in the labor she now attempted, but she set resolutely to work as if she considered Jean's unconsciousness to be but a slight faint. She brought water and bathed the pale, fair face, which represented all of earthly love to the homeless bound-out, and while she toiled she prayed with all the force of her strong nature that her new friend might at least open her eyes and speak one more loving word before she ceased to speak forever.

Meanwhile her thoughts were diverted by a shrill little sound behind her, and turning,

Angelia discovered the red squirrel upon his haunches, chattering away with all his might.

“Well, upon my word, if that isn’t the strangest thing! Where have you been, Whisker? I haven’t seen you since last night; and how in the world you have followed your poor mistress to this spot to see her die, passes my understanding.”

“Chitter—chatter!” replied Whisker composedly and regarding Jean with his head cocked on one side, and his bright eyes fairly sparkling with intelligence. But every time Angelia stretched out her hand to stroke or capture him he evaded her grasp and sprang aside, but never far from his beloved little mistress, who had such a wonderful influence over him and all wild things of the forest.

At last, as if he could endure Jean’s unresponsiveness no longer, he bounded lightly to her shoulder and playfully seized the tip of her colorless ear in his sharp little teeth. Angelia sprang forward to drive him off, but was arrested by a slight movement of the injured girl’s eyelids.

“My goodness, Whisker! has your instinct taught you what to do better than human sense

could teach me?" wondered anxious Angelia, and held her breath to watch the outcome of the matter.

"Chitter, chitter, chatter!" squealed Whisker, and took a second nibble, this time a sharp and very aggressive one. He felt he had been neglected long enough.

"Well, if that isn't an answer to prayer, and by the aid of one of the most insignificant of creatures, there never was a prayer answered!" cried the human watcher, devoutly.

It was quite true. The sharp pain which the squirrel's teeth had caused the object of his attack had recalled her dormant sense, and she now opened her eyes in a dazed way, which gradually changed to recognition and a smile. But when the silent voice spoke once again, the bound-out girl felt that she had been granted all the happiness her heart could bear.

"Why—Whisker! You—hurt me!"

"Good Whisker! Darling, precious, wise little Whisker!" responded Angelia, enthusiastically.

"Wise? But—what has happened? Where am I? Oh, I remember—the dreadful man—I mustn't stay here!"

“You must stay just still for one ten minutes. Hark! Listen to me. This is all nonsense. The very worst that can happen to you is to be made to tell in court all you know about the last hours of Doctor Disney. I’ve thought the whole business out since I’ve been watching you here, and I’m not going to let you run another single step. The man didn’t follow you, nobody will follow you. If the law wants to find you, it can without the aid of any of these greedy countrymen. You’ve nearly killed yourself tumbling down, and that’s got to end it! I’ll never let you make me suffer as I did suffer for the few minutes that I thought you were dead—never, never again!” cried Miss Todd, vehemently.

“Why, my dear!” exclaimed Jean, wonderingly, “could I make you or anybody suffer?”

“Well, I should think you could! You nearly broke Whisker’s heart in two, besides making me wish I was dead, also. Dear old Will Shakespeare had a deal to say about the pangs of love, but I never knew what he meant till this very morning. If you’re determined to hurt yourself or kill yourself, I’m awful sorry I ever saw you!”

There was something both comical and pathetic about the view of the situation which Angelia took, and it probably did more to divert Jean's thoughts from her own peril than any amount of coddling would have done. The bound-out girl's nature acted as a tonic upon the gentler but no less loyal one of her companion, and, presently, Lady Barefoot roused herself sufficiently to sit up and reply very lovingly and firmly :

“Why, my dear, if it means as much as that to you, I will try to take care of myself for your sake, as you must promise to do for mine. It seems as if I could bear anything for anybody else, and I'll try not to be frightened any more. What would you advise me to do? I promise that whatever it is I will do it.”

“Will you? You darling! Then there is an end of danger and fuss. I'm sick of it. We both claim that we have done nothing wrong. Why, then, should we act as if we had? Let us go to New York, as we set out to do; but let us take to the highway and go respectably and comfortably, not scurrying across fields like a couple of guilty creatures. Besides, our first experience in facing people

proved a good one. The woman in the cottage treated us splendidly, I think."

"So do I. But her husband—"

"Is probably ashamed of himself by this time. At any rate he has not attempted to follow us, for if he had he could have caught us; since you tumbled down so obligingly to give him the chance. Do you feel better now?"

"Oh, yes! I'm all right now, I think, only—sort of shaky and trembly like. But I'm getting used to tumbles, and I know the ill feelings don't last long."

"Then lean on me, and let us turn toward that road I see over yonder. I hope we may meet a wagon that will give us a lift. I'm terribly fond of riding."

"Are you? I don't know much about it; only that last ride I had with poor Doctor Disney."

"I used to ride once a week to church with the Wilkineses, but they never let me sit in the same pew with them. Back pews are good enough for poor-house girls, they think. But I'm coming back some day, and the sexton shall march me right up in front. I'll have a hat all trimmed with feathers and a silken gown trailing about two yards behind, so that the folks

will have to stand still and let me take my own time about passing down the aisle, unless they want to catch their feet on my train and get thrown down. It shall be dark blue silk; and my mantilla shall be black velvet, and my hat rose-colored satin. I will have a satin parasol in my hand all trimmed with lace; and I will throw my head back and strut—this way! Can't you imagine how fine I will look?"

"I can imagine how silly you will look!" returned Jean, frankly. "I like you ever so much better when you don't get on the Wilkins subject. They seem to make you feel cross and hateful."

"There you are exactly right. And since you've been so good as to take my advice I'll e'en take thine! Let the Wilkins family go! I wash my hands of them and of all their plebeian baseness. To fortune I set my face afresh! Come on, Whisker!"

But Whisker, who had played so important a part in the restoration of his young mistress, had now returned to his natural habits and sped along in his own fashion as if paying no attention to his human companions; save that once in a while he would spring to Jean's

shoulder for a moment, brush his plummy tail against her cheek caressingly, chatter a word of squirrel talk in her ear, then dart away afresh. But he was never far off though often out of sight; and Angelia began to wonder and speculate more and more about Lady Barefoot's power among her woodland playmates.

Finally her thoughts found voice. "I'll tell you what, Miss Jean Montgomery Wilder! If those Palatial Avenue folks of yours don't receive you with the frantic joy which they should exhibit, there is one thing you can do to earn your living."

"And what is that?"

"You can set up an establishment for taming animals and training them. Or, maybe you could get a position as assistant in some park where animals are kept. I think the care of a pigeon house would just about suit you, my dear."

"Humph! I fancy that nobody would give me the chance at that, though I should like it. But, now, for putting our resolution into proof. Here comes a wagon; shall we ask for a ride?"

"Yes; and I'll leave you to do the asking, since you have suddenly grown so brave!"

“All right. You shall see that I have really made up my mind to run no more away from people but try to show them that I have nothing to fear. Hello, there, sir! Hello! Hello—o!”

The driver of a mill team just passing along the road they had reached, slackened speed at this salute and returned it good-naturedly.

“Hello, yourselves! What do you want?”

“A ride, a help on our journey. We are bound to the Landing, and from there to New York. Will you take us as far as you go?”

“If I do it will be as far as you will want to go—on land. I, too, am bound to the Landing to ship this load aboard the boat for the city. Jump in if you like.”

“There! It is just as I told you. Run away from the world and it will chase you; face it boldly and it will give you a kind word,” cried Miss Todd, triumphantly, as she took her place on the meal sacks behind the miller’s wagon seat.

He turned round sharply, surprised at this outburst of wisdom. “Hm—m! I should like to know who had your bringing up, my girl.”

“A number of folks have taken a hand in the business. The poor-master first, then some

farmers, a good old parson, but William Shakespeare claims all the wisdom I possess.”

“Hm—m! I know the poor-master, and plenty of farmers and parsons, but I never heard of any William Shakespeare in these parts. Living here now?”

“No, sir; he’s dead.” Angelia’s face was a picture of sorrow as she made this announcement.

“So? A pity. I suppose that’s why you are out of a job, ain’t it? Been dead long?”

“Not very. Only about two hundred and seventy years.”

“Ginger! Crazy! I thought so the first time I looked at you! Out of my wagon—the pair of you. I don’t carry no lunatics to town with me, I can tell you!”

CHAPTER XVI

FLIGHTS AND FALLS

“WELL, will you stop laughing?” demanded the astonished future actress, as she stood regarding Jean giving way to an uncontrollable burst of amusement. “I didn’t know you could laugh like that. But—well, it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good, and if that man is a know-nothing it proves you are not the sobersides I thought you were. Do you often laugh so?”

“Oh, yes. I used to, but these last few days I haven’t felt much like it. No matter. What shall we do now? Wait for another wagon?”

“If you think best.”

“I do. Sit down here, and, Angelia, dear, you gave me some advice a while ago; now I heard you say ‘turn about was fair play.’ Don’t talk things to the next man which he cannot understand. I have heard my grandfather say

that an ill-timed jest was often terrible in its results."

"Humph! I should think so. But watch me next time. Hark! More wheels. I hope it's another chance. I won't abuse it this time. See if I do."

The approaching footfalls belonged to no ordinary farmer's team; that was evident even before the smart game-cart drawn by a pair of stylish cobs and officered by a pair of liveried attendants came into sight.

"My goodness! Isn't that a nobby turnout!" exclaimed Angelia, whose employers had once taken summer boarders and who had had more experience with city equipages—as far as sight went—than the mountain-reared Jean. "There will be no chance for us in that affair!"

On came the vehicle and Jean watched it curiously, and from a very superior point of view, for she had climbed into a hickory-nut tree by the wayside to shake from it the nuts which clung there, and she now stood peering out between the branches, her bare feet standing lightly and freely upon one bough, while her upstretched hands grasped another high above her head.

Her poise was full of grace and unconscious ease, her fair face looked forth from amid waving masses of golden hair, and her big blue eyes had all the brilliant gleam of youthful surprise and delight; but she had no thought of being observed until the ambitious Whisker, as if seeking to call attention to her loveliness, sprang rustling through the yellow leaves and landed from her shoulder at the bay cobs' feet.

“Oh, my squirrel, my squirrel! They mustn't kill him—they shall not!”

“By the great Diana!”

Whisker took a hand in affairs, as usual, and most effectively, if not wisely. By accident or in mischief, he made a sudden down-spring just before the mettlesome horses and caused them to shy and jostle their owner almost from her seat, while Jean's outcry roused her, at the same moment, to lift her eyes in the girl's direction.

“Well! what beautiful wood-nymph is this? But—hold a tight rein there, Thomas! That off beast! Take care, take care!”

“Oh, Angelia! My dear! my darling!”

It was all over in a minute. But when the fractious cobs had again become quiet, Jean had

reached the ground by the side of her stricken friend, who lay in the dust very pale and still, but smiling bravely up into the pitiful face above her.

“I—I’m all right. I just—I saw he had lost control—I guess—it’s nothing—”

The queer little old lady had now climbed out of the game-cart and was bending above the two girls, who paid no attention to her or anything else about them, and she laid her hand gently upon Jean’s shoulder.

“How did it happen, child? I was looking at you up there in the tree and I didn’t see this one. Is she much hurt? Here, Thomas! Let James take care of those beasts. Come and lift her out of the road.”

“I think, Madame,” said Thomas, touching his hat, “she thought the team was going to run and she stopped them; but not in time to avoid being hurt herself. It looks like her arm was broken. See how it drops when I lift her?”

“Oh, oh! But I hope it is nothing worse!”

“Worse! Could anything be worse?” cried Lady Barefoot, indignantly, and tenderly lifting that curiously-dangling arm of her poor friend to support it against her own breast as



ANGELIA LAY IN THE DUST, PALE AND STILL

Thomas carefully moved Angelia out of the roadway.

“Yes, many things are worse than broken bones. Hearts, for instance! Though I was thinking of some serious internal injury when I spoke,” responded the old lady, with a quiet smile.

“Maybe there might be worse for other people, but not for us! Are you in great pain, darling?”

“No, no, little Anxious! Only that arm. I can sit up if you will all move aside and give me room,” answered the injured girl, sturdily, but the attempt to change her posture whitened her face again to that dreadful pallor which had so terrified Jean.

Thomas quickly brought the carriage cushions and placed them carefully behind her back, as anxiously and gently as if Angelia Parthenia had been clothed in royal attire instead of a worn print gown; then he wrapped her in the fine plush robe and asked respectfully if he could do anything further for her comfort.

“Even a servant can show that his mistress is a gentlewoman,” responded the bound-out girl dreamily, and those who heard her thought her

brain was hurt. But it was not ; it was only her instant appreciation of the treatment she received, and her swift leaping to the conclusion she had murmured aloud.

“Are you worse, dear?”

“Worse, Jean, child? I never was so delightfully, luxuriously happy in my life—except for your worry and that arm. See! Feel this robe! That is a foretaste of what shall be mine some day—some day!”

Madame D'Albemarle stood curiously watching this little by-play. If Angelia Parthenia Todd was quick-witted and ambitious, she had now met her counterpart, and the white-haired little lady standing amid the fallen leaves by the roadside on that late autumn day, had been carried suddenly backward by the romantic girl's words to her own long-past youth and its brilliant dreams. There are some happy souls who never outlive their romance. Madame D'Albemarle was one of these, and Angelia Parthenia could not have fallen into more congenial surroundings had she had the world from which to choose, than when she threw herself before the carriage of a once famous songstress.

“My girl, who are you?” demanded the old lady briskly.

“A nobody now. A somebody sometime. By name Angelia Parthenia Todd.”

“Todd! Ha! That won’t do. It is horrible. Angelia, or even Parthenia, is not so bad. Where do your folks live?”

“I haven’t any.”

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“The gospel truth.”

“Where did you come from?”

“I ran away from a farm-house. I was born in a poor-house. I have been a bound-out servant. That is a servant who works for no wages. I am going to be a reader on the public stage; the greatest the world has ever known—if I can! But as great as I am capable of being, in any case.”

“Humph! How are you going to accomplish this?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. I am going to New York first. The rest I shall find out afterwards. ‘Great floods have flown from simple sources. . . . Oft expectation fails, . . . and oft it hits, where hope is coldest and despair most sits.’ ”

“Odds, faith, child! Do you know Shakespeare?”

“He brought me up, ma’am. That is, he taught me all I know worth knowing, except the good minister and his Testament. I am not so great a fool as I seem. But—you will think I am if I sit here and keep you waiting any longer. Oh, my arm!” as a twinge shot through the injured member. “Here, Thomas, you can take the robe again. I have had a taste of luxury, and I thank you for it.”

“Wait, Thomas!” commanded his mistress. Then she turned to Jean. “And who are you, dear? A wood-nymph, as I thought you?”

Lady Barefoot was not at all dramatic, and she did not either like or understand the sort of talk which seemed to come so naturally to these two others. “I am a homeless girl, too, ma’am; but I am going to find my friends. They live in New York and we were on our way there when—when your horses knocked Angelia down.”

“How were you going to get there?”

“We were going to try to earn our way there somehow. I don’t know exactly. This morning we earned our breakfast by taking

care of a woman's baby and milking her cows. I hope we shall find some other chances to help us along."

"You dainty little creature! That you should fare like this! My dears, I am an old woman. You can both trust me. I must make amends to this poor child I have been the cause of injuring, and the first step towards it is to take her to a surgeon. I am on my way to Chelsea Landing. You must go with me and have that broken arm set right away. Afterwards, I am going on the afternoon boat to the city. I invite you to go with me—if you are telling me the truth—as I believe you are I have not had such a chance to do anything out of the common in a long while. I should like to help you on your way, at least as far as the great town whither you are bound. Come. Get in, Wood Nymph! And, Thomas, help this future 'Cushman' into the cart."

Jean looked at Angelia for guidance and saw that odd girl's cheek flush with a brilliant color, and her fine eyes flash in a way that transformed her strong intellectual face to absolute beauty. "You need not assist me Thomas. I have nothing worse to contend with than a

broken arm;" and saying this the proud creature sprang into the broad game-cart as easily and lightly as if she had been accustomed to riding in fashionable vehicles all her life, and had no personal injuries to hinder her.

"Eh! Well, well! You'll do it, girl! You'll do it!" cried the queer little owner of the establishment, climbing nimbly into it herself; while Jean remained, somewhat sad of face and greatly perplexed, by the roadside.

"Come, come, child! In with you! You are both going with me, of course. You do not think I would part friends, do you? No, indeed! There is nothing so beautiful as friendship, while it lasts."

Jean needed no more urging, and five minutes later the whole party were bowling merrily along toward Chelsea Landing, while Jean was trying to tell her new acquaintance the history of her own and Angelia's lives. In this she was continually interrupted by Madame, who hated a long story and dreaded that this would be such, till Angelia herself interposed by saying: "You need not fear, ma'am. The annals of the poor are brief!"

"Go on, then," ordered the lady, smiling, and

thus commanded Lady Barefoot gave a truthful history of all that had befallen them, and of the dreadful suspicion which rested upon herself.

“Hm—m! You need not take that matter so much to heart. Any judge on the face of the earth who looks once upon your pure young face would send you out of court in a hurry. Don't think of such a terrible mistake again, my dear, but tell me instead, do you like riding?”

“Oh, I love it! It seems just like Whisker must feel when he goes from tree to tree. It is as if I had wings and could go up there above the clouds!”

“Fancy yourself above them now, dear child, and stay there as long as you can. Youth is the time for beautiful aspirations; age is not rich enough to keep them.”

But nobody stays above the clouds for very long; not even so bright a spirit as Jean Wilder, though her descent from them was not her own fault nor on her own account.

The downfall happened in this wise. The two girls, under the escort of their new friend, had just emerged from the office of the best surgeon at Chelsea Landing, some hour or more

after their entrance to the town, and Jean was congratulating Angelia upon the fortitude she had exhibited during the setting of her broken arm, when she felt herself pushed rudely aside, and a tall man in a straw hat laid a fierce grasp upon the bound-out's shoulder.

“Hi! I've caught ye, have I? You good-for-nothing hussy. Runnin' off this way, after stealin' enough provision to send you to State's prison! Hi, hi, my lady! I reckon it'll go hard with ye, now, if I don't take all your sin and wickedness out of your worthless young skin!”

Alas for Angelia Parthenia and her beautiful dress! The voice in her ears was a voice she both feared and hated. The hand upon her shoulder was a hand whose grip she had felt many times—the hand of her master, Farmer Wilkins!

CHAPTER XVII

THE END AND THE BEGINNING OF A SERVICE

“I WILL never go back with you—never!”

“You’ll go back with me so quick it’ll make you dizzy, ye sass-box!”

“I’ll die first! I hate you; I despise you! I won’t—I won’t!”

“Ye’ll have ter. I’ve got that here in my pocket ’ll take all the snap out o’ your wicked black eyes, you good-for-nothin’ poor-house brat! I’ve got a warr’nt fer yer stealin’ my goods an’ chattels. Larceny, that’s the count I’ve got ag’in ye, an’ I’ll press it ter the eend. Ye won’t git clear o’ workin’ yer time out when you’re eighteen, as you ’spected ye would, my lady. I’ll take the snap out o’ ye—er my name aint Wilkins.”

“I won’t—I won’t—unhand me, villain!” shrieked Angelia Parthenia, careless of who

heard her and cowed far more by this brutal master whom she feared, than by any amount of physical pain, or even starvation.

Jean had been standing beside her captured comrade, wringing her hands in mute distress, but comprehending fully what had occurred and the desperate case of the poor bound-out. When the "law" steps in all other arguments seem powerless. "Oh, if you only hadn't have taken that miserable food. But was it really stealing?" cried Lady Barefoot, clasping Angelia's free hand and clinging to it in an agony of fear.

Then did the future "illustrious reader" rise to the occasion, as turning with a gesture she flung aside the sympathetic younger girl and exclaimed majestically, "Et tu, Brute!"

"Magnificent! Magnificent! You'll do it—you little witch! You certainly will keep your word!" The delighted tone in which these words were uttered wrought a sudden change over the whole situation. The irate farmer slightly loosened his hold of his captive, Jean ceased sobbing, and Angelia herself forgot everything for the instant but the praise which had been accorded her.

In the pause, thus propitious, the interested

little Madame now stepped forward. "Hm—m! Good sir, is there no other way beside forcing this girl's unwilling service to compensate you for what she has done?"

"None that I knows on, ma'am, whoever you may be. An' I may as well tell ye that this wuthless critter ain't a good subjeck fer you ner nobody else ter waste sympathy on. She's a ungrateful, high-sprung pauper out o' the poor-house, that's what she is, no matter how she tries ter come the hypercrite over ye, a play-actin' in the streets, as a decent female critter ort ter be ashamed o' doin'. An' I hain't got no time ter waste. I've ten cows ter milk ag'in I git hum, an' it's arter noon spell now."

"So it is! And I feel hungry. I presume you all do, also. Suppose we all go into the inn opposite and have a comfortable meal? Invite your lawyer, too, Mr. Farmer Wilkins, and let us inquire more critically into the situation. I am interested in these two girls, and I have been the cause of your bound-out's broken arm. Therefore I must be allowed to compensate you somewhat for the want of her services while her arm is mending. Will you dine with me?"

“I begs your pardon, ma'am! Do I understand ye to ask me ter eat dinner with ye?”

“I hope you so understand. That was my exact meaning.”

“What fer? Folks ain't in the habit o' goin' 'round the public streets a pickin' up strangers to eat their victuals fer 'em. Not out o' Scripture, ma'am.”

“Well, my good sir, once in a hundred years some people do really practice the Scripture teachings which everybody professes to believe. Of course it's uncommon. The golden rule looks better and wears better kept on a closet shelf along with the Sunday clothes; but I happen to have a fancy for trying how it will work on a week day as well. For instance: ‘Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you,’ in this case I interpret thus: I am hungry and as none of you seem inclined to invite me to dine with you, I will try the reverse working of the maxim and invite you to dine with me. See? Where is your lawyer?”

“Here, Madame, at your service;” said a gentleman, emerging from the group which had gathered about the party, and smiling amusedly.

“Hm-m! You look like a person who has

been outside Chelsea limits. Please aid me. Make these people, who are not interested, immediately go away, and will you, with your angry client, do me the favor of stepping into the inn and settling this trivial matter in a comfortable fashion? I trust this will be guarantee sufficient;" and smiling in a manner so charming as to carry her point at once, the little old lady handed the lawyer a card at which he glanced with careless politeness only to look at it again, this time with amazement, then up into the donor's face with an expression of surprise and delight.

"Madame D'Albemarle! I hold myself most fortunate in this chance meeting. Your wish shall be obeyed. Beg pardon. Here, Mr. Wilkins, to the hotel, please. We can soon arrange this little matter there."

The farmer dropped Angelia's sound arm, to which he had clung all the time, lest she should escape him, and recalled his wandering thoughts.

"The pesky critter's gone and broke her arm, fer sure. I thought she was a shammin', but it ain't no sech thing. It's broke, sure's preachin', an' now what'll she be good fer?"

“Not much to you, of course. Only come across the square and we’ll arrange all that. There’s a dinner waiting you besides.”

“Who’s ter pay?”

“A lady who could buy and sell all Chelsea town, if she so desired. Have you ever heard of that rich woman who hired Judge Bothwell’s elegant country seat, during this last summer?”

“Sartain. My wife made butter for her fambly. Though she didn’t know as she’d orter, arter she heerd she’d been a-sellin’ it ter a public woman-singer.”

“Humph! Don’t be a fool! There’s many a public woman-singer could give a Christian points on religion. Madame D’Albemarle is one of that sort, besides being the leading woman of her profession among all the English-speaking people. It is an honor to see her, let alone a far greater one to be invited to dine with her. And if you know which side your bread is buttered, you’ll treat any proposition she may make you with respect. Come, and put on your best company manners.”

Thus advised, Farmer Wilkins followed his legal guide across the street, whither Madame

D'Albemarle and her young protégés had preceded him, and watching with curious eyes the handsome turnout which Thomas and James were now driving toward the inn stables.

It was an odd party, but one which the ex-songstress enjoyed to the utmost. She had a hatred of the commonplace, and cared not at all for the high-bred society dinners in which she frequently, from her own social position, was compelled to participate, and where people were seldom natural in their behavior; but this simple feast, which, by the way, was the best the resources of the country inn could furnish, with its untrained guests, delighted her.

“Now, Lawyer, make short shift of this man's complaint against his ex-servant. I wish to engage her, and she has—through my means—become useless to him. Broken arms are not good either for milking or scrubbing. Ask him what he will take to release her, and give me a paper acquitting her of every sort of sin against him. I leave it to your wit to make the transaction legal, but I want it settled at once. Then this poor, little girl will eat her roast turkey in peace.”

“I dunno, ma’am. I dunno what ter say three years’ labor would be wuth ter us.”

“At the end of three years you would have to pay her a hundred dollars, wouldn’t you? And a new suit of clothes?”

“Yi—is, marm. I s’pose so. Only ‘count’ o’ her stealin’—”

“Hush! Don’t you use that word concerning anybody I have taken under my protection. Did you ever, in your youth, take apples out of anybody’s orchard?”

“Humph! That’s a differunt thing.”

“Exactly. Shoes that fit our neighbors generally do pinch our own toes. Never mind. Have another piece of that boiled fish, Farmer. It’ll do you good. And, Lawyer, just find out whether the good man has any fine apples to sell. I am very fond of apples. Especially I should like some of the Wilkins’ apples, I am certain. If they were at all like the Wilkins’ butter—‘A No. 1!’”

In five minutes that astute reader of human nature had made the poor dazed farmer fairly beam with happiness and pride; in another she had so flattered his self-love that he began already to imagine the stories he would have to

tell when he got home again, and could boast that he had not only seen the richest woman who ever came into those parts, but had actually dined with her and on equal terms.

As for Angelia Parthenia Todd—fear was forgotten, and joy radiated from her freckled face as she received glance after glance of affectionate encouragement from the bright eyes of the little lady who had so unexpectedly been introduced into her life.

“See, Farmer. I haven’t to eat drumsticks this time! I do not mean to eat them any more. And some time—in the distant future, I invite you and all the Wilkinses, big and little, to dine with me at this same inn and on the best the market can supply.”

“Don’t be silly, gal!”

“No, indeed! If I were going to be that I should not be able to carry out my plans. I mean, on the contrary, to be as wise and well-informed as it is possible to become. If study can help me, I shall be a walking miracle of knowledge—‘A Daniel come to judgment! A wise young judge!’”

“Well, well, my Portia! Eat your dinner, now. Then go out to the store I see yonder

and buy some things for you and pretty Jean while I square accounts with your former employer," commanded Madame, smiling.

"I—I do not need anything, ma'am," remonstrated Jean, timidly. She had from the first moment accepted the Madame as Angelia's friend more than hers, and a latent pride forbade her accepting any favors done to her at second hand, or rather of necessity. She rejoiced with all her heart for her comrade's sake, and she was not envious on her own account. But she did not feel that she ought to receive more than the "crumbs" by the way, so to speak.

"No, Wood Nymph! I see you do not need anything but shoes, stockings, hat, jacket, etc., etc. However, be so kind as to supply yourself and Miss Parthenia with those four articles, duplicated to fit your different heights, and I will be contented until we get to New York, and I can do better for you. Now, here is some money. Trot!"

As the lady spoke she tossed upon the table two gold double eagles as carelessly as another might a copper cent, but the money lay there untouched, for all eyes rested upon it in amaze-

ment. Those of Farmer Wilkins with greed, as well, but Jean's in indifferent curiosity. "Good gracious, children! Why don't you go? You look as if you didn't know what money is!"

"Oh, but I do know what it is, only—I—I think I have no right to use your money for my needs, unless I can do something in return," replied Angelia Parthenia, simply.

"Well, Farmer Wilkins, if that is the sort of teaching my new maid has learned at your house, you are not half as bad a fellow as I thought. As for you Miss Todd—horrors! what a name! will you enter my service herewith, to do for me whatever I may require, and to learn of me what I may choose to teach?"

"Of course I will. But if I have not been worth wages for doing such labor as milking and cooking, certainly I shall not be for just waiting upon a lady like you."

"Stuff! If I hear any more such twaddle I shall think I have been mistaken in you. I would not have hesitated to take the first friendly hand held out to me on my entrance to a career!"

"Nor will I, Madame D'Albemarle! In advance, then, I very gladly take this money, and

will use it for my darling Jean and myself. Come on, dearie! You're going to have a pair of shoes of your own, henceforth, and not have to borrow mine when you bruise your pretty foot. Hurrah! To fame and fortune!" And throwing her sound arm about her friend, the high-spirited Angelia Parthenia jingled the coins in her hand and hurried storeward.

When she returned Farmer Wilkins had been disposed of, or rather his claim had been satisfied, and Madame, their benefactress, held a paper in her possession which gave her absolute authority over the services of the bound-out girl until her coming of age, as transferred by the original employer of that young woman in contract with the Poor Board of the town of Chelsea, State of New York.

"But I thought he said I was to be arrested for 'larceny,'" said Angelia, not yet wholly believing that she had indeed heard the last of that matter of the purloined food.

"Larceny—fiddlesticks!"

"But—the law. Isn't the law terribly strong? Strong enough to take me away, even from anybody as kind as you? Will I never have to be 'tried'? I feel brave enough to think

now I can plead my own case so that no kind-hearted man or jury would punish me very much, and I am more than willing to pay for what I took—some time. When I can.”

“My dear, never count upon the kindness of any man’s heart! Nor upon the stringency of the law, which is strong I grant you, but not as strong as one thing else.”

“What is that?”

“Money, sweet simpleton. ’Tis money upholds the world, and conquers all within it.”

“Save one thing, dear lady.”

“What’s that which money cannot down? You wise young Portia, teaching a grandmother wisdom!”

“Love. And I love you Madame. Not for the gifts you have made me and the future you have opened to me, but because you believed in me and understood me. Even as Jean here, who certainly did not gain my heart and devotion by any use of gold!”

“Humph! I like you child. I like you greatly. And there comes the boat. I hear the whistle. Let us step out and see that Thomas and James get the horses safely aboard, then take our places also. I hope with this, your

first sail over a famous river, you set sail for happiness as well! And if you are what you seem, you have given me a new interest in life. Come, let us go."

In a little while afterward all were on board the big steamer and moving smoothly down the stream; and Jean clasping the hand of her stronger companion, felt as if she were, indeed, beginning a new life; but for her it was full of an undefined fear, while Angelia's radiant smile told that in her mind fear had no place at all.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HOUSE IN PALATIAL AVENUE

“OH! how nice you look!” exclaimed Jean, on the day following the arrival of the waifs at the home of Madame D’Albermarle in New York. “I am so glad that you have found such a splendid friend!”

“Oh! isn’t she just perfect? If I can ever grow to be half as fine as she is, I shall be perfectly satisfied. But why, dear, wouldn’t you let her give you some pretty clothes too?”

“Because there is no need she should as yet—or, indeed, ever. If my relatives do not receive me I will find something to do to take care of myself. One couldn’t expect a stranger to adopt two poor girls at once, could one?”

“For the matter of that one couldn’t expect her to take even one in. But if me, why not you?”

“ Because you are her own kind. I can't tell it exactly but I felt it the moment I heard you speak to each other. You have the same sort of minds, maybe, or something. She is as bright as you are ; and you both say the oddest things which I should never think of saying. And it seems perfectly natural to you. I am sure you will be very happy together, and that it will be more like mother and daughter than mistress and maid. She thinks so, too. I saw she did right away.”

At that moment Madame herself entered the rich apartment in which the two girls were, and which was the lady's private sitting-room. Her eye fell instantly and with pleasure upon her own immediate ward, the proud Angelia Parthenia ; who in a tasteful costume that morning procured from a fashionable modiste's, would never, to use her own words, “ have been taken for myself even by Ma Wilkins who has scolded me times enough to feel acquainted with me !”

A hair-dresser had been called in to arrange the luxuriant hair, which Madame enthusiastically described as “ a magnificent Titian red ;” the fine eyes could not have been brightened by

anything known to the costumer's art; nor the shapely, perfect figure have been improved by any brace or stay. Miss Todd looked, as she felt, "to the manner born," and her old dreams of aristocratic parentage returned to thrill her soul anew.

As her benefactress came in, she flew to move a chair into the most comfortable spot, and rolled a footstool before it with a natural ease and grace as if she had been accustomed to ladies' boudoirs and ladies' fancies all her life long; and seeing a quizzical smile flit across Madame's countenance she instantly interpreted it correctly.

"Ah! You dear, blessed, good little Madame! You are wondering, as I am, how I know how to do things so soon! Do you believe me—it does not seem possible that I am the same girl who used to milk the cows and wash the dirty linen at Farmer Wilkins' house! Only day before yesterday was it, or a thousand years ago? All there is to remind me of it, is the hardness of my hands. But that will pass—it shall pass. They are not bad hands for shape; and I must take care of them. A great elocutionist must take care of herself in every way, must she not?"

Her good looks are part of her stock in trade. I am glad I am good-looking, though I never dreamed I was until I saw myself in your glass after the clothes woman had finished dressing me this morning. It is a beautiful surprise. And I am so glad, so glad I must sing! May I?"

"Unless you know how, you certainly may not, Miss Vanity!" retorted the little Madame, laughing merrily; for she saw that silly as Angelia's words may seem in the repetition there was no trace of ordinary vanity about them in reality. It was only that the child had suddenly wakened to a sense of her own good points and was estimating them exactly as anybody else estimates the capital he may bring to a chosen business.

"But I do know how! Though I never learned from anything except the birds in the wood. Shall I try?"

"If you must!"

Granted this much permission the ambitious girl burst into a song that certainly startled, if it did not please, her listeners. Of course it was from Shakespeare, the only storehouse of Angelia's knowledge; but the selection was about

as bad as the improvised tune, which could by no means be called a melody.

“All that glitters is not gold,
Often have you heard that told;
Many a man his life hath sold—”

“Great Goodness! Stop—stop!” cried Madame D’Albemarle, rising suddenly and clapping her hands to her ears.

Angelia ceased instantly, and turned upon her hostess with the utmost astonishment.

“Why! Don’t you like it?”

“Like it! I should think not, indeed! I never heard anything so perfectly outrageous! except one thing: the crowing of a half-grown cock of an early morning. It was of that I thought at sound of the very first note. Sing! Not you, indeed! You have a voice. A strong one—it will never be sweet, though training will do for it all that is necessary. But sing! Hark. I am seventy-five years old, but I can yet show you what singing is; or D’Albemarle will ‘hie her to a nunnery!’”

With that the little old lady tripped across the room to her piano and striking a few notes by way of prelude began to sing so softly and easily that it seemed she but opened her lips

and the melody floated from them without effort or volition of her own. The words were those of the same song which Angelia Parthenia had chosen—but there all similitude ended.

When the song was over and the rich and perfect voice, which even age had respected, ceased, the impulsive would-be songstress was on her knees by the piano-stool and her fine eyes were suffused with tears, but not tears of shame at her own defeat.

“Oh! you wonderful woman! I will never sing again! I never heard anything like it!”

“Nonsense! You will sing a great many times and perhaps before crowded houses. You will sing and I shall like to hear you; but not yet—not yet! The profession of singing or of elocution, of anything worthy the name of either, for that matter, is the study of a lifetime. You have the elements of a great impersonator; but—not yet, not yet, indeed!” and shaking her white head soberly the wise little woman returned to her chair and her contemplation of Jean Wilder’s personal affairs.

“Well, my Wood Nymph, since you will have nothing of me or mine—until you have tried your own flesh and blood first, I have

ordered Thomas to bring round the horses, and I will myself drive to Number 333 Palatial Avenue and place you carefully in charge of your friends. But I wish you would accept a simple suit of some sort, first; something a little better than you have on."

"Thank you, Madame, but I would rather not. Unless you do not like to go out on the street with me looking as you do not like. Though I'm sure I never had anything half as nice before. That jacket and hat you gave me yesterday are beautiful, and the shoes and stockings so warm. I feel very, very rich already; and I think I could find the place by myself, perhaps. I do not like to give you so much trouble."

"Oh, you gentle little wood-bird! As if D'Albemarle dared not ride with anybody she chose, even a tramp. And as for you and that pretty squirrel you keep so fast by a string, I am honored to escort you. I am, indeed. I have not met anything so pure and sweet in many a long day. Besides, I suppose you will not object to taking another ride behind those mad cobs, will you? I'm sure Angelia will not, even though she does have to carry her

arm in a sling, and has had the sleeve of her first good gown ruined to accommodate it."

"No, indeed," said the happy Miss Todd; "I don't mind how I go. Only I shall never forget how terrible it did seem to me when the clothes woman cut the sleeve to bind it above that miserable broken arm. I don't see what made me so silly as to tumble down, anyhow."

"I was under the impression that you were knocked down, miss, and couldn't help yourself. However, let us be off, so that Jean may have a chance to see her new home by daylight."

Then followed a gay and merry drive through many of the city's choicest streets, for Madame D'Albemarle enjoyed the pleasure of her protégés over their first glimpse of a great town, and delighted to prolong it; but at last the carriage turned into one of the quiet side avenues, where the magnificent houses all look as if they were too proper and fine to admit of any real, happy life within their walls.

"This is the most aristocratic street in Gotham, my dear, and I don't know as your fine friends will ever admit me if I call upon you, since I live in plebian 'Bohemia.' No, no; that is jest, of course. You do not take a joke as readily as

Angelia Parthenia does, my quiet little mouse. And, of course, even the residents of Palatial Avenue will be honored to have D'Albemarle visit them. Yes, yes, indeed. It is a very good thing for you that I am the one who presents you. A very, very good thing! They will know you have one influential friend, at least. And now, shall I go up with you, or do you prefer to go alone?"

"Oh, please, please go with me! It all looks so big and cold and hard. Nothing but stones anywhere, even the streets. I begin to shiver already. I am so afraid of—I don't know what!"

"Stage fright, my dear! Pure stage fright! It will pass. Come on, then. No, Angelia, remain in the carriage. You can bid Jean good-bye there, and it will be for only a little while. Come, Jean."

Obediently the coarsely clad girl followed the richly attired woman up the broad stone steps which led to the sculptured door of what appeared to the woodlander exactly like the prison of her imagination. Her heart beat fiercely and her throat felt dry and husky. What if they should turn her off! Alone in

that terrible city! For she did not, somehow, reckon the Madame as a permanent friend, who would be bothered again.

It seemed as if they had stood for hours upon that terrible step before the great door swung silently back and a man in queer, yellow clothes appeared at the opening. Madame D'Albemarle presented him her card and was courteously ushered within the portals. But even here the resemblance to a prison did not end, nor did Jean loose her tight grasp of her chapeau's skirt as she followed that lady forward.

A second servant appeared, and receiving the Madame's card upon a silver tray, retired with it. Then followed a still longer waiting, and, finally, the footman came back, bowed before Madame D'Albemarle, and announced gravely: "The ladies are not at home."

The visitor's eyes were keen. It was probable her experience had also given her a subtle understanding of many things not expressed in words. Her face flushed a little, then drawing a second bit of pasteboard from her card-case, and murmuring politely, "Allow me," she wrote a few words upon

the card and offered it to the servant in yellow livery.

“Be so good as to give that to your mistress. Jean, if I do not hear from you by to-morrow morning, I shall conclude that all is well with you. I slipped my card and address in the pocket of your jacket before we set out. If you need me, come to me; but I hope that you will not. Good-by! May the world use you as you deserve!”

Lady Barefoot did not understand quite how it happened, but overcome by her own awe of her strange surroundings, or not expecting any such action on the Madame's part, the door had opened for their exit, the lady had passed out into the street, and she, herself, had, by the same, little, daintily-gloved hand, been thrust backward into the corner of the dimly lighted hall, while the heavy outer doors clanged shut between herself and every person she had ever known.

Then a bitter cry escaped her. So might a young wildling of the forest cry, finding itself in a trap.

“Angelia! Angelia! Madame! Oh, Madame—don't leave me! Don't—I am afraid!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE AUNTS MONTGOMERY

“FOR goodness sake, child, hush !”

Now, for once at least, was the rigid footman, Dodson, startled out of his wooden calmness. Never had such a piercing shriek as that echoed through the aristocratic halls of the Misses Montgomery, number 333 Palatial Avenue. Always were precautions taken to deaden any noise which might shock the delicate nerves of the residents, but this sudden, ear-splitting, desperate cry had come without any preparation.

“Hush ! Hush ! Hush !” The sibilant whisper of the frightened Dodson was almost as loud as Jean’s cry. “You must—be still ! It may cost me my place to allow such a racket as this ! Be quiet and then I’ll let you out ! But I dare not open the door till you are still,

lest hearing the two sounds together Miss Montgomery or Miss Sophie might think of burglars and go into one of her 'spells.' Do be quiet! Do sit down a moment while—"

Alas for the best intentions! In this enforced detention Jean saw but fresh proof of her "imprisonment," and again her young throat emitted the shrillest cry of which it was capable.

Then there appeared a woman descending the stairs. Her feet sank silently in the thick pile of the carpet, and she advanced toward Jean with such directness of intention and such sternness of bearing that the girl became silent and awaited what might come next.

"Dodson, who is this?" The speaker's tone was not lifted above a trained monotone, yet its intonation thrilled Dodson with fear. Without raising her voice Miss Sophie Montgomery could give to her words a dozen different meanings. To Dodson, trembling in his short clothes, its present intonation meant: "Look out for yourself, my man! I hold you responsible for this."

"I do not know, ma'am. I think she must be a beggar, or a poor child trying to sell some-

thing. On account of your being so well known for charity, Miss Sophie, ma'am."

"Sell something, Dodson? The place for salesfolk and beggars is at another door." The voice now expressed amazement at the servant's unwarrantable forgetfulness of ordinary customs.

"Yes, ma'am. But it was with a caller she came. The same whose card was just sent above stairs."

"The public singer? Show her the door, Dodson!"

Whisker had all this time been quietly reposing in the pocket of Jean's new jacket, a nest he found very comfortable and cosy; but he now awoke and, as usual, decided to take a hand in affairs. He seriously interfered with his little mistress' departure by leaping from his place of rest and landing plump among the white curls which formed Miss Sophie's becoming "bang"; and which distance was the utmost limit his degrading string would allow him to spring.

Then something unprecedented happened: Miss Sophie Montgomery screamed as loudly, as fearfully, as her young relative had just done. "My gracious, Dodson! Ouch—ouch!"

What is it? What—is—it! Oh! my heart! Oh!—I—Dodson— Gracious—”

“Don’t faint, Miss Sophie! Please, don’t faint! Not till I can bring you a chair to be comfortable on! Don’t—”

“You need not be afraid, ma’am. It is nothing but Whisker!” said Lady Barefoot, laughing; her fear, for the moment, held in abeyance by the absurdity of the scene before her, and which the mischievous Whisker appeared to enjoy to the utmost. He whirled round and round upon the lady’s head, refusing to be captured and removed by anybody till Jean reached upward and administered to his soft little body a sharp tap, though a punishment she hated to inflict.

Dodson brought a chair forward and Miss Sophie sank into it; while upon the stairs appeared two more slender, white-haired women, peering with timid curiosity into the hall below.

Suddenly Jean remembered that she had heard the footman say the “ladies were out”; and believing these to be servants she ran toward them, demanding: “Do you live here? With my Aunts Montgomery?”

“Live—here—with—my—Aunts—Montgomery?” repeated the two new-comers, in utmost astonishment. “Is—the girl—crazy—Dodson?”

“No, ma’am, I am not crazy! But I begin to think everybody else is! I came here with a lady to call upon my Aunts Montgomery, and ask them, if they would take me to live with them, as my grandfather wished me to do; and all is so different—and dreadful—and the man says they are away— And—see! This is the letter! Can you read? Either of you? If you can you will see I am telling you just as it is. Grandfather Wilder—”

“Grandfather—Wilder—” gasped one of the ladies on the stair, and sank upon a step to recover herself.

“Grandfather Wilder!” repeated another, while Miss Sophie began to fan herself vigorously. “Child, who are you?”

“Jean Montgomery Wilder!”

“Are you—telling—the truth?”

“Of course, ma’am! I never told a lie in my life! See! Here is the letter. Will you read it? Will you tell my aunts? Will they be kind? I am so desolate—so all alone!”

One thin white hand was stretched out to take the extended paper, and the aristocratic fingers touched it carefully, as if afraid of contamination. But the hand belonged to Miss Montgomery, the elder of the trio of maiden sisters, and she prided herself upon her strength of character. She was always ready to set a good example to her younger and weaker sisters, and she now nerved herself to face this dreadful ordeal with the dignity which a Montgomery should ever show, no matter how trying the situation.

“Silence. I will read this aloud.”

Not a sound, save the clear tones of the reader was heard during the next five minutes; and the brief epistle had been gone through twice within that time.

Silence again; and then Miss Montgomery announced: “We—are your Aunts Montgomery! We are—the sisters of that misguided woman who married a Wilder, and had her heart broken for her recompense.”

“You—my aunts! Oh! Oh!”

“It seems so. But—let us be sure. Let us be sure. A mistake of this sort would be irretrievable. Tell me all you know concerning

this grandfather of yours, on the paternal side. Then we will have proof that you are a genuine descendant of our old family or an impostor."

Jean did not at all understand all they said to her, but she told them whatever she could remember about her grandfather and his lonely life and death; and from their former acquaintance with him, the "Aunts Montgomery," whose sister had estranged herself from them by her marriage to old Israel's son, became fully convinced that their small visitor was neither beggar-maid nor saleswoman, but their own niece.

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Sophie.

"Well?" questioned Miss Emily, the youngest of the trio.

"Well," remarked Miss Montgomery, decidedly; "I think I have always recognized my duty under all circumstances, no matter who painful; and having recognized it, it is needless to say that—with the exception of our misled younger sister—a Montgomery always fulfills what is expected of her. Sisters, we will retire to our apartments. Jean Montgomery Wilder, you will accompany us."

Whisker had not been invited; and he had

betaken himself once more, after his punishment, to that secure new nest of his in his mistress' pocket; but something now moved him to poke his funny little head thence and inquire with his bright black eyes if all were as it should be outside his hiding place.

Seeing this Miss Sophie screeched a high-bred screech. Miss Montgomery reproved her, and Miss Emily exclaimed, "My! how cunning!"

"Emily—Emily! When will you outgrow your youthful enthusiasm? Do try to be more sedate, dear Emily, even if you are inexperienced."

Even Jean found something amusing in this remark, which would have set Angelia Parthenia off into a gale of merriment, and smiling more brightly than she had felt she ever could do again, she turned to her younger aunt with the assurance: "He is, indeed, the very most cunning little fellow in the world, and the best. He did not mean any harm by jumping on Aunt Sophie's head, but I suppose he thought her hair looked ever so soft and pretty and he liked to play in it. You see, I have let him play in my curls as much as he likes, though sometimes he tangles them dreadfully, and until

yesterday I never had a very good comb to straighten them with. But Madame D'Albermarle—”

“Hush, child! The servants! Restrain your further confidences until we are in my boudoir. Meanwhile, give that wild animal to Dodson to dispose of. The idea of a Montgomery going about with a squirrel in her arms.”

But Jean was a Montgomery, too, and she resolutely clasped her favorite and only playmate to her breast, refusing utterly to be parted from him, even for a moment, which same was to the very great relief of Dodson, who did not like to soil his aristocratic fingers by contact with anything so plebian as a “wild animal.”

“You'll all love him very much after you get acquainted with him. Even Grandfather did, though he was used to seeing all sorts of creatures about. We used to live upon the sale—”

Hush, Jean! I command! The remainder of your disclosures will be heard above stairs.”

“Blood is thicker than water.” The orphan's fear of this strange house and her new relatives had vanished. She did not like them; she did not like them at all, except perhaps the rather

weak-minded Miss Emily ; but she felt she had a right to their protection, and that though they were not half so agreeable as Madame D'Albermarle, she would find more interests in common with them when she came to know them better than she could ever do with that erratic but brilliant old lady. Besides, she was obeying her grandfather, and obedience had been the habit of her life. So she followed her aunts up the stairs, wondering at everything she saw, and rendered silent by the richness and luxury which surrounded her.

As she sank upon a chair in her eldest aunt's private boudoir and was commanded to remove her hat and jacket, a sigh escaped her. "To think you have been having all these beautiful things all this time and I have been sleeping on a pile of pine branches ! Isn't it funny ?"

There was no reproach in the tone, but only the extremest wonder.

"You forget, child, that we did not even know of your existence. Rather, we did not know of your living, though when you were born the estrangement between your mother and ourselves had not become final. She was a pretty, silly young thing, misled by the first

flattering voice she heard, else she never would have married—”

“Hush, Sophia! There is no occasion to review the past. The daughter of our dead sister has come to us for protection. We will give it her. On either side there are no questions to ask, except the strictly necessary ones of how far her education and training have gone. We care nothing for Israel Wilder, his life or death. Jean is Montgomery. As such we accept her and will treat her. Let this be the end of the matter.”

“But—”

“But—that is all. I am not accustomed to having my decisions set aside. To you, Emily, I will assign the task of having the little room adjoining yours put in order for a child’s or young girl’s sleeping room. To you, Sophia, I will leave the providing of a suitable wardrobe as soon as possible. You will know what is proper. It must be simple and severe in taste. I will reserve the mental training, and consider that I have selected our several duties with judgment and discretion. If you two will now kindly withdraw, I will examine the ground whereon I stand in regard to our charge’s educa-

tion, and prepare myself to meet the necessities of the case at once."

Miss Sophie sniffed a little, though still in a well-bred manner, and slipped softly out of the boudoir. Miss Emily smiled more brightly than she often did, and followed her sister, but paused with her hand upon the portière long enough to inquire: "Can I arrange the room exactly as I wish?"

"Certainly; only do not 'wish' to fill it with flummery. The training of a child's taste should begin early."

"Then I'll make it as pretty as I can, my dear!" said Aunt Emily, brightly, and this was the first kind word, or, rather, loving word which Jean Wilder heard after she had thrown herself upon the hospitality of her three spinster aunts.

CHAPTER XX

ANGELIA PAYS A VISIT

“RING down the curtain, my dear! That is over with!” cried Madame D’Albemarle as she returned to her carriage, after leaving Jean within the shelter of her aunts’ home.

“What do you mean?” asked Angelia Parthenia, in surprise.

“I mean exactly what I say. You have parted forever from your woodland friend.”

“Impossible! I will not be parted from her! Here; please let me get out and go back there to her! It is terrible to be told such a thing as that—my sweet, dear little ‘sister’, Lady Barefoot. I will not have anything I cannot share with her—she’s ever so much better than I am!”

The carriage did not stop, however, for this impetuous outburst; nor did Madame attempt to

check it. She leaned back among her cushions, smiling amusedly and regarding her protégé with critical admiration. "Yes, indeed, my dear. You will certainly succeed. Your expression at this moment is worthy a most serious matter. You are intense, you are dramatic; you have not mistaken your calling, for nature unaided by art has made you true to herself in all your moods and tenses.

"Oh! please, don't! This isn't acting—it's real, awful trouble! I love Jean Wilder as if she belonged to me. We are one as poor as the other. I will not have any good thing which I cannot share with her. Please, let me go back."

"There, there, that will do. Do you like me? Have I been good to you?"

"You know that I more than like you! You know that you have been more than good to me!"

"Well, then, listen. I was turned out of that house as unfit to enter it."

"Wh-a-a-t! Please—what did you say?"

Even the well-trained Thomas turned around at this cry, and looked inquiringly upon his beloved mistress, who smiled composedly and nodded her head for him to proceed as usual.

“Quite true. Only, of course, it was done in a perfectly, a scrupulously well-bred way. My dear, public personages, however famous, do not belong to New York’s ‘four hundred’, that is, to New York’s most exclusive society. The Montgomerys of Palatial Avenue do. Therefore, though thousands of doors equally grand would open eagerly to receive me, the doors of Number 333 remain tightly closed when D’Albemarle comes tapping for admission, even in so slight a degree as introducing a waif she has picked up by the roadside.”

“Madame! This seems incredible! You are making sport of me, are you not?”

“Unfortunately for your present happiness, I am telling you the exact truth. It is just possible that these aunts of pretty Jean’s may repudiate her and turn her adrift again; in which case we will befriend her to our utmost. I took care to leave her my address and I think she would apply to us if she needed us. But the most likely thing is that people so highly respectable and exclusive will do their ‘duty’ to the end, no matter whether they wish to do it or not. That is the one thing I have always admired about your true aristocrat. He

is always 'game,' no matter where you put him. So I think my Wood Nymph has not only found a bower to dwell in, but a bower whence common human creatures like you and me will be rigidly excluded. The ladies sent down word that they were not at home. But they were. I know it."

"Then they told falsehoods?"

"Certainly. It is better to do that than to step outside the prescribed pale. No, no! I am not half so bitter as I seem. I don't blame them. They are right according to their lights, and so am I according to mine; only the fact remains, so make the best of it; your friend Jeau will not be allowed to associate with you any more."

To picture the mobile countenance of Angelia Parthenia Todd during these remarks would be impossible. Every emotion which Madame's words aroused played upon its surface in full intensity; and it was for this very reason that the little old lady prolonged the talk. Like Miss Montgomery, at that very moment, she was experimenting and testing the mental capabilities of her new charge.

"Well—then I am sorry I ever came to New

York! I am almost sorry we ever met you. It seems so terrible—”

“Be fair-minded, my dear. You forget that you were on your road to this town, any way, and would have reached here by hook or by crook, some time, even if I had not helped you forward. Besides, just as certainly would you have taken Jean to Palatial Avenue, and been yourself excluded from it. With this difference: that without me you would have been turned adrift among the pitfalls of a wicked town alone, unfriended. Now I can care for you, love you. No, no. It is all right. It is inevitable. Don't ever quarrel with fate; but 'take the good the gods give you' and be thankful. I had arranged to go abroad for this winter. If we do not hear from our little wood bird within the week, we may conclude that all is well with her and set sail with joyful hearts. Shall you like that?”

The tears were streaming down Angelia's cheeks but she raised her fine eyes and smiled through her sorrow upon the generous woman before her. Then she leaned forward and kissed the small, gloved hand, resting in the lady's lap, with heartfelt devotion.

“I shall like anything which you wish, dear Madame. But I cannot understand how you can take such things so calmly. I should be boiling over with indignation, if I were great—like you—and thought anybody felt above me—that way!”

“And very pretty and silly you would look, my dear. I would not change places with anybody in this world, dear child. What I am, I have made myself. But do, if you have any regard for yourself in the future, take care of that broken arm of yours! The way you manage to do things, one-handed as you are, is marvelous, but a little dangerous to the surgeon’s success. Now, I am going to take you into a restaurant for a cup of chocolate and to show you a glimpse of the busy people in this town. I wish you to watch how I do, and listen to the way I give my order. The next time I shall expect you to do the same yourself, for both of us. It will be part of your ‘service,’ about which you are so anxious. You are to take care of a childless old woman like a faithful maid or a loving daughter. Whichever you will.”

Angelia would again have demonstrated her

gratitude by an extravagant caress but a slight motion of Madame D'Albemarle's hand restrained her and gave her a delicate hint, swiftly understood, that it was time she began to adapt herself to the usages of the world in which she was now to live.

But nothing could restrain the brilliant, adoring smile which she bestowed upon her benefactress, nor the reverent attention she presently accorded the first simple lesson the country girl received of "how to order a luncheon."

Nor did her observation end there. Every motion of her companion was noted, and when the "cup of chocolate" received the addition of several dishes, with their specially designed methods of serving, she "took to the thing" with a readiness highly gratifying to Madame.

"Ah, ha, my dear! In six months' time you will have forgotten the farm!"

"Beg pardon, but I shall not, I shall remember it—but as a dreadful nightmare. Are you pleased with me? Do I behave not so very, very awkwardly?"

"You behave very satisfactorily, indeed. Now, let us drive to the office of the steam-

ship company, and then home. I am a little tired."

Afterward, on that home-ride, Angelia broke forth again:

"But it all seems like a dream! I heard you buying my ticket for Paris, though where on the face of the earth that place is, I am sure I don't know! And I saw you pay out a lot of money; and I kept pinching myself and saying: 'Say, Angelia, wake up! Is this you, or is it not?' But I can't believe it! I expect to get a knock on the head soon and be told: 'Hurry up with them milk-pails, sass box, er I'll tan yer hide fer ye!' I do indeed!"

Angelia's imitation of Farmer Wilkins' tone and speech was perfect, and Madame drove onward laughing far more than she thought was proper for a street occasion. But laughter does nobody harm, and the little lady felt she had already been repaid for all the trouble she was taking for her new charge.

The end of the week came round without a word having been heard concerning Jean; and Angelia became convinced that it was useless to hope for any being sent. So she resolved to take the matter into her own hands, and went

one morning immediately preceding her departure for France, to the Madame with the request for permission to go out.

“Alone, child?”

“Yes’m. I am not afraid. I could not get lost.”

“Why do you wish to go?”

“I would rather not tell.”

“Oh! As you like. In any case it is unnecessary. I know where you wish to go, and I tell you beforehand it will be ‘Love’s Labors Lost.’”

“Perhaps. But I cannot, I cannot bear to go away, so far as you say Paris is, and for six long months without seeing my darling Jean again. I cannot. I will see her, if I have to break into the house to do it!”

“You will do nothing of the kind. And you will be disappointed. You will get yourself into trouble, I fear. You are so impulsive.”

“Please let me try.”

“You wheedler! When you have already made up your mind beforehand! Well, go; and luck attend you! Also, Thomas or James!”

“I would rather go on foot, by myself. I will not get astray.”

“Well, trot! But remember I shall feel as badly for you as you do for Jean, if you do not return to me.”

“Of course I’ll return. In good season, too.”

With a laugh and a jest Angelia Parthenia set forth on her first journey through the unknown streets of the city, more confused by the directions which her careful patron gave her than if she had been let to go unguided save by her own observation.

But views from a carriage window and views on foot are different, as Angelia presently found; and it was not until she had questioned as least a dozen different policemen, according to Madame’s instruction, and had boarded cars going down town when she wished to go up, that she finally did find herself before the very house which had swallowed up her beloved Lady Barefoot as completely as a prison swallows its inmates.

But Miss Todd marched boldly up to the front door and rang the bell. She had provided herself with the card-case Madame had given her, and where the common name of “Todd” had been changed to the higher sounding one of “D’Albemarle;” according to the Madame’s

reasoning it being no worse to choose a name for one's self than to wear a name bestowed upon one by a Poor Board, and selected at hap-hazard from any number of equally ordinary ones.

“I declare, Angelia Parthenia, aren't we getting up in the world? Who would have dared to prophesy a week ago that I would now be calling upon aristocrats in New York and feeling myself top of the heap, as I certainly do. I don't believe Jean will know me. I wonder if they have rigged her up as fine as I am. I—”

Open flew the door, but not to reveal a servant's face confronting her. No, indeed! There stood Jean herself, laughing and dancing with delight, the very sweetest vision which that old portal had opened to disclose in many a long day.

“Angelia, Angelia, you darling—how glad I am! I never expected to see you again as long as I lived!” cried the joyous Lady Barefoot, barefooted no longer—by long odds, and clasped her arms about her friend and drew her within the house and shut the door with a bang, which made it tremble for the consequences—that is, if doors can tremble!

“Humph! Madame told me I would not be allowed to enter. She said everything she could against my coming, lest I should be turned away and made to feel worse than ever.”

“Oh, we’re so lucky! All the aunts have gone to different charity meetings, and Dodson is taking his breakfast—he takes it after everybody else is through—and the other servants are all busy. I was standing up by my bedroom window, and I saw you away down the street. I was so afraid Dodson would get back—and then—I don’t know what! I am so glad—I am so glad! Come right upstairs with me, before anybody sees you! Quick!”

“Why? I’m not afraid of anybody. Are you?”

“I—I—they are very kind to me, my aunts are,” returned Jean, loyally, if not warmly.

“But are you happy, dear?”

“I’ll tell you after we get upstairs. Hurry, before anybody sees us!”

Angelia followed readily, though not fully understanding the great need there was for all this secrecy. Yet anything in the shape of a mystery commended itself to her immediately, and her blood rose at the prospect of outwitting

somebody, she knew not whom. Up the stairs they flew, two steps at a time and noiselessly for the soft carpets.

But at the very top Jean paused, uttered a little cry of dismay, then seized Angelia's hand and dragged her forward swiftly.

“What—what is the matter?”

“Here comes Dodson. I thought he was downstairs. This way—into an empty closet I see open yonder.”

Into the “empty closet” they flew, whose floor gave way beneath their weight and sent them speeding downwards with a horrible crash.

CHAPTER XXI

WHISKER IN AN ANIMAL BOARDING-HOUSE

THE Misses Montgomery had never returned from their several expeditions in charity's behalf to find their hope in such condition, as on that morning of Angelia's visit.

As their brougham turned the last corner and brought them upon their own block, Miss Sophie leaned forward and exclaimed with dismay in her voice: "Will you look at those carriages before our door! They are doctors' carriages, or I am greatly mistaken. What can be the matter?"

"Drive faster, Betts; though, of course, not unduly fast," ordered Miss Montgomery, feeling her serenity disturbed more than she cared to show. "I suppose that child has been up to some sort of mischief."

"I'm sure I have never seen her do a thing

out of the way ; not intentionally ;” remarked Miss Emily, with as much force as she ever dared use against her eldest sister’s opinions.

“ A young person like yourself can scarcely judge of what constitutes mischief, dear ;” said Sophie sweetly. The poor little younger sister had already turned forty, but after the flight of Jean’s mother she had been considered the “ baby ” of the flock, and this delicate reference to her years quite mollified any resentment she might have felt against the open reproof.

“ There, I do hope it is nothing serious ! If it is I shall certainly faint !” ventured Miss Sophie, as she stepped to the curbstone, and glanced curiously, yet politely, toward the vehicles grouped there.

“ You will certainly do nothing of the kind !” returned Miss Montgomery, promptly. “ You will have the good taste to reserve all your faints for the privacy of your own household.”

And thus admonished Miss Sophie followed her sisters indoors.

“ Dodson—what is this ?”

“ Dear me, Miss Montgomery, I couldn’t help it, I could not ! Being that I was going above stairs to speak to the carpenter about

making as little noise as possible; when all of a sudden into the new elevator dashed those two children, and down to the bottom rushed as if they had been shot out of a catapult! Like they do at the circus, ma'am. They did, indeed!"

"The—elevator! The children! What—children?"

"Miss Jean, ma'am, and another. I don't know who nor what, being as I never laid eyes on her before I helped lift her out of the elevator, which same is broke all to pieces, ma'am, and not my fault, at all, as I was saying, I—"

Miss Montgomery raised her hand to command silence. "Where are the injured persons?"

"In the dining-room, ma'am, being as it was the near—"

Then did Miss Montgomery prove Madame D'Albemarle's words true. Her nerves might shudder but they were not permitted to show their weakness through her actions, and she descended rapidly and quietly to the lower floor, appearing before the physicians at work there like a spirit of peace and composure.

It was a sorry sight that met her eyes. On the table lay pretty Lady Barefoot, banded all about her head and shoulders where the flesh had been bruised or torn; and on the table—for lack of better place—was poor Angelia Parthenia, whose devotion to friendship had resulted most disastrously for herself. Her broken arm had been thrown out of setting, and her ankle was injured severely; while the surgeon was at that moment examining her ribs, fearing to find fresh fractures among them.

“What can I do, Doctor?” asked Miss Montgomery.

“Just hold this bandage tight, while I put on a fresh piece of plaster; and your other hand here, please. On the side. So.”

Poor little “bound-out” servant from the poor-house! The slender, delicate fingers of the most high-bred woman in Palatial Avenue did not shrink once from contract with the baser flesh which writhed in pain beneath even their daintiness; nor could even the worldly-wise Madame D’Albemarle have believed her own eyes had she witnessed the tenderness with which Angelia was treated. For the visitor’s

hurts had been far worse than Jean's own, which were mostly flesh wounds; and the wonder in the minds of all the doctors present, and whom the frightened servants had summoned from any house which bore a physician's sign, was that she, at least, had not been killed outright.

“Ting-a-ling-a-ling!” The peal on the bell was sharp and imperative.

Dodson obeyed it with his heart in his mouth. What new disaster was this?

There stood the same little lady, clad all in velvets and furs, whom his mistresses had declined to see, only a few days before. “Is there a young lady in this house named Todd—D’Albemarle? A visitor?”

“There’s a young lady here, ma’am. But, please give me a card; I will take it to the ladies.”

“Tush! This is no time for cards! What does all this closing of blinds and spreading of straw mean? Is my adopted daughter here? Is anybody hurt?”

“A moment, ma’am. The straw is on account of Miss Sophie, ma’am. She is that delicate in her nerves that she thought it the

proper thing to do. She has been having a great many 'spells' since the accident—"

"There has been an accident, then? I feared as much!" and without further parley, away marched the little woman and ascended the broad stairs before Dodson's very eyes, determined to find out for herself what had become of the child she had so lately but so wholly taken into her lonely heart.

"Oh, Madame!" cried a voice from an inner room; and recognizing it instantly, the lady pushed her way forward till she bent above the couch where lay her precious protégé. "How did you know about it?"

"Why, I was sent for, of course, as was proper and right. And thanks to the Misses Montgomery for the attention. But the message bore no hint of this! It merely asked me to call. What have you done to yourself, dear?"

A lady emerged from the semi-darkness behind the lounge where Angelia Parthenia lay and addressed the new-comer. "Madame D'Albemarle, I suppose. I am Miss Montgomery. I did not specify the trouble; it some times is too severe a shock. But the doctors say it is nothing very serious. Your charge will be

all right again after a while." Thereupon she gave a brief but clear description of the accident as she had learned it from the lips of others; and a half-hour thereafter Madame D'Albemarle drove away, with Angelia lying on a stretcher in her own roomy carriage, and determined that to the house in Palatial Avenue neither herself nor hers should go again—if she could help it. "There's a spell upon the place, my dear. It's an unlucky house for us!" And poor Angelia was far too ill to contest the point.

Bad as the injuries to both girls were, they were not so serious but that they mended soon; and though the Parisian trip was somewhat postponed, by Christmas time Madame and her charge were on the ocean and Jean was under a governess' care, trying with all her might to repair her neglected education.

On Christmas afternoon she sat by the window looking out wistfully. Her lap was full of gifts which her aunts had thought best to bestow upon her, yet with little pretence of an affection none of them seemed to feel, except, perhaps Aunt Emily, who, "being so young and silly, probably did not know any better."

The elder aunts were taking charge of Christ-

mas trees for poor children, and Jean turned a little wistfully toward Miss Emily, who entered at that moment. "I wish, Aunt—do you dare tell me where Whisker is?"

Miss Emily looked around cautiously. "I know where he is. I do not know as I ought to tell you, but I was not forbidden to show you."

Oh, you dear! will you? I am so unhappy without him. I miss him more than I can tell you. It is all so stiff and dismal here. If I laugh Aunt Montgomery says, 'Not so loud, Jean,' and if I dance Aunt Sophie says it makes her head ache. There are no birds, no squirrels, no woodchucks, no toads even. I am very lonely."

"Woodchucks! toads! Surely you cannot lament the companionship of such creatures as that?"

"But I do. I would give anything to have a good chase after a chipmunk this minute. And oh, Aunt Emily! The other day when I was out riding I saw a place, a store, where there are lots of animals. It isn't far from here. Do you suppose it would be very wicked if you and I should walk down there and look at them?"

“I—don’t—know,” responded the gentle Emily, with reckless eagerness shining in her faded eyes.

“Let’s! Come on! There cannot anything happen to us if you are with me! It will be such fun! You don’t have very much fun, either, do you, dear?”

“N—o. I—don’t know. Are you sure it isn’t far? Could we get back before sisters do?”

“Long before! Do come, please.”

They went,—the trembling spinster feeling as if she were outraging all the proprieties of Palatial Avenue, yet rather exulting in the hardihood of doing so, and Jean, unable to keep her dancing feet subdued to the prim little pace her aunt continually reminded her was the “ladylike” manner of walking. And when they reached the animal fancier’s there was a real Christmas delight awaiting Lady Barefoot, for there sat Whisker, perched high above the door, chattering away for dear life, and attracting the lion’s share of attention and praise from all visitors to the little shop.

“Whisker! Whisker, my darling!”

Down sprang the little fellow and began to

nibble Jean's lately healed cheek with happy fondness and never hurting one bit, though Miss Emily besought her with pitiful entreaty to "make him stop."

"I should like to know, miss, how you can train such things so well. You ought to be in the business," said the dealer, who "boarded" Whisker, to the squirrel's mistress.

"I was once," replied Jean, archly, and forgetting the "proprieties" completely, though she had been learning many things of late concerning them.

"So? Then all I have to say is that if ever you wish to return to it you may count upon me for a partner."

"Do you mean it?" asked Jean, mischievously, little thinking how much was to hinge upon the answer.

"Of course I mean it! If I had such a body as you up in the country somewhere, I should never have my stock fail or be furnished with poor creatures frightened out of all intelligence in the catching of them. Here's a chance! Here is a squirrel I bought two weeks ago, and he is almost grieving his heart out and slowly starving to death. Speak to him, miss,

and cheer him up, like you have been doing that cage full there yonder.”

Instantly Jean walked over to the corner where the woodland captive lay curled up in a ball, taking no notice of anything or anybody, and by the magic of her craft, which she declared was nothing but love, she made the sad little animal not only lift its dejected head, but take a nut-meat from her fingers and nibble it eagerly. Before she left this delightful place, the very pleasantest she had yet seen in all the great city, she had introduced Whisker to his race-fellow, and left the poor chipmunk a changed creature for her short visit to him.

“Well, it’s something to make one heart happy on Christmas Day, if even only a squirrel-heart!” said the kind dealer, cordially. “And I’m much obliged to you, miss, for your trouble. If ever you want to take up business again, remember, I’m your man.”

“All right, sir; I’ll remember!” answered Jean gayly, and followed her Aunt Emily out of the shop.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SHADOW OF A DISGRACE

“MISS HARRISON, please send Jean to me in my private sitting-room.”

Miss Montgomery's tone, saying this, was stern in the extreme, and Miss Montgomery's expression would have added a chill to ice. The governess who had received the request, which was of course also a command, wondered what could have happened, and pitied her dear little pupil as she delivered the commission.

“Your aunt wishes to speak with you, Jean, darling. I would be as prompt in obedience as possible.”

“Yes, ma'am,” answered Jean, rising instantly, but wondering somewhat at the advice. Was she not always prompt in obedience? Had not all her days, since the holidays were over,

some four months before, passed with rigid regularity and loneliness?

“Has anything happened, Miss Harrison? Only this morning I was wishing something would, I am so—so tired of being shut up and studying all the time.”

“Well, you have made good use of your ‘imprisonment,’ dear. I am very proud of my bright pupil, and I do not think it can be anything about lessons need worry you. Miss Montgomery herself has expressed great pleasure at your quickness, and only the last composition I showed her she said: ‘Remarkable! I really think it is remarkable, don’t you, Miss Harrison?’ And I assured her that I did. So just smooth your curls a little and run along. Maybe she is going to give you a holiday!”

But though the kind governess said this cheerfully she had been disturbed by Miss Montgomery’s manner more than she would have cared to have her pupil know.

“Dear Aunt, here I am. I understood you wished to see me;” said Jean, entering the room to which she had been summoned, and hesitating a second at sight of a strange gentleman conversing with her relative.

Miss Montgomery turned toward her niece, and now her face was not only stern but deathly pale as well. Instantly Jean divined that she was in disgrace, but in vain did her thoughts travel backward over all the past weeks. Since the escapade of the elevator, for which she had not been scolded, she did not remember to have done anything very greatly out of the prescribed order.

“Oh, yes! I remember! Aunt Emily said she did not think you liked to have me go to see Whisker so often! Is it that, Aunt?”

“Hush! Whisker! If it were only Whisker!” Then the lady turned toward the stranger. “This is the girl, sir.”

Immediately the gentleman rose, approached and handed Jean a paper, which she took wonderingly. “I summon you, Miss Wilder, as a witness on a trial to be held at Chelsea township for the purpose of discovering the murderer of the late Doctor Disney, of that place. The trial is set down for one week from this day.”

Had a thunderbolt fallen at Lady Barefoot's feet she could not have been more startled. During the months of her life at her aunts'



Wm. W. W.

MISS MONTGOMERY'S FACE WAS STERN

house she had almost forgotten the terrible events which had taken place just before her leaving Chelsea; or rather she remembered them as a horrible nightmare from which she had awakened to a tranquil monotony.

“Doc—tor Dis—ney! Oh! I had for—got—ten him!”

“That may have been more comfortable for you; but it is necessary that I should remind you of his death, now. The court will expect your presence. I am engaged upon the case. I will send a suitable escort for you at the right time; and I would suggest Madame, that it would be well for you or some friend of Miss Wilder to accompany her.”

“But what can I tell that I have not already told? Why should I have to go back to Chelsea? I am afraid of the place! The dreadful man—the horrible Peterkin Rideout— Oh! I don’t want to go back—I do not, I do not!”

“I have to advise you, miss, to say nothing in my hearing which you will not wish to repeat at the trial;” said the gentleman, rising. “I believe that my business is completed, and I will bid you good morning.”

As in a dream Jean saw the stranger pass out

of the room, heard the great front doors open and close for his exit, and realized that she was left alone in the presence of her aunt, who looked as if she could crush her to death in her anger.

For the space of some minutes neither spoke ; then the silence grew so oppressive that the girl could bear it no longer. "Oh! why don't you speak to me! Why don't you say something to tell me he didn't mean it! I won't go back—I cannot—I dare not!"

Miss Montgomery rose, crossed the room, and locked the door. The action was significant to her niece of something even more terrible than what had already happened; and she retreated to a corner and crouched there in an agony of fear.

"Jean, come here."

"I—dare—not!"

"Of what are you afraid?"

"You!"

"Why of—me?"

"You—look as—as if—you would kill me if you could!"

"‘The guilty flee where no man pursueth.’ I would not harm a hair of your head. I would

not touch you, save of absolute necessity. Come here. There are some questions I must ask and you must answer at once."

The dreadful, monotonous voice compelled the girl's obedience. Slowly as if she were in that nightmare she fancied, Jean left her corner and crept toward her motionless aunt. When she had come close to the lady's chair, she sank down in a heap upon the soft carpet.

"Jean! This is no time for folly. Sit up!"

The girl rose and clasped her hands tensely.

"Why did you come to this house with such a burden on your conscience, and keep silent?"

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"The truth. Speak it now, if ever. From what that person said I learned that you had not only been a witness of this other person's death, but might have known more about it than you chose to tell. He did not say this, plainly, of course. He was guilty of nothing unprofessional. But—this is the first time in the history of our family that even a shadow of a shadow of scandal has fallen upon our name. Montgomery! It has been a type of everything highest—purest—most honorable. Has it been left for you, a miserable child of a misguided

woman to drag it in the dust? Tell me, instantly, completely, all—all—you know of this affair. You need fear nothing. I shall protect that name as long as it is possible. Tell me all, at once.”

The lady's tone had risen ever so slightly and on her cheeks two small red spots now burned like fire. But no fiercer was the flame of indignation within her own breast than that which thrilled her young relative.

“You shall hear all that I know, Aunt Montgomery. I too, have the same blood in my veins that you boast is so pure, and I would neither lie nor harm a human being any more quickly than you would! I know nothing; absolutely nothing, about Doctor Disney's death. Though that wicked Peterkin Rideout told me that people—thought I—had—murdered him!—I! And he was my best, my dearest, only friend! But for him we should have starved—I—he—”

“I have heretofore forbidden you to speak of the past. I little dreamed how much there was in it I should have known. Begin at the beginning. Tell me the first thing you remember. Do not omit anything which will throw light

upon that which I should learn. In this you need not fear. You have deceived me—cruelly—awfully. But I shall protect my family name at all costs. What do you first recall?”

“A sweet-faced woman on a bed. She kissed me. Then an old man led me away. I think the old man was Grandfather Wilder.” Here Jean paused so long that Miss Montgomery reminded her: “I am waiting.”

“I don’t know what next, exactly. I have always lived in that old cabin with Grandfather. We had very little to eat. He had ‘flesh,’ meat of some kind, ‘to keep the life in his old veins,’ but I had porridge. I raised and trained birds and animals, and Doctor Disney bought them.”

“Go on.”

There was no escaping in that relentless voice.

“Grandfather had something wrong with his heart, or his head. He used to take dark medicine. Sometimes he acted queer. He would dance a great deal. He talked about things I did not understand. One night—one day, I mean—I went to the village to sell a pair of woodpeckers and a squirrel. Some bad boys

teased me. They always did, they called me 'Lady Barefoot,' because I never had shoes, except in winter. Then one of them was hurt and I helped him. Then they teased me more, and I was hurt. The Doctor came and took me home. Grandfather was worse. He was 'out of his mind,' the Doctor said. I was afraid, for Grandfather fell into the fire and was burned. Then the Doctor took off his own white shirt to bind the burns and he went away to the village to bring medicine and a nurse, he said. I never saw him afterward. I mean—"

"Go on."

"I stayed alone with Grandfather, and he was dead. In the morning a terrible man came and frightened me. I ran to the village and there I saw Doctor Disney dead; murdered they said. There was a reward offered. The Ride-out boy, who worked for the Doctor, told me they suspected it was I killed my dear old friend and he would have the money—the reward. So I took Grandfather's letter and ran away."

"Did you come directly here?"

"No, ma'am. I met Angelia Parthenia; she was running away, too. She was very kind;

she helped me go back and bury Grandfather. Then we saw the Rideout man coming and we ran again. Something stole our food, but we didn't need it. The sweet old Madame helped us after that. Then I came here."

It was a simple, straightforward story. Miss Montgomery believed every word of it. But none the less did that make her conscious of the degradation of having their name mixed up in any such affair, no matter how innocently. She could see nothing but disgrace, look either way she would. At last she spoke. "Go to your room, Jean; do not exchange a single word with anybody in this house. Do not leave your room until I see you again. Go—at once."

Jean crept out of the apartment. Her heart now seemed like lead. Two words had burned themselves into her brain, to the exclusion of more comforting thoughts—"the court."

"I suppose that is a prison. Well, I will never go there! Never! I will die first!"

But dying is not easy, and even terrible troubles lose something of their sharpness if one regards them fixedly, and by degrees a new idea entered the aching head of poor Lady Barefoot.

“I, too, am Montgomery. I did nothing wrong. I know nothing wrong, and I will not be treated as if I were a bad girl. I will go away; I will go straight back to Chelsea, and to that old Squire Dutton who is so clever, and was kind to me. I will ask him to take care of me, and I will tell him over and over exactly all I know. Then I will find out who did murder the poor Doctor—if it takes me all my life to do it.”

No sooner had she formed this resolution than a wonderful composure came to her. “I will go this very day. I will go decently, too; for I have a little money; my pocket-money, which kind Aunt Emily has never let me use, because she always likes to buy things for me. I will wear a plain dress and the storm-cloak, and a straw hat. But I will go. And when I see my aunts again they shall not dare to talk to me as if I were wicked or deceitful. I didn't tell her because, partly, she doesn't like to hear unpleasant things, and lately I did almost forget it. Oh, if I could only see dear Angelia once more! But now I never shall. Never mind. I will live to find the Doctor's murderer, and I will not think of any other thing.”

Life goes on in its usual order, no matter how much we suffer. Because Miss Montgomery felt that she had been bitterly humiliated this did not prevent her attending the "Orphans' Home" meeting as ordinarily on a Thursday; and it was Miss Sophie's day at the "Institution for the Blind." Even Miss Emily took herself out of the house on a visit to the "slums," and thus charitably engaged all three women forgot the poor little niece whose heart was breaking for a word of the sympathy they each so readily bestowed upon those who were of alien blood.

But Jean did not think of this. She only rejoiced that circumstances so favored her intention. A half-hour before the usual time of Miss Montgomery's return, a small figure, simply clad, passed out of the front door of Number 333 Palatial Avenue, and Dodson remarked with a smile: "Going to see the naughty Whisker, dear Miss Jean? Well, the air will do you good. It's lonely living with three maiden ladies, for a young thing like you."

"Thank you, Dodson. Yes. I am going to see Whisker. You can tell my aunts that, if they should ask about me, please."

“All right, Miss. I’ll be sure to. But do not stay late. I heard the lady’s maid saying that there was a charity concert somewhere to-day, and Miss Sophie was intending to take you. I’m sure a little recreation will be good for you, it’s that pale you’re getting, Miss.”

Jean did not reply. She merely smiled cheerfully and from the sidewalk turned to watch the great door, which had opened so reluctantly to her coming, close firmly behind her.

“Now I have done it. I have cut myself off from everybody. The one thing Aunt Montgomery would never forgive is disobedience and I am alone in the world once more. I am going to find who killed the Doctor.”

CHAPTER XXIII

SURPRISES

ON the second day after Jean left her aunts' home, and set out alone to face not only the dangers of a great city but of the greater world, and under the shadow of a terrible suspicion, Squire Dutton entered the room in the sheriff's house where Peterkin John Rideout awaited his coming trial for the murder of his late master, Doctor Disney.

A changed man was Peterkin, and about as pitiable and craven an object as it was possible to find. "Any news, Squire?" he asked, eagerly.

"No news, Rideout," answered the old gentleman, eyeing the prisoner compassionately. "But we shall have you clear. Unless some stronger proof is found against you."

"There ain't none! There can't be none, Squire! I'm as innocent as a babe unborn!"

“I believe you, lad. At least that you are innocent of the terrible crime alleged against you. It has not been pleasant, has it, to experience in your own person the suffering you were so ready to inflict upon another; and that other a delicate girl?”

“Don’t be hard on a poor feller, Squire. Don’t remind me what a fool I was.”

“Well, the girl has been subpoenaed as a witness, and will be here to face you in open court in less than a week’s time. I hope the meeting will result in our finding out the truth. It has been a weary waiting to me, but my old friend shall be avenged yet.”

“It have be’n a long time, Jedge. It have be’n a terr’ble long time. An’ me a-locked up ag’in after I’d oncet be’n bailed out!”

“Well, Peterkin, my man, you should not have tried to ‘jump your bail’ then. That is a rascally thing to do. It was the only way to have you where we wanted you, at the last, and as I said, I believe that you are really innocent of the terrible crime charged against you, and the circumstantial evidence is about the only proof. But that deepens, Rideout. I am sorry to say that it has not all been told yet.”

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Won't I quit this town the minute I'm cleared! But, say, Squire, did they find the girl?”

“Why, you stupid! I just told you so. Didn't you hear? I said you would have to face her at the trial.”

“Did ye? I didn't sense it. I don't 'pear ter sense nothin'.”

“Poor wretch! But we did not need to 'find.' I have known for several months exactly where she was. There was no need to disturb her peace till now. She is living with her relatives, who are among the wealthiest people in New York.”

“My land! That Lady Barefoot?”

“That Lady Barefoot, barefooted no longer. But I am very sorry that she has to be annoyed at all, or her people. Only, since she was the last person who saw Doctor Disney alive—who has yet confessed to seeing him—” here the old Squire fixed his piercing eyes full upon the trembling Peterkin's face, “of course her testimony has to be taken in the court. Peterkin, did you ever have a blue knitted jersey?”

“S—s—sir?”

“Most wood-cutters wear a jersey, a ‘Cardigan’ jacket when at their work. I know that you did. Was it a blue one?”

“S—si—sir?”

“Never mind.”

Peterkin groaned. His memory traveled back over the past and inventoried every garment he had ever possessed. Alas! Among them were jerseys galore. Some black, some brown, and some, indeed, of blue. “What—what—about it, if I had?”

The Squire sat down close to Peterkin. “I have something to show you. I have obtained permission to do so. I do not believe that you are guilty of the murder, but I want you to know exactly where you stand. There was a piece of an old blue knitted jersey found in Doctor Disney’s hand. I wish you to tell me if you ever saw it before?”

The Squire held up before the startled Peterkin’s eyes a scrap of ragged woolen cloth. It was so like hundreds of other jerseys in common use that he could not say it had or had not been torn from a garment of his own. He remembered, too, distinctly now a jacket that used to hang in the woodshed of the Doctor’s house.

He wore it about his work in the stable. His 'chores' he called it.

"Did you ever see this before, Peterkin?"

"Oh, oh! I—I—I've seen sunthin' like it, Jedge. I—I—boo-hoo!"

"Oh, you idiot! I have no patience with you. I wish you would be a man for the space of ten minutes. Then I will depart and leave you to blubber alone. I declare, Rideout, if it were not for your parents' sake I should think hanging would be a good thing for you. It would save the world any further exhibitions of cowardice, malice, and stupidity. At least from you. I'd like to see you stand up to your trouble like a man. Why can't you?"

"I dunno, Jedge. I dunno nothin', only I shall die—I shall die—I can't bear no more—I can't—"

Bang went the outer door, and the Squire had departed in disgust.

"Well, well! It is enough to make a man hate his kind! I do not believe that Peterkin Rideout is the murderer; but things look dark for him just now. And—I'll walk up to the place. It always seems to bring my old friend nearer and to nerve me to courage on his behalf. For myself

I wish the matter had never been stirred up. He is dead. No amount of legal conviction will ever put the breath back into his body, though it may check that of the guilty person. What an idea that would be! If the murderer could be made to restore his victim's life at the cost of his own! But even science, mighty though it is, can never accomplish that justice! Meanwhile—"

The few months which had elapsed since the death of his friend, the Doctor, had aged the smart old Squire very greatly. He had chafed at the law's delay, yet now as the time of trial approached, he felt that little would be proved. He had fallen into a habit of wandering about the spot where Doctor Disney had been found, as if by searching and researching he could come upon a clue which would amount to something; and he had now absently approached the ravine when he heard his name called anxiously from the opposite side. Startled he raised his eyes, and there stood Lady Barefoot.

"Oh! Squire Dutton! Squire Dutton! Wait a moment! Wait till I can cross over to you! Please wait!"

There was no need for her to urge the matter. Changed as she was in regard to her attire, even the old man's sight recognized at once the sunny hair and lovely face of the "squirrel-girl," about whose treatment he had had many remorseful thoughts. "I ought to have paid more attention to her, and not let her be frightened away as she was! But she has come back and I'll make it up to her!" he considered, as he watched her rapid and graceful descent of the opposite bank and her swift climb upwards to his side. He held out both hands and after a moment's pause of astonishment she grasped them eagerly.

"Oh! I am so glad to see you! I am so glad to get home again!"

"Glad to see—me! Who neglected you so shamefully? Do you call that—home? An empty old rookery! That you are 'glad to be back again'?" Even as he questioned her thus the old man's heart was beating warmly and a real pleasure stirred in his lonely heart. How he could have loved a child like this, if such had been vouchsafed him!

"But it is 'home' all the same, though it is poor and empty. The same sweet music in the

brook, the same sweet scents in the air, the same happy sounds in the tree-tops! I will never go away again. It is spring, now, and I shall not suffer from cold and things will grow that I can eat. I wish—are you too tired to come across to my poor little house and sit down with me? I have come all the way back to see you. Come all alone—and a runaway! I seem to be always running away, do I not? Though, I forgot, you don't know anything about that. Will you come?"

"Of course, I'll come, you bright little creature, if you will only give me time. There's a deal of difference between sixty and sixteen in the matter of limberness, let me tell you, Miss Blue Eyes! I'll come—but not 'in the twinkling of an eye.'"

"Oh! I am not in such a hurry as that. I only got here yesterday, and I have been as busy as busy ever since. I was pretty tired and I slept so long and so late I am ashamed. But, never mind. There is nobody to be vexed with me here."

"How is that? You are not alone?"

"But I am, quite alone! Didn't I tell you? I have run away."

“From whom?”

“From my Aunts Montgomery.”

The Squire's countenance became instantly very grave. He looked sharply into the bright eyes he had admired, and almost dropped the little hand which had confidingly taken his to help him over the rough path. “That is a bad business. A very bad business, indeed!”

Jean continued to smile. “I hope not, sir; I think not. For I could not possibly be so happy if I were doing wrong. I have written them a letter, and I was going to take it to your house and get you to see if it were spelled correctly and all that. My oldest Aunt Montgomery is very particular, and I have been learning only such a little while; only since I have been away from here.”

“Humph! I reckon she will not heed the spelling if she only hears. Why, child, it is a dreadful thing you have done. They must be heart-broken over your flight. I used to know your aunts when I was young, my dear.”

“Did you? Then you must know that their hearts are not the sort which break over their own folks. They are very, very good to real poor and wicked people, but just their own kind

don't trouble them. They were angry with me, that is, my oldest aunt was. The others did not know."

"There, there. I am comfortable. Don't fuss any more. Sit down on the doorstep and tell me the whole business."

"Like I used to tell Grandfather? I would always begin like this: 'I went from here'—and then go on and tell him every single thing. Shall I?"

Commonly the Squire hated a long story, but a long story from such smiling lips as those that put the question would, he now fancied, seem a very refreshing contrast to the dull and discouraging legal prosings to which he had been compelled to listen of late.

"Fire ahead, child. Begin: 'I went from here.'"

Jean laughed, a brighter, merrier laugh than had ever escaped her during her life in Palatial Avenue. "Well, then, about the first running away." And from this simple prelude she gave in eager, graphic, excited words a condensed history of all that has been recorded here. Her listener did not tire; indeed he scarcely moved, so wrapt was he in the tale whose truthfulness

and pitifulness impressed upon his kindly heart with a power of which the narrator never dreamed.

“You two buried him. You two girls alone, at the dead of night!”

“Yes,” said Jean, simply. “I hope it was done right. It was the best we could. Come, and I will show you where. I went there the first thing I did after I came, and it looked so peaceful and quiet. Angelia was very wise. Before we put the sods down she wrote on a leaf with a thorn something out of a book she loved: ‘After life’s fitful fever he sleeps well.’ I thought it would have pleased Grandfather, because he loved Shakespeare, too.”

In the midst of her chatter, happy and innocent as it was, Lady Barefoot was startled by hearing a sob. Looking up, there was the old Squire trying to hide the tears which would trickle down his wrinkled cheeks in spite of his desire that they should not.

“Why—what is the matter? Are you ill?”

“Ill of conscience only, dear. It—let us go back. I am an old man, too. I wonder, if my wife were dead, if there would be anybody to

do for me what you did for this man who ill-treated you?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. I would do it, if there were nobody had a better right!" replied Jean, cheerfully.

"Oh, you would, would you? Well, well; I'm not going to give you a chance! Not yet a while. Let's go back to the house. The subject is getting personal." The funny old gentleman was laughing again and Jean smilingly turned about toward the cottage.

"Grandfather did not mean to be unkind, I think, sir. He was only very poor."

"Humph! Go on with your story. Why have you come back?"

"I have come to find out who did kill the Doctor. I did not, and I do not want anybody else who did not to be made as unhappy as that Rideout man made me. I am going to find out if it takes all my life long. And I think I shall do so all the sooner in this very house. It is my own, you know. Isn't it?"

"Nobody will dispute your possession of it. Do you know the people think the place is haunted?"

"How funny!"

“Aren't you afraid? Of course there is no such thing as a haunted house, but it might make you nervous to hear about it.”

“Aunt Sophie said I had no nerves, sir. I suppose she knew.”

“Humph! I suppose she did. But who will live with you?”

“Whisker.”

“Whisker! who is he? Some masculine, I take it, from the name.”

Jean whistled softly; and out of the gloom of the rafters came a flash of graceful life, and down upon the Squire's lap landed the most mischievous squirrel that ever leaped among the tree-tops.

“Great Scott! Ouch!” cried the Squire, acknowledging the introduction.

CHAPTER XXIV

JEAN'S DISCOVERY

“THIS is absurd, and dangerous;” said the Squire, after Jean had called away her little, beloved companion. “You must have some human being—though I do not know who would consent to live in such a hole.”

“Nor I,” answered Lady Barefoot, not at all offended. “I love it because it is home to me—my own place where nobody can disturb or molest me. I shall be very, very busy. I found a man in New York, where Whisker boarded because my aunts did not like him, and he says that he will take all the birds and animals I will send him. He supplies the zoological gardens in some of the cities with such creatures and he sells a great many to private customers. He is going to send me up a load of little cages of the right sort, so I will not

have to make them any more; and I think I shall do very nicely, indeed, sir. Now, do you mind reading the letter?"

"I do not mind anything. And if I did it would make no difference to you, I fancy. Such a smart little business woman as you have grown to be!" Then the Squire did read the letter and was touched by its contents, which revealed more than the writer had supposed about her relations to her aunts.

"Is it all right, sir?"

"Perfectly. It explains everything—everything—very clearly. But, after living in luxury, as you have done, do you intend to return to your old habits and sleep upon nothing at all? Eat nothing at all? Wear nothing but rags? Though I see you are well clothed now; and I will take that last question back."

"I mean to have everything as comfortable as I can as soon as I can. But things do not trouble me—outside things, I mean—I want to find out about this mystery, and then I shall not care for anything in the world."

"My child, I do not like to discourage you; but do you for one moment seriously imagine

that you can, unaided, accomplish what the wisest lawyers have failed to learn?"

"I think I have a motive no lawyer could have. I think I will succeed."

"How?"

"I do not know."

"I thought as much!"

"All the same I shall. I feel as sure of it as that I see the dear old rocks and brooks again for which I used to long. I am not at all afraid. I do not believe God will let the innocent suffer for the guilty and I!—oh! I shall find out, somehow."

"You have not asked about your old acquaintance, Peterkin John Rideout."

"Must I ask about him?" Jean shuddered.

"I must tell you about him. He not only accused you, privately, to your face of complicity in this dreadful crime, but he insinuated the same thing in public. I fear it would have produced some terrible impression against you, had matters not taken just the turn they did. Besides, three days after you had flown I knew where you were, and I pledged my word to produce you whenever necessary."

"You—did—Squire—Dutton?"

“I, Squire Dutton, did. Do you think that a midget like you could be lost?”

Jean was silent.

“Now about Peterkin. A hatchet belonging to him was found near the Doctor's body.”

“Oh, oh! But I am sure he did not do the dreadful deed. He could not. Nobody could raise a hand against that dear old man, who had once been befriended by him.”

“It's a wicked world, my dear. The worst thing about it is its ingratitude. Shall I go on?”

“Yes, please.”

“A piece of a blue, knitted jersey, presumably once belonging to Peterkin John, was found in the dead man's fingers.”

“Oh, how dreadful!”

“The result was that Peterkin John found his own unholy wishes return to rest upon himself. The authorities arrested him for the murder, or for complicity in the murder of Doctor Disney, and he now awaits his trial.”

“Poor fellow! I do not believe for one moment that he did it.”

“Nor I, really, though I have doubts some-

times. The circumstantial evidence is very strong.”

“The man who came to the cabin on the morning after Grandfather died had on a blue knitted jersey. He stole the key and I ran away. He was dark and evil-looking. I believe he was the man. If he only could be found. And yet—”

“And yet—what?”

“I should hate to point him out. I should never be happy again if I sent anybody to prison.”

“Well, well. It is a sorry, sorry business at the best. But now, my poor child, do not for one moment think of staying here alone. Do come to my house and be my little daughter. I will then write your Aunts Montgomery a different letter and one that will relieve any anxiety they may possibly feel.”

“They will feel none, except Aunt Emily. I am going to ask her to come and visit me some day, when I have earned enough to buy a bed and two chairs and—a few other things. It will not take me very long if I am fortunate in my work. I have already found where some squirrels are building a nest, and I shall do very well. Then I can make baskets of pretty barks

and things—such as the Doctor used to buy—and the dealer will take them of me. He has customers that like country things, he says.”

“Well, well. We will not wait for that, my dear. I will invite Miss Emily to come and visit with you at my house. How will that do?”

“Thank you; by-and-by, perhaps. But I have made up my mind to one thing. Aunt Sophie says I am a ‘too decided girl,’ so I think I will keep my resolution. I do not mean to sleep under anybody’s roof, except this that was my Grandfather’s, until I find out who murdered Doctor Disney, and so have cleared my own name—the ‘proud name of Montgomery’ Wilder.”

“Child, child! Take care! Do not make rash vows! Do not make vows at all. They are difficult to keep. Ah, yes, difficult to keep.”

“Then I will make no more. This is already made—and I shall keep it.”

A little later the Squire wended his way homeward. Jean accompanied him as far as the outskirts of the village, where she parted from him gayly and turned mountainward again, apparently as happy to be back in that solitary

desolate hut she called "home," as a richer girl would have been in a mansion.

She was conscious of a strange elation of spirit. It made every thing seem rose-colored by the magic of the light it cast upon it. The bare floor became as pretty in Lady Barefoot's eyes as was her aunts' axminster carpet; the couch of pine boughs which she had spread the night before seemed soft and restful, and the plain dinner of bread and cheese which she had purchased at the Landing, a feast fit for a queen.

"I mean to hoard my money as closely as I can; for it will be some time before I can get any back from the dealer, even if my things please him. And now, I had almost finished that broom of pine branches I was making out here in the sunshine, so I will end that first, then go in and carefully sweep the floor. Dear me! It does seem as if I should see Grandfather come to the door and call: 'Jean! Jean! Come, cook my supper!' Wouldn't I do it gladly, gladly!"

Meanwhile the Squire hurried homeward and ordered a wagon load of necessaries packed for transportation to the cottage. He chided him-

self all the while he was thus engaged, for "an old idiot that has been talked out of his common sense by a silvery tongue and dazzled by a vision of innocence with her yellow hair and big, blue eyes!"

But good Mrs. Dutton did not join in the railing. She only nodded her gray curls and smiled encouragingly. "It's well for a man to be that sort of idiot as often as may be, husband! Think of the brave little creature and what she did for her dead grandfather! A crabbed old soul, by what I hear, too. And to think of her coming back to live alone in such a lonely place and not a bit afraid! No wonder about that, though. Sure the good Lord watches over all such pure souls as hers! And I pray with all my heart He will give her her desire, and soon. Shall you leave her there alone, to-night?"

"Indeed, I shall not; nor any night, as long as she persists in her nonsense of staying there. I shall hire some good man to patrol the locality and protect her. Though I will not let her know this, I think."

"And I think you would better. Suppose she should go to the door of a night-time and see a

man walking about, whom she did not know was there. I think it would scare her into a fit."

"Maybe so, maybe so. I guess you are right. We'll follow the load of stuff in the phaeton, if you like, and show her there is one woman in the world ready to love and care for her; even if that woman's name isn't Montgomery!"

"Don't be hard on the poor, proud, silly aunts, husband. I always feel sorry for a woman who hasn't a good man in her family, to teach her wisdom."

"Doubtless they feel sorry for themselves, wife! I've always heard so!" And chuckling over his own witticism the kind old man went out to get the phaeton ready.

"The dear child has done him a world of good, already. He has brooded over the death of his old friend so long and so much that I am pleased enough to have something to divert him. And I will be kind to this Lady Barefoot as he wishes, even without his asking. She must be a brave, whole-souled young creature by all accounts."

People opened their eyes and stared as the



“ I HAVE FOUND THE KEY ! ”

well-loaded wagon with its comfortable bed, its more than "two chairs," its big hamper of provision, its basket of dainty crockery, its snowy sheets and soft blankets, set off toward the mountain, with the Squire's phaeton and himself with "Mrs. Squire who never goes anywhere once a dog's age" carefully tucked in beside him to follow after.

"What do you s'pose is going on!" cried one to another; but nobody dared ask the village magnate a word about his private affairs, and so they were forced to await the return of the wagon before they could interview its driver and find out "what it was" which had roused their curiosity.

Little dreaming of the generosity intended her, Jean began her sweeping, singing at her task one of the songs her grandfather had loved. "It is awfully, awfully dirty. I should think all the dirt of the winter had blown right in at the door; but no matter. If this broom wears out I can make another. If poor people haven't much money they do have other things to work with!"

At the fifth sweeping, when she had even gone down upon her knees, the more forcibly to

push the dirt before her pine-needles, her eyes discovered something which startled them so that she dropped her broom and almost screamed aloud.

Only her amazement was too great for screaming, and for the space of a full moment she sat there, gazing wildly at a small, rusty object standing upright in the floor. Then a chill, as of fear, stole over her, and rising, she fled from the cottage as swiftly as her feet could carry her.

On the road she met the wagon of comforts intended for herself, but she gave it no second glance. Her eyes had passed beyond it to the phaeton and its occupants, and she bounded to their side, scarce touching the ground in her excitement. "The key! the key! I have found the key!"

CHAPTER XXV

TO WHAT THE KEY LED

“You have found the key! What key?” demanded the Squire, jumping from the phaeton and leaving Mrs. Dutton to manage the old sorrel for herself.

“The key which Grandfather gave me—that the black-eyed man stole from my hand—that shows where Grandfather’s ‘treasure’ is—if he had any, as he claimed!”

“Well, well, well!” cried the old gentleman, and could find nothing better to say. “Well, well! Where did you find it?”

“Sweeping the floor! Please come quick! I will show it to you. It will tell us many things I believe! Oh, come—come quickly!”

“See here, little Impatience, wait a minute! It is not likely that this key you say you have found will reveal anything of importance, and,

as I told you once before to-day, old limbs cannot equal young ones for speed. Besides, I have brought my wife with me and if there is anything marvelous to be seen the womankind always like to see it. Eh?"

The Squire's good-natured chaffing fell like ice on Jean's excited spirit. But she saw that she must conform herself to her old friend's judgment, and at his bidding she went to the phaeton and spoke for a moment with the lady who had come to visit and befriend her.

"Now, my dear," said Mrs. Dutton, who had been watching Lady Barefoot's face critically, and had seen the girl's attempts to curb her impatience, "now let us tie the horses here and all go together as quickly as may be to find out the mystery of this key."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, madam! Let me help you! I can hold the horse, if I don't know much about tying one."

"Here, Job, tie the other horse to this tree. We will leave the stuff in the wagon for a bit, and this is as far as it is safe to drive. Then come along with us; we will all go together. The more witnesses the better, if there is anything new to be discovered."

“Oh, sir, you are all excited, too, are you not? even though you talk so quietly. I am in such a flutter I can hardly wait—and yet—I am awfully—awfully afraid!”

“Why should you be afraid?”

“I do not know. I only know I am.”

“Where did you find the key?”

“Standing upright in the floor, in a corner where Grandfather would always have a pile of branches kept. He had them to replenish the beds and fire, he said, but he never allowed me to touch them. I never did touch them till the night he died, when I used some of them to feed the fire because—because—I did not like to go out after more.”

“Hm-m! Did you ever see this key before that last night?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you ever hear anything about any treasure until then?”

“Sometimes—when Grandfather was talking in that queer way, which my Aunt Emily said must have been insanity, he would speak of it. He always fancied somebody wanted to rob him. He once said I would love him better and appreciate him more after he was dead than while

he lived. He said I would then know how he had loved me."

"Did he ever talk of money?"

"Oh! yes, often. He said it was the greatest good in the world. The only good, he said sometimes. But I do not think he had any money. Take care, please, madam. The path is very rough. I mean to smooth it sometime, since people are so kind as to come and see me. We never used to have any visitors, except the woodmen, and they did not mind a rough path. Grandfather never went away. I do not remember to have ever seen him across this ravine."

"I do not much wonder, if he was feeble!" panted Mrs. Dutton climbing slowly up the bank toward the 'miser's' cottage, and regarding that poor abode with utmost curiosity. "It is a hard pull for anybody. If I were to visit you often I should propose that a bridge be thrown across the gully, which would save a deal of wasted breath."

"It would be nice, I suppose. But—we are almost there now. If you are tired, sit down on this stone for a moment; then we can go on." Jean thoughtfully paused beside the great boulder, as she spoke, but the impatient tap-

ping of her foot told that she was laying a real restraint upon herself.

“Go on, my dear, you and the Squire. I will follow directly,” said Mrs. Dutton, considerably.

“No, no. I would rather we all went together. I am as silly as this child here, but I ‘feel as if something were going to happen!’” exclaimed the old gentleman, hastily; and rather than delay the affair any longer Mrs. Dutton immediately rose and went with the others into the house.

“This way, please. See? here it is!”

Before a dark corner of the small abode Jean paused and pointed downward. The Squire put on his glasses, the hired man bent low, and Mrs. Dutton turned away her eyes. She was a nervous little woman, and the air seemed full of some dreadful mystery.

“Jean, have you a candle here?”

“Yes, sir. I bought one at the Landing. I thought I might need it.”

“Light it, please.”

“But—the sun shines!”

“Light it.”

When she brought the candle, lighted as he

had bidden her, the Squire took it from her, and, stooping, examined all the floor immediately about the place where the rusty key stood upright, in what looked but a rough hole in the wood. "Hm-m! It is as I thought. This is a trap door. The key is in the lock."

"A trap door!"

"Did you not know of it before?"

"I did not. But I thought of it as soon as I saw the key put in that way. I did not think anybody would bore a hole to put it in for fun—though it looks as if he had."

"This is far more serious than 'fun.' Job, have you a strong knife in your pocket?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then put its heaviest blade under the end of that board there, in the crack. I will use mine on this side—here. Jean, hold the candle!—and we will pry on the door together. I have a hope we can raise it that way. If not we must get some iron bars."

"Now—both together!" cried Job.

There was no need of the bars. The door yielded as easily as if its hinges were oiled, and with such readiness, indeed, that Job, who had made extra effort, tumbled backward upon the

floor; he had touched a steel spring in the fastening and this obeyed the correctly applied pressure.

“A cellar! And as strong a flight of stone steps as if they led to a vault!” The Squire bent over the opening, but a draft of foul air drove him back.

“What’s the matter, boss?”

“Try yourself, Job. I suppose it is the imprisoned atmosphere.”

Job’s stronger nostrils did not greatly shrink, and at a word from the Squire he held the lighted candle down the opening. It went out immediately.

“Go and bring the lamps from the phaeton. They are in order, I suppose?” said the old gentleman.

“Yes. I trimmed them myself, husband, knowing how particular you are about them being ready for a dark night,” answered Mrs. Dutton promptly.

“Let me go!” I can go quicker! I am so used to the way!” cried Jean, and was off and back again almost before they knew it.

The carriage lamps, tightly enclosed in glass proved to be just what was needed, and by their

light the two men soon proceeded to descend and explore the vault. But they were not allowed to do this until careful Mrs. Dutton had been convinced, by the clear burning of the open flame of the candle at the foot of the stone steps, that the foulness of the air below had passed away.

The Squire went first, Job following eagerly; and for a moment Lady Barefoot poised at the top of the steps, uncertain whether to explore the mystery for herself or await their disclosure.

“Jean! Jean! come here! It will not hurt you! But brace your nerves!” called the Squire’s voice, in a strange tone. “It is your right, since you have been so positive of—of the fact.”

Jean did not wait to ask “what fact,” nor to consider the Squire’s odd sentence. She descended as swiftly as she did everything, and in a moment stood within the circle of the light which the lamps shed over the place.

“Oh, sir? What is it?”

“It—is all that remains of a once living, human being. Did you ever see him before?”

Jean could not have seen the imprisoned man's face had she tried. His head had fallen forward on the folded arms, but the heavy black hair, the rough apparel—the blue knitted jersey—proclaimed the dead to be the same creature who had terrified her on the morning after her grandfather's death and who had stolen the key from her hands.

“Oh! it is he? I do know him! I believe this was the unhappy wretch who murdered Doctor Disney!

“Wait! There is a bit of writing—a paper near his hand!” cried Job, and before the Squire could remonstrate the servant had seized it and began to read it.

“May I go upstairs?” asked Jean, feebly; and turning hastily the Squire saw that she was on the point of fainting. Old as he was he made light work of bearing that slender figure up into the better air and more cheerful light of the upper floor, and handed her over to the care of Mrs. Dutton.

“Come up, Job! I think we would better have more witnesses to this business. Drive back to the village as fast as you can; and bring the coroner and some other men. Then we will

make a thorough examination of the whole place. As for you, Jean, will you stay here? Or go to my house with Job?"

"Let me stay! Oh! Let me stay!"

"Certainly, if you are well enough. This is no place for fainting girls!"

"I shall not faint again. I did not—really."

"All right. Off with you, Job!"

Job, who had been compelled to drop the paper which had aroused his curiosity, did not "let the grass grow under his feet" as he made the distance between the cabin and town—with return; but when he came back half the populace was with him.

At this the Squire frowned, then concluded that it was well to let the "whole world" know whatever he might learn himself. A deputation of as many as the cellar would hold went below to examine fully into the strange discovery, and the coroner took possession of the paper which had excited Job's curiosity.

This, with its broken English translated into readable shape, explained many things, and forever set at rest any suspicion against the innocent. It ran as follows:

“To Whom it may Concern :

“I, Bartolomé Rizo, am dying like a rat in a trap, caught in my own sin. I here confess and hope for pardon for all my crime. I did go to the house of an old man. I was cold and hungry. A boy did refuse me food. He laughed in my face, and I hate him. I saw him hang a jacket in the shed and I took it. I also took his axe he put in the tool-house. Then I looked through the window and I saw the old man with the white hair put a lot of money in his pocket. It made me crazy. I was so poor—and he so rich. Things are not right in this world, else he would not now be in his grave, or I in mine.

“With the warm jacket on my back and the sharp axe in my hand I followed him. I saw him take in his carriage a fair-haired madonna. He drove a long way. I lost sight of the girl, but I had seen the white-haired man go into an old cabin on the mountain. Ah, ha! that was where the miser lived of whom the village urchins talked. I would then do a double stroke of work. The white-haired man and the miser must be one, I thought. He lived in two houses—that was all! I watched till he

came out of the cabin in the night darkness, and I killed him in the gulf. Then I was afraid with a great fear, so I hid till daylight. Then I thought I would gather up my courage and get the gold of the miser I had killed. At the door the madonna met me again, but I knew her for mortal. She had a key in her hand and I snatched it. I went in—and there—he lay—another dead man! He fell to the floor. I was frightened awfully, and I ran away. I hid all day on the mountain.

“The next night I had regained my courage. Be no longer a fool, I told myself. The dead do nobody harm. That was a lie; the dead do harm. They have trapped me here—also—to die! I saw two girls in the wood, and one was my madonna. One was quite different. They had food—such good, good food! I stole the food in the bag. The dark-eyed girl awoke and saw me. We looked at one another, and if she had moved or screamed I would have killed them also. I had outgrown pity. But she never moved. She only gazed at me as an angel might gaze upon sin. I took the bag and ran to the cottage. I opened the trap-door—which I found after a long time. I did not take the key

from the lock, and—my God! The door flew back into its place. It is fastened by a terrible spring. I had brought a piece of candle, and I have toiled, toiled, toiled to escape, but I cannot! I am going to die here. I will write, I have written—there is heaps of gold in this vault—I have seen it—it is not for me—the candle—my head—oh! It is the end—I—”

The narrative broke off thus incoherently. Evidently, as long as the candle lasted the imprisoned wretch had written, at his task—prompted by remorse, or at his amusement lest his brain should turn. When its reading had been finished, the Squire turned to Jean and found that strange young person in tears.

“Well, what? Are you not perfectly delighted to have all this trouble explained?”

“Oh, it is so dreadful! So dreadful. To think of any creature dying so—so sinful and unhappy!”

The Squire’s face grew stern. “Think of an innocent man done to his death by such a villain! Let your pity be tempered with justice!”

With a renewed shudder Lady Barefoot raised

her head. "To the prison, then, I am going at once to tell poor Peterkin what will be good news to him!" And before they could stop her she had bounded away and toward the primitive jail where her only enemy was then confined, but to which, without a warrant, the jailer would grant her no admittance.

"No matter. You cannot stop his ears! Which is the place?" and she glanced upward toward the cruel, barred windows with the eagerness of hope and rescue in her lovely face.

"That one. He will not hear you."

"He shall hear me! Peterkin! Peterkin! Look out! Listen!"

A wan countenance was pressed against the sash. Who called him, with the voice of triumph and the face of an angel?

"Peterkin, you are saved. You will be free! The murderer is found. Free. free—dear Peterkin!"

Thus did a noble heart requite a base one.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONCLUSION—MORE WONDERFUL THAN FICTION

“YES,” said Jerry Jones, to the group of boys gathered about him on the old stone bridge, where he was first introduced to the reader; “yes, it’s miles ahead of any fairy story I ever read!”

“An’ my father says, ‘life’s allays funnier ’an books,’ though I never ’lowed ter hear nothin’ like this here afore. An’ ter think she is the very same girl we used to laugh at an’ call Lady Barefoot. I can’t hardly believe it’s true.”

“But it is true, Jim Saxton; an’ I’m real glad for her. So there!”

“You allays was a silly feller.”

“I never!” denied Jim, with prompt indignation; “and I’ll leave it to all the other fellows if it isn’t splendid.”

“Tell it over, Jim,” requested a new-comer, as he joined the group, and nothing loath to air his superior knowledge—for wasn’t Jim’s father the sheriff? and didn’t he know all about everything which went on in the community? Nothing loath, therefore, Jim began:

“First and foremost, they was more diamonds and rubies and other precious stones found in that cellar than ever was seen in one pile in the whole world.”

“Stuff!”

“No stuff, either! My father says that when old miser Wilder came here he was ‘sick of life,’ whatever that kind of sickness is. He had been disappointed in a good many things, and he had nobody belonging to him except one little granddaughter, Lady Barefoot. He made up his mind to go away somewheres, where nobody would ever see them much, and bring her up without knowing anything. He was such an old fool that he thought going to school and learning made folks wicked, and—”

“I—don’t think he was such a fool for that,” objected Jerry, warmly.

“Course not. Everybody knows you’re one, and the biggest dunce in the whole class!” with

which little exchange of schoolboy amenities, the narrator resumed.

“And so he sold all he had of other stuff, houses and lands and horses and cattle—”

“Draw it mild, Jim! That sounds like the parson reading out of Scripture.”

“And cattle,” continued the imperturbable James, “and changed ’em into diamonds and rubies and—”

“You’ve said that once.”

“And besides them, there was a awful lot of money. Some in ‘deeds’ and ‘dockyments’ and ‘mortgages,’ and so on. My! If that Italian murderer hadn’t got ketched in the trap like he was, wouldn’t he have made a haul?”

“Well, he was ketched.”

“Yep, he was. An’ so that cleared Peterkin Rideout. An’ he and his folks have moved away. And—”

“Where’s Lady Barefoot, Jim?”

“Don’t you say that no more. My father wolloped me for doing it myself, and I’m not going to have any of youse do what I dassent do. So there. You hear me?”

“Yep, I hear. But I—don’t fear. Go on.”

“And Miss Jean Montgomery Wilder is a-going to buy Doctor Disney’s old home. There are lots of squirrel houses and dove-cotes and aviaries and—and—things—that just suit her. My father says she is bound to be one of the best naturalists in the country. That her taste runs that way.”

“Is she a-going to live there alone?”

“No, she ain’t a-going to live there alone, neither. Her Aunt Emily is a-going to come and live with her, and there is an old actress-woman, richer ’an Crœsus, that’s a-coming to live there, too. Her name is like a cape or a strait or sound or something. Oh, I remember; ‘D’Albemarle.’ She has a girl that was poor, too, and a friend of Jean Wilder’s that the old play-actress is a-having taught to make a young play-actress out of. And she’s a-going to build the biggest kind of a house here in Chelsea town, and my father says a good thing for the village, too. And up there where the dead man was found, where nobody wants to live now very much that knows about it, the old Squire is a-going to build a ‘Fresh Air Fund.’ No, that don’t sound right; I guess I mean a ‘Fresh Air House.’ But it’s a place where a lot of

poor children who don't have any folks to take care of 'em, can come and live with a lot of women who don't have any children of their own to take care of. That's as near as I know. But my father says it's a good thing for Chelsea. And whatever money they don't have—I mean the Squire don't have—the Wilder girl and the play-actress woman are a-going to give. And—what do you think?"

"I dunno. What?"

"That squirrel of La—I mean of Jean Wilder's, is a-going to have a beautiful brass house all lined with wool and things and be the regular king of all the squirrels that ever was."

"My!"

"Jimminy!"

"Don't I wish I was rich and had a grandfather that had a cellar and—is that all?"

"That is all; isn't it enough?"

"Yep. I s'pose so. Only—"

"What?"

"Only one thing."

"Well, what?"

"I've been a puzzling it out o' nights, when my folks think I'm asleep. My father says I'm

going to be a lawyer, I've got such a head for puzzling 'bout things."

A shout of derision greeted this ambitious declaration of Jerry Jones.

"Wull—wull—wull, you needn't laugh. I'm like Daniel Webster, my father says, in one thing."

"I should like to know in what?"

"He wasn't very smart when he was a boy, and I ain't."

"Hi! hi! Hear!"

"All the same, where did that Italianer get that piece of paper and that pencil to write that long letter on, what was printed offen his copy in the 'Chelsea Trumpet?' That beats me, more'n the rubies an' such. It's like a story book for having things handy in, and—"

"Pooh! Old miser Wilder had a desk and a whole lot of paper an' writin' stuff in that vault. It was where they found all the 'deeds' and 'dockyments' and 'things.'"

"Oh!"

"I hope you're satisfied now! I hope you have heard all the ins and outs of the whole business."

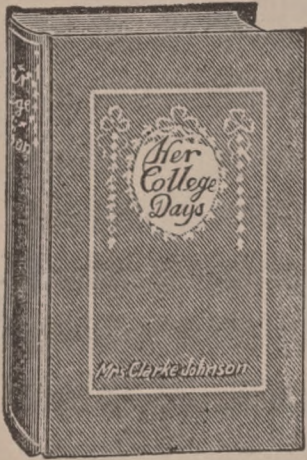
"Yep. I am satisfied. I shall sleep to-night."

“Then let’s go into the woods and see if we can’t get some squirrels. If we do we can sell ’em to La—, I mean, Miss Wilder. Here she comes, now, a-riding in her carriage—that Lady Barefoot!”

THE END

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The Girl Ranchers

By Mrs. Carrie L. Marshall *Illustrated by Ida Waugh*

A story of life on a sheep ranch in Montana. The dangers and difficulties incident to such a life are vividly pictured, and the interest in the story is enhanced by the fact that the ranch is managed almost entirely by two young girls. By their energy and pluck, coupled with courage, kindness, and unselfishness they succeed in disarming the animosity of the neighboring cattle ranchers, and their enterprise eventually results successfully.

An Every-Day Heroine

By Mary A. Denison *Illustrated by Ida Waugh*

The heroine is not an impossible character but only a pure, winsome, earnest girl, who at fourteen years of age is suddenly bereft of fortune and father and becomes the chief support of a semi-invalid mother. While there are many touching scenes, the story as a whole is bright and cheerful and moves forward with a naturalness and ease that carries its readers along and makes them reluctant to put down the book until the end is reached.

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