

AZZALEA

at Sunset Gap





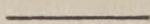
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“ So I lost David,” whispered Mary Cecily; “ I lost my little brother.”

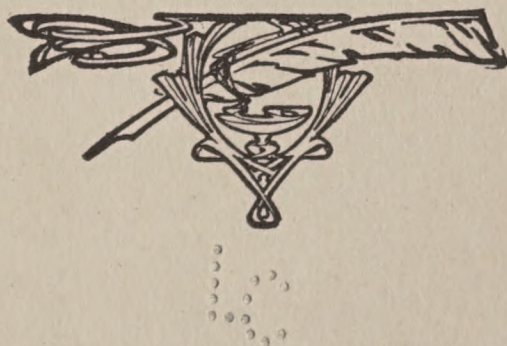
AZALEA AT SUNSET GAP

BY

ELIA W. PEATTIE

Author of *Azalea*; *Annie Laurie* and *Azalea*; etc.

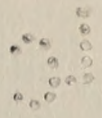
*Illustrations by
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Azalea at Sunset Gap

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AZALEA AT SUNSET GAP

CHAPTER I

THE PERFECT CHAPERON

Three girls, Azalea McBirney, Annie Laurie Pace and Carin Carson rode slowly along the red clay road that led no-where-in-particular. In fact, these friends were bound for No-Where-In-Particular, and the way there was lined on both sides with blossoming dogwood, as white as snow. There were snow-white clouds in the sky, too, against a background of glorious blue. But the balm in the air suggested anything rather than snow. It blew back and forth, carrying with it delicious perfumes of the blossoming shrubs that grew by the roadside and within the wood, and touching the cheek like a caress.

The horses seemed to be enjoying themselves almost as much as the girls. They stepped daintily, throwing back their heads as if they

would be pleased if their mistresses would give them leave to be off and away down the road, and expanding their nostrils to catch the scents of the spring-awakened earth. But their mistresses were too deeply engaged in conversation just then to grant them their desire.

“You see,” the fairest of them was saying — the one the others called Carin — “I don’t really *want* to go to Europe with father and mother this time. It isn’t as if they were going to stay in one place. They’ll be traveling the whole time, because, you see, father is going on business, and mother is going along to keep him company. It wouldn’t be very pleasant, would it, to hear mother saying: ‘And now what in the world will we do with Carin to-day?’ Really, you know, I wouldn’t at all enjoy having my name changed to ‘Little-Carin-in-the-Way.’”

The tallest girl, Annie Laurie Pace, laughed rather enviously.

“Think of giving up a European trip for that!” she cried.

“Oh, indeed, I’ll be only too thankful to go on some other occasion, Annie Laurie, when there’s time to see things or to study. Remem-

ber, I've gone twice already; once over the same ground that father and mother are going over this time. The next time, I hope to stay and study, but this summer I want to follow the plan we made last summer and go up into the mountains and teach school."

"Oh, do you really, Carin?" cried Azalea, the third girl. "I've wondered and wondered if you'd remember about that! Would your father and mother let you?"

"That remains to be seen. One can always ask. Do you think Ma McBirney would give you permission, Azalea?"

"Oh, I think she would. The trouble with Ma McBirney is that she's likely to say 'yes' whether my going makes it hard for her or not."

"But didn't she plan," broke in Annie Laurie, "to visit her cousin down Calhoun way? Pa McBirney will be going too, won't he?"

"I don't think he could leave the stock and the farm. But you see, I thought maybe Mother McBirney would want to take me along to —"

"To show off her new daughter," laughed Carin. "I don't blame her."

"I never meant anything of the sort," pro-

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tested Azalea, coloring. "But of course, having picked me up by the roadside the way she did — like a poor stray kitten, you may say — perhaps she would like her relatives to see that I wasn't —" Azalea hesitated again, with the mocking eyes of her friends on her.

"That you weren't *what?*" demanded Carin teasingly.

But Annie Laurie interrupted with one of the practical remarks for which she was celebrated.

"It's all very well for you girls to talk of going off to the mountains to teach school," she said, "but have you any idea of where you'll go and whom you'll teach?"

"We have a very clear idea," answered Carin. "We'll go back to Sunset Gap, where we were last summer, and where they need help about as badly as they can. I was talking with Azalea's minister, Mr. Summers, and he says he doesn't know of any place where the people are in greater need of schooling than they are there. You remember the place, Annie Laurie, don't you? We stopped there overnight when we were on our camping trip. It took us a long time to get there by wagon, but this time we'll take the train as far as Bee Tree and drive only

the last fifteen miles. Mr. Summers says he knows a man who will meet us at the station."

"You've quite made up your mind to go, haven't you?" asked Annie Laurie. "What a girl you are, to be laying out all these plans without telling anyone."

"Oh, I haven't done much," protested Carin, "only, when I happened to meet Mr. Summers, I talked it over with him. You see, there are men and women up there on Dundee mountain who don't even know their letters, and teaching the children will be like carrying civilization to them," said Carin earnestly, meaning very much more than she said but trusting her sympathetic friends to understand.

"It's the very kind of work that I want to do above everything else," declared Azalea with an earnestness no less than that of her friend. "Oh, Annie Laurie, if we go, do come with us! You'd make the best teacher of us all. You're so firm, and you always think out beforehand what you're going to do."

"The best way for me to live up to that fine reputation," retorted Annie Laurie, "is by staying at home. This is my last chance for learning to manage my dairy, for Sam Disbrow, who

has been taking almost all of the responsibility, is leaving me next October for his two years at Rutherford Academy. I'm so happy to think he's going, after all the disappointments and troubles he's had."

"But couldn't your Aunt Adnah look after the dairy for a couple of months? I thought she was a fine business woman," Carin persisted.

"Oh, Carin, father's death was a much greater shock to her than to any of the rest of us. She oughtn't to have much care. Anyway, the dairy is my business now that father is gone, and I'm anxious to learn every detail of it. I understand now about keeping the books, but I am making a study of raising fodder and preserving it, and of feeding the cattle and marketing the milk. Oh, it's a huge undertaking."

Annie Laurie drew a deep breath.

"Yes, I suppose it is," sighed Carin sympathetically. "Isn't it queer, when you come to think of it, that work had to be brought into the world? Why weren't we made like the birds, so that we could hop around awhile, and sing awhile, and go to sleep under a nice dry leaf?"

“Well, life isn’t that way,” said Annie Laurie in the solemn tones the Paces sometimes used. “We have to work for what we get, and I’m glad we do. Life is more interesting just the way it is.”

“I like to keep busy myself,” admitted Carin, “but if anyone came up to me and told me that what I was doing was *work*, I believe I’d fall in my tracks.” She gave a silvery laugh.

“After you’ve taught school a week, you’ll not need anyone to point out that what you are doing is work,” Annie Laurie returned. “Azalea, have you spoken yet to Pa and Ma McBirney about going?”

Azalea gave a little chuckle, half of amusement, half of affection, as her friend spoke the names of the good mountain people who had taken Azalea into their home when she was orphaned.

“Naturally, I haven’t,” she said, “because until this hour I didn’t know Carin was really planning for it. And now I’ll have to approach the subject cautiously. You know how it is with my dear pretend-parents; they’re mountain people and don’t like to be frightened out of

their wits by having a question hurled at them. You have to lead them up to it, like you would a nervous horse."

"Don't say 'like you would,' Azalea," pleaded Carin. "You know Miss Parkhurst never lets you. Say 'as you would,' Zalie."

"As you would," breathed Azalea meekly.

"Well," said Annie Laurie, "it's a grand plan and I hope it will come true, though I'm not perfectly in love with the idea of having you girls go off for the summer and leave me. But never mind that. Let's have a gallop!"

She flicked the reins on the neck of her pretty mare, and the animal, delighted at the signal, bounded away as playfully as a kitten. Like kittens, too, the ponies on which the other girls were mounted followed after. As they rode, the blooms of the dogwood rained about them and the laughter of the girls mingled with the nickering of the horses.

At the ford, two miles down the valley, they drew rein.

"It's time I was getting home," said Annie Laurie. "How about you, Azalea? Do you go up the mountain to-night?"

"No, I'm staying with Carin. That's getting

to be my habit on Friday nights. Mother McBirney comes down Saturday for her trading, and I meet her at the village and then we go home together."

And now while they canter back down the lovely Valley of Lee in the bland light of the closing day, let us tell something of their history to such readers as have not met them before.

Azalea McBirney did not bear the name to which she was born. She was Azalea Knox, the daughter of a ne'er-do-well son of a fine family, and of a loving-hearted mother who had left her home and friends for the sake of the man she married. The young mother had fallen upon such evil days that at last, to provide her little girl with the necessaries of life, she had traveled with a band of sorry actors who journeyed from town to town in squalid, covered wagons. Sick in body and shamed in spirit, she died on the road in front of the mountain cabin where Thomas and Mary McBirney lived. They had taken Azalea into their home, where she shared their care and affection with Jim McBirney, their only living child.

Carin Carson was the daughter of Charles and Lucy Carson, Northerners of wealth, who,

having lost their three sons in a tragic manner, had come to the beautiful little mountain town of Lee, to forget, if possible, amid its beautiful surroundings and peaceful life, the pain which had made their old home impossible to them. They had interested themselves greatly in Azalea, had offered to make her their adopted daughter, and upon her decision to stay with her devoted foster mother, had given her the privilege of sharing with Carin the excellent instruction received from Miss Parkhurst, Carin's governess.

A warm friendship had developed between the girls, and it was a sharp disappointment to them when Mrs. Carson, who thought they were growing too self-centered and indifferent to other young folk, brought into their classroom Annie Laurie Pace, the daughter of the dairyman at Lee. It was only after Annie Laurie's revolt from their selfishness that they realized the need they had of her as well as the privilege that it was to her — a girl too advanced for the district school — to share their opportunities with them. Troubles came to Annie Laurie. She lost her father and her fortune; but these misfortunes only bound the three girls closer in

“the triple alliance” which they had formed. When, finally Annie Laurie’s fortune was recovered by a singular chance, they settled down into happy enjoyment of their school days.

The previous summer had found them together with their elders upon a camping trip which was to remain in the minds of all of them as one of the most delightful experiences of their lives. On this excursion they had seen something of the lives of the mountaineers of the Blue Ridge far back from the railroads and the main routes of travel, and had resolved that at the first opportunity they would return to pass on to these untaught, friendly, wistful folk some of the knowledge which had been bountifully given them. But this thought had slipped out of sight during the winter, for each girl had been much occupied after her own fashion. Now, with the return of summer, their thoughts turned naturally to the mountains. Back of their desire to be useful to their less fortunate neighbors, was the hunger for life in the open. They dreamed of the low-lying valleys bathed in purple mist, of the flaming azalea burning on the higher slopes, of the innumerable flowers springing to life along the adven-

turous pathways, of the wild beauty of the storms, and the ever-new miracle of sunrise and sunset.

Annie Laurie said good-bye, and Carin and Azalea turned in at the great gate of the Shoals, the beautiful home built by Colonel Atherton, the grandfather of Azalea. But Azalea entered it now, a poor girl, the foster daughter of simple mountain folk, and it was Carin's parents who owned the fine old place and who lived there in a very different sort of state from that which had obtained in Colonel Atherton's day. His thought had been all of his own indulgence and glory. Charles Carson and his wife had their greatest happiness in sharing their prosperity with others. They had built up a trade for the handicraft of the mountain people, had lent a hand to several of the enterprises in the town of Lee, and were the chief supporters of a school for the mountain children.

When Mustard and Paprika, the ponies, had been led away by the stable boy, the girls ran up the wide sweeping stairs to Carin's room to dress for dinner, and as they brushed their hair and changed their frocks, they talked of how they could best approach their parents.

with their rather madcap plan of going up into the mountains. In the midst of their talk Mrs. Carson came into the room. She kissed them in her gentle way and then held Azalea off with one white jewelled hand, eyeing her with quizzical affection. Azalea returned her look adoringly, for Carin's mother was the girl's ideal of what a "beautiful lady" should be. The faint breath of violet perfume which floated from her gowns, the satin sheen of her waving hair, her indescribably soft and musical voice, her gestures, her laugh, all served Azalea as the standard by which she measured charm in women.

"You two have been plotting something," declared the lady. "I can read conspiracy in your faces — such a pair of telltale faces as you have! Come! What is it?"

She drew Azalea closer to her, and the girl nestled her face for a moment against Mrs. Carson's soft cheek.

"It's the mountains, mamma Carson," she replied. "Carin and I want to go up there and teach school the way we planned last summer. You remember, don't you?"

"So that's it! Well, that's not a very dark

conspiracy. There wouldn't be any objection if we weren't going abroad."

"But it's because you are going abroad, mamma," cried Carin, "and because I don't really want to go, that this plan seems so — so timely."

Well, that was where the argument began. It was continued at the dinner table; it was taken up the next day with the McBirneys as soon as ever they showed their faces in the village, so that they were not, after all, allowed to approach the subject in that gradual and cautious manner advised by Azalea; it was carried to the Reverend Absalom Summers and his wife Barbara. Even Jonathan Summers, aged three, took a hand in it by pulling Azalea's skirt and saying: "Don't go! Don't go."

Mr. Carson explained the situation to Mr. Summers after this fashion: "It's not that I am really so keen about taking Carin on this trip; and I certainly have no objection to her making herself useful, but going to live upon a wild mountain among wilder people doesn't appeal to me as the best thing for young girls to do. I doubt if it would be safe."

"Safe?" roared the Reverend Absalom, who

had been a mountain man himself and to whom the honor of the mountaineers was dear. "Safe, Mr. Carson! Do you mean to insinuate that those girls wouldn't be as safe on Dundee Mountain as here in the town of Lee? Are you not aware that women are honored and protected in the remotest regions of our mountains?"

Mr. Carson enjoyed the outbreaks of his friend and was not at all put out at having provoked one. His smile led Mr. Summers to suppose that his eloquence had not been vigorous enough, so he resumed in a louder tone of voice:

"We may do a good many things up on the mountain that aren't generally approved of by people living in the valleys; we may quarrel among ourselves, and we may forget to pay the government the tax on our whiskey; we may be lazy — we *are* lazy, if you like; we may have different ideas of enjoyment from those you have, but if you think there is any human panther among us who —"

Mr. Carson roared with laughter.

"No, Summers," he cried, waving his hands to stop the stream of protest, "I don't think so — I don't think anything. But you know yourself that if the girls go up to Sunset Gap,

they've got to have a reliable, sensible, agreeable woman along with them. Now where shall we find anyone like that? She must like roughing it, yet she'll have to be a refined, companionable woman. She must know how to keep the pantry stocked, do the cooking, and yet be a restraint to our impulsive young people. Such a person is hard to find."

Mr. Summers had to admit that it was. His little wife, Barbara, who wanted terribly to go with the girls but who was unwilling to leave her preacher-man, had to admit it also, though she usually was the first to think of the answer to any puzzle. Finally, Mr. Carson put it this way:

"McBirney and his wife are willing Azalea should go, providing the proper protectress is found. Mrs. Carson and I feel the same way. Now, Summers, I ask you, isn't it up to the girls to find the right chaperon? Why not leave it in their hands? Let them produce a woman of good sense, refinement, courage, love of adventure mixed with judgment, well-educated, accustomed to killing snakes, friendly to the mountain people, with a religious nature and a perfect disposition — no objection to a little knowledge

of medicine thrown in — and they can go.”

The Rev. Absalom threw back his head and laughed, and his laugh was entirely out of proportion to the size of the little house in which he and his wife and his yellow-headed son lived and had their being, and in which they were now entertaining their friends the Carsons and the McBirneys.

But Carin and Azalea arose to the situation.

“It’s an hour before father and mother are to start up the mountain for home,” said Azalea, taking the dare gayly; “so we’ve time to go out and look around.”

“Why not?” demanded Carin. “I’m great at finding four-leaf clovers. Why shouldn’t I find the perfect chaperon?” Half in expectation, half in despair, the two of them ran off down the sunny street, followed by the applause of Barbara Summers’ small brown hands.

“First,” said Carin, when they were beyond the hearing of their elders, “let’s go tell Annie Laurie.”

“Of course,” agreed Azalea. “Even if she doesn’t know of the right person, she must be told what we’re doing.”

It was not far from the Summers home to the

rather gaunt house which Annie Laurie Pace had inherited. The girls made their way between the well-kept fields in which the fodder was raised for Annie Laurie's fine herd of cattle — the celebrated Pace herd, which provided milk for half the county — and so came by carefully tended roads to their friend's home.

Annie Laurie had been training vines to grow over the austere house, and had made flower gardens in the yard which until recently had worn a forbidding and business-like appearance. There was even an arbor about which clematis and wisteria were beginning to climb, and here, sparsely sheltered by shade, sat Miss Zillah Pace, the younger and gentler of Annie Laurie's two aunts. There was a wistful look on her face and her hands lay idly in her lap, but when she saw the two girls she got to her feet and came swiftly forward to meet them.

“Oh,” she cried, “how very nice to see you on such a beautiful day! Everyone ought to be young to-day, oughtn't they? I declare, I don't see how I'm ever going to give up and be middle-aged if it means sitting around here at home season in and season out.”

“Were you such a very giddy girl, Miss

Zillah?" asked Carin in amusement, casting an eye at Miss Zillah's staid frock and prim little curls, and thinking how amusing it was that such a settled little person should be able to think of herself as adventurous.

"Not on the outside," returned Miss Zillah. "When I was young I had a very great sense of duty, and there were many opportunities for me to exercise it. But do you know, I'm kind of worn out doing my duty, and I'd give anything if I were going away on some such jaunt as we went on last year." She looked at the girls appealingly, and then concluded with a shy little smile, "I suppose you think I'm a dreadfully silly old woman."

But Carin had clasped Azalea's arm in a fierce grasp.

"The perfect chaperon," she whispered, "made to order!"

"Found in fifteen minutes," whispered back Azalea.

Miss Zillah, who caught their rapid exchange of confidence, looked perplexed.

"Oh, don't think us rude, Miss Zillah," pleaded Carin. "We're not; we're merely excited. You see, we've just made a discovery."

“Have you, my dears?” asked Miss Zillah. “Come sit down in the arbor and tell me about it.”

“I’m afraid we’re almost too elated to sit down,” laughed Azalea. “You see, what we have discovered, Miss Zillah, is you.”

“But it’s a long time since you landed on my continent,” said Miss Zillah.

“Yes, but when we first saw you we made the same mistake that Columbus did. We thought you were some one else.”

“Who did you think I was? Who am I?” laughed the nice old lady, glad of an excuse to be talking happy nonsense.

“Why, we thought you were just Annie Laurie’s aunt,” explained Azalea, “but now we’re wondering if you’re not our chaperon. We’re going up to Sunset Gap again; this time to teach school. And we *must* have a perfect chaperon, else we’ll not be allowed to go.”

“And you’re she!” cried Carin, flinging her arms impulsively about Miss Zillah’s soft neck. “You know you are! Say you’ll come, Miss Zillah, and then we can run back and tell our people that everything is all right.”

CHAPTER II

PASSENGERS FOR BEE TREE

Three weeks later there was a notable gathering at the railroad station at Lee. The Carsons were there, the Paces, the McBirneys, including Jim, in a new straw hat, Dick Heller, just up from the Rutherford Academy, Sam Disbrow, happy now and full of wholesome activity, Hi Kitchell and his sister, and ever so many others, some black and some white. The baggage man was oppressed with a sense of the importance of the luggage he was to put on the train, for it included, as he realized full well, the summer outfit of Miss Zillah Pace and her charges. That is, if Azalea and Carin, so important and full of business, so suddenly grown up as it seemed, and their own mistresses, could possibly be looked upon as "charges."

"Wire Mr. Summers if anything goes wrong, Carin," Mr. Carson was commanding.

"Mind you write me everything — simply everything," warned Annie Laurie.

“You will find it very profitable to keep a diary, Sister Zillah,” Miss Adnah Pace commented.

“It’s a burning shame we’re not all going,” little Mrs. Summers sighed. “I’m sure the mountain air is just what Jonathan needs.”

Jonathan, who was toddling from friend to friend, sociably offering the words: “Don’t go” as an example of his conversational powers, really did not seem to need much of anything.

“If you all went,” broke in the Reverend Absalom Summers, “we’d have just as much of a town up at the Gap as we have down here in the valley, and then that would spoil it all, and we’d have to light out again. Queer, isn’t it, how we all swarm to a town and then hike out to the solitude, and fret wherever we are?”

“Oh, there’s the train,” cried Azalea. “Oh, mother McBirney, dear, I’ve got to go. You’re sure you won’t mind?”

“It’s pretty late in the day to be thinking about that,” said Ma McBirney with laughing tremulousness. “You take care yo’self, Zalie, and look after Miss Zillah and Miss Carson, and yo’r pa and me’ll be all right. Do yo’r level best to pass on the l’arnin’ to them pore

untaught folks, Zalie. We'll be honin' for you, but we're mighty proud that yo're able to be a help to others."

Azalea blushed violently.

"Oh, mother," she whispered, "the people will hear you and they'll think I'm a regular missionary!"

"Shake hands, girl," cried Pa McBirney. "Here's the train."

So they were off. Miss Zillah had a seat to herself and her bags and boxes. Carin and Azalea sat together, and for a time said very little. Both were a bit tearful — Carin particularly, at the thought that her parents were going over-seas. But after a while they grew interested in the flowering mountain side and the little cabins tucked away on the shelves of the mountains. Azalea even caught a glimpse of the McBirney cabin lying so confidently on its high ledge — the cabin through whose hospitable door she had entered to find the only home she knew.

To keep the tears from getting out beyond her lids, where they were swimming at rising flood, she turned her attention to the people with her in the car. Opposite was an old woman in a sun

bonnet, chewing her snuff stick and staring straight before her, without, apparently, the slightest curiosity about anyone. In front of her sat a little girl of seven, who evidently was traveling quite alone. She was just the sort of a child Azalea liked — though, come to think of it, Azalea had never seen any sort of a child she did not like. This one, however, was especially attractive, no doubt about that. She had purplish-blue eyes, like pansies, and dark hair and lashes so long they swept her cheeks. She looked both shy and innocently bold, both plain and pretty, both graceful and awkward, both wistful and mischievous. Azalea decided that when she grew up she probably would be lovely.

She kept glancing at the girls as if she would like to be acquainted with them, and finally Azalea motioned for her to come over to their seat. The little girl got up at the first crook of Azalea's finger and crossed the aisle, smiling and coloring as she came.

“You don't like sitting all alone very well, do you?” Azalea asked. “I think it's horrid traveling in the cars with no one to talk to.

Don't you think I'm lucky to have my friend with me? ”

“ Yes'm,” said the little girl in a very sweet voice. Then after a pause: “ I couldn't bring any of my friends with me.”

She seemed to think she would have been the one to do the “ bringing.” It evidently did not occur to her that she would have been “ brought.”

“ I'll turn over this seat if you like,” said Azalea, “ and then you may sit with us. Mayn't she, Carin? ”

“ Why, of course,” said Carin. She got up to turn over the seat, but it stuck and rocked and acted in a singularly perverse way, as car seats sometimes will, and at that a lad who had been sitting with his nose buried in a book, arose and came quickly to her assistance.

He was so slender and graceful, his dark eyes were so friendly and quick to make responses, that the girls and Miss Zillah could not help staring at him for a few seconds with surprise and admiration in their eyes. In America lads and young men often have a way of looking like grown men before their time. They are too

business-like, too responsible, too seasoned. But this boy was as eager, as gentle as the girls themselves. He not only had not grown up — though he was as tall as the majority of men — but he looked as if he had no intention of doing so for some time to come. He held his cap in his hand, and showed a beautifully shaped head overgrown by a short crop of dark curls which he had, apparently, tried in vain to straighten.

“That seat,” he said with a sudden smile, showing two rows of teeth that could be described in no other way save as “gleaming,” “has a bad disposition.”

“Yes, hasn’t it?” said Carin. “But I’m sorry to have troubled you.”

“It’s no trouble,” he said, “for me to shake the cussedness out of anything that acts like that. It’s a pleasure.”

He gave the seat such a shake as irritable parents give to naughty children, and got it over in place somehow, and he settled the little girl in it.

“Have you anything that you’d like to have brought over here, Miss Rowantree?” he asked.

“Please,” said the little girl, “my dolly and my package.”

She spoke with a fine distinctness and with a charming accent.

"She's English, I'm sure," whispered Carin to Azalea.

The doll, a battered but evidently well-loved affair, was brought, and a box held in a shawl strap, which no doubt contained the small person's wearing apparel.

"But how did you know her name was Miss Rowantree?" Azalea asked, or started to ask. Before she had finished her question she saw on the child's dark blue reefer a piece of cloth, neatly sewn in place, and with these words on it in indelible ink:

"Constance Rowantree. Please see that she leaves the train at Rowantree Road."

"You're terrible young to be traveling alone, child," said Aunt Zillah seriously. "How ever could they let you do it?"

"I got so homesick they had to," explained the child with equal gravity. "Nobody could come with me, so I had to come alone. I don't mind," she added valiantly.

"I hope you reach your home before dark," went on Aunt Zillah, quite at ease now that she had somebody to worry about.

“ Oh, yes, ma’am,” the child answered, “ I’ll get home a long time before sundown, and my father will meet me.” She spoke in such a slow and particular fashion that she made them all smile.

“ That’s all right then,” said Azalea cheerfully, who was afraid the little girl was having some fears manufactured for her. “ Now, please tell me the name of your doll.”

“ It’s Mary Cecily Rowantree, after my mamma,” said the little girl. “ Isn’t that a pretty name? ”

“ Pretty as a song,” said the youth, who was still standing by them.

“ I wish it was my name,” the little girl added. “ I’m only named Constance.”

“ But that’s a lovely name,” Carin told her. “ It means that you will always have to be true to those you love.”

“ I love ever so many people,” said the child. “ And I’m going to keep right on loving them as long as I live.”

They chatted on for a while, as congenial folk will on the train. No doubt if Azalea had been left to herself she would frankly have told her new acquaintances just where she and her friends

were going and what they intended to do, but the more reserved Carin and the cautious Miss Zillah forbade, by their eyes, any such confidences. So, after Constance had finished telling how a lady named Miss Todd has come to live with them for a while, and how she had taken her — Constance — home with her, and how Constance had stayed till the “spell” of homesickness conquered her, no more confidences were made save by the young man.

“This country’s new to me,” he told them. “But I’ve heard a lot about it, so I came up to see what it was like. You see, I’m a painter. At least if I keep on working for the next twenty years maybe I’ll become one. I’ve been sketching on the islands off the Carolina coast, and now I’m going to see what I can do with the mountains. I painted some pictures of the sea that were so bad the tide didn’t come in for three days and maybe I can make the mountains so enraged that they’ll skip like lambs. Anyway, it will be fun.”

“Where do you get off?” asked Azalea cheerfully.

“Hanged if I know,” the youth replied, turning on them again the radiance of his beautiful

smile. "Any place that looks wild enough will get me."

"It's wild at Rowantree Road," said the little Constance gravely, looking up from under her long lashes with almost the expression of some woods creature. "We never see anybody hardly. You can't think how wild it is!"

Time went on and in spite of Miss Zillah's reserved manner, all of the young people were beginning to enjoy themselves and each other when the train came to a sudden stop. It was so sudden that it threw Constance forward on Carin's lap and hurled the contents of the overhead carry-alls down on the heads of the travelers.

"Oh!" cried Constance, righting herself, "I hope Mary Cecily isn't broken!"

"What is it?" asked Miss Zillah anxiously, addressing herself to the only man in the party.

But the young man was already out of the car, making investigations, and he was followed by four traveling men who plunged out of the smoking room.

"Oh, let's go see —" began Azalea. But Miss Zillah's hand was on her arm.

“ Sit still, my dear. The gentlemen will look to the matter,” she said with the confidence of the old-time woman.

“ Of course they will,” protested Azalea, half-vexed and half-laughing. “ They’ll have all the fun of seeing to it. I want some of the fun myself.”

“ No doubt the engine has broken down,” said Carin calmly, “ and you couldn’t do anything about that, could you, Azalea? ”

Constance wriggled out of her seat and started for the door, but Miss Zillah caught and held her gently.

“ You are much better in here, my dear,” she said.

The child, rebuked, turned her attention to picking up the articles that had fallen from their racks. There were, in the seat where their new acquaintance had been sitting, a knapsack and an artist’s kit, marked K. O’C. in large black letters on the canvas.

“ K stands for Kitty,” said Miss Constance. “ O stands for Oliver. C stands for Constance.”

The young man came rushing back into the car, and he overheard.

“ K stands for Keefe,” he declared, “ and O’C for O’Connor. That’s myself, such as I am. The engine has broken down — ”

“ Just as I thought,” murmured Carin.

“ And we’re likely to be tied up here for hours.”

“ It is a single track, I think,” said Miss Zillah with forced calm. “ Are we not in danger of a collision? Would you advise me, sir, to take the young ladies out into the open air? ”

“ Why not? ” asked Keefe O’Connor, packing articles back in the racks and generally settling the car. “ We may as well break up the time a little.” He happened to look at Constance and caught a look of dismay on the face that until now had been so cheerful.

“ Well, Miss Rowantree, what is it? ” he asked.

“ If we stay here for hours,” said the wise little girl, “ it will be jet dark when I get to my place.” Her lips quivered a little.

“ Come dark, come light,” said the young man, “ you’ll be all right, Constance Rowantree. Just you trust to me. Anyway, worry never yet mended anything.”

But plenty of worrying was done on that train

first and last that afternoon. The engineer worried and the conductor worried, the brakemen had their own troubles, and the passengers fretted as hard as they could. Carin and Azalea walked up and down the track with Miss Zillah and Constance, and tried to think they liked the adventure.

“Mr. Summers said that Mr. McEvoy would meet us no matter what happened,” said Miss Zillah, “and I take it that what Mr. Summers says is so.”

“Of course it’s so,” Azalea assured her. “We’ll certainly be met, Miss Zillah. But even if we shouldn’t be, there’d be some place for us to stay. There are houses at Bee Tree, aren’t there? Or do you think there is only a tree?”

“Oh, there are houses,” put in Constance. “Daddy goes there to get his letters and the groceries.”

“Why don’t you get off at Bee Tree with us?” asked Azalea. “Then we can look after you.”

“Oh, no,” said the child. “Daddy wrote that I was to get off at Rowantree Road. It’s ever so much nearer our house. I must do just what papa said. If he was there waiting for me

and I stayed on the train, he'd feel dread-ful-ly."

She made a very long word of "dreadfully," separating the syllables in her queer way.

The conductor of the train overheard what was being said.

"I tell you what it is, Miss Constance," he said: "I'll have to see your father standing right there before me ready to take you in charge before I'll let you off in those woods alone. It will be plumb night before we get to your place."

"Now, see here, conductor," said one of the traveling men, "let one of us boys get off with the little girl. It won't do at all for her to be dropped in the woods."

"Draw lots to see who does it," proposed another of the traveling men, and began tearing up pieces of paper. "Here, you fellows!"

But Keefe O'Connor objected.

"Not a bit of it," he cried. "You men are on business, and it throws you out of your whole week's schedule if you miss a town. I'm out gunning for scenery. Want to paint it, you understand. I have no destination — only a mileage ticket. Let me get off with the little girl. If her father is on hand, I can swing back

on the train again. If he isn't, she can guide me to her house."

"It's a terribly long way," said Constance dolefully. "It's right through the woods. You haven't a lantern with you, have you?"

"No," admitted Keefe, "I've no lantern, but I'm sure we'd make our way. Didn't you promise me you wouldn't worry?"

"No, sir," said the child seriously, "I don't think I promised."

There really was only one person on the train who could be said to refrain, and that was the mountain woman with the snuff stick.

"I've been a-studying nigh on three months about going to see my son Jake," she said, "and now it don't seem to matter much when I do git thar. I've got shet of the work to home for a spell, anyhow. I've kep' at it twelve year without a let-up, and setting by a while won't trouble me none."

No one had anything to eat, for all had counted on reaching their destination by supper time, so that sundown saw a group of hungry people with only Miss Zillah Pace's generous supply of cookies to comfort them. But at last

the engine was repaired in such a way that the engineer "reckoned it would hold," and the train moved cautiously on through the darkness, delayed here and there at sidings, and throwing trains all along the line out of their time schedule.

There was silence in the car. The traveling men no longer told their stories; Aunt Zillah nodded but dared not doze for fear of missing her station; the mountain woman brooded patiently, caring little, it seemed, as to what fate might have in store for her; and little Constance slept in Azalea's arms. Carin was supremely patient and quiet; and the bright eyes of Keefe O'Connor gleamed now and then from under the rim of his cap, which was pulled low over his face, and behind which he was occupied in thinking his own thoughts.

But he was alert enough when the conductor came to warn him that they were approaching Rowantree Road. He and Azalea between them got the little girl awake, and with his packages and hers, the friends saw him swing off the train in the black murk. The conductor's lantern threw a little glow around him where he

stood holding the hand of Constance fast in his own.

“Mighty good thing you’re here, sir,” they heard the conductor say. “I certainly would have been put out if I’d had to leave the little one in the dark by herself.”

“Oh, my daddy is somewhere,” Constance reassured him in her high ringing tones; and as they pulled out they heard her voice calling “Daddy! Daddy!”

“There’s a light!” cried Aunt Zillah excitedly. “See, it’s just up the track a way. Her father must be there after all. Really, it’s the greatest relief to me.”

The traveling men seemed to be relieved, too. So was the conductor; so, no doubt, were the brakemen. No one knows what the engineer felt. He probably was praying that his repairs would hold out. The mountain woman took out her snuff stick again. Just then the conductor called:

“All out for Bee Tree.”

Azalea caught at her parcels; Carin gathered up hers more deliberately; Aunt Zillah arose in a flutter, dropping things here and there which the conductor and the youngest of the travel-

ing men picked up, and presently they were off in the mellow gloom. But it was a gloom with a lantern-light to mitigate it.

“Be you the ladies Mr. Summers writ about?” a cordial voice inquired. “I’m McEvoy. Step along this way, please.”

CHAPTER III.

SUNSET GAP

The night was as bland as it was dark. Neither stars nor moon lighted the way of the travelers, but Miles McEvoy's horses had no need of these celestial bodies to help them keep the road. They knew it, though it swept around Simms' barn and took the cut-off by Decker's hill, and plunged straight through Ravenel's woods. They did not tremble as, climbing and still climbing, it carried them along the edge of a gorge; nor did they quake when their hoofs beat on a resounding bridge, though there were but planks between them and an abyss.

Dew-wet branches touched the faces of those who sat in the sagging old wagon, and low-flying bats brushed their hair. Owls hooted, hounds barked, and all the unnamed sad night noises of the mountain reached their ears. Azalea had known such journeys many and many a time in the old days when she had traveled in the caravan with Sisson's actors, but to

Carin and Miss Zillah this plunging ahead up a strange road in the pitch blackness was a new and not altogether pleasant experience. Mr. McEvoy may have guessed at their feelings, for he said after a long silence:

“Mr. Summers was for you-all stopping down at Bee Tree for the night. You could 'a' put up at Mis' Casey's by turning her step-ma out'n her bed. But even then it would have took some studying, for the three of you would have had to bunk together, and that looked to me a leetle like crowding the mourners. So I said to Mis' McEvoy I'd better haul you right up home and settle you in our spare room.”

“That was very good of you,” said Miss Zillah heartily. “It's a shame that you had to wait so long for the train. I'm afraid Mrs. McEvoy will have cooked supper for us hours ago, and that she'll be quite discouraged by this time.”

“No'm, she won't,” said McEvoy placidly. “She's been laying in stores for you-all these two or three days past. All I'm to do is to whoop when we hit Rattlesnake Turn, and she'll put the kettle to b'iling.”

“What,” asked Carin from somewhere down

in her throat, "is Rattlesnake Turn, Mr. McEvoy, please?"

"'Tain't nothin' but a crook in the road, miss. A few rattlers has been kilt there on and off, and the folks like to keep the name. It makes it sound kind of exciting like, and there ain't so many things to cause excitement hereabouts. We have to make the most of them we've got." He gave a little chuckle, and Carin drew a sigh of relief.

"I know," she said under her breath to Miss Zillah, "that I wouldn't be afraid of lions. At least, not terribly afraid. I'd be willing to go hunting wild beasts if I had a good rifle, but I certainly do hate snakes."

"Snakes?" murmured Mr. McEvoy pensively. "Snakes don't like to be rubbed the wrong way. Nuther do folks. Take things easy, I say — snakes included. Go your way and let them go their'n. Of course if they show fight, why, scotch 'em. I seem to understand snakes."

His musical drawling voice died away languidly, and no one made any reply. But Azalea, who knew the mountain people, smiled a little in the darkness, thinking to herself that Mr.

McEvoy's kind treated their neighbors much as he did his snakes.

All things come to an end, and the mountain ride was no exception to the rule. Tired, rather stiff and very hungry, Miss Zillah and the two girls were helped out on a horse block made of the huge bole of a chestnut tree, and were ushered by "Mis' Cassie McEvoy," into the brightness of her mountain cabin. (She was given the benefit of her full name by the neighbors to distinguish her from her sister-in-law who lived "over beyant.")

Mrs. McEvoy had the table set, the fire blazing on the open hearth, and the kettle simply leaping among the coals.

She was quiet and shy, but she wanted her visitors to feel at home and she told them so in a voice even softer and slower than her husband's. She led them into the second room in the cabin — there were only two — and here, sure enough, was the "company room," with its two beds heaped high with feather ticks and covered with hand-woven counterpanes. The walls were decorated with large framed patent medicine advertisements, very strong in color, and quite entertaining in subject. One showed

St. George slaying the dragon, the legend below advertising some oil that was warranted to cure man of almost all his pains and aches. Another pictured a knight in coat of mail, mounted on a charger, rushing at the fell castle of Disease, his lance in rest. There were many others, and in a moment or two Azalea discovered that these went with the rows of bottles — three deep — upon the mantel shelf. Tall and dark, squat and ruddy, all much labeled and sampled, they stood there to bear witness to the chief interest of Mis' Cassie McEvoy's life.

“She didn't look sickly to me,” said Miss Zillah anxiously. “At least no more so than the mountain women usually do.”

But Mis' McEvoy did not long leave Miss Zillah in ignorance of her complaint.

“Anybody'd think,” she said while she busied herself setting her supper before them, “that I was trying to p'isen 'em, to look at them medicine bottles in thar. I said to Miles it was a pity I didn't have no other place to put 'em —”

“And I told her,” broke in her husband, “that a chimney shelf was whar folks set out the most costly stuff they had, and by that I reckoned

them medicine bottles was whar they belonged."

"I've been ailing," said Mis' McEvoy, looking straight past her husband at Miss Pace, "for nigh on fifteen years. Nobody," she said proudly, "can make out what it is that *does* ail me. Some says it's this and some says it's that. Some says take this and some says take that."

"And she heeds 'em," said McEvoy, with a sound in his throat between a laugh and a groan. "So if you've got anything that's good for what ails her, Miss Pace, ma'am, if you'd be so kind as to mention the name of it I would get it the next time I'm down to the town."

"Them pictures you see on the wall in the company room," went on Mis' McEvoy, "come with the medicine."

"They do so," said her husband, passing the chicken to Carin.

Carin and Azalea were just tired enough to feel silly. Each girl knew if she but caught the eye of the other, she would be off in a fit of laughter, and this was no time for them to disgrace themselves when they had come up as bearers of learning and manners, so to speak. So they looked anywhere except at each other,

and only Miss Zillah noticed that they were choking over their food as they strangled their giggles.

As soon as politeness permitted, they excused themselves, and it was a happy moment for them when they tumbled onto the high feather bed and lay there in delicious drowsiness listening to the call of the whippoorwills. They could hear Miss Zillah softly moving around, and now and then through half-closed lids they saw her conscientiously brushing her hair — counting the strokes as she did so — reading her Bible and saying her prayers. But at last preparations for the night were finished and all sank to sleep.

“Why call this Sunset Gap?” asked Carin the next morning. “Wouldn’t Sunrise Gap do as well?”

The sun was streaming gorgeously through the open casement full upon the bed where the girls lay. Azalea sat up with a start, wondering for a moment where she was, and how it came that Carin’s voice was in her ears. Then she saw Miss Zillah’s curls upon the pillow of the adjoining bed, recognized the triple row of bottles on the mantel shelf, and remembered that she was now a responsible person. She

was a teacher, a kind of missionary, a somebody with a purpose! It was both amusing and alarming.

"Oh, Carin," she said with a little nervous laugh, "why ever did we come? Do you suppose we can do anything worth doing? I'm frightened, honestly I am."

Carin sat up in bed too, and Azalea watched her hair turn into shining gold where the sun played upon it.

"Honey-bird, what's the matter with you?" Carin demanded. "I thought people were always brave in the morning and downhearted at night. You were braver than I was last night coming up that dreadful road in the dark, and now here you are, getting fussy in broad daylight."

"Well," said Azalea, a little ashamed, "we've simply got to make a success, haven't we? I don't know as I ever before simply *had* to make a success."

"Take it easy, the way Mr. McEvoy does the snakes," laughed Carin. "If you get to feeling so dreadfully wise and responsible you won't be able to do a thing."

"That's right," said Miss Zillah from her

bed. "I myself have always been too anxious. It runs in the Pace blood to be serious and care-taking. But now that I'm middle-aged and have taken time for thought I see that owls have never been as much liked as larks. So you be a lark, Azalea. That's what you naturally are, anyway."

Azalea gave a little chuckle. She liked Miss Zillah's way of putting things; moreover, these particular words stuck in her memory. She contrived to "be a lark" at breakfast, and she insisted on helping Mis' Cassie McEvoy with the dishes and on entering with vivacity into the discussion of whether medicine that was good for rheumatism would cure heartburn. Two bottles of patent medicine which were enjoying the most favor just at that time, stood on a tiny shelf above the kitchen table. One was very fat and contained a dark liquid, and this Azalea secretly named "Bluebeard." The other was slender, tall and filled with a pinkish stuff, and this she called "The Princess Madeline." She told Carin, and they amused themselves by watching to see which was most in favor. As nearly as they could make out, Mis' Cassie favored Bluebeard of mornings and so

probably turned to Princess Madeline along toward night.

Mr. McEvoy had gone down to Bee Tree to get the three horses which Mr. Carson was having sent up. Mustard and Paprika were coming, with a gentle old nag which had been one of Miss Zillah's best friends for many years and which bore the name of Minerva. So, the house being tidied, the four women folk started out — Mis' Cassie acting as guide — and went to look at the schoolhouse and the little cabin where Miss Zillah was to set up housekeeping with the girls.

The log schoolhouse, which had been unused for four years, lay four-square to the compass, facing the purple south. Not that the south had any advantage over the other points of the compass in regard to its color. All the world, except, of course, the immediate foreground, was purple up at Sunset Gap. The mountains threw up peak after peak through the purple dimness, and the sky itself lost something of its blue brightness because of the purple veils which drifted between it and the sweet-smelling earth.

“Time was,” explained Mis' Cassie, “when this here school was kep' up fine. That was

when the Ravenels lived over to the Hall. Mr. Theodore Ravenel was pore in his health and he come up this-away to git well. He and his wife and his children lived to the Hall — ”

“ What is the Hall? Where is it, please? ” asked Azalea.

“ It’s over beyant, ” replied Mis’ Cassie, waving her hand vaguely toward the slope before them. “ But he died, and Mis’ Ravenel took the childer’ and left. I reckon she would have given something toward keeping up the school if she could have spared the money, but she had four young ones to rear, and couldn’t see her way to it. The school and the teacher’s house is just as she left it. My old man’s kept an eye on things. He vowed he wouldn’t see the place tore to pieces. Thar was plenty hereabouts who would ’a’ helped theirselves to the furniture and fixings if he’d let ’em, but he said, no, anybody who had the gift of peering into the future could see that sometime that school would be set up here ag’in. And what he said has come true. ”

“ Yes, it has, hasn’t it? ” cried Azalea, delighted as she always was at any sign of friendliness and hopefulness in the world. “ Do

hurry, Mrs. McEvoy, please; I'm just wild to see how the schoolhouse looks."

Mis' Cassie slipped the huge key in the door and the four entered the musty schoolroom. It was, as mountain schools go, a well-equipped room. There was a fireplace on one side for comfort in mildly chill weather, and a large sheet iron stove on the other for use on colder days. The teacher's platform was backed by a blackboard; there were good desks for both pupils and teacher, and comfortable seats with backs to them. The room was well lighted, and no dirtier than might be expected. It is needless to say, however, that Miss Zillah's first thought was of the cleaning it must undergo.

"Where can I find some one to do the cleaning for us, Mrs. McEvoy?" she asked. "We must have everything scrubbed and the walls whitewashed."

"Well," said Mis' Cassie, "I'd take pride in cleaning out, and Miles, he could whitewash."

"But are you strong enough?" asked Miss Zillah kindly. "Taking medicine all the time as you do, I'm afraid you oughtn't to do such hard work."

Mis' Cassie smiled so that she showed the vacant places between her long pointed teeth.

"It's taking all that thar medicine that's pearted me up so I *can* do it," she said triumphantly. Miss Zillah said no more in the way of warning, but straightway came to terms with Mis' Cassie. Azalea and Carin, looking from the windows, did not really think this the best site in the world for a schoolhouse.

"I don't know how it will be with the pupils," Azalea said, "but I'm afraid the teachers won't do a thing but look out of the window. Honestly, I've never seen such views, and you know, Carin, that first and last I've seen something of the mountains."

"Oh, how I can paint," Carin sighed happily. "I shall get up early mornings and work before school. Oh, Azalea, anyone could learn to paint up here — a person couldn't keep from painting."

"I could," Azalea had to admit. "You know, Carin, if you were a wicked queen and threatened to cut my head off if I didn't give you the picture of a cow, I'd send for my friends and relatives and bid them a tearful good-bye, for I'd know my last day had come."

“Now we’ll go to the house, my dears,” said Miss Zillah. “If that only proves to be anything like as comfortable as the schoolhouse, we shall be fortunate indeed.”

They passed through a grove of maples, and followed a trail once well worn, that led them by way of a little bridge over a cheerfully noisy mountain stream to a little headland from which the mountain shelved abruptly. Here, among towering white pines, and seeming to be almost a part of the earth itself, stood a little cabin of logs. They were square hewn, but so weathered that their color was like that of the tree trunks, and the slope of the roof was as graceful as the sweeping branches of the great pines. The windows were closed with board shutters, and the door—well-made and paneled—was double-locked. Mis’ Cassie, however, was soon able to admit her guests, and they stood for the first time within the little room which was to live, forever after, in the minds of all of them, as a place of peace.

It was a room of good size, divided after a fashion by a huge “rock” chimney with a fireplace on each side of it—an interesting fact which it did not take the delighted girls long

to discover. A few simple pieces of furniture stood about the room — some easy chairs, a settee, a table and a clock. Behind the chimney was the bedroom. Here stood two beds, a chest of drawers, some straight-backed chairs, and a wide bench with pail, pitcher, and washbasin. There was nothing more. Nothing more was needed.

“But the kitchen,” said Miss Zillah, turning her gaze reproachfully upon Mis’ Cassie.

“Oh, yes,” said Mis’ Cassie, “sure enough — the kitchen.” She led the way through a door they had not noticed, and there in a lean-to, with a spring bubbling in a “rock house” fairly by the door, was the little work room, with its small cooking stove and its shelves of dishes.

“Are the dishes horrid?” demanded Carin, fearing the worst in the matter of china.

“No!” cried Azalea in the tone of one who makes a discovery. “They’ve pink towers on them and pictures of trees. Oh, Carin, see, they’re like that plate your mother has! Aren’t they the dears?”

“Mis’ Ravenel left them plates and cups,” volunteered Mis’ Cassie. “She said when she put ’em on the shelves that she did hope they’d

fall into the hands of some one who would set store by them. They was what she used and she was mighty particular about them, but it was such a chore toting things down the mountains and she'd had such a lot o' trouble that she just left things behind her."

"Well, about all we brought was clothes and bedding," said Miss Zillah. "Sister Adnah wanted me to bring along dishes and pictures and curtains and all manner of things, but I said 'No, wait. We won't be needing pictures or curtains, where there's a picture out of every window and no one to be looking in at night, and if we've no other dishes we can eat out of gourds.'"

Miss Zillah gave one of her odd little laughs — one of the gypsy laughs in which she sometimes indulged.

"It's a fit home for anybody," she decided. "I can't hardly wait to get my hands on it and clean it up."

"Well, let's don't wait," cried Azalea. "Mr. McEvoy can bring our things right here when he comes, can't he, Mrs. McEvoy. Oh, yes, and is there a place for the ponies?"

"No," Mis' Cassie told them. "The ponies

is to be kept at our place. Miles will fetch 'em when you want them."

"Some one is coming," said Azalea under her breath. "I saw some one walking along the road."

"Why, Azalea, anybody would think you were Robinson Crusoe. Why should you be so surprised to see anybody coming down the road?" asked Carin.

Azalea did not answer for a moment. She moved nearer to the door and looked out; then drew back suddenly.

"Oh," she said under her breath, "it's that boy we saw on the cars — that young man, I mean. You know — Keefe O'Connor."

"Oh, is that so?" said Carin in the most matter-of-fact way. "How jolly! Call him in, Azalea."

But Azalea, the friendly one, Azalea who always liked to talk to people, and who, up at the McBirney cabin could hardly let anyone pass the door without saying "come in," held back unaccountably. Miss Zillah and Mis' Cassie were still in the kitchen, so they could not be appealed to, and finally it was Carin who ran out of the door and called. But it really

was not necessary to call, for Keefe O'Connor had already discovered the little house dropped among the pines as naturally as a ground-bird's nest, and he had turned aside to investigate it. When he saw the open door and the girls, he took off his hat and swung it.

"Isn't this great!" he cried, not trying to hide his delight. "Do you live here?"

"We've been here only half an hour," said Carin. "But in half an hour more I think we may truthfully say that we are living here."

Keefe took it for granted that he was expected to enter. He looked about the house with admiring eyes.

"It's a perfect place," he said, "for a painter."

"Oh, Carin's a painter," Azalea said quickly. How wonderful, she thought, that both Keefe and Carin should be artists. It ought to make them good friends.

"And are you an artist too?" asked Keefe, turning his dark eyes on Azalea with laughing and admiring inquiry.

"Mercy, no," said Azalea. "I'm nothing — just a girl."

"Oh, I see," he said, smiling radiantly.

Carin broke in cheerfully with:



“ I an artist? Mercy, no,” said Azalea. “ I’m nothing
—just a girl.”

“And are you really staying around here?”

“Yes,” he said; “I’m at the Hall. You remember little Miss Rowantree? Her father and mother have consented to let me use one of their rooms. They have a great many, you know.”

“Ravenel Hall?” asked Carin. “Is that the same as Ravenel Hall? We have just been hearing something of the Ravenels.”

“It’s called Rowantree Hall now,” smiled Keefe. “You see, Rowantree himself lives there. He’s lord of the manor.”

“Is he so magnificent?” asked Carin, her eyes widening. “I thought no one lived about here except the mountain folk. Mr. Summers never told me anything about Mr. Rowantree.”

“Then,” said Keefe O’Connor, “Mr. Summers, whoever he may be, couldn’t have known very much about the country. To be sure, I haven’t been here long myself, but from what I’ve seen I should say that Mr. Rowantree was a very important character.”

“Oh, tell us —” began Carin. But just then Miss Zillah entered.

“My dears,” she said, “Mrs. McEvoy has kindly started the fire. Let us wash the dust

off the dishes without delay. Mrs. McEvoy offers to provide us with vegetables, and our supplies will soon be here, so presently we shall have dinner."

Keefe came forward from the shadow of the huge chimney.

"May I help with the dishes, please?" he asked. If he saw in Miss Zillah's eyes a gleam of annoyance that she should have a third person foisted upon her care he paid no attention to it. She was too hospitable, moreover, to refuse.

"Yes," she said, "if you do it well. Then, having paid for your dinner beforehand, you shall eat it with us."

Azalea, who was already in the kitchen, heard the answer — and dropped the dipper.

CHAPTER IV

“ SAY! TEACHER! ”

The schoolhouse was ready. The books and tablets, pencils and stereopticon pictures ordered by Mr. Carson, all had come. The little house of the schoolteachers was ready, too. All that was wanting was the pupils.

But there was little doubt about them — they would soon be coming, for posted at corners of the main traveled roads, nailed on trees and tacked on station and post office walls were placards bearing the information that the Ravenel School was open and that all who wished to study would be welcomed. To make plain the nature of the invitation even to those who could not read, Carin painted on each placard a picture of the schoolhouse, and put beyond it a beckoning hand, which, as she explained, was her idea of sign writing.

“ Why, even the groundhogs and chipmunks ought to be able to understand that, ” said Azalea.

Then the services of the carrier of the rural mail and of the doctor and the preacher were asked. Miles McEvoy made it his business to send on the good word by everyone he saw going mountainward. The grocer promised to let no mountaineer leave his place without telling him of the news and asking the person to whom he told it, to spread it far and wide.

So it came to pass that Azalea, sitting on the doorstep one morning after her early breakfast, saw three heads appearing above the slope.

“Carin,” she called. “They’ve come!”

“Who? The gypsies?”

“No. The pupils. Oh, where is the key to the schoolhouse? Oh, Aunt Zillah, do I look in the least like a teacher? Come, Carin, we must go meet them.”

But Carin held back a little because she had a curiosity to see how Azalea would meet these first seekers after knowledge. They were three slender young creatures, two boys and a girl, the eldest twelve, the girl not much younger, and the second boy a mere wisp of a child who looked as if he had been dragged along for safe-keeping.

Azalea had rushed forth from her door

impetuously, the key to the schoolhouse in her hand, but Carin saw her check herself and walk toward the children rather slowly. Anyone looking at her would have said she was shy. But she was not half so shy as the children. They had a certain dignity about them, it is true, and looked as if they were there to face whatever might come, but they, too, came forward slowly, looking from the corners of their eyes, and with their heads drooping. When Azalea got near them they stopped, and she stopped too.

“Howdy,” said Azalea in the mountain fashion.

“Howdy,” said they.

A little silence fell.

“Have you come up here to get learning?” asked Azalea quaintly.

“Yes’m,” said they. The girl added, “Please ma’am.”

“It certainly does amaze me,” said Miss Zillah under her breath to Carin, “the good manners all the mountain children have. It doesn’t matter from what way-back cove they come, they seem to understand politeness.”

“Isn’t Azalea clever?” murmured Carin. “Now I would probably have frightened them

so that they'd have scampered away like rabbits."

"The schoolhouse is over yon," said Azalea. The three pupils nodded and when she set out they followed. Carin joined them, walking a little behind the others.

"What are your names?" she heard Azalea ask quietly — almost lazily.

"Coulter," said the elder boy. "I'm Bud Coulter; my sister, she's called Mandy Coulter. And this here is Babe."

Carin ran forward and held out her hand to the little one.

"Take my hand, Babe," she said. The child drew back for a moment, looking up in Carin's face with something like fear; but when he saw those beautiful blue eyes which Azalea loved so well, and the shining mass of golden hair, his mouth opened slowly like one who sees a vision, and when Carin had grasped his thin little hand in her own, he walked beside her quietly, though his heart beat so that it made his homespun blouse rise and fall.

"Thar's a boy living over beyant us that aims to come to school if we like it," Mandy Coulter told Azalea.

“Hush up,” her brother whispered, poking her reprovngly in the ribs. “Don’t be a tell-all.”

“Oh, you’ll like it, I reckon,” said Azalea. “Anyway, it’s worth while to learn to read and write, isn’t it? People who get on in the world all know how to read and write.”

“Sam Simms can’t read nor write none,” said Bud, “and he’s got six mules and ten head of cattle and his own house and fields.”

Azalea flushed a little. It came back to her memory that it was a part of the delight of mountain people to catch each other tripping. They liked a tussle of wits; it was an intellectual game with them.

“Oh, well,” she said, “there’s more than one way of getting on, of course. But Mr. Simms must have been a smart man to get all those things without having reading and writing to help him. I don’t suppose there’s another man in the country who could have done that and been so ignorant.”

“Ignorant?” retorted Bud Coulter. “He ain’t ignorant. He knows just what to do for sick horses and how to gather in swarming bees and lots of other things.”

“How clever of him,” said Azalea. “I’d like to know him.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” declared Bud emphatically. “He’s about the meanest man around. He can shoot like —”

Azalea stopped him on that last word. She knew quite certainly what it was going to be.

“He wouldn’t want to shoot me, would he?” she asked smilingly. “I only wanted to meet him because he could do so many things, although he could not do the best ones — he couldn’t read in books what other men thought, and he couldn’t write down any of his own thoughts. That leaves him in a bad way, doesn’t it? Many men not nearly so clever could get ahead of him.” Azalea paused a moment. Then she cried: “Why, come in, quick, and I can show you how to get ahead of him yourself.”

Bud’s calm was broken. He looked at Azalea for the first time as “teacher.”

“Can you, now?” he asked.

She threw open the schoolroom door, showed the children where to put their hats and ran to the blackboard.

“You must tell me your real name,” she said. “Surely it isn’t Bud?”

“ No'm. It's Laurence Babbitt Coulter.”

“ Laurence Babbitt Coulter,” she wrote on the blackboard in very plain letters. “ Can you write that, Bud? ”

“ No'm.”

“ Do you know your letters? ”

“ When I don't forget.”

“ By the end of the week,” said Azalea with decision, “ you will know your letters and you will be able to write your own name. Then you can do something that Mr. Simms can't do.”

The boy grinned.

“ I can come it over him,” he said. He was again enjoying the encounter of wits. This made Azalea say hastily:

“ But of course, since he's so much older than you, Bud, you mustn't let him know that you can come it over him.”

“ Sure, I must,” cried the boy. “ He's been mean to my pa. He's the meanest man in these parts, and he's got a son — at least it ain't really his son — it's his brother's son — who's so meachin' that he don't even know enough to be mean, and if that white-livered boob tries to come up here to this here school — ”

“Why, we’ll teach him how to write his name, too,” said Azalea valorously.

“I won’t stay in no school that Skully Simms comes to,” declared Bud.

Azalea threw a glance at Carin, who was sitting in one of the school seats beside Babe, and whose face had turned rather white. Carin had been prepared for gratitude from the pupils; it had never occurred to her that they would come to school in a warring attitude. Moreover, for the first time she realized what a young girl Azalea still was. As her Zalie stood there on the platform, her hair ruffled by the wind, her face flushed with perplexity, her frock coming just below her shoe tops, she looked very tender and youthful indeed. But she had what Sam Disbrow would have called “the fighting stuff” in her.

“This school is for learning,” she said, “and learning has nothing to do with friend or foe. It is for all alike. Chinamen with cues down their backs, Arabs riding on camels over the desert, East Indians, all dressed in white with turbans on their heads, may be learned. They live on the other side of the world — quite on the other side of this great ball we call the earth

— but they have just as much right to get learning as we have.”

Carin had an idea. She jumped from her seat and ran to the blackboard.

“Did you ever see a picture of a camel?” she asked.

Before the children could answer she had begun sketching one. She had colored chalks, and in a moment or two her brown camel was surrounded by a stretch of desert sand. Far off, a fronded palm indicated an oasis. Then she began telling them what the picture meant; she told them of the desert and the life on it, and of the old, old learning of the Arabs. The children sat spellbound.

When she had finished, Azalea took up a piece of chalk.

“Now,” she said quietly but in a tone from which there was no demurring, “we will learn our letters.”

Bud gave her one last defiant glance; then his eyes fell.

“Yes’m,” he said.

Half an hour later two more pupils came, one a red-headed boy named Dibblee Sikes, the other a girl called Paralee Panther, with aston-

ishly heavy eyebrows, a sullen look and only one arm. She was the only one of the pupils who really knew how to read. Moreover, she was, under all her sullenness, wild to learn more. With her heavy eyes she watched every move that Carin or Azalea made; she listened eagerly and yet as if only half understanding, to all they said.

After school was over, Azalea, more tired mentally than she ever remembered to have been in her life, walked beside this girl for a way.

“How is it that you have been taught?” asked Azalea.

The girl did not seem to understand. At least, she failed to reply.

“Who taught you your letters?” Azalea asked again.

“A woman. She’s dead.”

“Did she live around here? Was it Mrs. Ravenel’s teacher?”

“No. We don’t belong hereabouts. We’ve just come.”

“Oh, is that so?” said Azalea with interest. “And do you live near?”

“Six miles from here.”

“No — not really! Oh, that’s too far for you

to walk every day. Can't you live somewhere nearer while school lasts? ”

“ I'm content where I be.”

“ But the walk — ”

“ I can walk it,” said the girl. Compared with her heavy sulkiness, Bud Coulter's habit of arguing was blitheness itself. However, as Azalea turned at the house door to look after her strange group of pupils, Dibblee, the red-headed boy, waved his hand, and little Babe Coulter called: “ Say, teacher, I'm coming nex'-day.”

She slipped in the house with Carin beside her, to find Miss Zillah and Mrs. McEvoy waiting anxiously to get a report of the first day's work.

“ Them Coulters,” said Mrs. McEvoy when she heard the name of the first pupils mentioned, “ are the ones that have a war with the Simmses. They've kept it up for twenty years and more. Seems like they're set on seeing which can kill the others off.”

“ Oh,” cried Azalea, “ is it really one of those dreadful mountain quarrels? Mrs. McEvoy, do you suppose we could do anything to break it up? ”

Mis' Cassie threw an amused and commiserating look at Azalea, who was looking, for her, white-faced and nervous — not that Azalea's cheeks could really fade out completely.

"I don't think I'd aim to do that," she said dryly. "You 'tend to your teaching, Miss Azalea, and perhaps the light of learning may show them the folly of walking in dark ways."

Carin was telling about Paralee Panther.

"Oh, one of them Panthers," said Mrs. McEvoy. "They're strangers. Nobody takes to them much — can't get it out of them where they come from nor what they aim to do. They've all got heavy looks, but that girl's the worst of the lot."

"She's quite a contrast to Dibblee Sikes," mused Carin.

"Now, there's a right peart boy!" exclaimed Mrs. McEvoy with unusual enthusiasm. "He's a blessing to his mother, and a fine friendly lad altogether."

It was time to get supper and Carin and Azalea insisted on helping Miss Zillah, though they would have been particularly glad to have

snuggled down on the settee and forgotten the world. They had promised Annie Laurie that Aunt Zillah should not be allowed to get weary and they were determined to keep their word. But after supper Miss Zillah insisted on stacking the dishes away until morning. She said she wanted to sew and talk, and that doing the dishes the next day would help her to pass the time. So while she put some tiny tucks in a summer frock for Annie Laurie, the girls told her of everything that had happened during the day. Miss Zillah was rather dismayed.

“ I don’t understand about those children,” she said. “ Their spirits don’t seem to be right.”

However, by the end of the week, there was much more encouraging news to give her. The children who joined the school along toward the last of the week were milder and better mannered than those who had come at first. It seemed as if the more obstinate and ill-tempered had come first to try out the young teachers. Poor Skully Simms, the nephew of the man who had a “ war ” with the Coulters, dared not show his face. Mrs. McEvoy heard that he was “ wishful ” to come, but was afraid of Bud

Coulter. One day Azalea caught a glimpse of a face at the window, and after school Dibblee Sikes told her that it was Skully Simms.

“He’s jest pestered to know what we-all are doing,” he said. “But he’s skeered of Bud.”

“I might ride down and see him,” said Azalea. “Perhaps I could coax him to come.”

“Then if he got in bad with Bud and there was blood-shedding,” said Dibblee wisely, “you’d be taking blame to yourself. It might break up the school, ma’am. That would do harm to the whole lot of us. Folks around here don’t believe in stirring up the Coulters and Simms.”

“‘Let sleeping dogs lie,’” quoted Azalea. “Perhaps you’re right. You know the neighbors and I don’t.”

She was glad when Keefe O’Connor volunteered to come in every afternoon and teach the upper class boys geography and what he called “current history.” He had a notion that what they needed more than anything else was to have some notion of what was going on in the outside world. He said he always managed to be followed by a New York newspaper no matter how far in the backwoods he went. He had

left Rowantree Hall, partly because he had no wish to put the family to further trouble, but chiefly because he wanted to be nearer the school, where he meant to lend a hand now and then. A tent appeared miraculously on the mountainside, to which Keefe proudly gave the name of “home.” He arose early and painted during the morning hours; then, after his dinner, cooked in the open, he helped at school. After that, as the shadows deepened and lay across the slopes, he went back to his canvas and brushes. Carin was wild to join him, but the truth was that those first few days of teaching drained every drop of strength in her, and Azalea and Aunt Zillah hurried her into her bed immediately after supper.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” she complained to Aunt Zillah, half laughing and half in earnest, “if it wasn’t for that dreadful Paralee Panther. She seems like a bad dream; the only trouble is I can’t wake up.” I’d like to think I had imagined her. But she is real and needs us more, I suspect, than anybody else in the school.”

“She’s always frowning and watching,” Azalea added. “It makes me want to scream. Carin, did you ever see anybody with such heavy

eyelids? And Aunt Zillah, she watches at us from the corners of her eyes. Don't you just hate a trick like that?"

"How ever could she have lost her arm?" wondered Carin. "A boy might have shot his off, but it's strange for a girl to have lost an arm."

"Oh, well," said Aunt Zillah philosophically, "we came up here to find some queer people, and we're not disappointed. Queerness often means unhappiness, that's what I've discovered. If you girls succeed in doing what you came up to do and help these poor people out of some of their troubles and drawbacks, perhaps they won't be so queer."

The evenings at home — they called the cottage "home" now and had named it the "Oriole's Nest" — were very restful and delightful. If Carin went to bed, she did so on the couch in the sitting room, so that she might be with the others. Sometimes Aunt Zillah sewed — always for Annie Laurie — and sometimes she read aloud. Azalea had some crocheting with which she busied herself. Mrs. Carson had taught her to make some beautiful things, and Azalea had developed a sort of pas-

sion for them. She wanted to make something lovely for everyone she loved; and Mrs. Carson's last gift to her had been a great quantity of beautiful wools of many delicate shades.

Keefe O'Connor dropped in the little house evenings, too, and added to the gayety by “ pick-
ing ” on the guitar which he had borrowed from the McEvoy's. Sitting on the doorstep, his handsome head thrown back against the casing, his dark eyes fixed with something like yearning affection on the group in the room, he crept, brotherly fashion, into the heart of each of them. He did not explain himself — said nothing of his parents, of his past, of his means of living — yet he seemed to have for his own Bohemian purposes, all that he needed, and to be happy in spite of that curious wistfulness which everyone felt who came near him.

“ It does seem as if he was honing for something,” Mrs. McEvoy said one day when he was under discussion. “ It may only be liver trouble, of course. If so, I could help him out there. I've got three bottles of liver special that I ain't never took. Or if it's indigestion or rheumatism, there again I could be of aid to him. I was saying to Miles the other night, seems as if, since you

folks came, I didn't pay half the attention to my medicine that I used to. Aside from them two bottles in the kitchen, I don't call on none of them."

"And if those two bottles weren't sitting where you could see them," said Miss Zillah with unusual boldness, "probably you wouldn't be taking the medicine from them. I do say, Mrs. McEvoy, and I'll abide by it, that health is nine-tenths a matter of good food, good air and a happy heart."

"Oh, la," said Mrs. McEvoy with more temper than any of them had yet seen in her, "it's easy for you to say that, Miss Pace, when you've got your health. But if you'd been through what I have —"

She could not bring herself to finish, but suddenly remembering that she had some baking to do, left hastily and walked with unusual swingings of her body down the path that led to her home.

The path was getting pretty well worn now, and the dwellers in the Oriole's Nest were well pleased that it was so. They were attached to Mis' Cassie McEvoy, and were a good deal worried that she seemed displeased with them.

“I’d like to knock Bluebeard and the Princess Madeline off the shelf and break them to flinders,” said Carin. They all called Mrs. McEvoy’s favorite bottles by the names Azalea had given them. “It could be done so accidentally that she’d think it was the cat.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” said Miss Zillah firmly. “Don’t you try anything like that, Carin. Folks have to work out their own liberty. It can’t be done for them by anybody else, though a little help may be given now and then. I think I’ll bake some of those cookies that Mis’ Cassie likes, and I can send some over to her when Mr. McEvoy comes with the milk. I wouldn’t have her offended with me for anything.”

Miss Zillah always contrived to be busy, it seemed, and she could keep those around her busy, too. She was quite determined that there should be nothing slipshod about the Oriole’s Nest, and had laid out a fine set of rules for work which had to be followed. Even Keefe — who had soon fallen into the way of having his dinner with them — had his duties. At night, when Miss Zillah supervised the last offices of the day, it was he who brought in the pails of

fresh water from the spring, and who filled the wood box. When he had said good night — lingering a little — Miss Zillah locked the doors and drew the curtains. Then she waited till the girls were snug in bed, and kissing them with gentle seriousness, turned out the light.

It made it a touch less lonely for them all to hear Keefe whistling on his way to his tent-home. He had made it quite “shipshape” and he took a genuine pride in it. But he did not sleep in it; instead, he slung his hammock from the trees and rested there in moonshine or starlight. Even a light rain could not drive him in. Then, in the morning early, having cooked his breakfast, he was off with his painter’s kit. But his duties seemed always to take him past the door of the Oriole’s Nest, and as he passed he called out mockingly:

“Say, teacher.”

It won him a blithe signal from some one — possibly from all three of the cottage dwellers.

CHAPTER V

ROWANTREE HALL

The third Sunday of their sojourn on the mountain, they accepted an invitation to Rowantree Hall. Keefe O'Connor had been the messenger, bringing the invitation by word of mouth, and though Miss Zillah was not quite sure about the propriety of accepting, the girls overbore all objections. So it was agreed that Keefe was to be their guide there and back — to which end he borrowed one of Miles McEvoy's horses — and they set forth in the middle of a shimmering July forenoon. Keefe and Miss Zillah rode ahead; Azalea and Carin followed on their ponies, each of the feminine members of the party carrying in a neat saddlebag a clean summer frock to be donned upon arriving.

They followed the main traveled road but a short way, turning off presently on what looked like an old wood road. It was almost overgrown with huckleberries and little pines, and the farther they went, the prettier and wilder it grew.

At length they entered a magnificent piece of woodland where the chestnut and the maple, the tulip and the gum, the chestnut oak and the red oak and many other beautiful trees grew together. Then behold, in the midst of this they came upon a gateway made of great logs, with an iron lantern hanging from each end of the crosspiece, and above it in rustic letters the words "Rowantree Hall."

"I feel," said Carin, "as if I might come upon the Sleeping Princess at any moment."

"And I feel," Azalea answered, "as if we might all be turned into sleeping princesses. Oh, Keefe, are you sure this is not an enchanted wood?"

Keefe looked back over his shoulder gayly.

"I'm not at all sure," he said. "If you know of any way of keeping off enchantments —"

"I don't want to keep them off," Carin called. "Oh, how wonderful it all is! Aunt Zillah, we are going to have an adventure."

"No doubt," said Aunt Zillah, quite as light-hearted and care-free as any of the young people. "It is impossible to avoid adventures. Life itself is an adventure."

They had to ride a mile after they entered

the gate before they came to the house, and the only indications that they were near the habitation of man were the paths which ran here and there among laurel or rhododendron, and the rustic seats which were placed at intervals along the way. But at last the house arose before them. It had started out to be what Mr. Carson would have called a Southern mansion. The double gallery should have been supported by fluted pillars, but instead of these classic shafts, the boles of eight great chestnut trees served the purpose. The house had never been properly painted, only "primed" with ochre which had faded until it was almost the color of the ground around it, but over this had grown a multitude of vines. English ivy, Virginia creeper, trumpet flower, honeysuckle, purple and white clematis, the Dorothy Perkins rose and the matrimony vine climbed, ramped, and enwrapped according to their dispositions, till the ragged looking house was as gay as a castle with banners.

On the lower gallery, in white linen, very stately and hospitable in appearance, sat Rowantree himself.

"What a pleasure to have guests," he said

with an English accent, coming forward to assist Miss Zillah from her horse. "We have been looking forward to this honor with the greatest appreciation."

Miss Zillah could be stately herself when occasion demanded, and she was quite as polite as Mr. Rowantree when she thanked him. If Mr. Rowantree could have had his way, he would have beaten his hands together and summoned his slaves to lead the horses to the stables. But the truth — the bare and undecorated truth — was that there were neither slaves nor stables, the first never having come into Mr. Rowantree's life, and the second having been burned to the ground a few years back. But the horses, which Mr. Rowantree and Keefe cared for, were no doubt much happier let loose in a field near at hand. The ponies in particular were enthusiastic, and their cheerful neighings could be heard at intervals the rest of the day.

Aunt Zillah, followed by her two girls, entered what the Rowantrees were pleased to call their "drawing-room." It was large enough to deserve the name, no question about that. And the outlook from its great windows was so beautiful — the house being on a rise and overlooking

the forest about it and glimpsing the mountains beyond — that curtains would have been a mere drawback. Nor could any wall covering have been softer in color than the gray building paper which had been tacked on the joists of the house, since the builders never had got as far as lath and plaster. There was no chimney shelf, but there was a large fireplace, heaped for the occasion with oleander leaves. A few pieces of fine mahogany furniture were surrounded by the rudest mountain chairs, and the wall decorations consisted of a beautiful clock which kept the time of sunrise and moonrise as well as the hours of the day; in addition there were two fine, mellow portraits in oil, a fowling piece, two broken tennis rackets and some mountain baskets.

Miss Zillah was too delicate-minded to take stock of anybody's possessions, but the eager girls, set on their own sort of an adventure, noticed these odds and ends with one sweep of their eyes. Then, the next moment, the mistress of the house entered, and all was forgotten in looking at her.

She was taller than Barbara Summers, whom they both used as a standard for sweet women, but still she was small. Her face was unmis-

takably Irish; her eyes gray-misted blue, her hair as black as Keefe O'Connor's. Her mouth was sad and glad at once, and there was a strange, appealing look in her face as of wanting something. She seemed homesick for something — perhaps for something she never had had. The girls felt that if she had a happy time she wouldn't, in the midst of it, be able to forget sorrow; and that if she were very sorrowful, she would still manage to hold on to joy. Carin said afterward that her face made her think of Ellen Terry's. Azalea had not, of course, seen this great actress, but she, too, thought somehow of acting. As soon as Mrs. Rowantree began to talk, Azalea felt as if she were in a story book or on the stage. Like Rowantree himself, his wife was dressed in white, but it was, as Azalea could not help noticing, a very old frock with various rents in it, just as Mr. Rowantree's linen was frayed and ragged. But these things seemed, somehow, to make the "adventure" all the more interesting. Mrs. Rowantree had quick, gay motions, and she walked down the length of the long curious room as if she were tripping on her toes.

"Miss Pace, it's a great pleasure to be meet-

ing you," she said, not waiting for an introduction, but grasping Miss Zillah's hand. To Carin and Azalea she said: "Young faces are flowers at the feast!" Her way was so quaintly old-fashioned, so charming, so dramatic, that Azalea again thought of play-acting; yet Mrs. Rowantree was nothing, it seemed, if not sincere. So perhaps it was best, Azalea decided, to think of this as the most charming "really truly" thing that had come her way.

Miss Zillah made it known that they were not content to remain in their riding clothes, and Mrs. Rowantree offered their apologies to her husband with pretty ceremony.

"The ladies wish to be excused, my dear," she said. "They have to make themselves more acceptable to the gentlemen." She contrived to include Keefe in the little bow she swept them. So the four ladies were off up a stairway designed for a magnificent hand rail, but having nothing better in the way of a balustrade than a stout rope strung through posts.

Upstairs the appearance of things was even more bare and unsettled than below. The room to which they were taken was that occupied, apparently, by Mr. and Mrs. Rowantree,

and here was almost nothing in the way of furniture beyond the beds and a most elaborate dressing case belonging to Rowantree himself, spread out on a table before a triplicate mirror. Opposite it stood another table above which hung a very small mirror, where, it was evident by the meager little feminine articles, Mary Cecily Rowantree made her toilet. The celluloid brushes were in great contrast to the gold-stoppered, tortoise shell contrivances in Mr. Rowantree's case.

While the white frocks were being put on, Mrs. Rowantree lent a hand with deftness and gayety. She delighted in Carin's golden hair and in Aunt Zillah's beautiful silver curls. She said Azalea was like a rose, and that Constance had done nothing but talk of her since the day on the train.

"The children," said Mrs. Rowantree, "are in the nursery waiting impatiently to see you." It appeared that every bare room in the great unfinished house had its name.

When they all rustled down in their white gowns, Mr. Rowantree greeted them magnificently at the foot of the stairs.

"Have the children brought, my dear," he

said to his wife. "They naturally are eager to be released."

From his tone one would have expected the children to enter accompanied by at least a governess and a nurse, but it was the little proud mother herself who brought in Gerald — "my eldest son, Miss Pace," — and Moira and Michael — "my darling twins, young ladies," — and led by the hand that wise young person, Constance, who flew like a bird to Azalea's arms.

"She's like myself," said Mrs. Rowantree, "fierce in her affections."

Azalea laughed. "Oh, so am I," she said. "Mr. McBirney, my adopted father, always tells me that. He wants me to be calm, but I can't stay calm."

Mary Cecily Rowantree gave a rippling laugh.

"Why be calm," she asked, "when you can be having a fine excitement about something or other?"

"It's the Irish blood in her," explained Mr. Rowantree benevolently, "that makes my wife like that. I am not so easily amused myself. A quiet life, that's what suits me best. I ask noth-

ing better than to sit on my gallery and look at my peaceful trees. My dear, dinner will be served ere long, I take it?" Again it seemed as if there must be a cook and cook's assistants, scullions and servitors not far off. But again it was little Mrs. Rowantree who dashed to fill orders. Miss Zillah was persuaded to join Mr. Rowantree on the gallery, but Carin and Azalea insisted on going into the kitchen to help, for by this time they were quite aware of the condition of things. It was quite evident that Mr. Rowantree had an imagination, and not only saw some things which did not exist, but contrived not to see the unpleasant ones that did.

However, as the four handsome children persisted in tagging their mother into the kitchen, Mrs. Rowantree said to Carin:

"If you're really wanting to help — and I can see your heart's in it — would you mind telling a story to the young ones off somewhere? They're always under my feet, and while goodness knows I love to have them hanging about me, they are a hindrance to the getting of the dinner."

"Story?" cried Carin. "I know twenty.

Come, children!" And she vanished, followed not only by the four young Rowantrees, but by Keefe O'Connor as well.

So it was Azalea who had the next hour with the hostess.

"I thought we'd eat on the gallery," said Mrs. Rowantree. "It gives us a fine outlook over the estate."

There was no table on the gallery, but boards laid on sawhorses served every purpose, and the linen which Mrs. Rowantree gave Azalea to spread over this rude table was of the finest, most beautiful damask. The dishes, on the other hand, were of the commonest and had evidently been purchased at Bee Tree or some similar mart. But as for the food, Mrs. Rowantree knew how to manage that. She evidently made a fine art of seasoning, and while, as she said, they "had not the advantage of markets" at Rowantree Hall, they contrived, apparently, to get plenty to eat.

It was quite a formal moment when Rowantree himself waved them all to their seats. He placed Miss Zillah's chair for her magnificently, while Keefe placed Mrs. Rowantree's. Miss

Zillah was made to feel the distinction conferred upon her by being placed at the right hand of her host, who proceeded to carve his barnyard fowl with as many gestures as a trencher man of the middle ages might have used in carving the wild boar.

The Rowantree children apparently forgot nothing in the way of manners — at least so far as outward appearances went. It is true that Carin received a bad kick in the shins which was not intended for her; and that Azalea had to hold Moira's hand to keep her from pinching her twin, but nothing could be sweeter than the way they thanked their father when he served them with food, or the smiling manner in which they answered questions.

While they sat there, it began to rain softly, gray, bead-like drops falling from the gallery's edge to the ground, and hanging a soft shining curtain between them and the outer world. Azalea never forgot the beauty of it all. There was no wind, and they were quite as comfortable behind their silver curtain as they would have been in the house — more so, indeed, for the day had been a hot one. Delicious odors came up from the ground; the birds gave forth contented,

throaty sounds, and all the regal midsummer mountain world seemed well content.

They were very happy together, with a freedom from care that does not often come in this rather grim world. Only in the eyes of Mary Cecily Rowantree there remained that strange look of longing, of forever searching for something which she could not find. Keefe O'Connor caught it, and sympathized. Azalea saw it, and because she too had a hurt — as orphans must needs have — she too understood. Those who have a sorrow belong to a great brotherhood and know each other by secret signs.

But it was a happy dinner for all of that. Between courses Rowantree himself offered to sing them an old ballad, and in a rich bass voice which set the echoes of the wood at work, he thundered the lines of "The Maid of Bohea." There was great applause, and he sang again. It was to his singing of "Bold Robin Hood," that Azalea and his wife brought in the custard pie and the homemade cheese, and to the sad strains of "A Sailor There Was" that they finally cleared the table. After dinner everyone turned in to help, save the master of the house, who still felt the need of quiet and of

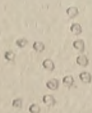


looking down what he called "the approach," by which he meant the winding road that led from the house to the gate.

If Mr. Rowantree could sing old English ballads, Mrs. Rowantree could sing, most bewitchingly, old Irish lyrics. Carin and Azalea could sing, too, though not like their friend Annie Laurie. Keefe had plenty of good will even if he had not much of a voice, and Miss Zillah had a sweet little silver thread of song which she was not ashamed to display. So among them they had a musical afternoon, accompanied by one and another on the old square piano with its rattling keys. The gentle shower that had fallen during dinner had passed as quietly as it came, and the sun shone softly through the wet shining leaves of the trees into the room.

However, it was just before going home that Azalea had her real "adventure." Mrs. Rowantree had drawn her arm through her own, and the two of them had strolled together down one of the laurel-edged paths of the place.

"Keefe O'Connor has been telling me your story," Mary Cecily said gently, "and I want



to say that it's myself who knows how to sympathize with you."

"Oh," Azalea replied with a sharp little catch of the breath, "I didn't know anyone had told Keefe about me."

"Never fear but the story will follow you," returned Mrs. Rowantree with an accent of wisdom. "Stories good and bad have a way of following one. But this I will say, Miss Azalea: I honor you for what you've done and the way you've clung to those who took you in when you were homeless. It's very like my own story — very like, indeed."

"Is it?" asked Azalea, forgetting herself at once and warming to her companion. "Have you been alone in the world, Mrs. Rowantree?"

"Alone in a way you never were, Miss Azalea, for I lost through my own heedlessness the one living creature that should have been my care, and the knowledge of it is always eating at my heart in spite of my good husband and my blessed babes."

"Oh, Mrs. Rowantree," cried the girl, distressed, "aren't you blaming yourself for something that wasn't really your fault?"

Mary Cecily turned her misty eyes toward Azalea, tragedy brooding in them.

“If you wish to hear my story,” she said, “sit here and I will tell it to you. My good husband doesn’t like me to talk of it, but my sorrow gets pent in me and tears me, which is what he doesn’t understand. I’ll be better for telling you the strange tale.”

There was a rude bench beneath a fine sourwood tree, and Azalea, sitting Turk-wise at one end so that she might face her companion, prepared to give her attention to the “strange tale”—and she thrilled as she did so, for she loved strange tales with a great love.

CHAPTER VI

LITTLE BROTHER

“My father,” said Mrs. Rowantree with her delicate Irish accent, “was a gentleman — a scholar and a gentleman.” She paused a moment in that little dramatic way of hers and then went on. “But my mother was a cottager’s daughter, very sweet and lovely to see, but lacking the fine ways of himself. He gave up his friends for her sake, and they left the village where they were known and went to live in Dublin where my father made a living by writing for the newspapers and reviews. I was born the second year of their marriage, and seven years later my little brother David came into the world.” She paused again, but this time because there was a tightening in her throat which would not let her go on.

“David,” she said, “was the finest baby I ever laid my eyes on, and I’ve had some fine ones of my own. He was a treasure from the first,

but the older he grew the nicer he became, till, when he was three years of age, he was the pride of the neighborhood. People stopped my mother on the street for the privilege of looking at him. He had laughing black eyes and curly black hair, and the oddest little turns to his baby talk that ever were heard. Oh, we were so happy with him—so wrapped up in him. Indeed, you'd have looked well through Dublin before finding a home equal to our own for contentment. My father was getting some little fame for his writing, and my mother no longer had to slave for us the way she did at first.

“Then, just as we were at our happiest, father came home with a chill. I well remember it. We were watching for him at the window, David and mother and I, and we had a meat pie because of his liking for it, and we had taught David to say ‘Four and Twenty Blackbirds.’ Oh, we were counting on such a happy evening! But when dad came in, he did not speak to us for the anguish that was on him, and mother got him in his bed, and he never got out of it again.”

“Oh, me!” said Azalea softly.

A little silence fell in which Mary Cecily

Rowantree locked and unlocked her thin, nervous fingers in a way of her own.

“And after he was gone,” she resumed, “we had nothing. Never had he earned enough for my mother to put by any savings. So we took to selling off what was in the house, and she to doing sewing and embroidering, but in a little while she saw it was no use — there’d be nothing for us but starvation unless some great piece of fortune befell us. My mother was a devout woman and she prayed morning and night and often through the day for help for her children, and her prayers, she thought, were answered when word came from my father’s brother who was in America, that if she’d bring the children to him, he’d care for them with his own, and she could be about some kind of work. In America, he said, there were chances. He sent us money for the journey, but not very much — all he could afford, of course. So mother, who was not afraid to do anything for her children’s sake, took passage with other poor people in the steerage of a great ship sailing from Queenstown.”

“Poor little dear,” said Azalea.

“Poor little dear!” echoed Mary Cecily.

“There were swarms of us on that boat. We were all huddled and mixed; a torment to each other, with the number of us. And the sea was very rough. Day after day it stormed, and my little mother, worn with work and worry, was ill unto death. Others were ill, but not so cold, so weak, so weary as she. But few could give her attention. They said: ‘She’ll be well in a while.’ But she woke me one night and told me she would never be well; that she could feel her heart giving way. She gave me the address of my uncle, and told me not to lose it whatever I did, and she had me pin the money that was left, on my little shirt and told me God would raise up friends for me, who would give me directions to my uncle’s door, and that once there I was safe. I listened till she had finished and then I ran for help. At first the ship’s doctor did not want to come out of his warm berth, but I got on my knees to him and he came. He thought ’twas only a case of seasickness, and maybe he was right. But my little lion-hearted one died that night. So David and I were alone in the world.”

The memory of the old anguish was upon her, and she stared before her at the great trees of

her "estate," all of her life dropping back to that bleak hour when she was left an orphan among those many poor in the great ship's heart.

"Oh," cried Azalea, "I hope you won't think about it, Mrs. Rowantree. That's how I manage to get along. I say to myself: 'My sorrow is sacred. I will not take it out and look at it often. I will leave it in a holy place. It will be safe there. I will go my way, doing happy, common things.' Can't you look at your trouble that way, Mrs. Rowantree?"

Mary Cecily turned her misty blue eyes on Azalea.

"My girl," she said solemnly, "I have not yet told you of my real trouble."

Azalea caught her breath.

"Well?" she breathed.

"Well, they dropped my little mother in the sea, a good priest saying the words of the church over her. Some were kind to us, but after all it was not many who were knowing us. The wild weather kept up, and hundreds there were on the ship who did not leave their beds at all. David and I had no heart for talking, and we kept much to ourselves as we had seen our mother do. There were rough people all about

us, and our ways were gentle, so oftentimes we did not feel at home with them. I kept up my heart by thinking of David and what I must do for him; and now that mother was gone, he clung to me all of the time. He could hardly breathe without me it seemed, and though I was only ten years old, I had the mother-feeling in me, and I prized myself for the sake of my little child."

"I can understand that," Azalea murmured from her heart.

"Well, we got to the landing place at last, and I was near suffocated with the beating of my heart. I was as afraid of the city as if it had been a dragon. The fear of cities always was in me, but no city — not Calcutta, not Hongkong nor any foreign place — could have seemed more terrible to me than New York. 'For David's sake I must be brave,' I kept saying to myself. 'For David's sake.' Well, the first and second-class passengers were let off, and then came our turn. I never did know how many hundreds there were of us. We seemed like a city-full in ourselves. And if you'll believe me, at the same time, on the other side of the dock, another great steamer was unloading. So that

presently we were all mixed — all mixed and scattered.”

“Yes,” said Azalea, guessing now what was coming.

“So I lost David,” whispered Mary Cecily; “I lost my little brother. His hand slipped from mine and I could not find him. I looked for him all that day; I asked everybody, and no one could tell me anything about him. At night a policeman took me away and put me in the house of a woman and told me to sleep and he would look. So I stayed in the house that night, and the next day I began searching again; and the policeman had others looking. But we never found him, any of us.”

“You never found him at all?”

“Never at all. My uncle came on, after I had written him, and he searched. But it was no use. David was never found; and they concluded at last that he had been pushed from the wharf into the water and drowned. But I said no. I could hear him calling for me in the night the way the dead never call. I could feel him somewhere, drawing me, drawing me, but I could not tell which way to go, or I would have run to him across the world.”

“Of course you would — of course.” Azalea drew nearer till she could rest her hand on Mary Cecily’s knee.

“But we never found him,” she repeated. “So after a while we left the city, my uncle and I, and went to the little farm he had in Maryland. He was something of a writer too, like my father; and he published a little weekly paper. So you see it was an interesting home he had brought me to. His wife was one of those women who are well pleased to have a motherless child to add to her own. She was kind to me but she didn’t spoil me because I was bounden to her. She set me my tasks and saw to it that I did them, and when I was a grown girl and showed a little talent for writing I was sent to my uncle’s office to help with the making of his paper and setting of it up. He drilled me in writing and he taught me type-setting, and I was content there. I never wanted to take up any life of my own. I wanted to be left to myself to mourn for David — ”

“Oh, but there was nothing in that,” broke in Azalea.

“Don’t I know it? But sorrow is like sickness and it can cloud the spirits as sickness

weakens the body. But for being kept so busy by my wise relatives, I should have lost my mind altogether, I make no doubt. But they were a large family, and there was teasing and laughing and tricks going on as well as work, and that was my medicine. But even with all that, I was forever looking down the road, thinking one of those New York detectives would be bringing my little brother back to me. Whenever the letters came I sat frozen with hope that wouldn't be hope, till they were given out. I kept thinking that one would be handed to me that would tell me David was found. But none ever was."

"But you grew happier after a time," protested Azalea, who could not long endure the thought of sorrow. "You must have! See how happy everything is with you now."

"Yes," admitted Mary Cecily, "I did grow happier after a time, though as I say, I didn't really want to. But I got to be a young woman, and Bryan Rowantree came along. He was the younger son of a fine English family — Irish on his mother's side, however — and he came over to America to better himself. He heard of my uncle's little paper and looked him up, thinking he might be wanted to lend a hand, but my uncle

liked to run things his own way, quietly and casually, as he used to put it. So he didn't take the young man into partnership — but I did."

She smiled down at Azalea happily, and the girl could see that whatever others might think, Rowantree's wife could see nothing but the advantages of the marriage.

"I say he was young," she went on. "He was, however, twelve years older than myself. But I have always been a poor thing and thankful to have some one to lean on."

"Mercy me," thought Azalea, "can it be she thinks she's leaning on that man? I thought it was just the other way." She kept her eyes fixed on the ground carefully, afraid that if she lifted them her thoughts would be read in her face.

"We had a sweet little wedding," said Mary Cecily dreamily, "and then we came away together. We had no particular place to go to, but Bryan said he thought he would like to wander for a time. That suited me, too. But after a little we got tired of that. Besides, we saw that our money would soon give out. So, when we heard of this woodland up here for sale for almost nothing, we bought it. The

Rowantrees were once great landed proprietors, but in recent years they had been obliged to live in cities, and it had not suited them. At least, it did not suit my husband. So here we are. We lead a very peaceful, retired life. Mr. Rowantree loves quiet, as he said to you. And I've the children if ever I feel the loneliness stealing on me."

A call sounded through the woods.

"They think we're lost," smiled Mrs. Rowantree. "And we must be getting back to the house, but before we go I want you to promise me that you will not speak of my sorrow. It's a queer way I have with me, not liking to see sympathy save in the eyes of my own chosen friends. Come now, and I hope and pray Miss Pace will not accuse me of rudeness!"

"Aunt Zillah? Never!" said Azalea. "It's a wonderful story you've told me, Mrs. Rowantree — so sad I can hardly believe it — much sadder than mine, and that is sad enough. Not that I feel sad," she added hastily. "Since I became a McBirney I'm a very happy girl."

"But you're not really a McBirney, are you? Those good mountain people haven't really adopted you?"

“Not by law, ma’am,” smiled Azalea. “But what does that matter if we love each other?”

“And you have Miss Carin and her parents for your friends. That must be a great comfort to you.”

“Oh, indeed, they’re like flowers in the garden of the world,” cried Azalea with one of her pretty extravagant speeches.

“Indeed, I believe it, my dear. Yes, we are coming,” she called. “Did you think I had locked this dryad up in an oak tree?” she asked playfully, her arm about Azalea, as they came up to the gallery. Her husband threw a quick glance at her. He knew how to read the changes on her emotional face.

“Tut,” he said under his breath to her. “David again! You shouldn’t, mavourneen.”

“She’s a treasure, Bryan,” his wife whispered, indicating Azalea with a little nod of the head. “It never could do any harm to ease my heart to her.”

“Miss Pace thinks they must all be on their way, Mary Cecily,” he said aloud. “I must have the horses brought ’round.”

“Oh, have a taste of tea before you start,” pleaded Mrs. Rowantree. But Aunt Zillah as

politely declined. So, presently, Zillah Pace and her three young people rode quietly beneath the lengthening shadows through the sweet smelling woodland to their home. This time, Aunt Zillah and Carin rode together, and Azalea's pony tried in vain to keep pace with Keefe's raw-boned horse. Keefe had much to say of the day.

"I was very happy the little time I stayed there at Rowantree Hall," he said. "I understood their ways — understood the things they do and the things they don't do — and what's more I perfectly understand why they don't do them. Rowantree himself amuses me, yet I'm fond of him. Mrs. Rowantree — well, she's a little miracle."

"Oh, she is," cried Azalea. "How she works — and doesn't mind. What ducks the children are! And how contented they all seem in that solitude!"

"Might be Highland chieftains," laughed Keefe. "And how do you suppose they live?"

"I can't imagine," Azalea admitted. "Does he farm?"

"A little — a very little. It's she who thinks out the things that keep the wolf from the door.

To be sure he has a little money coming from England now and then; but it's Mrs. Rowantree with her little movable sawmill, which she pays men to run, who really keeps the flour in the barrel. Then she raises chickens, has a cow or two, a vegetable patch and all that. But best of all, she knows how to do without and yet be happy, and she's bringing up the children in the same way. You noticed, they never apologized for a thing."

"Not a thing! I liked that, Keefe. She knew we wouldn't care how things were. All we wanted was themselves."

"Quite right. All we wanted was themselves." He sighed sharply. "She makes one feel at home, doesn't she, that little Mary Cecily Rowantree? I've been a lonely cub, Miss Azalea — a queer lonely cub — thrown out of the lair by an accident, and not knowing much about home. But she does something to me — makes me feel as if I'd got back —"

He hesitated for a long time. At last Azalea prodded him with a "Got back?"

But he did not answer. They rode on then in the noisy silence of the woods, rode to the sound of falling water, the call of sleepy birds,

the almost inaudible rustle of the trees and the little sharp cries of insects. Keefe saw the ladies to their door but he would not come in with them. He left them, to go to his tent and to boil his own tea in the little iron kettle, which, swung from his tripod, had served him on many expeditions. He had placed his tent not far from the rim of a precipice, though back among trees where it would be protected from storms. But to-night he abandoned their shelter, and sat quite on the rim itself, letting the rolling earth fill him with wonder. The stars swept by, a young sickle moon arose, the world faded from rosy gray to purple, from purple to the soft starlit gloom of a summer night. And still he sat there, dreaming, wondering, planning, longing.

Most of all he wondered why it was that there were so few thoughts really worth thinking which one could put into words.

CHAPTER VII

“ DOING GOOD ”

The little silvery shower which had helped to make Sunday charming, sent along a number of less agreeable members of its family the following day. Azalea and Carin opened their eyes upon a rain-smitten landscape, and down the chimney blew a damp wind. It made a failure of breakfast, for the kitchen stove absolutely refused to draw, and it sent the girls out finally in a pelting shower.

“ You are foolish to go,” Miss Zillah told them, really quite out of patience with them for the first time. “ There will be no pupils at the school to-day. You might much better stay at home and keep dry. I can't think that your parents would approve of your going out in such a storm.”

But what was the use of having rubber boots and raincoats and rubber caps and umbrellas, if they were not to be used? So the girls argued till they finally won Miss Zillah's consent.

It really was rather a lark to be out in a buffeting storm like that. They could hardly see for the downpour, but they ran on, heads lowered, skirts gathered close, and were presently in the little schoolhouse.

“ We’ll have to light the lamps,” said Azalea. “ Not a soul could see to study in this place to-day.”

“ You remind me of Ma McBirney,” said Carin, wiping the rain from her face. “ Your first thought is always to make the room bright. Now me, I think of myself first.”

Azalea took off her dripping coat, removed the rubber boots from her slippered feet, released her head from its cap and looked about her, shivering a little.

“ Do you know why? ” she asked. “ In the old days when my own mamma and I were wanderers, going from place to place with that terrible show, we were often so cold and wretched that no words could describe it. Yet mamma always tried to make some sort of a little cosy spot for me — some sort of a nest that I could get into. It might only be a ragged comfortable in a corner of the wagon; or it might be a place under a tree near the camp

fire. She didn't seem to care how she got along, if only she could make me happy. I realize now how often she went without food to feed me well, and how she gave me the best of everything. I was told about that by poor old Betty Bowen that time Sisson kidnapped me."

"Oh, don't talk about that, Azalea," cried her friend, throwing her arms about her and kissing her on the cheek with a sort of desperate tenderness. "I can't bear it. Oh, those nights that we didn't know where you were!"

"I only speak of it," said Azalea, holding her friend close to her, "because that explains why I want to make every place cheerful. I can't stand gloom and chill and hunger — can't stand them for myself or anyone else. And then — don't laugh at me, Carin, please — there's another reason. I want to pass on to others all the goodness that has been done to me these last lovely months. Oh, Carin, I want to do good the way your father and mother do. I'd like to give up my whole life to it. You see, I've really no family. I'm very queerly placed in life. There's gentle blood in me, and restless blood. I'm different from Ma and Pa McBirney and dear Jim. I can't get around that, can I?"

No matter how much I love them, no matter how long we live together, I'll always be different. Yet, on the other hand, I'll not know the sort of people that Colonel Atherton's granddaughter would be expected to know. They'll not come into my life. I — I can't expect to marry — when I grow up — the sort of — ”

“ Nonsense,” cried Carin impetuously. “ You'll marry whoever you wish. And you'll meet all sorts of people at my house — people who will appreciate you.”

But Azalea shook her head.

“ No,” she said; “ my lot has been cast in with that of simple folk. I'm glad of it, mind you, and proud to be loved by Mother McBirney. It's the sweetest thing that ever happened to me. But all the same, I think I shall have to choose some sort of a career.”

As she talked, she tidied the schoolroom, lighted the lamps, and ventured on a little blaze in the fireplace to send away the chill. Carin, less used to such services, sat fascinatedly watching her friend.

“ A career!” she sighed. “ Oh, Azalea, what do you mean by that? Of course I believe girls should have careers,” she added hastily. “ I

want to be an artist myself, and if that old dairy doesn't use up every ounce of Annie Laurie's energy, I suppose she'll be a singer. Anyway, she could be, if she chose. But what would you do, Zalie?"

"Just do good," said Azalea simply.

"But that wouldn't earn a living for you. Weren't you thinking of earning a living?"

"It might," said Azalea. "It would be a great living to have people coming to you for help and to know you could drive the misery out of them — and the devils out of them, too."

"But the money —" continued Carin.

"There would be enough, probably," said Azalea, still not willing to give attention to that part of the subject. "I feel, Carin, that somehow there would be money enough."

Just then the schoolhouse door blew open with a sweep of rain-laden wind and it took the combined strength of the two girls to close it again.

"Aunt Zillah was quite right," said Carin breathlessly after this was accomplished. "We ought never to have come, Azalea."

"Oh," cried Azalea, "there's some one trying to get in, Carin. Did you bolt the door?"

“ Yes — it wouldn't stay shut otherwise. Help me open it, Azalea. The bolt sticks.”

It came back so suddenly at last that Azalea almost lost her footing, and the next moment, half-blinded by the storm, her poor garments soaked and dripping, her blouse held together by her single hand, Paralee Panther stood in the room. If she had been sullen on other days, she was tragic now. So storm-beaten in body and in spirit was she, that she looked as if all the world was her foe. Indeed, she always seemed to be thinking that, and now as she stood there, frowning from under her dripping hair, the gentle girls at whom she glowered fairly shrank from her.

Then Azalea remembered, as by a swift light of the spirit, how misfortune could make one misrepresent one's self. She thought of herself as she had been in the old days, when, dust-stained, weary, hungry, shy and often resentful, she had slunk along beside the wagons of Sisson's All Star Show, and of how in reality she had been the same as she was now, friendly and good, loving cleanliness and beauty and all seemliness.

She went forward to the girl and seized her hand.

“ Oh, Paralee,” she said, “ I’m so glad now that we came. Miss Pace thought no one would be here; but you started, I suppose, before the storm began. Come to the fire, do. We can take off your dress and hang it on the chair backs — ”

But she had made a mistake. The girl drew back, her eyes full of that hurt, animal-like anger which was almost always there.

“ I won’t take off my dress,” she said. Azalea guessed why — that she would not have them see her makeshifts for underclothing.

“ Perhaps it would be better not,” Azalea said, as if having thought the matter over, she reached the same conclusion. “ Come to the fire, then. You will soon dry.”

She turned away to give the girl a chance to make herself comfortable in her own manner, and lighted the alcohol stove beneath the shining brass teakettle. She and Carin kept a little store of supplies at school — dainties designed to help out their light luncheons — and now she made a selection from these, and spreading a tray daintily, put it before Paralee. There was the steaming tea, crackers, cookies, cheese, and candied ginger.

“ Such a queer little meal,” she laughed apologetically, “ but it will help to get the damp out of you. You must feel quite like a sponge, Paralee.”

The girl looked up from under her heavy brows.

“ What is a sponge? ” she demanded.

Carin heard Azalea stammeringly trying to make clear to her pupil the nature of a sponge, and discreetly withdrew to the most distant part of the schoolroom and began busying herself by making a sketch of the storm-tossed trees in the wild purple light. She heard Azalea’s voice going on and on, kindly, gently, insistently; heard Paralee’s gruff answers; but the rain and the wind drowned the words. It was only when Azalea called to her that she learned of the nature of the conversation. Paralee was standing with half dried garments before the fire. She had eaten her little repast, and with her one poor hand was brushing back the hair that straggled about her face.

“ Paralee,” said Azalea, “ wants to be a teacher, Carin. She has to make her own living, and that is the way she means to do it.”

Not a gleam of Azalea’s eye, not the barest

flicker of the voice, told that she thought such an ambition outrageous. The heavy-faced, half-clothed child, so dark and hateful, so ugly and suspicious, might have been the embodiment of light for all that Azalea's manner betrayed. Once more Carin's affectionate appreciation of her friend went out in swift response.

"Does she?" asked Carin in the same friendly tone. "Well, we'll teach her what we know, and then she can go to some one better fitted to make a teacher of her."

They could see the girl peering up furtively from under her hair, wondering if it could be possible that they believed in her. No one ever had. But obstinately, passionately, in the face of all things, she believed in herself.

"I can't do nothing else," she said in her deep voice. "I hain't got but one hand."

"She lost the other," said Azalea in her even, pleasant voice, "when she was trying to shoot rabbits for the family to eat. She and her grandmother have come down with her brother while he works at the sawmill Mrs. Rowantree has set up on the Ravenel Branch."

"He wouldn't come 'less I did, too," explained Paralee. "He didn't like to leave home."

What could the home be that the brother of this girl would hate to leave, Carin wondered. It seemed as if Paralee must have come out of a cave rather than a house.

“ We Panthers has always lived by ourselves,” the girl said in half angry explanation. “ Jake hain’t used to talking to strange folks. And he didn’t have no proper clothes for leaving home.”

“ Panther is a strange name, isn’t it? ” asked Carin. “ Are there many families of your name in these mountains, Paralee? ”

“ It hain’t our name,” returned the girl. “ Our name’s Marr. My granddad was a fighter, he was. He kilt six men. It was a war. They called him the Panther of Soco River. Then they called us all Panthers. We don’t care!” she added defiantly. “ One name suits us as well as t’other.”

“ Her father,” explained Azalea, “ is paralyzed from a tree having fallen on him. His home is away out on the tongue of the Soco mountain — so far away it can only be reached by ‘nag travel.’ Paralee says no doctor ever goes to see him.”

“ Once,” said Paralee, “ for two years nobody

come up the road, and we didn't go nowhere. For two whole years!"

The girls let the words rest on the air for a moment, taking in their meaning.

"How in heaven's name do you live?" asked Carin.

"We live 'cause we don't die. We git up and go to bed," said the girl. "It gits so still up there we stop talking. Why, we 'most forget the way to say words."

"I should think you would," said Azalea. "But what do you have to eat? How do you make money?"

"We don't need no money. Not much, anyhow. We raise some corn and two or three hogs; and we have some chickens and a garden patch. Ma does some weaving. Pa used to hunt. Then, when he got hurt, I tried hunting." She looked down at her maimed arm. "That's all," she said bitterly. "The Panthers is well named. They just live up a tree." She gave a short, sharp laugh.

"How ever did your brother and you come to leave home?" demanded Azalea. "Didn't they need you there?"

"Needed us terrible. But I couldn't do work

to 'mount to nothing, and Jake was just hanging 'round doing chores Pete could do as well. I goaded Jake on to coming down to the sawmill. I thought he might get some comforts for pa. And grandma, she'd got so mean and worried ma so, I got her to come along.” She paused for a moment, and then gave way to an outbreak of rage and misery. “ We was getting to be like stumps,” she cried. “ That's what we was getting like — just like the stumps out in the clearing. You couldn't tell we was humans. I — I couldn't stand it no longer.” As she stood facing them in her ugliness and wretchedness, with her great mass of hair hanging about her half-bare shoulders, she seemed to be mysteriously redeemed from mere brutishness by this rebellion. Out of that sodden silence and poverty, that shame of inaction, her protest and purpose had sprung into life. For a moment the girls were silent with sympathy. Then Azalea said:

“ We'll teach you, Paralee, early and late. We'll help you in every way we can.”

“ Oh, we will,” agreed Carin. “ And we can do so much more than you think, Paralee. Paralee?” she repeated. “ Such an unusual name. Is it a — a family name? ”

Paralee Panther gave a curious shrug.

“No!” she said with an accent of disgust. “That ain’t a name any more than Panther. They didn’t name me at all — called me Babe. When I was six, I got tired of it. I wanted a name — cried for a name — but they didn’t seem to think of none. I invented that name — Paralee. I thought it awful pretty then. I don’t think so now,” she added bluntly. “I think it’s a fool name. I wish my name was anything else — anything!”

“I have a middle name that I don’t need,” said Carin with a laugh. “It’s Louisa. Now, what if I should give that to you? ‘Louisa Marr!’ How would that sound?”

“Mr. Summers is coming up to see us by and by,” said Azalea, taking hold of Paralee’s arm with a girlish squeeze, “and he can name you properly. He’s a Methodist preacher.” Paralee nodded.

“I know,” she said. “Once he came to see my pa. He said if pa could be got to an X ray, or an X ray could be got to him, maybe he’d be cured. But it was just talk. He didn’t do nothing,” she added with a return to her old bitterness.

“ Probably he couldn’t do anything,” said Azalea, swift to defend the husband of her own “ pretend cousin,” Barbara Summers, whom she had picked out of all the world to be her “ kin ” since she had none of her own. “ Mr. Summers is poor, too, and there are many people that he must do things for.”

“ Well, he didn’t do nothing for us,” said the girl. Then she brooded for a moment in her heavy way. “ And we didn’t do nothing for ourselves,” she broke out. “ That was what made me mad — we didn’t do nothing for ourselves!”

“ Your folks didn’t know how,” said Azalea. “ That was it — they didn’t know how. They couldn’t help themselves any more than if they had been children.”

“ That’s what they are,” the girl cried. “ They’re children — they don’t know nothing. They won’t *do* nothing. Oh, it’s so awful — not to have things to eat; to be like this.” She held out her stump of a hand. “ To be like dad — not able to move! Ain’t it a curse?”

“ It must be changed,” said Carin decidedly. “ It can be and it shall.”

“ You don’t know,” replied the mountain girl

with a return of despair. "There's so much to change."

"Braid your hair, Paralee," commanded Azalea. "Then we'll have a lesson. I'll teach you more this morning than you ever learned in any one lesson in your life. I noticed last week that you knew how to study better than anyone in the school. You could keep your mind on a thing, and that's much more than half the battle. Oh, we'll make a teacher of you, never fear."

So all that long day of wild wind and rain, Azalea labored with her pupil. Hitherto, teaching had been a pleasant if tiring experience. Azalea had felt a cheerful zest in passing on her ideas and her good practical knowledge. But this morning a holy passion for teaching came to her. She poured facts into Paralee's starved mind with the same deep satisfaction that she would have given her water had she been perishing of thirst. No other pupils came. Carin, sitting apart, silent and content with her own occupations, did not interrupt them, and the mountain girl listened to her ardent young teacher, conned her lessons untiringly, and throughout the long hours of the school day refused to rest. It was as if she had come into

the house of her own mind; as if she had opened up the weed-choked door and crossed the threshold, discovering within fair rooms undreamed of; as if she had put the shutters back from long-closed windows and let the light stream in.

By four o'clock the rain seemed to have beaten itself out, and the wind died, too.

"Study is over!" cried Azalea at length. "Come, Paralee, get your things. Such a day! I tell you, anyone who can study as you do will make a success. Isn't it so, Carin?"

Carin got up from her letter writing.

"Of course it is," she said. "And I have been writing some letters that ought to help on. You must go away to school, Paralee. There are boarding schools —"

"What good would they do me?" demanded the girl. "How could I pay?"

"I have money to be used for such things as that," Carin said gently. "My father gave it to me. I would love to use it for you."

"What could I give you back, then? When us Panthers has presents give to us, we pay back."

"I have not thought yet," said Carin seriously,

“but I will think. I will let you pay me back. Please, please, don't think about that now. Only study — study — study.”

“I wish you didn't have to go home to-night,” said Azalea. “Couldn't you stay with us? A six mile walk over gullies like those out there in the yard doesn't seem a pleasant prospect.”

The mountain girl looked at her almost with pity — as if for once she understood something which her instructress did not.

“Do you think I'll mind gullies?” she asked.

“No,” confessed Azalea; “no, I don't.”

Paralee Panther had worn neither jacket nor hat, and in her thin blouse and short skirt, bare-footed, her great braids, half undone, straggling down her back, she swung off down her mountain trail. Her heavy, awkward body gave the impression of great strength and for all of her awkwardness, whoever looked at her felt that she would be brave.

“That's the best day's work we've done yet,” said Azalea at last, turning rather wearily to find her things. But Carin had them ready for her, and when the schoolhouse was locked, the two friends made their way single file beneath the dripping branches and across the noisy brook,

thankful for their good rubber boots and coats.

“ I can’t think where Keefe has been to-day,” said Carin. “ It is just the sort of a day you’d have expected him to come. We might have needed him, if the storm had grown worse. Weren’t you surprised that he didn’t look in on us? ”

“ Yes, I was,” confessed Azalea. “ It wasn’t like him to stay away on a stormy day.”

Carin laughed — and her laugh had a touch of vexation.

“ How do you know it wasn’t like him? ” she demanded. “ You know very little about him, really. You mustn’t go on your impressions too much, my dear.”

“ I know,” confessed Azalea. “ Everyone tells me that. Pa McBirney is forever saying it. Just the same I know it wasn’t like Keefe to stay away on a stormy day like this and I’d feel better if I knew where he was this minute.”

They should have been in sight of the Oriole’s Nest by this time, but the clouds, which had lifted for a time, were settling down again in white drifting masses. They had not, of course, been able to see the mountain peaks all day; but now the trees began to disappear as if willed out

of existence by some wonderful necromancer; then their very pathway before them seemed swallowed up; and finally each looked to the other like a ghost.

“ Goodness, but it is uncanny!” said Carin. “ I’m glad we haven’t far to go. We could get lost in our own doorway.”

It was then that they heard the cheering whistle of Keefe O’Connor. It came, apparently, from the cottage.

“ He’s been with Aunt Zillah,” said Azalea with a little sigh of relief. “ That was nice of him, wasn’t it? A day like this she’s sure to be lonely.”

She gave a blithe answer to the whistle, and seizing Carin’s hand, ran on swift feet to the cottage, laughing as the billowing mist parted and then closed like water behind her. The little cabin could not be discerned till she and Carin were fairly upon it. Then they saw the dull glow of a light in the window, and groping for the door, found the handle just at the moment Keefe opened it.

“ Here they are, Miss Pace,” he called, “ quite safe and sound. I’ve looked in at you several

times to-day, if you want to know, but I thought my room was better than my company.”

“ Oh, my, but I’m glad you’re home,” cried Aunt Zillah, helping them off with their things. “ I declare, it’s getting darker every minute. Why, the mist isn’t white any more — it’s black! ”

“ We’re in the heart of a black cloud, that’s why,” said Keefe cheerily. “ Well, we’ve wood and oil and food inside, so what do we care? ”

“ He’s been working around the place all day,” said Aunt Zillah. “ And I must say I was glad to have him take a hand. Mr. McEvoy is an excellent man, but he certainly does carry his ‘ take-it-easy ’ philosophy to extremes. But even he is a comfort. In my opinion, every house needs a man around it to make it look right.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAR

Well, but it was a snug little cabin! The mist-wraiths might drift by the window, might even pause to thrust their spectral faces against the pane, but it mattered nothing to those who were safe and snug within. Aunt Zillah cooked her special stew for supper, and served it with potatoes baked in the coals, raised biscuit, and honey and dainties for dessert. Keefe had brought out his borrowed guitar and kept the room ringing with his melodies. The girls saw that the occasion was to be a festive one, and put on the brightest frocks they could find in their trunks.

Then, with the fire leaping and the candles and lamps lighted and supper laid out with the pink dishes and the white doilies, the place was charming indeed. To Miss Zillah, for the first time in her life removed from oversight of her elder sister, and playing at being the mother of a family, it was an experience that made her

shy, middle-aged heart leap within her. To Carin, used to luxury and beauty and her parent's unceasing care, it was an adventure in independence; to Azalea, accustomed to changes, to people of many sorts, to both rough and smooth living, it was one more chapter in a book destined to be filled with curious incidents. To Keefe — but let him speak for himself.

“This place,” he said, “looks to me singularly like Paradise. My own particular habitation is as damp and cold as the Mammoth Cave. My bed is done up in oilskins, and my easel is under the bed. Every stick of wood I have is drenched, and the field mice have got at my food.”

“Poor orphan,” laughed Carin, and then stopped on the word, wondering if she had not spoken the truth concerning him. He had told nothing of himself, save that he hoped to be an artist, and that he already had studied at the New York Academy of Design.

“Well,” he retorted, giving no heed to her embarrassment, “I congratulated myself when I borrowed that tent from Mr. Rowantree. I saw it wouldn't keep water out. I said to myself,

‘The first time we have a downpour I’ll have to take refuge with the nearest neighbor.’ I saw to it that you were that neighbor. To-night, of course, I shall put in an application for the guest chamber at Mis’ Cassie McEvoy’s, and I’ll sleep in the room with the medicine-bottle decoration, but until the clock tells me it is really night, here I stay. Don’t I, Miss Pace?”

“Indeed you do,” she returned. “The laborer is worthy of his hire.”

She had got over the slight prejudice she felt against him at first meeting. He was too obliging, too amiable, too wistful, for her to keep him at a distance. Miss Zillah’s heart was a particularly soft one, though for conscience sake she could be stern.

“I hear you had only one pupil to-day,” she said to the girls when they were seated at the table.

“And she underwent a curious transformation,” said Carin. “She came to us Paralee Panther. She went away Louisa Marr. Of course we can’t call her that just yet, as people wouldn’t know whom we were talking about. But when she goes away to school, as I mean she shall, she’ll bear a proper Christian name.”

Between Azalea and Carin the grim story of the Panther's life was told.

"And now," concluded Azalea, "my heart is set on rescuing that poor Mr. Panther. Why, it will be like bringing a man from a mine — or taking him from the Bastille. Oh, we mustn't wait. We must set about the rescue at once!"

"It won't be so easy as you imagine," said Miss Zillah, with a sigh. "When people get away down like that, they don't seem to want to be disturbed. They enjoy their misery. You needn't be surprised if after you get to the poor man, you find him quite unwilling to let you do anything for him."

"Oh, we won't even think of such a thing as that," cried Azalea, with her usual impatience at the mention of obstacles. "When can we go to him, Keefe?"

"Not before Saturday, of course. We ought to take a physician with us, oughtn't we?"

"Of course we ought," said Azalea. "Carin, couldn't we telegraph back home and get Doctor Stevenson to come up?"

So they wrote out a telegram which was sent to Bee Tree the following day and from there telephoned to the nearest telegraph station. But

to their disappointment they received the reply from Dr. Stevenson that he had a very critical case in hand which he could not leave. Carin wired elsewhere, but without success, and they were on the point of postponing the visit when, on Friday, there dawned upon their view the familiar figure of Haystack Thompson, their old friend with the fiddle. With his "haystack" mop of hair in wilder confusion than ever — for it had grown grayer and more wiry every month — with his kind, keen, rolling eyes looking extraordinarily large, and his spare frame thinned, as it seemed, to the very bone, he appeared at the schoolhouse just before closing, and the moment Azalea's eyes fell on him, she felt that he was the person to help them out. Just how he would do it she did not stop to think, but ever since she had known him she had counted on his power to help.

He was lending his aid to some one at that moment evidently, for by the hand he led a small boy whom neither Carin nor Azalea had seen before, but the moment that Azalea noticed Bud Coulter starting from his seat, she knew the newcomer for Skully Simms, the nephew of the Coulters' hereditary enemy, and the boy who

had on several occasions peeped in at the windows of the schoolroom which he dared not enter.

All week things had gone moderately well. The school now had twenty-four pupils, one of them a girl older than her teachers, another a married woman, Mrs. McIntosh, who, having brought her painfully shy little daughter to school had been obliged to stay with her. Mrs. McIntosh had at first meant only to look on, but the example set by the children had been too much for her, and she was now conning her first reader beside an eight year old girl. Azalea and Carin had almost ceased looking for trouble, and it was with a sharp shock of alarm that they saw Bud Coulter spring to his feet and shake a hard young fist in the direction of the quivering Skully.

“No Simms can’t come to this here school while I’m here!” he shouted. “You git out o’ here, Skully Simms, you hear?”

Simms cast one glance behind him as if for flight, but the firm hand of his friend Haystack Thompson upon his shoulder held him; then the second glance made him aware of all the children rising from their seats, of the flaming

eyes and distorted mouth of Bud Coulter, and the next moment all of his fears vanished in a flare of the old inherited hate. He drew in his breath sharply through his teeth, leaped forward, all bunched up like an animal, and the next thing that anybody knew, the two boys were struggling together in the center of the schoolroom.

The fiddler might have managed these two boys, but he saw in a moment that he would have trouble coping with what was likely to follow. For generations the neighbors who bore the names of the children within that school had taken sides in the long and dark struggle between the Simms and the Coulters, and now, in a flash, all their old loyalty to the "mean fighters" of their mountain was upon them. They leaped to their feet, got from the floor on to the seats, shrieking and stamping to cheer on their favorites. It was not a "scrap." It was a war — an old war — in which men of both names had fallen, and for which they all thought it honorable to fight to the finish.

Azalea, sitting stark still at her desk, saw, with wide-stretched eyes, her peaceful schoolroom turned into something resembling a cave

of angry wildcats. Moreover, she knew enough about such quarrels to imagine what the outcome might be.

“Carin,” she shrilled to her friend who had turned from the blackboard and stood paralyzed at what she beheld, “we must think — we must *think!*”

But there was little time for thinking. They could see that in a few moments more every boy in the room would be at the throat of some other boy, all for the glory of the old war cries: “Coulter!” “Simms!”

Just then, as Azalea was discovering how unlikely her “thinking” was to be of any use, an extraordinary sound smote her ears. It rolled out like thunder, it came in volleys like pistol shots, it was so strange, so loud, so mocking, that all save the fight-crazed boys at grips on the floor turned to see what it was.

And what they saw was Haystack Thompson laughing!

He was leaning against the door post and he was laughing as if he were Jove and could find nothing half so amusing as the capers of earthmen. He laughed on and on, more and more mockingly, more and more terribly. His mirth

was an insult to those who were engaged in that senseless combat. It held them in contempt; it made nothing of them. The children, amazed, fixed their eyes on him. They did not like that laughter. It raged and roared at their ancient mountain quarrel; it put them among the fools of the world. Their anger turned from each other to the man. They forgot the writhing boys upon the floor, and drew towards Haystack Thompson, resentment in their faces.

Just then, they were given another surprise. Azalea had at last thought to some purpose. No one saw her save Carin, as she took the full water pail from the bench and advanced with it toward these last silly clansmen of the Simms and Coulters; but Carin, quick to catch the idea, seized a second pail, and a moment later a deluge of water descended upon the fighters, and two gasping, strangling boys, their grip relaxed, lay upon the floor.

Haystack Thompson was a quick-witted ally. He bounded forward and grasping Coulter by the shirt collar — a stout shirt it was, made of home-spun — plumped him down in a seat, then seeing him still in the throes of strangulation, proceeded to pound him lustily on the

back. Azalea, meantime, had pulled the smaller boy to his feet. He was bleeding at the nose; one eye was closed and he was blubbering and choking. She wiped his face with a firm and determined hand, and led him to the front of the room.

“Go for more water,” she commanded, finding that the blood still spurted from the poor injured nose. The children held back sullenly, but Paralee Panther picked up a pail and went to do her bidding. The fiddler’s fearful laughter having ceased, a strange, shamed quiet hung over the room, broken only by the angry snortings and sobbing of the two fighters. And then the fiddler began to laugh again, but not in the old way. This time he laughed as if at the funniest joke that man ever heard. He began gently, like one amused, he went on to heights of wild and reckless mirth which reduced the children, and Azalea and Carin with them, to helpless, suffering spasms of laughter. There was no resisting such mirth. It spread like fire, and once alight, it seemed as if nothing could ever extinguish it.

Then, suddenly, the wizard released them from the spell. He stopped and looked about

him at his helpless victims. He shook his head at them sadly as if he regretted their folly, and drawing faithful "Betsy," his fiddle, the one close friend of his lonely life, from its case, began to play. It was quiet music, almost like a hymn, and kind music, like friendship which endures. Paying no attention to the gasps and gurgles of those he had led into folly, he went on steadily with his playing. Deep, full and rich were the chords he played; clear and high and serene was the melody, and the troubled laughter died before such sounds. Little Simms with his aching face and humiliated spirit, was struggling to get the better of his sobs. Coulter, the conqueror, had folded his arms across his unbuttoned shirt and sat there waiting for what might happen next.

What happened next was that Haystack Thompson began to talk. He did not cease playing, but the music that came from his instrument was as soft as the summer wind in the trees.

"There's something on my mind," he said in his deep, kind voice, "that I want to pass on to you-all. You're young and I'm old, and it's fitting that what I've learned by living a long time should be handed on to you, who ain't lived

long and consequently hain't had the chance to make the mistakes I have.

“The constitution of the United States says that all men are born free and equal. Now, in a way that there saying is true, and in another way it ain't. There's differences in men and in the chances that come to them, that can't be gainsaid nor got around. But it is true that all men have an equal right to certain things. They've an equal right to be free, and an equal right to the good things God made — to sun and air and water and food. They've a right to feel happy and a right to be good. What's more, they've got a right to learning — got a right to know what's hid in books and in Nature. Anybody who tries to take away these rights from another is a mean cuss. He's unfitten for other men to deal with. He's got the soul of a wolf, and it seems like he should be hunted out of the ha'nts of men. Only that wouldn't do, for then we'd be taking away the greatest right of all from him — the right to be good. You can't make an outlaw of a man and expect him to be good. No, you've got to forgive him and help him — you've got to show him what his rights are, what the rights of his neighbors are.

“ I’m a mountain man and my forbears were mountain men. I know the feelings of folks raised in the mountains. I know they’re brave, and kind to friends and mean to foes. I know they’ve got sense and patience, and that they’ve got folly and madness in them too. These here quarrels, like the one that broke out a few minutes ago between these two young bantams — friends of mine, both of them, and good bantams — are a wicked waste. That’s what they are. They waste human lives and human happiness. They make enemies out of folks that had ought to be friends, and they leave little children orphans and make our people the laughing stock of the world.

“ For my part, I don’t wonder that the world laughs at them. I laugh at them too. They’re so behind the times — they’re so foolish — so like the wild animals out there in the mountain. They don’t seem to realize what it is to be men and to stand up fair and square, taking life and rejoicing, and letting other men take it and rejoice. They don’t seem to understand that hate is like a disease and that it causes rot at the heart and makes a man as disgusting as rotten fruit or a sick animal. They don’t under-

stand it, because they've grown up in the blindness and sin of it. Why, I used to feel like that myself. I didn't come of a quarreling family, and us Thompsons had no war of our own, but we took sides with them that had wars, and I'd have been as silly as the rest of you if I hadn't been taught better by —" he hesitated and looked about him with a half-shy smile, drew his bow with thrilling resonance thrice across the deepest strings of his fiddle, and went on — "by my old fiddle here. Maybe you'll understand and maybe you won't. Music has laws. They are laws that run through everything that's good and true — they run through the things you're studying there in your books and they run through Nature too. They come from God and if we study them right they help us to know that we're God's children.

"I've had to study it all out for myself, but I know what I know. And the grandest thing I know is that every man has an equal right to his life, to his liberty and to his learning. You may be friends and you may be foes, but life and liberty and learning are things that friend and foe have equal rights to — equal rights! Think of it awhile. Think of it as you walk

up and down this here mountain side. Think of it when you go to bed at night. I'm an old man — an old mountain man — and you're just as good as my kin, you-all are. And I tell you, it will be a shame to you what folks will spread over the whole countryside if you drive these two young ladies away when they've given up their ease and their friends for the whole summer long to come up here to learn you."

He ceased speaking, but his bow continued its magic movement back and forth across the strings. For a moment or two he played a curious melody with sharp, bright notes, like the sparks from a blazing pine. Then he spoke again.

"Skully Simms ain't got no pa; he ain't got no ma. He lives with his uncle and makes out the best he can. He's pretty much alone, and it ain't natural for children to be alone. All the rest of you can go to homes where there is folks waiting for you. But this boy has just his uncle. That ain't much like having your ma and your brothers and sisters and your pa watching out to see you coming home and speeding you on your way. He's been wanting to come up here to school ever since it opened. He *has* come up

here and peered in the windows, and honed to come in. But he didn't durst. Why? Because some of his folks, that perhaps he never so much as laid eyes on, took a dislike to some of Coulter's folks, that Coulter never knew. Do you wonder it made me laugh and mock?"

He played on, happily. The tune took dancing feet to itself and set the hearts if not the feet of the children, to a gay rhythm. Once he lifted the bow.

"Do you wonder?" he thundered at them in the pause. Then he went on with the merry tune. And now, indeed, the feet of the children began to keep time.

"Say, Coulter," he cried as if he were calling out the numbers of a dance, "will you cut it out?"

Coulter, never a hangdog, sat with his arms still folded. His blue eyes met the old fiddler's steadily.

"Coulter, you've got brains. You're not a dolt. You see the point of what I told you. Cut it out, Coulter, will you, for the sake of these here young ladies, and for my sake, and for the sake of learning, Coulter!"

How happy the music was — how far away

from hate and meanness and grudging! Coulter looked squarely across at poor little Simms, who seemed very small and thin. His spare arms showed through his torn shirt; his wisp of a face was marred and blackened by Coulter's fist. Suddenly, Bud Coulter saw the point. Yes, "l'arnin'" was a thing that had neither to do with friend or foe.

"Cut it out, Coulter?" questioned Haystack, vociferously.

"Yessir," called back Coulter. "If he wants to come to school, I'll keep my hands off him."

"Honor bright?"

"Yessir. When I give my word, I keep it."

"Glory be!" shouted Haystack. And "Glory be!" shouted "Betsy," the violin.

"School over?" queried Haystack.

Azalea nodded.

"School's over," announced the fiddler. "And this is where we march."

He started down the aisle, his huge head with its wild hair bent above the violin, and from the little great instrument came the sounds of marching feet. They were victorious feet; feet marching in brotherhood; faithful, determined feet. Falteringly, shyly, the children fell in

with him. It was not, indeed, in human power to resist that march. Carin, joining with light step, Azalea, marching more seriously, courage and determination in her face, removed the last hesitation of the laggards. Skully Simms' tears dried on his swollen face. He got up, half shame-facedly and fell into the march, and so marching forgot his shame and his resentment. And Bud Coulter, springing at last to his feet, tramped with the others. He was, after all, a "good sport." He had spoken out his feelings, and now, head up — just a touch defiantly — he fell in line. They all went out of the school-house so, and on to where the various paths diverged, running this way and that over the mountainside, to end in the little cabins where the children lived.

Haystack sped them on their way. Then he dropped his instrument and turned to Azalea who stood beside him.

"Well, honey-bird," he said with fatherly tenderness, "how does the world treat you?"

CHAPTER IX

THE RESCUE

“There ain’t many men as inquisitive as I be,” remarked Haystack Thompson as he sat at Aunt Zillah’s supper table that evening. “’Tain’t the kind of inquisitiveness that takes men to big towns, nor the kind that takes men to sea. It’s jest the kind that has to know what’s going on in the neighborhood.”

“But you must admit,” said Carin teasingly, “that your neighborhood is rather a large one.”

“So it is, so it is,” confessed Mr. Thompson. “It includes these yere mountains in all their outcroppings in the two Carolinas. I make it my business to know what’s going on in them whenever possible. Earthquakes, funerals, singings, weddings, corn huskings — anything out of the usual — demand my attention.”

“Well, I’m glad *we* received it, at any rate,” said Azalea. “Did you think we were getting into mischief? The truth is, all had been perfectly quiet till you arrived on the scene.”

“But it was a dishonorable peace,” roared Mr. Thompson. “The enemy had you. You were in league with the powers of darkness. Now, freedom and honor sit upon your banners.”

“So they do,” said Miss Zillah. “I declare, whenever I thought of that poor little boy who honed to come to school and wasn’t allowed, it seemed to me I couldn’t stand it. I wanted to go out and do something about it, but I didn’t know how.”

“I picked him up down the road a piece,” explained Mr. Thompson. “He was playing with a little snake — both of ’em having a nice pleasant time — and I up and said: ‘Why are you playing with snakes instead of studying up at Ravenel School with the young misses?’ And what do you think the little cuss said? ‘It ain’t as dangerous,’ said he. ‘Not as dangerous?’ said I. ‘How is that?’ So he up and told me the whole story.”

“There’s a story whichever way you turn here,” said Azalea. “Just listen, Mr. Thompson, while I tell you the story of Paralee Panther.”

So she told the tale of Paralee, of how her name was no name, of her father, paralyzed, in

need of every comfort, and far from all physicians' aid and all neighborly service. Mr. Thompson listened with deep interest.

"Troubles," he said, "is divided into two kinds. There's the kind you can't help and that you'd best forget; and there's the kind you can help and that you want to get after. It looks to me as if this is something to get after."

"We all think so," said Azalea. "And we propose going to-morrow to see. There's a nice boy up here named Keefe O'Connor, an artist — he helps us in our school, too, almost every day — and he's going with us."

"You-all don't have no call to go," said Mr. Thompson. "Not now, at any rate. Here I be, a lazy old coot, with nothing else to do. Just let me go and investigate these here Panthers."

But Azalea shook a finger at him.

"Mr. Thompson, Mr. Thompson," she said. "Do you think we're the kind that can come up into the mountains and just sit and look off at the view? You know we aren't. We mean to go to that poor man. That's our adventure, don't you see? Rescuing the helpless is the greatest fun there is. Why, the knights of old found that out. After you've tried all sorts of

things, being rich and gay and all that, you come back to that old idea. So we're setting out to rescue somebody, and we simply can't be interfered with. But you may come along if you like. It will make it twice as interesting."

"About this 'nice boy,'" said Haystack, ever the watchful protector of Azalea. "Who is he? Where does he come from? Who are his folks? What kind of a job does he look to have — or is he a shiftless good-for-nothing like me?"

Carin, who felt the inquiries to be justified, flushed slightly and Azalea distinctly frowned. It was Azalea who spoke.

"We don't know a thing about him, and that's a fact," she confessed. "We thought that perhaps some day he'd be telling us about himself, but he never says a word. I think there's something he doesn't want to tell."

"Like as not," said Haystack, dryly.

"Oh, not anything that he's ashamed of," put in Azalea quickly, "but something that it would make him sad to tell. You know, Mr. Thompson, dear, that it's just that way with me. There are things in my life I don't want to speak of, ever, but nothing that I'm ashamed of. If it's

that way with me, why shouldn't it be the same with others? ”

“ Why not, indeed, honey-bird? ” said Mr. Thompson contritely. “ Well, we'll see this ' nice boy,' and pass judgment on him. Though, honor bright, Zalie, I think your judgment ain't the worst in the state. For a young-un you've had a good deal of experience in life and I reckon you have your own way of sizing up folks.”

As a result of all this, the next morning, early, in the best of moods and with a spirit for kindly adventure burning within them, a party of five started for Soco Mountain.

The “ sun ball,” as the mountain folk call it, was just showing a burning rim above the purple horizon when they set out, with food in their saddle bags, matches in their pockets and canteens of pure spring water on their backs. Food for the horses and raincoats were buckled to the saddles.

“ Short of breaking a nag's leg,” said Haystack Thompson, complacently, “ we're safe.”

The first business of the day was to go for Paralee, who was of course to be their guide. Living as she did a mile or two back of Rowan-

tree Hall, Azalea begged that they might pass through the Rowantree estate, giving her a chance to speak a word with Mary Cecily, whose haunting story stayed with her almost constantly — all the more, perhaps, because she had been forbidden to speak of it to anyone. The detour made for the purpose was not great, and presently they were pounding up the “approach” which Mr. Rowantree so prized. But on this occasion the master of the house was not sitting upon his gallery. Instead, they found him in the “drawing-room,” clad in a snuff-covered silk dressing gown, reading from an old red-bound copy of “The Lady of the Lake” to the twins, Moira and Michael, while little Mrs. Rowantree got the breakfast.

“The vocation I should have chosen,” he said to his guests after they were seated, “is teaching the young mind to expand. It is, I may say, one of the few things which really interest me.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Rowantree, bustling about to serve her guests with hot coffee, “I can’t tell you what a help it is to me, having Mr. Rowantree amuse the children the way he does.”

“Wouldn’t ‘instruct’ be a better word than ‘amuse,’ my dear?” asked her husband.

“ Oh, indeed, you do instruct as well as amuse them,” she cried loyally. “ You instruct us all.”

“ He didn’t amuse nor instruct me none,” said Haystack Thompson when they were on their way again. “ A great hulk of a man a-setting around while his little wife lugs in the firewood!”

“ It would be horrible, the way she works and the way he loafes,” said Keefe, “ if it weren’t that she is happy. She likes to be doing things for him and the children.”

“ He sure is a loafer,” mused Haystack. “ I know, because I’m a loafer myself and I can recognize one when I see him. But he puts on airs with his loafing, and I swan, I don’t like that. But say, he’s got cute children, ain’t he? That there little Constance said if I’d stay she’d call me ‘uncle.’” He laughed in a flattered way at the remembrance of it.

They were soon at the little cabin where Paralee lived with her grandmother and her brother. The brother they learned, was already off at the sawmill, but the grandmother, bent double with age, with two sharp teeth protruding from otherwise toothless jaws, and with her face brown and furrowed, came out to see her

granddaughter's guests. Her gimlet eyes seemed to bore through them. She looked as if she knew many things which she would not tell, and which, indeed, she ought not to tell. Carin had brought her sketch book, and was eager to make a drawing of old granny Panther, but she was given no time, for Paralee was awaiting them, ready and impatient to lead them on. She had no horse, but she said she wanted none.

"I can keep up with your horses," she told Azalea.

Keefe wanted to lend her his mount, but at his offer she frowned with vexation.

"I don't want to be plagued," she said sullenly, and set off down the road. Her strong, short body moved over the ground with astonishing swiftness; and as she took advantage of every cut-off, leaving the riders to go around by the road, she soon proved that they would not be obliged to waste time by waiting for her. The Gap was quickly crossed and she turned up a shoulder of Dundee Mountain, where for an hour the blowing horses had a hard climb. Then came a canter along the almost level table-top of the mountain, till, having reached the end of the plateau, the road began to descend. The

great mountain reached out many arms, each of which bore a name; and it was along one of these wooded reaches that Paralee led them. By noon, a narrow valley was reached; and here, beside a pleasant stream, the green solitude all about them, they dismounted for their luncheon and to rest themselves and their horses.

Paralee would not eat with them, though she accepted the luncheon Azalea offered her. She walked away to a shady spot, turned her back upon her companions and munched her food alone.

“Why does she do it?” Carin asked. It was Haystack who knew the answer.

“She does it because she’s as proud as Lucifer,” he said sympathetically.

“She does it,” echoed Azalea, “because she’s afraid her manners won’t be like ours.”

“She does it because she is unhappy,” said Keefe. “I have been unhappy, and I know.”

It was the first time he had made a reference to his past life.

But now there was another mountain to climb. It was low, long, and dull-looking, and so heavily wooded that there was little outlook. Azalea

said she believed that it was the only mountain she ever had seen which she did not care for. The road was so bad that it was impossible for a wagon to pass over it; and even the horses had trouble making their way. Only Paralee, grown up in that tangle, knew how to thread it with ease. It was one of the few things which she did know well, and as she went on, showing no sign of weariness, her awkwardness and shyness began to drop from her. She was on her own ground — the ground where she and her people had fought their lonely fight for life; and she was carrying help to those whose sorrows had been a savage grief to her.

Presently they reached a ragged clearing, stumbled past it to an ill-kept garden, passed a number of pig pens and a large chicken yard, and came upon the place that Paralee Panther called home. It had been rather a pleasant cabin, once, perhaps, in the old days when Thomas Panther had brought his bride there and had "aimed" to be a farmer and woodsman. But the roof now hardly gave shelter from the storms, the shutters sagged from the unglassed windows, the steps had rotted away, and one

mounted to the floor by means of ill-chosen stones which had been placed before the door, and which rocked when they were stepped upon.

Paralee plunged ahead to carry word to that desolated house that visitors were at hand.

Visitors!

The word means little enough to most people, thought Azalea, but to these strange, stricken people, these people who, as Paralee said, had "almost forgot how to talk," it must be as the sight of a sail to one upon a desert island. Perhaps they would fear as much as they would welcome it; yet there was Paralee, dragging a gaunt woman to the door.

"Tell 'em to 'light, ma, and come in," begged the girl, using the mountaineers' old phrase of hospitality.

"We will, ma'am," cried Haystack Thompson, just as if Mrs. Panther herself has spoken. "We'll be glad to."

He left Keefe to help the ladies from their mounts, and himself went forward to shake this ghostlike woman by the hand. She was tall and sunburned, thin past belief, and so smitten by the silence and deadness of the days that she



There was Paralee, dragging a gaunt woman to the door.
“ Tell ’em to ’light, ma, and come in,” she begged.

looked like a person who had lost some of her faculties. Yet now, with a visible effort, she summoned back her knowledge of what should be done when guests came.

The first glance in the cabin was enough. Its two beds, its rickety chairs and uncovered table, were the whole of the tale so far as furniture went, and a pathetic tale it was. But the tragedy began with the man who lay in one of the beds. His wandering, wild glance fell upon the visitors with something like terror. His yellow skin clung to his bones, and only one side of his body was alive. The other was immovable in the curious half-death of paralysis.

It was Keefe who first went to him, for Mr. Thompson had paused a moment, aghast at the sight.

“You must pardon us for coming to your home, sir,” he said in such a gentle and winning way that no one could have resisted his plea. “It is taking a liberty, we know, but we heard how ill you were and how no doctor could get to you. We are not doctors, but we mean to get you to one if it will do any good.”

Panther, it appeared, could talk but little. He shook his head despairingly at Keefe's speech,

and made a strange, inarticulate sound in his throat.

“Nothing won’t help him,” said his wife. “A tree fell on him and he’s got the paraletics. He ain’t going to git well.” She made the statement calmly. She was used to the idea; it was her house-companion and always with her.

“Where’s Pete?” asked Paralee. “Ain’t he ’round?”

“He’s done lit out,” said Mrs. Panther, still in that dead voice.

“Lit out?” cried Paralee. “You don’t mean he’s gone and run away?”

Mrs. Panther nodded again; and again the eyes of her husband rolled wildly.

“Did he leave you all alone, ma?” persisted Paralee. “’Th’out anybody to do for you?”

“My childer has all done that,” said the woman. “’Thar ain’t nary one left.”

“Oh, but Paralee didn’t mean to desert you, ma’am,” cried Azalea, unable to endure the spiritual bleakness of that home another minute. “It was only that she might find some way to help you that she left. She’s going to be a teacher; she —”

Mrs. Panther lifted her sun-faded eyes and looked at Azalea with unspeakable scorn.

“Her! A teacher!” she said.

Azalea saw Paralee cower at this speech, and she knew then why the girl was so sullen, so heavily sad. She had been “put down” all her life, and she had grown to be like a hateful, chained beast under it.

Then Miss Zillah spoke. She was occupying one of the three chairs in the room, and in that bare and bitter place, she looked — with her kind face and seemly garments — like a being from another world than that in which poor Mrs. Panther lived and had her aimless being.

“She has the wish to be a teacher, Mrs. Panther,” she said in her soft tones, “and she has the brains for it as well, so these young ladies tell me. In fact, I hear that she understands book-studying better than most. We all hope to help her, ma’am, and to see you and your husband in a different home from this. Wouldn’t you like to have neighbors and to be where a doctor could visit your husband?”

But Mrs. Panther could not face Miss Pace as she replied. There was too much she could not tell. How could she leave the only spot

on earth that belonged to her? How could they make any sort of a living elsewhere? Dare she, who had no more clothes than the poorest beggar, go out into the world?

Miss Zillah looked at her with her soft yet penetrating gaze.

"I know all you're thinking, Mrs. Panther," she said in tones that carried conviction to the heart, "but I'll just ask you to trust in us and we'll see you through."

For a moment or two no one spoke. Mr. Thompson was leaving matters for the present in Miss Zillah's hands. Keefe and the girls were silent with pity. Never had they imagined anything so hopeless as the look on the faces of that man and woman.

"You'll think of a dozen reasons why you can't do this or that," went on Miss Zillah, "but I feel that every one of them can be overcome."

Paralee had drawn nearer to her mother, and her dark eyes shone like points of fire there in the gloom of the cabin.

"Say yes, ma," she whispered. "Say yes! We'll all die here like snakes in our holes, if you don't."

Mrs. Panther turned on her.

“What you talking to me for?” she demanded. “Didn’t you turn your back on me? Didn’t you make Jake leave? Didn’t you take Granny? Much you care!”

Then Haystack Thompson arose. He towered till he almost touched the roof of the cabin.

“Mrs. Panther, ma’am,” he said, “you ain’t seeing things right, but I don’t blame you none. I’m a mountain man and I know how you feel. You’re proud. But this ain’t a question of pride. This is a question of saving lives. Now, ma’am, does it hurt your husband to move him?”

“Oh, awful,” she said. “One side don’t feel, but to touch him hurts the other side awful.”

“Does it, now?” said the fiddler, his voice quivering with sympathy. “I wonder why? Ladies, if you’ll be so good as to step outside, I’ll see if I can find out. I’m something of a bone-setter in my way. O’Connor, will you lend a hand?”

Half an hour later Mr. Thompson came to consult with the ladies.

“I believe,” he said earnestly, “that the man can be cured. There’s a broken collar bone — broken in two places as I make out, and never set — and it’s pressing on nerves and muscles in

such a way as to make him helpless. That's the way it looks to me. Now, Miss Carin told me coming over, that she'd pay for his keep in a hospital at Asheville if only we could get him there. It would be the death of him to take him in a wagon; and he couldn't sit on a nag. So O'Connor and I have fixed it up that we'll carry him out."

"But you can't do that, Mr. Thompson," objected Miss Zillah. "You're not so vigorous as you used to be, sir —"

"Never tell me that, Miss Pace! Never tell me that! Old Haystack's got muscle and he's got grit. You'll see. You've set me on doing it more than ever, Miss Pace."

"It might be all very well to carry him for a mile," said the practical Azalea, "but just think of doing it for miles and miles — for twenty miles."

"We won't have to carry him that far. Say we rig up a hammock and carry him ten miles. Then we'll reach a wagon road. Meantime, you-all ride ahead, and have a wagon waiting for us. Put a mattress on it with plenty of pillows and comfortables."

"And we'll bring along something to sustain

him," added Aunt Zillah, forgetting all about her objections, "and some refreshments for you and Keefe —"

"And the first thing you know we'll have him at Bee Tree."

"Then," put in Carin, "we could get the drawing room on a Pullman for him, and you and Keefe could go with him to Asheville."

"Sure," said Mr. Thompson. "Sure we can do it!"

"And is Mrs. Panther willing?" asked Miss Zillah.

"You can't tell whether she is or whether she ain't," said Mr. Thompson. "She's fierce as a tiger. But then she's lived like a tiger — only the hunting ain't been good. Say, ladies, are you with us?"

"Oh, we are," said Miss Zillah fervently. "It will be like taking a man from a living tomb. Of course I can see there are many difficulties, but probably it is best not to think too much about them."

"That's the idee exackly," agreed Mr. Thompson. "If you want to do anything, don't waste your time thinking about the difficulties."

“For example,” went on Miss Zillah, “you’ll never reach the main road before sundown.”

“We’ve thought of that,” said Mr. Thompson, “and what we propose is that we shall stay right here to-night.”

“Oh, I couldn’t sleep in that house,” whispered Carin. “Honestly, I couldn’t.”

“No call to,” said Mr. Thompson, flushing a little, however, in spite of himself, out of loyalty to his fellow mountain folk. “You-all will sleep out in the open. You can have the stars for your candles and the sun-ball for your alarm clock. O’Connor and I will scrape up pine leaves for your beds. You can put your rain-coats around you, and maybe I can find an extra blanket to help you out. We’ll build a fire and you can sleep with your feet to it. Now, what’s the matter with that?”

“Nothing, nothing,” cried Azalea. “Oh, Mr. Thompson, how sweet of you to think of it.”

Haystack Thompson grinned mockingly at his young friend.

“Me, ‘sweet’?” he asked derisively. “Jest about as sweet as a green persimmon.”

CHAPTER X

THE RESCUE, CONTINUED

Breaking up a home is not an easy matter, even when the home has little in it; nor is it a happy thing — no, not even when the home has been a sad one. Moreover, it can not be done in an hour, even under the easiest conditions.

“We’ll come back some day, I reckon,” said Mrs. Panther to Miss Pace, looking about her at the bare room with its broken fireplace and dingy walls. “Seems like I wouldn’t know how to live nowhere else.”

“If Mr. Panther gets well, maybe you’ll be glad to come back,” faltered Aunt Zillah, trying to say the kind thing, but thinking in her wise heart that these people were perishing, soul and body, for lack of mixing with their kind. But there was really too much to do to spend time sighing over the breaking up. Even the one remaining hog and the thirty odd chickens had to be planned for. It was decided finally that Paralee was to drive the hog, and that such of

the chickens as were not eaten that night for supper, were to be put in panniers fastened to the saddles and carried to the McEvoy's for safe keeping.

Miss Zillah wanted to help Mrs. Panther pack her clothes, but she was not quite sure that there was anything to pack; and indeed there was no more than could be put in a couple of old melon-shaped baskets.

"Clothes ain't come into my reckoning," said Mrs. Panther quaintly, growing more sociable as she felt the influence of Miss Zillah's genial atmosphere. "And, anyway, there wa'n't nobody to see what we had on."

Meantime, Mr. Thompson and Keefe had, with the aid of Paralee, been giving their attention to the hammock in which the sick man was to be carried. The house contained one good blanket of wool homespun, strong yet flexible. This, doubled, was stretched upon poles, and since no stout rope could be found about the place, heavy braided warp was fastened to these poles. This improvised rope was to be slung over the shoulders of the carriers. Azalea and Carin braided the rope and found it a pleasant task. Indeed, they both were very happy.

“It warms me all up,” said Azalea, “to think of getting this poor man out of here and giving him a chance, and I’m just as glad for his wife as I am for him. Talk of paralysis; Mrs. Panther has paralysis of the soul, don’t you think?”

“Isn’t Paralee changed?” Carin cried, not bothering to answer Azalea’s question. “She’s actually tidying up things. I saw her straightening out the mess under the house with her one poor hand. She wants the Panther house to fall to ruins decently. That’s going a good way — for Paralee.”

“Oh, you never can tell a thing about these mountain people,” said Azalea. “Very likely, a few generations back these silly Panthers, who ought to have called themselves Marr, had no end of self-respect. Many, many generations back, they may have been fine people. Marr certainly is the name of one of the greatest of families.”

“Perhaps it meant the same as Panther in the beginning,” surmised Carin. “Mars is the god of war, and maybe the Marrs and the Panthers all got their names because they were such good fighters.”

The sick man had been carried out of doors

by Mr. Thompson and Keefe, and placed where he could watch the preparations that were being made for his journey. And while he looked, not more than half-understanding, his great wild eyes rolling in their sockets, his wife mixed hoe-cake, using the last meal she possessed, and cooked it on the coals. Chickens had been prepared with dispatch, and were boiling in the pot, and Aunt Zillah, having given all necessary attention to affairs within the house, was now gathering dewberries and getting a fine bowl of them.

Presently the hammock was completed and supper was served. Miss Zillah had persuaded Mrs. Panther to let them eat it in the open, and they sat together, that strangely mingled company, in the clear light of the long-lingering day, enjoying their homely repast. The lovely evening, the wild spot, her friends — so various, but so dear — the awakening light in Paralee's eyes, the sense of being, somehow, on the right road of the world, brought to Azalea's heart a sense of dancing delight. She insisted on serving the chicken, the hoe-cake and the hot decoction which Mrs. Panther was pleased to call tea, making the others sit still while she waited on

them. She could only be contented when she was doing something, it seemed.

It was well on into the evening before the company was ready for rest; for the last preparations for moving had to be made that night if the company was to have an early morning start. The horses had to be cared for, Mr. Panther made as fit for civilization as possible, some sort of garments contrived for Mrs. Panther, and the house and yard "put straight." Everyone, save, of course, the helpless, silent man upon his couch, turned in to help, Carin with the rest. Once Azalea whispered to her friend:

"Did you hear that noise? It's Paralee laughing!"

"Do you think so?" asked Carin skeptically. "It sounded to me rather like a frog."

"It was Paralee," declared Azalea seriously. "It did sound a little like a frog, didn't it, but just you wait a month or two, Carin Carson, and then hear how it sounds!"

Carin gave a tired little laugh.

"I can't take another step, Zalie," she declared. "No matter what the rest of you do, I've got to go to bed."

Going to bed on this night meant rolling one's

self in a raincoat, covering one's self with some coarse handmade sheeting, and lying straight upon a bed of pine needles with one's face to the stars.

“You don't seem nearly so tired and sleepy as I am, Zalie dear. Sit by me and hold my hand,” pleaded Carin. “You'll lie next me, won't you — quite close? The mountain seems huge, doesn't it? Like a kind beast. Isn't it breathing? I feel as if it were breathing. Deep breaths. Where do you suppose my own, own father and mother are to-night? It was queer that I didn't want to go with them, wasn't it? I wonder if it was because I didn't wish to leave you, ‘honey-bird’ — as Mr. Thompson calls you. Why didn't he bring his fiddle? He doesn't look right to me without his fiddle. Oh—h, how tired I am. Sing, Azalea: ‘Now the day is over.’”

Carin hummed the first line; Azalea took it up at the second, and the soft silence of the night was broken by the harmony of their voices. Azalea remembered the evening, long ago, when she had heard Carin and her father and mother singing that far down the trail. That was the night they had come to ask her to be Carin's

adopted sister — the night she had weighed her love for Ma McBirney in the balance with riches and opportunity, and had decided in favor of the mountain cabin and Ma McBirney's love.

Carin slept quickly, but she was over-tired; her slender shoulders twitched spasmodically, and the hand Azalea held would clutch and then as suddenly relax.

“ Oh, me,” thought Azalea, suddenly anxious, “ are we forgetting how delicate and tender she is? What if she should be ill, with her mother so far away! We aren't looking after her the way we ought. She can't stand the things the rest of us can. I must have a talk with Aunt Zillah at once.”

She drew her hand softly from Carin's grasp and looked about her for Aunt Zillah. Someone paced slowly up and down beneath the trees at no great distance, and Azalea ran to see who it was.

“ It's only Keefe,” said a voice in answer to her low inquiry. “ Not the person you're looking for, I'm sure.”

“ I happened to be looking for Aunt Zillah,” said Azalea; “ but why shouldn't I be looking for you, Keefe O'Connor? ”

“ Because you never do — you never have — never will. Nobody looks for me. Nobody worries about me. I come and go as I please — and don't like it. I had some hope at the beginning of the season that Mrs. Rowantree would worry about me — she seemed so nice. But she hasn't a speck of worry to spare from Himself and the children. Then I thought maybe Miss Pace would devote at least ten minutes a day to worrying about me, but *she* hasn't shown a sign of it. She never asks me where I come from or who I am, or why I am, or — ”

“ Why, Keefe O'Connor, you're as unjust as you can be. She hasn't asked you — none of us has asked you — because we thought that for some reason you didn't want to tell.”

Keefe stopped short in his pacing, and standing twenty feet from the girl, let one cold word drop between them.

“ Oh! ”

“ What a horrid way of saying ‘ Oh! ’ ” cried Azalea. “ I meant just what I said and not anything more. You know very well that we've liked you from the first, Keefe, and that it never would occur to us to think anything about you that — that wasn't nice. What's the matter with

you to-night, anyway? I feel as if, whatever I said, you'd put some meaning into it that I didn't want put there."

"What's the matter with me?" he asked. "Why, I'm homesick,—for a home I never had. I want to see the kin I haven't got. I want to know my own name. I want to understand—" he broke off and let the words rest quivering upon the air. Azalea drew a little nearer in the gloom.

"Don't you know any of those things, Keefe?" Her voice sounded awed.

"No, Azalea, I don't. I have, I believe, the strangest story in the world. I've wanted and wanted to tell it to you, but I've been afraid that you—well, that you wouldn't believe it, or perhaps that you wouldn't like me so well after you knew it."

"Oh, Keefe, tell me now! I should love to hear a strange story to-night. I love to live under the sky, don't you? When I was a little girl I often slept out like this with my poor mamma. Oh, Keefe, how I wish you had known my poor little mother! Where shall we sit while you tell me the story? Or would you rather we walked back and forth?"

But before Keefe could reply, Miss Zillah, with Paralee and her mother, came from the house and joined them.

“Paralee wishes to sleep out here with us, Azalea,” said Miss Pace. “That will be very nice, won’t it? Mrs. Panther has come to say good night, my dear. I tell her she must get to bed. To-morrow will be a trying day, though, I hope, a happy one, too.”

Keefe and Azalea stood silent for a moment. Their little moment of enchantment was shattered and it was hard for them to hide their disappointment. Then Azalea tried to say what was expected of her, but Mrs. Panther broke in:

“I’ve got it on my mind,” she said slowly, “to say how I feel about you-all coming away out here to help me and my man. It’s hard for me to say, for I ain’t used to strangers. What’s more, it’s a good while since I had call to thank anyone. Things has been against me and folks has been against me. My own children has been against me.”

“No, they hain’t, ma. No, they hain’t,” cried Paralee excitedly. “You’ll see it hain’t so — ”

“What I can’t get clear in my mind,” went on the woman, paying no heed to Paralee’s wist-

ful tug at her sleeve, "is why you-all should trouble yourselves to come up here on something that ain't no concern of yourn —"

"You would have done just the same, wouldn't you, Mrs. Panther," said Azalea in her light, almost gay little way, "if you had heard we were in trouble and had known you could help us out?"

"Who, me?" gasped Mrs. Panther. "I never helped nobody. Never had the chanct." Again the bitterness came into her voice.

"I'm going to give you the chance sometime, Mrs. Panther," said Azalea, laughing softly. "Then you'll help me the very best you know how; won't she, Aunt Zillah?"

On that they parted. Keefe and Mr. Thompson slept at some distance, guarding the path — though indeed there was no one to guard it against. Aunt Zillah and her girls lay beneath a hemlock tree. Beside them, Paralee watched the slow roll of the stars till far into the night, unable to sleep for the thoughts that beset her.

"I couldn't stay in the house," she whispered to Azalea. "It made me think of the dark days."

"The dark days?"

“ Before I went away — when I thought we was forgot by all on the world.”

The night was good to them; the wind was low and kind; the dew softer than fairy fingers; the stars softly bright. Even the dawn did not come blazing upon them. In pink and gray, delicately it smiled from the farther hills. True, all night long the whippoorwill teased the air with his foolish song, but all there were too used to the notes of his voice to heed.

An hour after sunup, the procession was on its way. Mrs. Panther and Paralee rode the horses which had carried Keefe and Haystack Thompson the day before. In the panniers by their side cackled the excited and displeased chickens, and following them came the equally surprised and disgusted pig, for whom Keefe had constructed a harness by means of which Paralee led him. Last of all came Keefe and Haystack, carrying the paralyzed man in his hammock.

The little house looked wretchedly deserted when Paralee had closed its shutters and Keefe nailed up its door. He noticed that Mrs. Panther kept her head turned away from it and he wondered if she had, after all, some strange,

irrational love for this grim place, where she had suffered so much, and known such bitter solitude.

Well, he reflected, the wrench would soon be over. Ten minutes took them out of sight of the house. They presently were out of the clearing and picking their way along the most terrible road in a country of bad roads. The drag of the sick man's weight, half-skeleton though he was, was more of a burden than Keefe thought it would be. At the end of the first mile it seemed to him that he could not go on; but oddly enough, the second mile found him getting accustomed to the task. With Haystack Thompson, however, the carrying of this dead weight seemed to be but a small hardship. Though making the best baskets in the country and playing the violin with the touch of wild genius were not occupations to strengthen muscles, still Thompson was capable of great exertion. Keefe, who walked behind him, looked at his great shoulders with envy.

Miss Pace, with Azalea and Carin, had ridden on ahead as fast as they could push their horses, in order to send the McEvoy wagon to the point where the rough trail met the wagon road. They

had no fear of losing their way, for the marks their horses had made the previous day were their sure guide. So if they were anxious, it was not for themselves. Their fear was for the two burden-bearers. Azalea had seen from the first that Keefe was finding the task a very difficult one. He was not strong in the way her good Haystack was, and he never would be. She thought of his delicate, long, "clever" hands, that could handle the sketching pencil or the painter's brush so deftly, of all his quick, kind, charming ways, and wondered again what the story could be that he wanted to tell her, and how it was that he seemed so alone in the world.

The day was proving itself a surprisingly hot one for that altitude. Azalea was glad to remember the canteens of cold water that the men carried with them, and hoped Haystack would tell Keefe to put green leaves in his hat to keep his head cool. She wondered if there was danger of sunstroke away up on the mountains and wanted to ask Miss Pace, but for some reason didn't quite like to. Too much anxiety about Keefe might bring out Carin's little teasing smile. Anyway, it was no time for asking questions. She urged Paprika ahead of the

others, and rode him over the stubble, through the bushes, across the fords, until at last she reached the well-traveled road. Here she watered him lightly, and breathed him for a few minutes. Then she flicked the reins on his neck.

“Go home, pony,” she called sharply. Paprika gave a little sniff as much as to say that he had supposed that was what he *was* doing, and reaching out with his tough little legs, he fairly flew over the ground. Carin set her pretty Mustard at the same pace. The ponies had been bred together and were equally matched, yet to-day Mustard did not seem quite the equal of Paprika, and Mustard’s mistress wondered why. But Aunt Zillah knew. The difference lay, not in the ponies, but in the riders. It was Azalea whose aching sympathy with those she had left behind her, diffused itself through the heart and lungs and legs of her staunch little mount, giving him a speed he seldom had known before.

Indeed, it was an all but fainting pony that was drawn up at last by the McEvoy steps. Azalea had slipped from her saddle as the little creature swayed, and guessing at his trouble, had snatched up a pail of water which stood upon the house steps and dashed it over his face.

Miles McEvoy, placidly smoking his pipe in the shade of a sweet gum tree, came to her aid, but she waved him away.

“Hitch the horses to the wagon,” she said, “and please ask Mrs. McEvoy to come here.”

McEvoy, the leisurely, stared for one second. Then, putting a question or two, and receiving Azalea's clear answers, he strode away to do her bidding. Azalea got the saddle off her weary little mount and ran to get the necessaries for the relief wagon, explaining as she worked. A few moments later, Miss Zillah and Carin arrived, Carin too jaded to be of much service just then, but Aunt Zillah full of expedients.

So in less than an hour, McEvoy, with his wife beside him, was on his way, and the three who were left behind were making free in the bedroom of the many bottles, getting all in readiness for Mr. Panther.

At midnight they laid the sick man on Mrs. McEvoy's best feather bed. Very deep and soft and sweet it was, and very kindly and safe looked the homely room. Miss Zillah's soup was hot and savory, and her tea had comfort in it for the weary. Azalea and Carin, swift-footed and eager, rendered all the service in their

power, and at length, when every task was performed, with their lanterns in their hands, they, with Miss Zillah, started for their home.

Keefe O'Connor was sitting without the door waiting for them.

"I want to see you safe, please," he said in rather a curious voice. Azalea looked at him to see what was the matter, but the lantern revealed nothing more than a white and strained face. She noticed that he was unusually silent as they made their way over the path of pine needles to the Oriole's Nest, but for the matter of that, none of them felt talkative. She certainly was not prepared to see him, when he had unlocked the cabin door for them, reel suddenly and fall unconscious across the threshold.

CHAPTER XI

KEEFE.

Miss Zillah laid a hand on Azalea's arm.

"Don't be so frightened," she said. "He's overstrained his heart, no doubt. Find a match. Light the lamps. Carin, help me lift him — well, drag him then. We'll get him to the lounge. No hurry."

Azalea, fumbling for the matches and missing them, wondered why Miss Zillah had spoken to her. How had she known that her heart stopped beating at the sight of Keefe prone across the doorstep? And if she was more frightened than the others, how had she shown it — and why, indeed, *should* she care more than they?

Then she knew. She was only a young girl, but she knew. Somehow, mysteriously and beautifully in this lonely old world, we are able to pick out our own. We know, as we eye them, those who will make us feel befriended and comfortable and safe. At least, we think we

know, and even when we find we have been mistaken, we have had the sweetness of the hour of apparent discovery. Yes, it was true; Azalea admitted it as with trembling hands she lighted the lamps, shuddering at the sound of that body being dragged across the floor. Keefe O'Connor, who had said that he did not know his own right name, who admitted that his life had been strange and sad and unsettled, had seemed to her, from the first, like some one she always had known — some one it would be a wicked folly to lose out of her life.

Pa McBirney had warned her that she was too impulsive. He had told her that she must watch out for this very thing, and she had promised him that she would try to put a guard upon herself. Yet by a swift understanding which she could not explain, she had felt from the first that she could trust this lad; could forgive him when he needed forgiveness, and take life as it came, with poverty or plenty, with good or ill luck, if he were near to praise her for the long day's work, or to laugh with her when play-time came. And now perhaps he was dying!

There, the lamps were lighted at last! She

had touched a match to the kindling in the fireplace; she had tossed on a log. She was willing to do anything rather than turn her face and look upon that white one on the couch where Aunt Zillah and Carin, breathing hard, had managed to lift the inert body of her friend.

“Make some black coffee, quick, Azalea,” she heard Aunt Zillah saying. “Make it very strong. Carin, come hold the light while I look in my medicine case.”

Black coffee, very strong! How did one make that? Azalea could not think. “Quick, quick,” Aunt Zillah had said. Azalea gave up thinking, because her hands were doing the work. She found that she could trust them, that some faithful servant in her confused house of thought was doing the work for her. The coffee was ground, the fire was lighted, the pot set on — all as it should be — and still it was not of coffee that she was thinking, but of that white face which she would not look at; that fluttering breath that seemed to cease.

She could hear Miss Zillah slapping the cold hands of the boy there on the couch; could hear her speaking to him and getting no answer. She wondered why Carin didn't come to her to say

something — to tell her how he was faring. Did they expect her to think of nothing but coffee, coffee, coffee — particularly when it seemed never to boil, never to get where it would be of any use?

When she carried the coffee into the living room, he was breathing heavily. His eyes were partly opened, and Miss Zillah had loosened his shirt at the neck, and had poured water over his face and hair. It made him look so strange — so different from the way he usually looked. And yet, though he looked so different, he seemed familiar, too, in a new way.

“It’s not of himself that he reminds me,” thought Azalea, “but of some one else.” The resemblance was pleasant to her, as if the person he made her think of was some one she liked, though she could not think who it was.

Miss Zillah lifted him up and held him steady while Azalea fed him from the spoon with the strong black coffee.

“Don’t let your hand tremble,” said Miss Zillah rather sharply. “Don’t think about your fears, Azalea. He’s got to have the coffee. His heart needs stimulating. Give it to him and stop trembling.”

Azalea wouldn't have supposed it possible that by the mere exercise of will she could stop the shaking of her hand, but when Miss Zillah spoke to her that way, she steadied herself.

Did the moments go fast or slow? She could not tell. She gave him the full cup of coffee and went for more. Carin had heated some hot water and had put it in rubber bags at his hands and feet. He had been wrapped warm, and now, little by little, the horrid purple of his lips began to turn into something more like their usual color. His lids opened with a flutter and he saw those about him. He smiled piteously, like a little boy, and closed his eyes again.

"Perfect rest is what he needs now," said Miss Zillah. "He may have to be quiet for days. It takes much longer to rest a heart than it does to tire it. Go to bed now, girls. What a day you've had! Mercy, what would your people think, Carin, if they knew all you have been through? Don't think of getting up in the morning, or of going to school. The very thought of your falling ill distresses me."

It seemed outrageous to leave the gentle Miss Zillah there, her face all drawn with anxiety,

alone with that almost unconscious boy, but she insisted upon having her way.

“ I’ll call you,” she assured the girls, “ if there’s anything you can do.”

“ Any least thing — ” begged Azalea.

Miss Zillah nodded. So the two crept away to their bed behind the great chimney and the screens, but they did not undress; only lay down in their wrappers and with the light burning beside them. Carin dropped into a heavy sleep and lay there so sunken in the bed that Azalea had her to worry about too. Being of knightly spirit and rescuing folk in distress was rather an expensive business, it appeared. If anything happened to Carin or to Keefe, would the rescue of the Panthers have been worth it? It was not a pleasant question to dwell upon, and Azalea tried not to think of the answer.

She was not sure whether she slept or not. The wall between sleeping and waking was transparent, like glass, and she could see through it. So it was a relief when morning came and she could get out of bed. She was stiff and half sick, but when she had taken her cold bath in the little dressing room they had contrived in

the shed, and had got into her clean clothes, she began to feel better. Carin tried in vain to shake her sleepiness off, but she was so wan and worn-looking that Azalea sternly commanded her to keep her bed. In the front room Miss Zillah slept wearily in the arm chair, and Keefe, his eyes wide open, lay watching her. He held up his finger for silence as Azalea drew near, and she slipped out again, comforted at his appearance, to get the breakfast.

In the midst of it, she saw some one coming down the path. It was Paralee, swinging along with her great stride. She still wore her hideous, outgrown, ragged dress, but for all that she looked changed from what she had been. Her hair was smoothly combed, her face properly washed, and there was hope in her eye and decision in her step.

Azalea slipped out of the door to speak to her.

“How be you all?” she asked.

Azalea told her, hastily.

“Ain’t that a pity, now?” sighed Paralee. “I knew that boy wasn’t peart enough for such a long tug. I wanted him to let me carry part of the way, but he wouldn’t hear to it. He’s jest beat out; that’s what ails him. Lying quiet

is the best thing he can do, I reckon.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Azalea anxiously. “And, Oh, Paralee, how ever am I to get over to school to-day? I’m so stiff I can hardly move; and there’s so much to be done here at the house that I don’t believe I ought to leave.”

“Ain’t it a pity,” said Paralee, kicking viciously at a stone, “that I ain’t got my eddication yet! I would jest love to do that thar teaching for you-all.”

“I wish to goodness you could,” sighed Azalea fervently. “But you seem to be the only person around here who even wants to do such a thing —”

She broke off her sentence suddenly, remembering that she had heard Mr. Rowantree say that teaching was the one thing in the way of work that he actually enjoyed. She told Paralee.

“He’d do it,” she cried, “if only I had some way of getting word to him. It seems such a pity to break up school just when we’re getting it so nicely started, doesn’t it? And this is little Skully Simms’ first day, too! I couldn’t really answer for what might happen if he got there and met the Coulters and their friends face to face.”

“ Oh, that thar Bud Coulter’ll keep his word about not tetching the little cuss,” said Paralee placidly. (She was a Coulter in her sympathies.) “ But I’ll tell you what, Miss Azalea, you jest say the word and I’ll run shortcuts over to the Rowantrees and tell them what’s doing.”

“ Oh, will you, Paralee? Dare you? Oughtn’t you to be with your father and mother? ”

“ Nope. They’re all right, I reckon. Mr. Thompson, he’s to take ’em down to the afternoon train. Pa ain’t looking very peart, but it warn’t to be expected that he would. Ma acts like she was scared to death, but Mis’ McEvoy’s fixing her out in proper clothes. Mr. McEvoy, he’s gone down to Bee Tree to do some telegraphing about the hospital pa’s to go in. My, ain’t they rich! ”

“ Rich! ” cried Azalea aghast. “ Who? ”

“ Oh, the McEvoy’s and Mr. Thompson. ”

“ Rich! ” repeated Azalea. But the words died on her lips. So Paralee thought the McEvoy’s in their two-roomed cabin, and good old Haystack with his fiddle, rich! She only said:

“ Have you had breakfast, Paralee? ”

The girl shook her head.

“Come in then. Things are cooked now, and you can eat and then run to Rowantree’s. But you *are* obliging, Paralee!”

Paralee looked at her with something akin to impatience.

“Say,” she said deep in her throat, “don’t you thank me for nothing, you hear? If I was to crawl on my hands and knees around this here mountain, it wouldn’t even up with what you’re doing for me. Why, Miss Azalea, I thought I’d go crazy thinking about my pa and ma in that thar place — plumb crazy, that’s what I thought I’d go. Ma laid it up against Pete for running away. I tell you, he had to. It got so awful he just had to.”

“I suppose he did,” said Azalea sympathetically. She knew very well — for she was still a child — that there are troubles so dark and hopeless that children cannot endure them.

A few moments later, standing by the door, she saw Paralee striding along the old, overgrown road that ran toward Rowantree Hall.

She had confidence, somehow, that Mr. Rowantree would not fail her. Indolent he might be, odd and proud and vexatious he undeniably was, yet he had a reverence for the seeking

mind, and she felt he would not let these mountain children ask in vain.

She was quite right. An hour before school time she saw him mounted on a sorry nag, which he rode magnificently and as if it were the most dashing of horse flesh, coming toward her door. He dismounted with a splendid gesture, and riding crop in hand, came forward toward the Oriole's Nest. By this time Aunt Zillah was sleeping properly in her bed, and Keefe, wide-eyed and restless, lay on the sofa with instructions neither to move nor talk. So Azalea met Mr. Rowantree outside the door and hurriedly told him all the story of the past two days. As he stood there on the little porch, he, being tall, could look well over her head at the figure of Keefe lying stretched upon the sofa. It was a sight to make him sorry, but not one, it would seem, to hold him fascinated. Yet he gazed and gazed; then, trying to look away, looked in again.

“Who is it that boy looks like, Miss Azalea?” he asked. “Somebody —”

“I know,” replied Azalea under her breath. “Somebody — but who?”

They could not decide, and let it pass. Azalea

went over to the schoolhouse with Mr. Rowantree and introduced the pupils to him, and gave him an idea of what was to be studied for the day. Mr. Rowantree looked somewhat out of place in the little schoolhouse, to tell the truth; he was so tall, so fine, so altogether magnificent with his reddish brown hair and whiskers and his snowy suit of frayed linen. The children seemed rather awed by him, but Azalea noticed that little Skully Simms kept close to him, preferring him, with all his strangeness, to the Coulters, although the warlike Bud had given bond for good behavior.

When she got back home, the house was very still. Carin was lying in the hammock asleep. There were circles under her eyes, and the lovely wild rose bloom was gone from her cheek.

"I must take better care of her," thought Azalea for the twentieth time, stealing past her into the house. Aunt Zillah was giving Keefe some milk, and treating him as gently as if he were glass and might break.

"Remember," she said as she left the room, "he's not to talk. Two or three days of perfect rest will, in my opinion, make him all right. It isn't anything unusual for a young man to over-

strain his heart. He might have done it in school athletics and then he wouldn't have been a hero at all. Mr. Thompson was looking for you, Zalie. He starts in a short time for Bee Tree, so that Mr. Panther may have a little rest between his wagon ride and his train journey. Mr. Thompson is going with him straight to the hospital. Carin gave him the money — except for a little — a very little — addition which I made. So now, all is well again, or on the way to be well, and you must go and lie down. Take a glass of milk first and sleep as long as you can. I'm going out to see to the chickens. They've been sadly neglected, poor things."

Azalea stood in the cool, tidy little room vaguely regarding the lad on the sofa. He looked amazingly long as he lay stretched out, all relaxed and pallid like that. The "sad-glad" look which Azalea so often had noticed on his face, was there now. He held out his hand for her to come nearer and when she was close enough he whispered:

"I oughtn't to be staying here, Miss Azalea. It's making trouble I am for Miss Pace and the rest of you. Anyway, it's not fitting for me to

be here. Isn't this a sort of nunnery?" He smiled in his sidelong, whimsical fashion. "If my tent was to be fixed up right I could wait on myself well enough, and Mr. McEvoy could be bringing me over a drop of soup now and then or a pail of milk."

Azalea made no protest, for she knew how he felt. She would have felt the same way in his place.

"We love to have you here," she said softly. "We truly love it. And it wouldn't be safe yet for you to go to your tent. But I was thinking —"

"Yes?"

"How would it be if you went to Rowantree Hall, and got some one — Bud Coulter, or some one like that — to wait on you?"

To Azalea's surprise he looked up with eagerness in the eyes that a moment before had been so lackluster.

"Oh, I wonder if it *could* be arranged," he said. "I should like that. I can't tell why, but I should like it more than anything. Miss Azalea, will you see if it can be done? I'm terribly tired. I — I should like beyond words to go there."

A sharp little grip of jealousy that he should prefer Rowantree Hall to the Oriole's Nest had Azalea by the throat and kept her from answering. But she was ashamed of that pang even while she suffered from it, and nodding reassuringly, she went into the kitchen to attend to the neglected duties there.

CHAPTER XII

THE BLAB BOY

Meantime, Mr. Rowantree (who loved teaching) was having his experiences. He had been in the habit of instructing his own children, who, from early infancy had been taught to listen and to learn. Indeed, there was nothing they would rather do. They knew almost all of the great stories for children that have been written by the different peoples of the world, and they were so used to having their father speak partly in English, partly in Latin and partly in French, that they did not mind that at all. Very likely he may have ventured to throw in a little German or Italian now and then — he certainly could have done so if he wished. Then, too, he had taught them their notes in the music book; and he had made figures seem like a game to them. Really, he had done little else since they were born but train them and teach them, and their minds answered to his as the strings of a harp respond to a piano.

Imagine then, his feelings, when he was left alone to deal with the twenty-one pupils — including Mrs. McIntosh — of the Ravenel school. He tried his best to realize how little they knew, but he really could not do it. He had begun with Skully Simms because Azalea had particularly begged him to look after the boy, owing to the peculiar circumstances under which he had come to school, and he set him a little reading lesson to con. Then he turned to Mrs. McIntosh, whose eagerness to learn, grown woman as she was, seemed to him very touching. But he was interrupted by Skully, who in a high-pitched voice and a wild singsong something like that used by the traveling preachers at a camp meeting, was going on:

“T-h-e, the, c-a-t, cat, s-a-w, saw, a r-a-t, rat —”

“What do you mean by that noise, sir?” thundered Mr. Rowantree. “Can’t you study to yourself?”

Skully looked terribly embarrassed and buried his scarlet face down behind his book. Mr. Rowantree regarded him something as a king looks at a cat — a stray, wayside cat — and resumed his instruction, only to hear a moment

later the wild, high notes of Skully breaking out again.

He turned on the little boy in his most majestic manner.

“Will you have the goodness to tell me —” he began. But he was interrupted by a chorus of explanatory voices.

“He’s been to a blab school, sir,” the other children declared. “He don’t know how to study no other way. Once you’ve got the blab way o’ l’arning, you can’t do no other way.”

Mr. Rowantree grasped the meaning of the statement. He had heard of the “blab schools” where each pupil studied his lesson aloud, often at the top of his lungs. He looked about him expecting to see the Coulter crowd doubled up with scornful mirth. But he saw nothing of the sort. The children there understood the difficulties of Skully. Nay, they firmly believed that when once the blab habit was settled on a person it could not be got rid of. They expected to see the schoolmaster fall into a terrible rage and they naturally looked forward to it with a not altogether innocent glee. But Mr. Rowantree, it seemed, could be a surprising person.

“I beg your pardon,” he said to Skully

politely. "I didn't understand. It will be rather bothersome for you to break off the habit of studying aloud, but of course you must, for it puts other people out very much, don't you see? This morning I will allow you to move your lips as you study, but you must not speak aloud. By to-morrow I shall hope that you can study without even moving your lips."

"Yessir," said poor Skully, and he tried as hard as ever he could with his untutored, eager little mind, to do as he should in the school which he so very much wished to attend. But it was hard work, and from time to time his high-pitched singsong voice would break from the whisper to which it was held in leash and would cause Mr. Rowantree to hold up a warning finger. Then, Skully, scarlet-faced and wretched, would try again.

This, however, was not the only excitement of the day. Just before noon the instructor was surprised to see a very long, very thin, very dust-colored man appear in the doorway. It was not only his homespun clothes which appeared dust-colored. His hair and skin, even his eyes, had a faded yellowish hue.

He leaned forward, peering in the room

curiously, his high, arched nose seeming to smell out what his eyes did not at first discover. Then he shot out his long arm and pointed at little Mrs. McIntosh, where she sat, her worn yet girlish face white with nervousness, and said:

“ I want you-all to git out of this.”

For a moment no one spoke. The woman had not arisen. A little look of trembling bravery shone in her eyes. She seemed to be seeking for some words in which to express her thoughts and not finding them.

“ You hear? ” cried the man. “ You-all git out of that thar seat and come to home whar you belong. Thissen ain't no place for a married woman. You hear? ”

Mr. Rowantree had been stroking his long ruddy mustache with his white hand, waiting, it seemed, for developments. But now he came forward, bearing upon his handsome face a look not unlike that he had turned upon Skully a while before.

“ Mrs. McIntosh is your wife, I suppose,” he said in his easy, pleasant way.

“ You jest bet she is,” said the man defiantly, “ and I want her to home. She's making me the laughing stock of the hull place.”

“Oh,” said Mr. Rowantree, quite politely. “What are they laughing at? Excuse me if I don’t quite understand.”

“They’re laughing because a married woman leaves her home and sets in school with childer, l’arning like she was five years old.”

“They probably are not aware that men and women of the most learned sort go to universities until they are much older than Mrs. McIntosh. Naturally, they wouldn’t know that, would they? It’s not the kind of thing that folk here on the mountain would be liable to hear about.”

“We know ’nough,” said the man sullenly. “We ken git along without nobody’s help.”

“Now, really,” said Mr. Rowantree in a pleasant tone, “you *don’t* get on very well, you know. You couldn’t get on with men beyond the mountains — wouldn’t measure up with them in any way, except perhaps, in the use of a gun. And that’s because you don’t know the things your excellent wife is trying to learn. She already knows her letters, writes her name, and is beginning to read books. Of course that puts her quite a way ahead of you, Mr. McIntosh.”

Mr. Rowantree still stroked his mustache with a white hand and smiled.

“I don’t allow no woman belonging to me to know more than I know,” said Mr. McIntosh in what was meant to be a very manly manner. “What knowing thar is around our house is for me.”

“Too late, too late,” cried Mr. Rowantree, waving his hand magnificently in the air. “You see, she knows more than you this very minute. She’s got the key to the puzzle. You can’t stop her now. She’s got something you haven’t — something that puts her in line with the world beyond these mountains — something that will comfort and amuse her as long as she lives. That’s the wonder about learning; once you get it in your head, nobody can take it away from you.”

Mr. Rowantree regarded the mountaineer with an unflinching eye.

“I reckon I ken take it out o’ her,” said the man, his eyes flashing.

“No, you can’t,” retorted Mr. Rowantree. “You may think you can, but you can’t. She’s got hold of a secret that makes her more powerful than you, though of course your muscles are

much stronger than hers. Mark this, Mr. McIntosh: No matter how things go with her, she'll always have a kind of happiness that no one can take away."

There was a little pause and then Mr. Rowantree went on.

"What's more, she's getting something that she'll not want to keep to herself. That's the way with folk who learn. They want to pass their knowledge on. She'll be passing it to her children and they'll come up in the world. You can't tell anything about *how* far they'll come up. They may get to be the best known and most useful men and women in the state. They say children take from their mother, and your children have a good mother, Mr. McIntosh. She's a woman with a clear, sensible mind, who wants to lift herself up out of poverty and ignorance. That's the sort of a wife you have, sir, and I congratulate you."

The preposterously pleasant Mr. Rowantree advanced upon the glowering McIntosh and held out his hand. In bewilderment the mountaineer took it and received a grip that surprised him.

“Aren't you proud of her?” demanded Mr. Rowantree. “I know what it is to be proud of a wife, sir. I have one that's much too good for me, and I realize it. Yes, it's a great thing for a man to have a wife he can be proud of; one that can do something he can't.”

“I ken do what she's doing,” said Mr. McIntosh defiantly. “Thar ain't no reason that I ken see, why I can't do it as well as her.”

“I doubt it,” said Mr. Rowantree, shaking his head, “you might — but I doubt it, Mr. McIntosh.”

“I'll bet you a young shote that I ken!” cried the man.

“I'll bet you a brace of my ducks that you can't,” retorted Mr. Rowantree.

“Done!” said Mr. McIntosh. “Give me a book. Set down and tell me about this here l'arning.”

Mr. Rowantree turned to the school.

“A brace of ducks against a young shote that Mr. McIntosh cannot learn to read,” he said gravely. “You are the witnesses. Coulter, kindly bring me a primer from that closet. You will all observe that I play fair. I shall do my

best to teach him, but I frankly confess I have my doubts. He has looked down on book-learning and that is against him."

Mr. McIntosh made no reply. He had hung his hat on a nail and now he drew his one "gallus" a little tighter as if to prepare for a struggle. At the opposite corner of the room from his wife, he bent over his book. Mr. Rowantree drew a chair up beside him.

"We will give our attention, if you please," he said in his mellow voice, and in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, "to the first letter of the alphabet."

Young Mrs. McIntosh bent very low over her page and only the children sitting next saw her shoulders shaking with laughter. The children themselves, determined not to spoil sport, kept their mirth till they should be upon the mountain paths. Then they would have their chuckle there over the way McIntosh "was tricked into l'arnin'." Now they devoted themselves to their own lessons, and away in the backs of their minds a new idea was growing. Why shouldn't their own fathers and mothers come to school? Why shouldn't they all know how to read? It was just as Mr. Rowantree said; they couldn't

“match up” with the men and women beyond the mountains. They were different — terribly different. Oh, yes, proud as they were, these children of the mountain clans, they knew that. Their sisters weren’t like Miss Azalea and Miss Carin — not at all like them. Their fathers weren’t like Mr. Rowantree; and though in some ways Mr. Rowantree was not liked by them, and his disinclination to work was noted even by these folk of easy-going ways, still, he was different. He knew about the great world beyond; about what people were doing in the cities; he was acquainted with what other men thought and wrote, and he could talk in a wonderful way. Just see how he had come it over McIntosh, and taken the “meanness” out of him!

It was the red-headed boy, Dibblee Sikes, the most sociable child in the school, who put into words the thing that had been stirring in the children’s minds. He came up to Mr. Rowantree at the nooning.

“Please, sir,” he said, “I’ve been thinking about something.”

“You look as if you had,” said Mr. Rowantree cordially. “Well, I always count it a

pleasant day when I have a new idea. What have you thought of, Sikes?"

"Why, seeing Mrs. McIntosh take up with books, sir, and Mr. McIntosh set down to beat her out in learning, made me think of having a school for the grown folks. They need it just as much as us young-uns."

"They certainly do, Sikes, and do you know, the same notion has been in my head ever since McIntosh joined us? Just look at him, will you? He's sitting over there on the ground, studying like a good fellow. Can't even stop to eat."

"Maybe he ain't got nothing *to* eat, seeing he didn't count on staying when he come." Sikes grinned at his instructor, and Mr. Rowantree returned the smile, accompanying it with a gentle wink of the left eye.

"Yes, his wife offered him half of her luncheon, though she didn't have much."

"Then I reckon he's eating with one hand and studying with the other," said Dibblee blithely. "But how about that school, Mr. Rowantree?"

"Well, I suppose it would be impossible for most of them to come in the daytime. They

have to attend to their work, don't they?" Mr. Rowantree asked the question rather vaguely. It was a subject about which he was not very well informed.

Dibblee nodded. "Sure they do," he said in the language he had picked up from some "tourist" boys at Bee Tree.

"What we need here, then, is a night school. Everything could be made safe in the homes, the big children could be set to look after the little ones, and then the fathers and mothers could come here. What do you think of that, Sikes?"

"It would be a mighty good thing, Mr. Rowantree, but there's one thing stands in the way." Dibblee wore a "studyin'" look which sat oddly on his round, smiling face.

"And what is that, pray?"

"Well, you see, half the time it's darker than a hat on the roads, with the trees growing over them and all. Some folks around here ain't even got lanterns, and anyway, if they had, they wouldn't want to go out such pitch black nights."

"Then they could come on moonlight nights," cried Mr. Rowantree triumphantly. "We'll

have a moonlight school, Sikes. Moonlight will be a sign and token that school has taken up. What do you say to that?"

"I say it's just the very thing," cried Dibblee Sikes. "Then my ma can come, can't she? Why, she's jest as knowing as she can be — keeps me laughing at her purty near all the time I'm home. She's got more rules for cooking than anybody hereabouts, and she can remember the greatest songs — about fifty verses long, some of them be — about things that has happened in this here country. But she carries it all in her head. She can't read, jest because she ain't been taught. If she could read she'd be the smartest woman anywhere, almost."

Mr. Rowantree was a man with his own faults, but for every fault he had a virtue, and now his eyes were alight like the boy's.

"Right you are, Sikes," he said. "And we'll teach her. A moonlight school we shall have, and with the permission of Miss Carson and her friend, I will teach it. I've been a happy man, Sikes, but I haven't been a particularly useful one. So now I'll surprise myself by turning over a new leaf. I'm going to be useful, if teaching my neighbors what I know is —"

“Oh, Mr. Rowantree,” interrupted the boy, “I wisht school was over so I could run home and tell my ma. I know she’ll want to come, and she’ll make other folks want to come, too. You’d be real surprised the way my ma can get folks to do things.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” said Mr. Rowantree; “not if she’s like you, Sikes. You can get folk to do things, too. You’ve got me to take a job, and by Jove, I didn’t know it was in me to do such a thing.”

The laziest man in the community smiled at the red-headed boy, and the boy grinned back, and in doing so revealed three vacancies in the two rows of teeth. It was “tooth-dropping” time with him, and he was not beautiful.

The afternoon, it must be confessed, seemed rather tedious to Mr. Rowantree. He wondered where Azalea and Carin had found their patience. Nay, it took something more than patience to sow the seeds of knowledge in these uncultivated minds. Yet he had to admit, that though uncultivated, they were not rocky and sterile soil. On the contrary, beneath all their shyness, the children were wild to learn. Paralee was, of course, not present that day, so he

missed the pleasure of instructing the one pupil who treated books as if they were food and she a starveling.

One last odd incident closed the day of strange experiences for this new teacher. In spite of his utmost efforts, poor Skully had broken out every once in a while with his "blabbing." The children, rather strained and excited by the presence of their very learned instructor, finally "got the giggles" after the fashion of tired and nervous school children the world over. Even the gentle Mrs. McIntosh could not keep from a foolish "snicker" now and then as the wild cadences of Skully's voice broke on the air and were choked back by a grimy hand clapped across his mouth. The poor little "blab" boy was covered with confusion, and finally, in despair, dropped his towseled head upon his arm and softly wept.

The children, ashamed and sorry, did the very thing they did not want to do, and giggled all the more. And at that, up rose Bud Coulter, the hereditary enemy of little Skully.

"Look a-here, you-all," he said defiantly. "I said that there kid should come to school and no harm should be done him. What I say I

mean. Nobody but a Coulter ken take the stuffing out of a Simms, and this here Coulter is going to see that this here Simms is give a chanct."

"Go home, Skully, my lad," said Mr. Rowan-tree kindly. "It's been a hard day for you, but you've done wonders. Practice studying to yourself awhile this evening, and be here to-morrow morning with the rest. You'll come out ahead. Miss Azalea was very happy that you were to be in her school. You see, she and Miss Carin have given up a good deal to come up here to help you young folk along, and they want everybody in the country round about to get some good out of the school. They want you to make their sacrifice and hard work worth while. So you'll come to-morrow, won't you, son?"

Skully lifted a tear-stained face and looked at the teacher with weary eyes.

"You bet, sir," he said sadly.

"And please be so good as to run over to Miss Azalea's house to see how they are getting on there, and bring me back word."

Skully cast a look of gratitude at the man who was making his escape easy, and finding his bat-

tered corn husk hat, fled from the school.

Incredibly soon he was back again.

“Miss Zalie says for you to come over to the house soon as ever school closes, sir,” Skully reported. “She says to tell you Mis’ Rowantree is there and Mr. Keefe is mighty poorly, and Mis’ Rowantree wants to take him home with her.”

An hour later when school closed, the teacher found Skully sitting on a log, book in hand, studying with one finger acting as monitor to his lips.

The children pretended not to notice and slipped away after their fashion down the mountain paths. Mrs. McIntosh walked with her little daughter, but while Mr. Rowantree watched, he saw McIntosh stride forward, throw his little girl pick-a-back over his shoulder, and lope down the trail behind his wife.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HERMIT THRUSH

Keefe O'Connor had slept for hours, heavily, and Miss Zillah, stealing in every few minutes to look at him, was not well satisfied.

"I'd give anything if we had a good doctor at hand," she said to the girls. "Rest is a fine thing, of course, but it isn't always enough. Keefe seems badly in need of stimulation. I don't believe his heart would have been strained like that, great as the exertion of carrying poor Mr. Panther was, if he hadn't been run down. Probably he hasn't been having half enough to eat, for one thing. Cooking for himself the way he has is a bad thing. We ought to have had him in here with us oftener. I blame myself very much. But I hesitated to act, knowing so little of him and being responsible for you two girls."

In course of time Mrs. McEvoy came over, and she, too, tiptoed into the room to look at the sleeping youth.

“I’ve got medicine for almost everything that can ail a body,” she said when she had joined the others on the porch, “but the trouble is, I don’t know what *is* the matter with him. He seems clean beat out. Now, if only Mrs. Rowantree was here she might be able to give us some notion of what to do. She reads doctor books so that she can care for her children.”

Azalea snatched at the idea.

“Let’s do have Mrs. Rowantree come,” she said. “Now that Mrs. McEvoy speaks of it, I realize that I’ve been wanting Mary Cecily Rowantree all day.”

“What a queer girl you are, Azalea,” smiled Carin. “Every little while you put on a mysterious look and say something eerie, as if you had been talking with spooks.”

“I’m not one bit spooky, Carin, and you know it,” said Azalea rather indignantly, “but now and then I do have feelings —” she did not try to finish her sentence, but stared before her.

“That’s what I meant,” retorted Carin. “You have feelings! And you look as if you did.”

“We are all mysteriously moved to do certain things,” said the gentle Miss Zillah, who did

not like her girls even to make a pretense of teasing each other. "I myself would like to have Mrs. Rowantree here. She knew Keefe before we did, and she is of the same nationality, and so possibly might have some peculiar sympathy with him. I also think we should send for a physician."

"There doesn't seem to be any use in sending for physicians to come up here," Carin put in. "Just think how hard I tried to get one for Mr. Panther. Let's have Mrs. Rowantree over by all means."

So Miles McEvoy, a much busier man these days than he had been for years before, undertook to go for Mrs. Rowantree, though he was only just back from carrying Haystack Thompson and Mr. and Mrs. Panther to the station.

Carin decided to walk down the road a way to meet the wagon bringing Mary Cecily Rowantree; and Miss Zillah, seeing the prospect of another guest, went into the kitchen to stir up a cake and compound a custard. But Azalea did not move. She sat near the door and from time to time looked in at the delicate face of the sleeping youth. It appeared almost transparent as he lay there, his eyes closed and

yet not quite closed, his lips trembling a little from the fluttering of his over-taxed heart.

“Oh, I don’t want anything to happen to him,” her heart cried within her. “How sunny and brave he is — and yet how sad, in that strange quiet way. We know him, and yet we don’t know him. If he should die, we wouldn’t be able to send word to any of his friends, for we haven’t an idea who they are. But of course he mustn’t die. There’s no reason why he should when he’s so young and all. And yet — ”

The boy opened his eyes drowsily and looked about him. At first he failed to remember where he was, and half-raised himself on his elbow. Then he sank back, white and trembling. Azalea poured a glass of water from the jar they kept on the window sill, and hastening to him, lifted his head and gave him the cool drink.

Keefe smiled gratefully.

“You’re good,” he said simply. Then, after a pause: “Sit down, please.”

Azalea took a low mountain chair and brought it near, so that she could face him. That mysterious feeling which had been hanging over her all day, whispering to her that something

strange was about to happen, deepened curiously. Little chills ran lightly over her frame and she had to close her hands to keep her fingers from twitching.

“It must seem particularly silly to you that a fellow can’t do a little job like the one I did yesterday without going to pieces over it,” Keefe began. “But I don’t believe I’ve ever been very strong. I have color in my face, and that rather fools people. It fools me too, and makes me think I’m of more account than I am.”

“It was a terribly hard piece of work you did yesterday,” replied Azalea softly. “But perfect rest will make you all right, Aunt Zillah thinks. If I were you, I wouldn’t talk, boy. Aunt Zillah says you’re not to move a finger, and I’m sure that means you’re not to move your tongue either.”

Keefe shook his head.

“Never mind what anybody wants, Azalea. I’ve something to tell you and I’m going to do it now.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t, Keefe, really — ”

Keefe lifted a languid hand, but it had authority in it.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time,” he said. “You know, Zalie, if I wait — it may possibly be too late.”

“No, no, Keefe, I won’t have you — ”

“Keep still, please. I’m going to tell you now, quickly, before anybody comes.”

“Go on then. Speak quietly. I’ll listen.”

She realized suddenly that it was kinder and wiser to let him have his way. So she folded her hands in her lap, and sat as still as a stone — no, as still as a rosebush, for the wind rustled her pale green frock, and lifted the tendrils of her brown hair.

“Zalie,” he began, his voice at once uncertain yet determined, “I told you, didn’t I, that I knew neither my name nor my kin? I am a waif, but not because I was not loved. That is what is queer and sad about it all. That is what keeps me always looking and hoping that some day — ” he broke off and rested for a minute. “I must begin at the beginning,” he recommenced. “I must tell you what I remember. There was a pleasant home, somewhere, with a low window from which I could look down the street if I stood on my toes. There was a father, a mother, and a sister who played with me, and



Keefe lifted a languid hand. "I've been wanting to tell you for a long time," he said.

whom I adored. Matey was what I called her. That little name is all I have to remember her by. I cannot even tell you my own last name. I was 'Little Brother.' When any of the three said it, I was happy. 'Little Brother!' It is the thing I have loved best in all the memories — the way they said that. But father went away. There were darkened windows, a long black box, and all the house was changed. It was as terrible as if the sun had gone out of heaven. I was so lonely and sad it seemed as if I would die, and I remember always clinging to black skirts — sometimes my mother's, sometimes my Matey's."

He paused for a moment longer, his dark eyes darkening yet more, and throwing into relief the pallor of his face. Azalea was still immovable, but the look of her face changed. A warm, wild surmise banished something of the anxiety in it and flushed it with excitement.

"Then next, I remember the ship. Mother and Matey and I were on it with hundreds and hundreds of others, all crowded together sickeningly. Mother was always in her bed, and Matey and I sat together, creeping out of people's way, wrapped in an old plaid shawl.

I would go to sleep beneath the shawl; and under the shelter of it she told me stories, while the wind flapped it against us. Then there came a day when — when my mother would not answer either Matey or myself. I heard Matey screaming and I screamed with her, and some women were good to us. One kept kissing me, though I didn't want to be kissed. After that, I saw no more of mother. I know now they must have dropped her in the sea, but of course they told me nothing of that. There were only Matey and me crouching out of the wind beneath that old shawl, Matey crying in my hair and on my face, and trying to laugh and play with me."

He saw the changed look on Azalea's face and could not quite make it out.

"So then, the landing day came, and sister and I were pushed down the gangplank with the others. I remember falling and losing hold of her hand, and getting up and catching at her skirt again. At least I thought it was her skirt. I ran down the wharf as fast as I could, holding on to that dress. Then I remember some one shrieking: 'It ain't Jimmy at all! It's another boy altogether!' And with that a woman seized

me by the arm and shook me till I screamed. 'Who air you that's takin' the place of me Jimmy?' she asked.

"I have forgotten all the other words of that day, but I remember those. The people kept pouring and pouring along, and I think the woman left me to look for her Jimmy. So after a while I found myself in the street with the people and the carts and carriages dashing every way about me. I ran about like a crazy boy, too frightened to ask questions. Finally a man who was going along with a tin pail on his arm, stopped and picked me up. He tried to talk to me, but I was too frantic to listen, and anyway, I was only a baby. He took me to a poor home, a dark place with two rooms or maybe three, and there was a woman there who was good to me. I used to hear the two of them talking and saying that whoever I belonged to couldn't have cared much for me or they'd have been looking for me. But afterward, I came to believe that they were not very anxious to have my people find me. They were homesick folk with no little ones, and they thought I was one of a great brood and would not be missed. So I lived with them, Azalea, till I was seven years of age."

“Till you were seven!” breathed Azalea, leaning forward a little now. “And then, Keefe?”

“And then good Bridget O’Connor, who had, in her way, been a mother to me, died. Mike O’Connor was fond of me, too, but how could he be looking after me, and himself away every day working on the street? Besides, said he to me: ‘You be different from us O’Connors, boy. It would be a shame to tie you down all your life to a man like me. Bridget knew it, God save her, but she wanted the sound of your voice in the house. I’ll put you with the good Sisters, and they’ll find a new fayther and mother for ye.’ So he did. He put me in an orphan asylum, and there I lived for three months, and at the end of that time I was taken by another lonely woman who wanted a child in her house.”

“Oh,” breathed Azalea, “was she good to you, Keefe? You were so little — so dreadfully little! Was she good to you?”

A slight color had come back to Keefe’s face. His lips were no longer so blue and unnatural as they had been. He put out his hand and caught a little fold of Azalea’s frock between his fingers and held on to it as children hold on

to the dresses of the women they depend upon.

“She was good to me,” he said simply, “with a wise goodness which did not let me be spoiled. She was not a married woman. Her name was Harriet Foster, and the name tells what she was like, simple and straightforward and practical. She had lost all of her family and was tired of living alone. She had been looking for some time for a child to help fill her life, and when she saw me, she seemed satisfied. I was satisfied, too, and not at all afraid of her even at first.”

“Won’t you rest awhile now, Keefe?” broke in Azalea, trying desperately to do her duty. Keefe looked at the parted lips and shining eyes which betrayed her breathless inquisitiveness, and shook his head.

“Miss Foster did not make me her son by legal adoption,” he went on. “She left my name as it was. Bridget had named me Keefe, which was her name before she was married, and dear old Mike had lent me the honorable name of O’Connor. So Keefe O’Connor I remained. But instead of the foul basement home I had known, here was a quiet, staid, respectable home; a three-storied red brick structure, cared for by self-respecting servants, furnished with pleasing

old furniture, and presided over by Harriet Foster. She had a group of quiet, gracious friends like herself, whom she entertained at tea once a week, bringing me in to be shown off. I passed their teacups and sang little songs for them sometimes, and after I had begun to draw, was told to show them my drawings."

"Did you love her?" broke in Azalea. "Did she seem like a mother to you?"

"Love her? I felt contented with her; but she seldom kissed me even when I was a little fellow. She taught me to be very self-reliant and thorough, and gave me a fine discipline. We liked to be together. It was always a great day when we went out to the sea, or to the picture galleries. We could laugh together and be patient together over troubles. If that is loving, then we loved each other. But no, she didn't seem like a mother to me. She seemed like Miss Foster, and that is what I called her."

"Oh, poor little boy!"

"Not so poor, Azalea, not so poor. Children aren't poor when they're given a chance to be themselves and aren't driven from pillar to post by some tyrant. Miss Foster let me grow up to be myself. She fed me, clothed me, housed me,

and taught me her ideas of honor and kindness and right living. When she found that I wanted to be an artist, she put me in the way of becoming one. I lived with her till I was seventeen years of age. Then she, too, like my poor little mother and dear blowsy Bridget O'Connor, left me, and since then, I have been alone."

"Alone!" repeated Azalea beneath her breath. "And never a word of your sister all these years, Keefe?"

She smiled at him so beautifully, bending forward, questioning him as it seemed, so almost gayly, that he looked at her in amazement.

"Not a word, Azalea, in all these years — not one word. I used to hope and pray to meet her, but after a time I tried to put it out of my mind. I didn't want it to undermine me. We Irish are queer folk, Azalea. We can wear ourselves out with longing. I didn't want to do that. Miss Foster had left me a little fortune; enough to let me keep on with my art studies and to give me a little start in life. I had to leave the comfortable old house where I had spent such contented years, because that went to make a home for old ladies. But I lived on well enough in my attic — Oh, don't be frightened at the word.

I lived in an attic by choice. Then perhaps I overworked. At any rate, the doctor said I must get out of the city and live in these mountains for two or three years. So here I am, piling up canvases in Miles McEvoy's barn and as happy as anyone need be, especially since I met you — you people, Zalie. It may seem odd to you, but these few weeks here with the Rowantrees and 'you-all' at Oriole's Nest, have been the happiest of my life."

"I don't think it odd at all," cried Azalea. "Oh, Keefe, I think it the most natural thing in the world."

"Why?" he asked, astonished at her tone. But she remembered that dragged and wearied heart of his and putting her lips tight together, would say nothing. He had to take her smiling silences for his answer.

Then, before he could urge her, some one stood on the doorstep without the room. Azalea, seeing the shadow fall across the floor guessed who it was.

"Oh, you!" she cried happily, "you, of all people! Come in, Mrs. Rowantree. Keefe's fallen ill and Aunt Zillah said that you'd be just the person to know what to do for him."

“ I hope I’ll know,” said Mary Cecily in her sweet Irish voice, “ but how can we be sure of that at all? Still, it’s myself that must confess to some experience, what with the rearing of the four children and the being so far from a medical man. What’s ailing you, Mr. Keefe, dear?” she asked with beautiful gentleness, stooping over him, sister-fashion, and taking his hand in hers.

And then Azalea knew beyond all doubt! She wondered that she had not always known. Each had reminded her of the other, and yet with a strange stupidity she had not realized it, no doubt because it had seemed so certain that they must be strangers whose paths never had crossed.

She tried to be calm, to take the scene as a matter of course, but those two who had so longed for each other being there, so near, so unlike in some ways, yet so like with their sad-glad faces, made her put her hands to her eyes to hide the sight of them. She almost forgot that they did not yet know. She all but forgot Keefe’s heart and his need for quiet.

“ I didn’t know they’d sent for you, Mrs. Rowantree, and I’m sorry you’ve been put to the trouble,” Keefe was saying.

“ I met Miss Carin down the road and I know what a hero you’ve been, lad,” she said under her breath. “ It was beautiful — helping a man out of his ‘ prison house of pain ’ like that. Maybe you’ll have to pay by being laid up for a time, but I know you’re thinking to yourself that it’s worth it.”

Keefe nodded. “ If poor Panther gets well — ”

“ Ah, I hope for that — I pray for that — the poor man! ”

Keefe said nothing more. He seemed very weary. Mary Cecily sat beside him, looking down at him, and he, half-closing his eyes, watched her changeful face. Azalea had sunk on the doorstep and sat there, her heart beating so she thought the others must hear it. All her thoughts and wishes were pouring out toward them, willing them to speak.

Somewhere in the woodland a hermit thrush sent out its liquid, lovely note. It seemed above all sounds in the world, the one that suited the moment.

“ Why don’t they speak? Why don’t they speak? ” Azalea asked the question over and over to herself. “ They *must* speak. They will

be so happy when they know! Oh, how lonely they've been. Oh, poor dears! But *why* don't they speak?"

It seemed as if the very air palpitated with her passionate desire.

Then: "I wish you were my sister, Mrs. Rowantree," said the boy's wistful voice. "I've just been telling Miss Azalea how I once had a sister. Matey, she was called. Isn't it a sweet little name? We were on a ship crossing the sea, my sister and my little mother and myself. It's just a little bit of a boy I was —"

Azalea heard a low cry of utter happiness, of amazed, yet undoubting faith. She slipped from the room and ran down the path. Her tears fell as she fled, but her heart was singing.

The hermit thrush kept up its deep and tender song, but Azalea was certain that the words being spoken in that room were more beautiful and wonderful by far.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REBEL

Azalea never forgot how quietly and sweetly that night came down. The mountain, so old — older than the peaks of the Rockies or the Sierras — lay beneath the stars with an air of placidity as comforting to the spirit as great music or great words.

Within the room where Keefe rested, the shadows deepened till Azalea and the others could no longer see his long form on the sofa, nor the little dark head of Mary Cecily bent to touch his.

“To think of finding some one on the earth who really, really belongs to you,” said Azalea. “Oh, Carin, how happy they are!”

“Aren’t they!” sighed Carin sympathetically. “Oh, dear, Azalea, it makes me homesick for papa and mamma. Yet here we are, only half through the term of school we promised to teach.”

“You can’t say that it’s been dull,” replied

Azalea with a fluttering little laugh. "Just think of all that has happened these short three weeks."

"I ought," murmured Mr. Rowantree, who had supped with them, and who sat with them now on the porch, "to be riding home to Constance and the other children. Paralee kindly promised that she would look in on them and help them get a bit of something to eat, but now I really must be getting along. They've never been alone before after nightfall."

"You're going to leave Mrs. Rowantree here then?" asked Aunt Zillah. "Oh, that's good of you. I don't believe those two could bear to be separated. I know I couldn't bear to have them."

"Of course they must stay together," answered Mr. Rowantree. "Ah, what a brave, bright little creature my Mary Cecily is, Miss Pace! Folks think I don't appreciate her because I'm a lazy, dreamy fool who hasn't found out how to take hold of life over here, but perhaps some day I'll be able to show them that I'm not quite such a useless creature as they think me. I know my faults better than anyone else knows them; and the worst fault of them all is not being

properly ashamed of myself. I always was too indifferent to what others thought; but since you came, Miss Pace, with these fine unselfish girls, I — well, I've seen myself pretty much as others must see me and I confess I don't like the picture."

"Oh, Mr. Rowantree," cried Aunt Zillah, distressed, "I'm sure —"

"Don't trouble yourself to say a single polite thing, ma'am. Leave me the virtue of my repentance. Now, about my little wife's brother in there; he must come to Rowantree Hall to-morrow morning. Miles McEvoy can drive him over the way he took Panther to the station, lying out on the straw in the wagon box. Keefe's a fine fellow, no manner of doubt about that. I took to him from the first."

"Have you seen the pictures Keefe has up in Mr. McEvoy's barn?" asked Aunt Zillah. "It's a great pleasure and profit to look at them. I'm sure when Mr. and Mrs. Carson see them they'll be all for having an exhibit of them down at Lee. Many artists come there, as you know, and it's the habit of the tourists to attend their exhibits. Sometimes they purchase very freely."

"It would be a fine thing for him if something

of the sort could be done," said Mr. Rowantree. "My only fear is that Mary Cecily may have another philandering male for her to care for. That really would be one too many. I declare," he added humorously, "if it came to that, I think it might drive me to work!"

Azalea could not repress a little laugh, but Carin maintained disapproving silence. She liked Mr. Rowantree — nobody could help liking him — but she certainly did not approve of him, and it was not in her to ease off the situation as Azalea could. Azalea had grown up among vagabonds, and if she recognized in the magnificent Rowantree a new variety of the tribe, it only made her tolerant of him.

"But you *do* like to teach, don't you, Mr. Rowantree?" she said encouragingly. "Paralee met me and told me what a wonderful day it had been for them all, and how you came it over that poor silly Mr. McIntosh. If only you had been given a chance to teach, maybe —" she hesitated, not quite seeing where her speech would lead her.

"Maybe I would have stirred my old stumps, eh, Miss Azalea, and not sat around on my gallery giving a bad imitation of a Southern

planter, while my lion-hearted little wife used her wit and her strength to provide for the lot of us? Well, now, maybe you're right. And that reminds me of a plan we evolved among us to-day. That nice red-headed boy — whatever his name is — helped shape the notion."

He told them the idea of the moonlight school and instantly Azalea was on fire with enthusiasm.

"Oh, Mr. Rowantree," she cried, "what a splendid thought — what a shining, glittering thought! It looks just like a king, dressed in white and jewels and with a crown on its head. Let's make it come true. Carin, you're the wonderful one for doing things. All I can do is to exclaim, but you go off and do them. Make this come true, Carin! I couldn't bear to have it stay merely a dream."

"It is a glorious idea," said Carin. "I suppose men and women were quite happy in the old days, Mr. Rowantree, in ignorance. My father says some of the old, unlettered peasants were very wise, and that they had valuable knowledge they passed on from father to son. But in these days it certainly does seem terrible for a man or woman not to know how to read

or write, particularly here in our country where everyone should have a chance.”

“That’s it,” cried Aunt Zillah, who was a great patriot; “in this glorious country where everyone ought to be given a chance! That’s the promise we’ve held out to those who come to our shores, and it’s that which helps me to overlook so many things that seem wrong in our dear land. Greedy we may be, and disgraced by the scheming and grafting of our politicians, but after all, it is here that the ignorant are educated and the lowly learn to lift up their heads. Oh, I’m proud to be an American, and if I had my life to live over again I would devote it to some cause that would help on the real Americanism. Now, here’s Azalea, God bless her. She’s going to work among the mountaineers. What could be more fitting? The child has just the nature for the task, and her experiences have helped her to understand many things that a more carefully sheltered girl could not have understood.”

“I hope she’ll marry happily and keep in her own home,” said Mr. Rowantree shortly, while Azalea colored scarlet and was grateful for the gloom that hid her face. “I’m an old-fashioned

man and I like to see a woman in her home. As one of the chief of Miss Azalea's friends I do not desire a public career for her."

Even in the dusk Miss Zillah's head could be seen shaking emphatically.

"Well," she said, "if you're an old-fashioned man, Mr. Rowantree, I suppose I'm what could be called an old-fashioned woman. But this I will say: I believe in women's using their powers, and I think a woman of intelligence and health has the ability to look after her home and do something else besides. Azalea may marry or she may not, but in any event I hope she'll use her influence and some of her best thought in behalf of these poor people 'round about us. I'm not a great one for foreign missions — although I've no objection to them — but I do say that life is twice as wonderful and beautiful when one helps on her fellow beings. There never was a place in the world where missionary work was needed more than it is right here in our own beloved state of North Carolina. It's a kind and gracious old state, and as beautiful as anything that lies beneath the sky, but it's got some poor, neglected members of the human family in it, and I'm all for helping them on. I

love Azalea, and have great confidence in her, and that's why I want to see her give herself to a useful and important work. If she wasn't of much account, I shouldn't think that it mattered what she did; but she's of much account, and so, if she were mine I would give her to this service of her kind as I would give a son, if I had one, to fight and die for his country."

Miss Zillah's gentle voice had gathered to itself unusual power, and its tones, charged with feeling, penetrated to the shadowy room where Keefe and Mary Cecily were. Mary Cecily laughed softly as she arose from the low chair where she had been sitting, and Keefe echoed her. Perhaps it struck them as amusing that anybody should find it necessary to worry about anything now, when suddenly, to them, the world seemed so completely right.

"How are you in there?" queried Rowantree. "I'm thinking of driving home the night, Mary Cecily, and leaving you here with Keefe."

"Oh, would Mary Cecily be happy away from the little ones?" asked Keefe. "Really, I'm much better — fifty percent better, I assure you. It's not necessary for — for my sister to stay with me." His voice caught on

the words. "My sister" was not easily uttered.

"Indeed, I've no thought of leaving you, brother dear — no thought at all. It's as my husband says. He can ride home to the children; and very good and dear it is of him to think of it. The two of us will be along in the morning, as you were planning a while back. Be off, Bryan dear. There's only Paralee with the children, and she's strange to them. Tell them all that's happened to me to-day, and let Constance know that I'm bringing home an own uncle — the very one she'd have chosen, I'm sure."

Azalea drew back into the shadow of the house. So in the morning they would be off — Keefe and his bright little sister — carrying their rich romance with them, and the Oriole's Nest would be the poorer for their going! They would be gloriously happy together, telling each other all that had happened in the years they had been apart. They would go farther, those two, with their eager, answering minds, and would talk not only of what they had done, but of what they had thought and felt. Each would be turning out the riches of his mind for

the other to see — holding up their fancies as if they were embroidered clothes, and each marveling at what the other had to show. They would be telling to each other the poetry they knew; and Keefe would be making pictures while Mary Cecily watched. And how the two of them would love the children and admire their graceful ways! Azalea could see how they would look, all the family of them, sitting about the blazing fire in that queer “drawing-room.” Keefe’s pictures would be put up on the wall — the whole place would be plastered with them — and they would be talking about this one and that, and where it was painted. Then they would be singing together, and whistling and dancing — heaven only knew what they would or wouldn’t do.

Azalea felt the hot tears of shameless envy crowding out from under her lids, and hated herself for them. She to help on her fellow-men? She to work to add to the goodness and happiness of the world, when she grudged these two their simple happiness, after so many years of tears and longing and heartache? Could a more miserable, absurd, abject girl than herself

be found anywhere, she wondered. She thanked heaven that the friends there beside her did not dream how ignoble she was.

Rowantree meantime had said good night and had mounted and ridden away. They watched the light of his lantern flitting like a firefly among the trees and at last disappearing entirely in the night.

The McEvoy's came with the milk, and lingered to learn the news. As they walked away Miss Zillah and her girls could hear their soft singsong voices in kindly unison.

"They're right sweet folks," Miss Zillah declared, sighing unaccountably. "At first they did seem queer to me, but now I've grown to be as fond of them as if they were old neighbors. They're a good example of a happy married pair, too. I don't know as I ever heard them really disagree about a thing; and though those medicine bottles must be a terrible trial to Mr. McEvoy, he never says a word about them, except, of course, to tease Mis' Cassie a little now and then."

"There haven't been any new bottles bought since we came up here, I notice," said Carin. "I suppose we've kept Mis' Cassie so busy that she

hasn't had time to take thought about them."

"I've a fine little plan that I'd like to carry into execution," said Miss Zillah. "Down home I have quite a number of pretty mantel ornaments I bought long ago when — when I thought I was going to have a little home of my own. I — I never told you about that, my dears, but it seems a good time to do it now, this being such a wonderful day for us all. You see, I had my wedding clothes made, and I was to marry one of the kindest, fairest-minded men that ever lived in the world. And he — he was killed, dears — thrown from his horse and killed."

Azalea had still kept in the background, those hurt and lonely tears hot beneath her lids; and now, at the story of another's sorrow, she frankly let them fall. Curiously, though, they were not so hot and bitter as she had thought they would be.

"Why, Aunt Zillah," she murmured, "we never guessed! Yet we might have known. There always was something about you so gentle and sweet — we might have known that you'd had sorrow."

"Few live to my age without having sorrow, Zalie, but my sorrow came in my youth, and it

took the zest out of life for a time. However, it was a sweet sorrow. I've always been able to keep my lover young and kind in my memory. But what I started to say was, that I put away and never have used the things I got for that little home I meant to have. Now, I'm going to write sister Adnah and ask her to send me my mantel ornaments. They're very pretty and chaste," went on Miss Zillah quaintly. "Little shepherds and shepherdesses, piping to each other, and all dressed in the softest pink and blue, and a clock to match. I even have an embroidered cover for the mantel, done in cross stitch and in pastel colors to go with the ornaments. If I give these to Mis' Cassie and induce her to put them in the spare room she'll stick the medicine bottles away out of sight."

"They'll go in that mess under the house," agreed Carin. "And it will be a grand day for the McEvoy's when they do. Oh, Aunt Zillah, how tired and sleepy I am — almost too tired and sleepy to go to bed."

"I feel just the same way," said Azalea. "Yet I hate to leave the night to itself, it's so lovely. Sometimes I think I'll sleep days and keep awake nights, I love the night so much."

“Come,” said Miss Zillah with the voice of authority, “don’t be talking nonsense. We will get to our beds.”

So they slipped in softly behind the great chimney and the pretty screens to their own quaint makeshift of bedroom, leaving Mary Cecily on a cot near her brother. The windows and doors all stood open to the night, and the girls could hear the soft rustlings of the wood and the tinkle of the brook. The whippoorwills were very distant and their insistent cry sounded sweet and mournful, though it could be hectoring enough when it was near at hand. But nothing was hectoring this night, except that foolish, wistful longing in Azalea’s restless young heart, because Keefe and Mary Cecily were so happy in themselves, and because it was taken for granted that she, Azalea, was always to be so brave and so eager for service, and was to be a missionary to the mountain folk and was never to have any joy of her own — no real, selfish, glorious joy! Yet only the other day she had told Carin how clearly the finger of fate pointed to her as one set apart to “do good.” She would never marry, she had said — never, never — because she could not marry a “gentleman” and

because she would marry no one who could not lay claim to that name. And they had taken her at her word — or at least, they had almost done so. She was to be Azalea McBirney, the adopted daughter of the mountain folk, the little sister to all the unfortunates, and was to live apart and be good!

Azalea lay quite on the edge of her bed, very straight and rigid, and looked up at the stars through her open window. They were cold, unsympathetic looking stars! Azalea had not previously noticed how very haughty and remote they could appear, or how indifferent they could be to the woes and doubts, the frets and flurries of one self-centered young person called Azalea McBirney — one reneging, horrid young person, who was secretly going back on all her declarations of faith and service, and wanting nothing in the world so much as merely to be happy!

Life, decided Azalea, was a puzzle. Once it had seemed simple. Some things had plainly been right to do; others, as plainly wrong. In those days she had believed she had only, at any time, to listen to her conscience to find out precisely what she ought to do, and therefore what

she wanted to do. Because, of course, she wanted to do what was right.

Now she was finding out that there were all sorts of matters which were neither right nor wrong, about which she had to decide. At present she was tormented with a longing to share in the joy and in the lives of Keefe and Mary Cecily. Something in them called to her. Their quick gayety, their sudden sadnesses, their caring about pictures and poetry more than they did about food or work, or sleep, or any usual, dutiful thing, made them seem the very kin of her soul. She couldn't account for it. It was merely a fact. She began to understand that there might have been something of the sort in her own poor little mother. When she took to wandering the roads with a cheap "show" perhaps it was not merely necessity, but some half-formed dream of wildness and gayety and art that had led her on. She too had loved the night and laughter and dancing, singing and pictures. Not anything evil — Oh, no, on the contrary, only happily, brightly good things, things that lightened the heart and set the brain moving so that glittering little thoughts shone in it like stars in the night.

The Carsons, gentle and kind, formal and polite, were Azalea's tried and trusted friends; the McBirneys, generous and loving, lived in the inner chamber of her heart; Annie Laurie was a gallant girl and her own true friend; but the soft gay laughter of Keefe and Mary Cecily was as fairy bells in her ears, and that night she could hear nothing else, it seemed — not even the voices of the dear old friends — for the tinkling of them.

So, very stiff, very straight, very miserable, she lay upon her edge of the bed and counted the hours. Carin, soft as a kitten, curled down well in the center of the mattress and slept as babies sleep.

“What's come over me?” demanded Azalea of herself. “Haven't I any heart? Haven't I any sense? Can't I see anybody else happy without being jealous of them? Am I an Everlasting Pig?”

Haughty and remote stars do not answer questions like that. Along in the latter part of the night Azalea fell asleep with the question hanging in the fast-chilling air. When she awoke, the day was already bright, and outside the door sounded the voice of Miles McEvoy

making arrangements to carry Mary Cecily and Keefe to Rowantree Hall.

Azalea sprang out of bed with decision. Her lips were set in a hard little line.

"Come, Carin," she said, "we mustn't be late to school. Let's settle down now for a long hard pull. We'll teach school as we never did before. There's only three weeks more ahead of us and we mustn't waste a minute."

"My goodness," yawned Carin, prettily, "you sound like a call to arms. All right, comrade, I'm with you. Shall we wear our pink gingham?"

"What does it matter what we wear?" demanded Azalea sternly. "We're here to *teach school*. Nobody cares how we look."

At that Carin sat up in bed bristling with protest.

"What's come over you, Zalie?" she demanded. "Of course the children care how we look. Looking as well as we can is part of our work. You know you've often said so yourself. But, dear me, why should I worry about you, you old Zalie thing? You always look lovely."

Her friends thought so that morning, cer-

tainly. Her eyes were a touch too bright, perhaps, her cheeks a shade too red, and there was something a little too vivid and throbbing about her. Try as hard as she could to keep in the background, she could not succeed.

“You’re a flaming Azalea this morning, my dear,” whispered Mary Cecily just before she took her seat beside her brother in McEvoy’s wagon for the rough journey to Rowantree Hall. Keefe was white and spent-looking, but a glorious happiness shone in his eyes.

“No one is to worry about me,” were his words at parting with his friends at the Oriole’s Nest. “If it’s sick I am, it must be with gratitude and bliss. Never will I forget your goodness to me at this house; and now here I am, going — home!” He turned swimming eyes on his sister.

As they drove off he raised himself on one elbow — he was reclining on the clean straw in the wagon box — to catch one last glimpse of “the flaming Azalea.” But she was out of sight — absurdly and irritatingly out of sight. There were only Miss Zillah and the golden-headed Carin to wave good-bye.

CHAPTER XV

NEW HOPES

“ Only two more little days,” said Azalea, “ and then we are through.”

“ Little days, little days,” sang Carin in a tune of her own. “ Only two more little days.”

“ You use strange expressions,” remarked Miss Zillah to her girls. “ Why do you say ‘ little days ’ ? Why not ‘ short days ’ ? ”

“ When I love anything,” explained Azalea, “ I call it little.”

“ Then you do love these days? I’m glad. I was afraid — ”

“ Aunt Zillah, dear — afraid? ”

“ Afraid you were tired, my girl. You’re tanned, of course, and so not pale, but you do seem rather weary.”

“ Oh, I’m tired, but school teachers have a perfect right to be tired. Six weeks of teaching children who haven’t been in the habit of learning *is* rather an order, now, isn’t it, Aunt Zillah?

But they've *learned!* All this last week they've studied like mad trying to get as much as they could before school closed. Even that queer, cross Mr. McIntosh has worked as if his life depended on it."

"His young shote depended on it, you remember," laughed Carin. "Mr. Rowantree has lost his wager with him and will have to hand over the brace of ducks."

"So much the worse for Mary Cecily and the babies," sighed Azalea. "Well, they'll have plenty this year, anyway. The farm is really doing well, and it will do better next year now that Jake Panther is to take it over to work it on shares. He has *much* more in him than I thought at first. Now that he sees there's some hope ahead for the Panthers, he's a changed fellow. He's roofed the cabin he and his grandmother live in, and set up a doorstep, and put out a rain barrel and made all sorts of improvements. Even Grandma Panther herself doesn't look quite such a witch as she did."

"Oh, but Paralee is the prize," said Carin. "Since the great news came from Asheville that her father would soon be as strong and active as ever he was, and since dear Aunt Zillah fitted

her out in decent clothes, and Jake got his regular job, she walks and looks like one who has just discovered what it is to be alive."

"I hope it will all come right about her going to the Industrial School at Hardinge. You wrote to your father and mother about it, Carin, didn't you?"

"Of course I did, Zalie. That's the third time you've asked me that question. I'm just as sure father will send her away to school as I am that he'll open up the moonlight school and put Mr. Rowantree at the head of it. Oh, I do wish those dear people of mine would come! There's so much I want to show them and tell them about. We must take them over to Rowantree Hall the very first thing."

"There's a large package waiting for me at Bee Tree," said Miss Zillah. "Little Dibblee Sikes stopped in to tell me. It must be my mantel ornaments. I want to see them on Mis' Cassie's spare room shelf before we go."

"Come, Carin we must be off," cried Azalea, snatching her parasol from its hook. "Good-bye, Aunt Zillah. Only two more little days — little days — little days."

"Silly one!" cried Carin, gathering up her

parasol also and trailing after her. "Why is your heart so thistledownish?"

"How do I know? How do I know?" answered Azalea, still lilting. "Except because I like my little days."

It had come to that, simply. She liked her little days of hard work. She had broken the back of rebellion that memorable day when Keefe rode away to his great happiness with his sister, and she had been left, bereft of these two "charmings of the world" as she called them, to do her hard stint of work. In a way, Carin followed where she led. If Azalea's enthusiasm for the teaching had faltered, Carin's would have faltered too. But Azalea's devotion to her work had steadily increased since she had fought her fight with envy and selfishness. She had been able to summon to her aid the hidden powers of her will, and these had sustained her even through these last hot, nerve-wearying days of her teaching. Now she felt herself to be the victor over that indolent, brooding, indulgent self which had more than once in her life tried to get the upper hand.

Not a pupil in the school but had made headway. Some of them had done extraordinarily

well. Dibblee Sikes had cried whenever the last day of school was mentioned; but he cheered up when Azalea assured him that there should be a "moonlight school" for his mother.

"Maybe," said Azalea, "it can be arranged so that there will be a day school all winter long for you youngsters."

"But you'll not be here, ma'am," said Dibblee. "No one can learn us like you and Miss Carin. There's been teachers here that just yelled at us and we got so skeered we couldn't learn nothin'. All the fun we had was running away from school."

"You shan't have that kind of a teacher, I promise," Azalea assured him. "Oh, Dibblee, if only I knew enough I'd stay right here and teach you all the time; but, you see, I have to go to school myself for a long time yet. As I am now, I should soon run out of learning and you would get ahead of me." She laughed gayly and Dibblee laughed with her. There was much laughter about the schoolhouse these days, and it was no longer because some one had blundered or met with an accident. They laughed now because they were happy, because their shyness had ceased to be a torment to them,

and because they felt that they were more like other children — not strange, not some one who needed a “missionary” to help them on. Of all the services that Azalea and Carin had been able to perform for them, the bestowing upon them of self-esteem was the greatest. Just how this result had been attained it would be hard to say. Perhaps it was the gentleness, the unfailing politeness of their young teachers and their way of seeming as “kin” to these shy, wild, suspicious young creatures, that had done it.

“It’s like teaching squirrels to eat from the hand,” Azalea had said more than once to Carin.

Little had been seen of the Rowantrees and nothing of Keefe since the day Keefe went to his sister’s home, but they were all, even the children, coming to school for the “last day.” The parents of the pupils were coming too, not only that they might, like parents the world over, swell with pride over the accomplishments of their offspring, but also because word had been sent broadcast that the moonlight school would be under discussion.

There were few flowers left on the mountain side by this time, but the prettiest imaginable decorations had been contrived with spurge and

galax, rhododendron leaves and vines. The place was really a bower, and the children were clean and fresh for the occasion. Indeed, it may well be doubted if certain of them had ever been so freshened and decorated as on this day. Their young teachers had led them to believe that they were to expect high festival, and they themselves were in the most charming of their white frocks, with the little strings of gold beads which Mrs. Carson had given them at Christmas.

The event held one throbbing secret. It was a cold secret, although it arose from a warm impulse. By the greatest perseverance, Aunt Zillah had managed to get a wagonload of ice and a number of ice cream freezers up from Lee, and now, with the eager aid of the McEvoy's, delicious ice cream, made after Miss Zillah's own receipt, smooth as satin and tempting as nectar, filled the great freezers which bulked mysteriously beneath their gunny sack wrappings in the shade of the schoolhouse. Moreover, in the little cupboard where Azalea and Carin kept their stores, were six of the most noble, decorative and triumphant cakes which Miss Zillah ever had concocted.

“I don’t know much about educating the young,” she told the girls and Mis’ Cassie, “but when it comes to feeding them, I understand the matter perfectly. Anyone who has reared a girl like Annie Laurie is bound to know something about that.” She sighed a little, for the day held one drawback. She did long to have her niece share in the pleasures of this closing time and to have her see what had been accomplished, and she had written begging Annie Laurie to come, but the girl had replied vaguely. Business at the dairy was very brisk. She was working early and late to get her hand in completely before her valuable assistant, Sam Disbrow, left for Rutherford Academy.

“It will be a month yet before he goes,” Aunt Zillah had said almost petulantly. “I should have thought Annie Laurie might have spared us one day.”

Mr. and Mrs. Carson were already at Lee, having run down to open up the house.

“There seems to be no end of things to do,” Mr. Carson wrote his daughter. “Do you really think you need us up there, kitten? What difference will a few hours make? Have

McEvoy pack up your possessions, and hasten to us."

"He doesn't mean a word of it," Carin declared. "He and mother are simply dying to get up here and see what we've done. Whenever papa sounds dull and prosy like that I know he's planning something delightful. It isn't normal for him to be stupid. He's up to something, you'll see."

But as the "last day," hot, with gay clouds, came, and the pupils appeared an hour too early, and the Rowantree's old surrey swung from the thick shade of the old wood road, all indicating that the hour was at hand, Carin began to have her doubts. For once in the history of the world, her parents were going to be stupid and sensible and economical! They were going to act like other people! She was horribly disappointed in them, and kept very busy so as not to be alone with Azalea and let her see how disappointed she was.

There really was a great deal to do, for the parents of the pupils required much polite consideration. School did not call that morning until half after ten o'clock. The time preceding

that was spent in talking about the moonlight school. There seemed to be a general desire for it, although some of the neighbors were exceedingly shy about expressing their desires.

“I’m ready to teach it,” Mr. Rowantree declared. “And I’ll do it for the smallest sum possible.”

The mountain folk may or may not have approved of Mr. Rowantree, but there was none who doubted his ability to teach them anything they might wish to know. Indeed, they always had held a great opinion of his bookishness; and now they seemed to find him more likable than they had imagined possible. His fine and gracious manners never relaxed, no matter with whom he talked, and where they had once been offended and annoyed by this display of elegance, it now seemed different to them, since the young teachers, who evidently approved of him, had themselves such pretty, fine ways, and yet were so simple and friendly.

The truth was, the folk of Sunset Gap were beginning to take a new view of various matters. For almost the first time in their existence they had been brought into close contact with people from the outer world, and their fears and

prejudices had, in the light of their summer's experience, been dying a rapid and painless death.

The morning hours were given up to a hasty review of the work done, that the parents might see something of what their children had been learning. The young teachers secretly hoped that their audience would be so pleased that they would take measures to establish a school of their own volition.

Now Azalea and now Carin, flushed, eager and slightly tremulous, led on their classes through the review of reading, spelling, geography, history and arithmetic, while crowded about the windows and the platform sat the parents, their tanned faces smiling and interested. Miss Zillah in her lavender lawn, her curls fresh as flowers, beamed upon them from the platform. Little Mary Cecily Rowantree and her brood was at the rear, where her young ones could ease their feelings by turning somersaults in the school doorway or by chasing an alarmed bunny.

Mr. Rowantree moved about from place to place, lending an academic aspect to the scene. Seated on the low, broad window sill, gay and

lithe as a faun, was Keefe, with whom Azalea and Carin had been able to exchange little more than a nod. He still showed the effects of his illness, his eyes looked unnaturally large and his mouth was strangely sensitive; but he was more charming than ever. He had a sketching pad and pencil with him, and in the most engaging manner he sketched the heads of those in the room. He seemed very far away to Azalea — very much a creature of some brighter, lighter world than that in which she dwelt. She felt in her heart that he was going on to things of which she would know nothing — to a successful life in some great city. He would know artists and the most interesting sort of folks. He would live in strange, delightful places; he would travel. She and Sunset Gap would be only a fading, picturesque thought in his memory.

But all that foolish fretting and fuming, she told herself severely, was over and done with. She was Azalea McBirney, with her chosen work to do. Things were as they were; not dreams, not charming visions, but just plain facts, plain needs, plain work. Moreover, life was all the better for being as it was. If the body needed simple bread more than candies, so

the spirit needed the plain bread of life more than delicacies.

So she bent brain, spirit, eyes, hands, lips to the labor of the day. She determined to draw from each of her pupils a quick and eager response. She threw herself into the hour's performance, and had the profound satisfaction of feeling those minds which a few weeks before had been so aloof, so chilled, so closed, open to her influence as flowers open to the sun.

From time to time more neighbors came and clustered about the windows without, leaning on the sills and listening to the program. Neither Azalea nor Carin paid much attention to these soft comings and goings, these quiet unobtrusive movements of the people without there in the heat of the changing day. There was some fear of rain; Azalea heard the people whispering about it; she herself noted how the light in the room changed from bright sunlight to soft shadow. She hoped, of course, that the rain would hold off; and yet she couldn't help thinking how charming Keefe would look there on the window ledge, with the silver rain falling between him and the trees; and she remembered that first wonderful day at the Rowantrees,

when they all had eaten on the gallery with the rain making a silver curtain between them and the rest of the world.

It was time for the nooning — the famous nooning that was to hold Aunt Zillah's surprise — and Azalea was just bringing the exercises to an end, when she saw an extraordinary sight. Carin, the proper, the correct, the ladylike, who had been seated on the platform near an open window, was suddenly seen to plunge through the window like the most madcap child in the whole school. Not a sound came from her, but with her bright hair tumbling about her from the violence of her leap to the ground, she was speeding down the path. What was worse and more astonishing, Aunt Zillah, the very mirror of what was decorous, had looked, and was now speeding after her, only she was swung down from the window by the sympathetic Keefe, who apparently had the key to her extraordinary conduct. In spite of the titter of delight that shook the school, Azalea preserved her dignity, but out of the corner of her eye she saw Mr. and Mrs. Carson, and Carin homing to them like a swift dove;

and Annie Laurie running with outstretched arms to meet her Aunt Zillah.

Azalea didn't say even in her inmost heart: "And there's nobody for me." She was through with that sort of "grumping" and did not mean ever to give way to it again. Besides, in a day or two she would be driving up the dear familiar road with Pa McBirney, and coming upon the well-loved clearing with the little house that was her home, and listening to Jim's questions, and feeling Ma McBirney's kind eyes on her, and then she would go creeping up to her own sweet, odd room in the loft that looked up the mountain side, and she would be happy. Yes, of course she would be happy. That was her life. Every one had his own life. Mary Cecily had hers and Keefe had his, and Carin had hers —

All of this time she was talking, was neatly and cheerfully bringing the exercises to a close, and her well-trained pupils were doing their best to give her their attention and not to let their eyes wander down the road to view the interesting scenes taking place there.

"Miss Pace," said Azalea clearly, "has a luncheon prepared for you which you are all

asked to help prepare in the grove. Everyone is invited — everyone. No one is to go away.”

No one had the slightest intention of going away. What was the use of doing that when already Paralee and Mis' Cassie and Mis' Sikes and others of the neighbors who had been pressed into service, were bringing forth platters of sandwiches and cold meat loaf and pickles and salad; and Miles McEvoy was starting a fire among the well-blackened stones of a rude fireplace in the schoolyard, and Mrs. McIntosh was mixing coffee in the huge pot.

“And now,” said Azalea to herself, “it is the moment for me to go and meet my friends.”

She walked out of the schoolroom door quite properly, meaning to remember every step of the way that she was only the schoolteacher, and not Carin with loving parents, nor Aunt Zillah with a devoted niece — but just at her most dignified and self-conscious moment she was caught about the waist by Annie Laurie's strong arms and lifted entirely off her feet. Yes, right there before her pupils and all the people she had been hoping to impress with her discretion, was swung quite clear of the ground and

hugged till she literally heard a little crack in her ribs!

“ I suppose you thought I wasn't coming up here to see how things were going on, didn't you, you funny little old schoolma'am? ” demanded Annie Laurie's strong bright tones. “ Me — as inquisitive as a house cat — not to come nosing! That's too ridiculous. Well, here I am, anyway! ”

Here she very much was, tall and glowing and quite grown up in her pretty blue linen, with her wide hat with the cornflowers. And here were Mr. and Mrs. Carson, ready to greet Azalea as if she were almost their own. Oh, it was good to have Mrs. Carson's arm about her waist — good to be in the encircling gentleness and protection of her calm love!

But there really wasn't a moment to waste in talk. Azalea told them that. Her mind swung back to its duties.

“ After luncheon, ” she said, “ we'll visit. ”

Carin remembered her responsibilities, too; and Aunt Zillah was suddenly in a hospitable flurry. But there really was no call for haste. Sunset Gap was not used to it. There always had been, in the experience of its inhabitants,

plenty of time for everything. There was time to eat, certainly. People sat about in little groups and partook of Aunt Zillah's delicious repast, and they waited on each other graciously, forgetting, it seemed, all about their shyness and their terrific pride and their old quarrels.

But the great moment came when the generous freezers yielded up their strange confection, and for the first time in their lives the folk at Sunset Gap knew the taste of that odd little miracle among foods, ice cream in August weather. Some tasted it suspiciously; some ate it injudiciously; some knew it for a good thing from the first second; some doubted till they had sampled the second saucer; but all realized that this would be an occasion to tell of; and that if the truth of the statements were doubted, they had witnesses to prove that they had eaten frozen food the hottest day of the year.

That afternoon came the "exercises" and like last day exercises in schools the world over, what they involved of anguish, triumph, amusement and disaster it would take long to relate, and the record would be of no interest save to those who had suffered and rejoiced with the day's events.

They were shortened — fortunately, no doubt — by the approach of the storm which had threatened all day. The watchers without grew restless; the horses stamped and tugged at their hitching, and Azalea, bringing the session quickly and happily to an end, begged for one second's hearing for Mr. Carson.

“He has something very important to say to you,” she cried, her voice reaching out above the heads of her restive audience. “You must listen, because it is something that may make all your future lives happier.” She smiled at them beautifully, and they paused, half risen from their seats to listen.

Charles Carson had but a brief word.

“The moonlight school of which you have been talking, friends, will be opened here next month. It will hold every night that the moon shines the year round for the next twelve months. Each person who enters has the privilege of paying what he can for his instruction. If he cannot pay, he shall have the instruction nevertheless. Mr. Rowantree, your neighbor, a scholarly man and one whom many a university would be proud to have on its list of teachers, will be your leader. May it be for your great

good and joy! I believe it will be, for no joy in this world is greater than the joy of knowledge."

"Three cheers for Mr. Carson," cried Keefe. "Come now! *Whoop — whoop — hurrah!*"

The neighbors and the children gave the cheer heartily if somewhat awkwardly, and when Keefe called "Three cheers for your teachers, Miss Carson and Miss McBirney," they became rather lustier; and when he came to, "Three cheers for Miss Pace," remembering the dainties she had provided, they were aroused to a hoarse enthusiasm. They wanted to be polite; to shake hands; to say thank you; but the storm was muttering. Azalea waved them all away laughingly.

"Why say good-bye?" she cried. "We'll never forget you and you'll never forget us, but we mustn't stop to talk about it. The storm's coming. Run — or stay."

The thunder drowned her voice.

"Come, Azalea," cried Keefe; "don't stop to lock up. Some of the people will be wanting to stay in the schoolhouse, probably. Here, put on my coat and run."

"But you mustn't run, Keefe," warned Aza-

lea. "Your heart — mustn't you be careful of that?"

The boy laughed lightly and held out his hand, and Azalea, taking it, felt herself flying along through the darkening paths of the woods.

Safe in the Oriole's Nest, the Carsons, the Rowantrees, the Paces and Keefe and Azalea, made many plans that evening of wild summer rain. It had been arranged that they were all to be accommodated for the night between the McEvoy's and the cottage, so since none was leaving, there was no need for haste. Not a person there was of the sort who feels that night-fall bids him to bed. They did as they pleased with their day and their night, and this night they wished to talk. The little Rowantrees, Gerald and the weary Constance, Moira and Michael, the twins, were nested in the hammocks and on the couches, and in the lightning-pierced gloom, with the storm crashing and thundering about them, the others sat long, talking over each other's affairs with a frankness which might not have been easy under other circumstances.

Keefe made it known that he was going to New York, taking his summer's product of pictures with him, to "try himself out." He had something to work for now; there was some zest to life; he wanted to make a success of himself for the sake of Mary Cecily and the children. Annie Laurie was to attend to her dairy, and being now ready to take up advanced studies, was to study the University Extension Course by herself.

"Miss Parkhurst, your governess," said Mrs. Carson to Carin, "is not coming back, my dear. She is to live nearer her mother and sister and teach school. That means that our plans for you must be changed. We shall send you to the Roanoke Academy for Young Ladies. After you have had two years there you may take up your study of painting, if you wish to do so, in some art school. In the meantime, you will have art instruction at the school."

"But, mamma," cried Carin, "that means — why, that means that Azalea and Annie Laurie and I will not study together any more. Why, it means breaking up the Triple Alliance!"

"Never worry about changes," said Mrs. Carson in her silvery voice. "It is the changes that

make life interesting. Good has always come to you, Carin, and good will continue to come. Annie Laurie has already chosen what she wishes to do. We have decided what we think best for you. There remains only Azalea to care for. How is it with you, Azalea? What do you wish to do?"

"I mean," said Azalea, her heart trembling a little in spite of her efforts to be calm and philosophic, "to prepare myself to take charge of the mountain industries at Lee. Just how I can best fit myself for this work I do not know. I mustn't desert Mother McBirney, must I? I can't put any expense on my dear family, but I can stay at home and learn weaving of Mother McBirney and basket-making of dear old Haystack Thompson, and go to Jug Town and find out how to make pottery. I can pick up my education, don't you see?"

She sat tall, slight and very girlish-looking, by the table on which rested the reading lamp. Her vivid face, thrown into relief by the soft glow, had, to all those present, a sweet and gracious familiarity. They loved her, wanted her with them, wanted her to help them make up the sum of good things that is called "home."

There was not one person there who wanted to spare her, yet here she was with her little declaration of independence.

“Come up to New York,” whispered Keefe, fascinated, “and study at the School of Design.”

Azalea shook her head.

“I’d like to make my own way,” she said valiantly. “It—it would make me happier than anything else. I’d rather not be sent anywhere. I’d rather cut my own path.”

“So proud,” smiled Mr. Carson whimsically. “Would it hurt you to accept help from those who love you, Azalea?”

“Is it pride?” asked Azalea with a bright thoughtfulness. “I’m sure I don’t think it is. I want to use my own will, Mr. Carson, to see what I can spin out of myself. If it should happen to be a wonderful silver web how pleased I would be!”

“Oh, you’re so young, Azalea, dear,” mourned Miss Zillah. “Don’t go to taking too much risk. Don’t be too independent.”

“No, don’t, Azalea,” pleaded Carin. “Let papa and mamma make some plan for you.”

“They understand me better than you do, Carin love,” said her friend. “They know what

a joy it is to make one's own plans and carry them out. Annie Laurie knows, too, don't you, dear?"

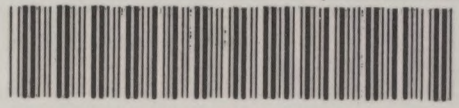
Annie Laurie nodded her fine ruddy head. She knew. Keefe knew too, for he was like an eagle in his love of freedom. They all gave way before Azalea finally. She was no longer a little girl to be petted and given presents to, and to be consoled for her orphanage by the hospitality they could offer. She was a young woman, poor, united to humble people, gifted with a strange, fine talent — a talent for living and for making things seem rich and wonderful — and it was their business to let her have her way. She had grown up during the summer. She realized it herself, and knew as the rest of them could not, what the influences had been which had brought that transformation to pass. Henceforth, she would have her own way to make, her own sorrows to endure, her own peculiar joys to seek. Until now one hand after another had guided her; she had clung to skirts, so to speak. But she had grown past that; she must walk alone.

She looked about her at the rude but charming room, and at the faces of her kind and dear

friends. She seemed to see herself, too, as she sat there, a girl with a curious past and a strange present. As for her future! She shrugged her shoulders gayly — as her poor little dead mother sometimes had done — and spread out her hands with a wide gesture.

“It’s to be Azalea for herself,” she said with a brave little laugh. “Wish her luck!”

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