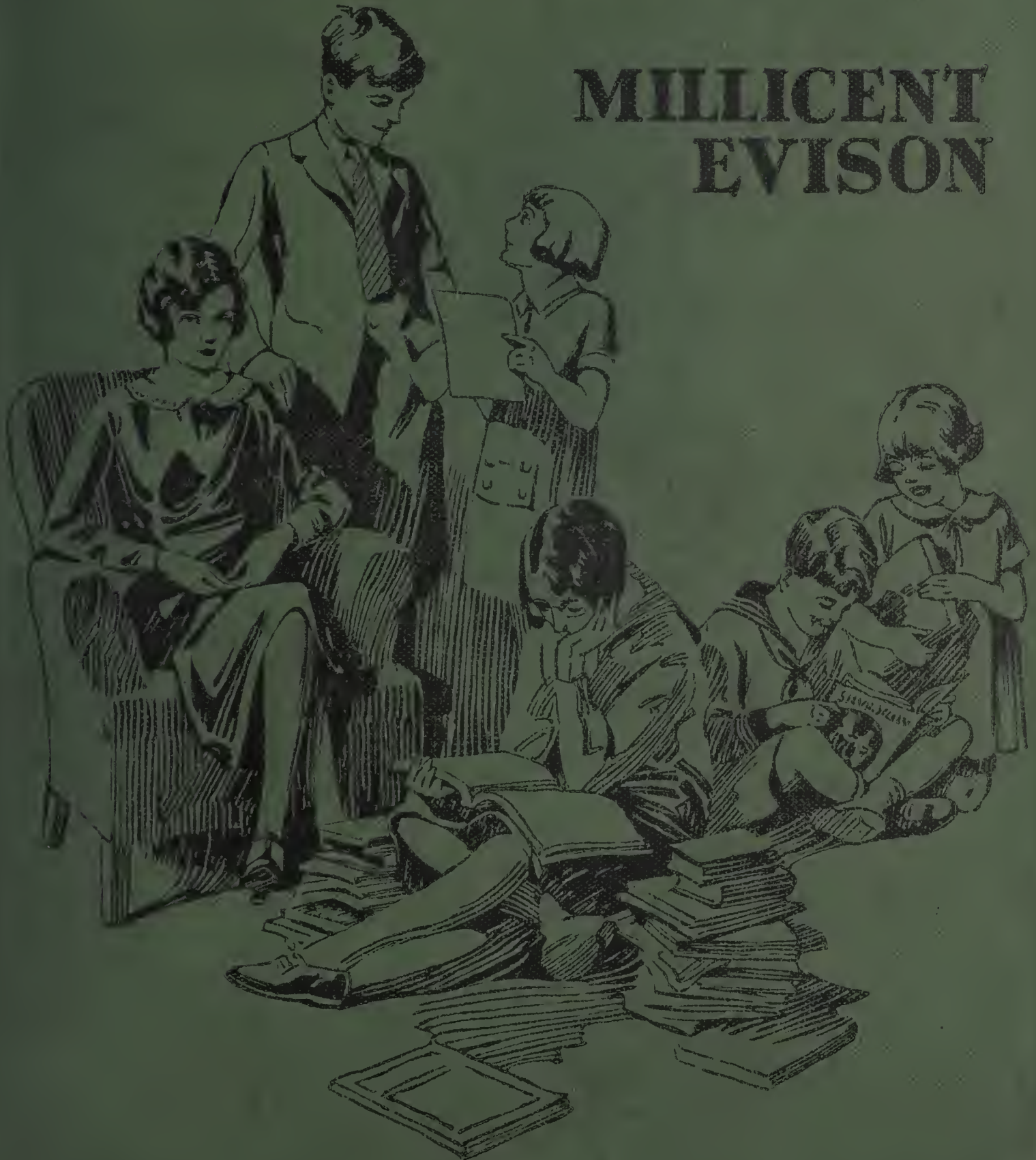


"THE GOOD-FOR-NOTHING GRAYSONS"

MILLICENT
EVISON





Class PZ7
Book F94
Copyright N^o G5

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT

“The Good-for-Nothing Graysons”



ON THIS STORMY AFTERNOON THE GRAYSONS WERE GATHERED
IN THE LIBRARY.— *Page 50.*

“The Good-for-Nothing Graysons”

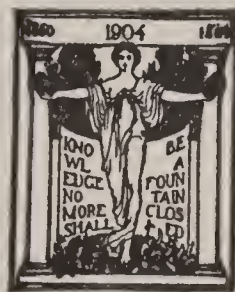
By

MILLICENT EVISON

Author of “Rainbow Gold,” “Peggy Pretend”

Illustrated by

F. VAUX WILSON



BOSTON

LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

1922

L. G.

Copyright, 1928,
BY LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

All Rights Reserved

“THE GOOD-FOR-NOTHING GRAYSONS”

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

SEP 19 1928

©C1A1054595

To
the memory of
Dear Little Grannie,
E. J. E.

CONTENTS

I.	“WATCH-AND-PRY” CORNER . . .	11
II.	THE HOUSE OF TOYS . . .	23
III.	THE GOSSIP SHOP . . .	33
IV.	THE HOUSE OF MISRULE . . .	49
V.	THE ANGELIC IMPS . . .	61
VI.	NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS . . .	69
VII.	PAN’S BROTHER . . .	84
VIII.	THE “CHEER-UPPERS” . . .	96
IX.	THE GHOST VOICE . . .	110
X.	THE SLEEVE OF CARE . . .	122
XI.	CHECK AND “CHECKMATE” . . .	129
XII.	JOAN PUTS A FINGER IN THE PIE . . .	139
XIII.	THE LOTUS GROUP . . .	150
XIV.	GUESSES AT HEAVEN . . .	162
XV.	CONCERNING SUSAN . . .	171
XVI.	JOAN’S CONFESSION . . .	183
XVII.	A LOVER AND HIS LASS . . .	191
XVIII.	TOIL AND TROUBLE . . .	201
XIX.	MISS FAIRY GODMOTHER . . .	217
XX.	MORNING’S JOY . . .	233
XXI.	GRANNIE . . .	240

XXII.	SPREADING THE NEWS	253
XXIII.	“BALDUR THE BEAUTIFUL”	263
XXIV.	OPAL MIST	273
XXV.	“MILLIONS OF MISCHIEFS”	277
XXVI.	“VOX-POPPING”	290
XXVII.	IF	300

ILLUSTRATIONS

On this stormy afternoon the Graysons were
gathered in the library (Page 50) *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

“ We’ve come to cheer you up, you know ”	. 100
“ I s’pose that we’ll soon be hearin’ of another weddin’ in your family ”	. . 140
“ Then you shall be Grannie, our own little Grannie! ” 246

“The Good-for-Nothing Graysons”

CHAPTER I

“WATCH-AND-PRY” CORNER

MANY people in Cassburn disapproved of the Graysons, and it was Louella Greer, the oracle of the village gossip-mongers, who branded the family name with the hyphenated adjective, “good-for-nothing.”

“There’s some mystery ’bout Mr. Grayson,” she often declared, “an’ it ain’t fit an’ proper fer a man o’ his years to be so handsome an’ so young-lookin’, like as if he was the brother ’stead o’ the father o’ his family, I say.”

“Just so,” agreed Mrs. Hertz in her purring voice, and blinking her white-lashed eyes like a contented cat.

Mrs. Hertz always corroborated Miss Louella’s statements with a stuffy murmur of “just so.” She was a fat woman with a squat, shapeless figure, and she looked as though Nature, after supplying sufficient material for a very tall person, had spite-

fully pressed her down into a bulging bundle of flesh.

Miss Louella was tall and angular, with snappy black eyes like a pair of jet beads. Her thin, colorless lips were dry to the point of cracking, and their redness seemed to have strayed to the end of her long nose, from which a bead of moisture frequently oozed and hung like a dewdrop lingering on a rose. While she talked she would irrigate her lips with the tip of her tongue, and her nasal effusion gave her the disagreeable habit of punctuating her conversation with sniffs.

“Yes, Mr. Grayson is a mystery to all right-thinkin’ folks,” continued Miss Louella. “He spends all his time in New York, that Sodom and Gomorrah place that’s so full o’ rascalities an’ electricities where, as the Holy Writ says, the wicked never cease from troublin’ an’ the weary don’t get time to rest. He’s all for the pomps an’ vanities o’ this wicked world, an’ he neglects his family, that’s what. An’ as for that tribe o’ boys an’ girls,—well, their poor mother’s hair must be turnin’ gray in her grave knowin’, as she must, that there won’t be harps an’ halos handed out to her children on the Day o’ Judgment. The good-for-nothing Graysons is a disgrace to Cassburn. They’re *Disgraysons*, I say!”

Miss Louella always spoke of the Day of Judg-

ment with the authority of one who had more than a personal interest in the event, as though she had been appointed a special agent of the Deity to relieve Him of all responsibility concerning the future, celestial or otherwise, of the inhabitants of Cassburn.

“I hope I’ll wake up good an’ early on the Last Day,” Jim Deane, the blacksmith, once remarked. “I don’t want to miss the fun o’ seein’ Louella hustlin’ round an’ gettin’ us all sorted out an’ labeled with tickets for our upward or downward journey. It’ll be a busy day for her, an’ I guess Saint Peter is often shakin’ in his shoes now, thinkin’ as how he may lose his job when Louella quits this world an’ goes to glory.”

Everything about the Graysons was “a disgrace to Cassburn,” according to Miss Louella: their ramshackle house and neglected garden, their shabby clothes, their buoyant, youthful pride and, worst crime of all, their poverty. Even the street where they lived brought forth her censure.

“Cedar Street ought to be called Cedar Lane, that’s what. With grass growin’ on the road, an’ vi’lets an’ moss beside the fences, it looks like as if it was nothin’ but a cow-path, I say. But it’s good enough for them Graysons.”

“Now, Louella, why are you so down on those girls an’ boys?” questioned Mrs. Talbot, whose

sense of justice often prompted her to dispute Miss Louella's statements. “ They can't help bein' poor, an' I'm sure Nancy does the best she can with her brothers an' sisters. It's hard for a young girl like her to handle a bunch o' lively young ones; an' her with no mother an' a father that's away all the time. I do admire their spunk an' their cheerful manners; but I vow you never have a kind word to say for them.”

“ Huh! ” snorted Miss Louella. “ Spunk is deceitful an' cheerful manners is vain, Melissa; an' folks as poor as the Graysons have no right to be spunky an' cheerful, even if their ancestors *were* rich an' had silver spoons in their mouths when they were born. As the Holy Writ says, I have a hearin' ear an' a seein' eye, an' the Lord hath made even both o' them: so I know what I know, an' the Graysons' soft words an' manners butter no parsnips with me. An' there's plenty o' folks in Cassburn that'll agree with me when I say that the Graysons is *different*, that's what. An' if you'll let your mouth speak out o' the abundance of your heart, Melissa, you'll have to own up that they *are* different.”

Mrs. Talbot nodded her head dubiously. “ Well, Louella, I guess you're right there; but bein' different ain't ——”

“ Makin' excuses for the Graysons,” interrupted Miss Louella, “ is, as the Holy Writ says, swal-

lowin' camels when you'd choke on a gnat. Public opinion is down on the Graysons, an' public opinion is of the people, for the people, an' by the people. You can't alter public opinion, I say."

"Cassburn owes a debt o' gratitood to the Graysons," was Jim Deane's verdict; "they give Louella an' her bunch o' hornets something to buzz about. An out-of-the-way little village like this would die o' monotony if some one didn't give the gossip-gabbers a tongue-tonic now an' again. 'Tis gossip that makes the world go round. That's a sort of a quotation, but it ain't from Louella's Holy Writ. Louella's tongue keeps the village cranked up to a lively speed that makes it important enough to have its name printed on the railway timetables."

Trains rush past Cassburn station every day with prolonged screeches of warning, as though ordering the little village to get out of the way. The giant monsters sweep along, belching clouds of smoke, and the clangorous rattling of their wheels gradually diminishes into a purring rumble when they round a curve and leave a coil of smoke curling in the air and vanishing into the vastness of the sky.

The engines of the two daily trains scheduled to stop at Cassburn always hiss and fume with a shrill escape of steam, as though they considered the de-

lay an affront to their dignity; and they depart with ear-splitting blasts from their whistles which sound like hoots of derision voicing their contempt for the insignificant place.

As viewed from the train windows, Cassburn is not prepossessing. It is like the rough under side of a piece of tapestry,—a vague conglomeration of dull colors and loose, raveled ends and knots. The station is a small brown building with its roof extending over one end of the platform. Across the road, which is muddy or dusty according to the whim of the weather, are an abandoned paper mill and a long row of workmen's dwellings, all vacant, with gaping doorways and windows. The neighboring fields are intersected by straggling rail-fences and dotted here and there with sagging cottages and gaunt, unsightly barns. In the distance, half a mile from the railroad, is a dense mass of foliage, through which gabled roofs and red brick chimneys peer at the sky.

Aeroplane travelers could look down at these clustered trees and dwellings and see the upper side of the tapestry,—a quaint design of irregular streets, gardens, orchards, and houses, with a small stone church surrounded by white gravestones, like a gray nun standing in a garden of lilies. They could also see a ruined mill brooding over a willow-edged pond, and a brook that rambles in a round-

about way through the village, as though it wished to linger among the peaceful homes instead of journeying onward towards the town of Bradbury, where it loses itself in sea-swept marshes.

Cassburn is a picturesque, overgrown village, a sleeping beauty of a place whose dream of waking up and becoming a thriving town was thwarted when the paper mill ceased its activities. The wide, shady streets are named after trees, and wind among gardened homes to the shore which the sea has gnawed away into sandy coves and rocky ledges. The houses are simple, homelike, and suggestive of long abiding, with Virginia creeper draping their weather-worn walls and roses trimming their porches and verandahs. With a sort of shy modesty they stand back in flowerful gardens, where beds and pathways are edged with clam-shells bleached so snowy white that they look as though they had been whitewashed.

Louella Greer's house crowds boldly against the sidewalk at the corner of Chestnut and Maple Streets, the two principal thoroughfares of the village. From her bay-window Miss Louella can see when people come and where they go, missing few, if any, surmise what they do, and watch for their return. She can look across to the churchyard on the opposite corner, and her evergreen memory, recalling old, half-forgotten stories,—tragedies buried

with the dead that have left scars in the hearts of the living—enables her to plant on many a grave the rank weeds of scandal.

Her prim, white clapboard dwelling wears two signs which are like official badges proclaiming Miss Louella's position in the community. Over the door is “U. S. Post Office,” and a little lower at the left, “Western Union Telegraph Company.”

Several Cassburn women have acquired the daily habit of dropping in to see Miss Louella under a pretext of calling for their mail; a habit scarcely warranted by the occasional letters they receive. They always linger for an exchange of gossip with the postmistress, and the bay-window where they sit is known, through the sponsorship of Jim Deane, as “Watch-and-Pry” Corner to distinguish it from the church across the way which stands for “Watch and Pray.”

“Well, the Government an' the Almighty hev appointed Louella Greer to watch an' pry over our mail an' our morals,” Jim once observed in his quiet, droll way, “so she sorts out our letters an' our sins; an' it's lucky for us that she don't make our gravestones, else there'd be some mighty queer epitaphs in our cemetery. Them stones that hev a hand pointin' upward, as a delicate sort o' hint which way the dead hev gone, would be turned upside down if Louella had her say-so.”

Two large chestnut-trees stand like sentinels at the northerly end of Chestnut Street, just before it loses its identity in the country highway known as the road to Bradbury. This is the beginning of Cedar Street, which runs shoreward and passes the old Grayson house to end abruptly at the wrought-iron gates of Cedarwold, the home of the Thorolds.

Cedar Street was once the private driveway of the Grayson home. In the old days seafaring ancestors, returning from their long voyages, had driven up to the beautiful colonial house with treasures from the East,—rare porcelains, silks, ivory carvings, jewels, costly rugs, and Mandarin robes. Other Graysons—men and women—had traveled abroad and had brought back old-world furniture and portraits of themselves painted by immortal hands. Then followed a series of unfortunate speculations which, coupled with feminine extravagance and masculine indulgence in idleness and gambling, drained the Grayson coffers until it became necessary to sell nearly all the property, leaving only the old neglected house and garden to harbor the present family.

Lemuel Hertz bought several acres, and his house, facing Chestnut Street, now occupies the north corner of the former driveway. The south corner was annexed to David Hale's orchard. Then John Thorold, a wealthy New Yorker, acquired the vast

extent of shoreland for his summer home. This purchase robbed the Grayson estate of the sunken garden with its marble seats and statuary, and the artificial lake which was gemmed with water-lilies and dotted with tiny islands, strung together with bridges of such an airy, fantastic construction that they seemed to have been built of cobwebs.

In spite of its newness, Cedarwold soon acquired an old-world appearance, in keeping with its surroundings. Nature laid a caressing hand on the new house which was built among the cedars, aging its gray stone walls with lichen and veiling its angles with vines. The interior was enriched with spoils from an ancient English manor-house: carved walls, doors, ceilings, and stairways, and antique marble mantelpieces.

No grass grew on the road, no violets bloomed beside the footpath of Cedar Street when the gates of Cedarwold were open. The Thorolds and their guests filled the place every June and made each summer a nightmare of noise and excitement. Their automobiles, “horseless carriages” they were called in those days, honked and snorted through the streets, raising clouds of dust and scattering children and chickens in a mad panic. The solitude of the pine-woods was shattered by hilarious picnics. There were clam-bakes on the shore and midnight bathing-parties in the moon-silvered sea, fol-

lowed by dances on the hard, damp sand to the raucous music of a phonograph.

Sometimes the decorum of the Sunday evening services was disturbed when a party of Cedarwold guests, bored with hours of card-playing, billiards, and dancing, and seeking fresh diversion, came to church with a frivolous display of flowered and feathered hats, gauzy gowns and white flannel suits. They assumed an exaggerated Sabbatical solemnity, and joined in the hymns with a fervor which overwhelmed the efforts of the choir and the puny harmonies of Miss Louella's organ; although, as Jim Deane said, she “wrestled with that tune-box like she was pourin' out the wrath o' God along with her perspiration.”

“They jes' make a mock o' religion an' turn the church into an opery house, that's what,” she breathlessly whispered to Mrs. Hertz, and the choir's leading soprano, giving an assenting nod, replied, “Just so.”

Cassburn disapproved of the “city folks” and the villagers kept their distance, as the saying goes, not through a sense of inferiority but rather because of a sturdy, proud independence which increased every year and raised a wall of stubborn prejudice between them and the unwelcome intruders.

The summer orgies always ended in September

with a flare-up of fireworks on Labor Day, and during that week Cedarwold was closed for the winter. The days of falling leaves brought a grateful peace to the gasping, racket-torn village, and throughout the winter the Thorolds and their friends formed a topic for conversation at quilting-bees and sewing society meetings.

“Those city folks don’t do Cassburn any good with their vanities an’ hilarities,” was Miss Louella’s dictum. “They just upset the village, that’s what. An’ when the Day o’ Judgment comes,—well, they’ll find that the Lord hasn’t any use for their fine clothes an’ top-lofty manners. They won’t go walkin’ through the streets o’ heaven with their noses in the air like as if there was bad smells around, an’ callin’ the angels ‘natives’ like they do us folks in Cassburn. As the Holy Writ says, pride goeth before destruction an’ a haughty spirit before a fall, if folks don’t look before they leap, which they can’t do if they go about with haughty noses an’ chins held high, I say.”

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE OF TOYS

IN his early boyhood Dick Thorold often eluded the vigilance of his German tutor, playing truant from Cedarwold to revel in barefooted freedom with the boys of Cassburn. Mrs. Thorold disapproved of her son's associating with the "village hoodlums," and the boy's wayward wanderings always resulted in schoolroom captivity and extra lessons. The mischievous, high-spirited lad rebelled against the restraint of his magnificent home. He was like a sturdy weed transplanted from the sunny, breezy wayside to the artificial atmosphere of a hothouse where his sister Muriel, true daughter of a frivolous, pleasure-loving mother, thrived like an orchid.

"I hate this darned place!" Dick passionately exclaimed to Muriel one day as they sat in the schoolroom preparing their lessons. "It's nothing but a house of toys. Father and Mother and all their friends aren't real human beings, they all have withered souls, and the only hearts they know anything about are on playing-cards. They're just mechanical toys wound up to dance, drink, play cards, and flirt. They're shams, every one of them;

the women with their painted smiles and the men with their sneering eyes. I hate them all! A fat chance a boy has in this house to have any real fun! Mother wants me to be a Little Lord Fauntleroy, and Father doesn't care a hang. Aw, shucks!" he kicked the table leg and threw his Latin grammar across the room.

Muriel smiled with simpering disdain and twined one of her golden curls around a slim forefinger. "You're a silly, uncouth boy, Dick; a clumsy, awkward clown, as Mother often says. Why don't you try to be like Ralph Gordon? He is always polite and never gets grubby the way you do."

"That sissy! That pretty-mannered popinjay! I'd like to push his face down his throat. Mama's little gentleman! Huh!"

The girl gathered up her books. "I refuse to listen to your vulgar talk. I shall go and finish my lessons in Mother's boudoir, and I shall tell her what you've been saying,—calling her a mechanical toy with a painted smile!"

"Sweet little sneak, aren't you?" grinned Dick, "and suppose you tell Father about those French novels you borrow from Celeste and read on the sly. He'll be frightfully interested, I bet, to learn that his fifteen-year-old daughter is filling her mind with such beastly stuff."

A flush of indignation flamed over Muriel's face.

“You needn’t try to preach to me! I’m a year older than you, and I’ll read what I please. You haven’t the first instincts of a gentleman, running off as you do with the common boys of the village. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I *would* be ashamed of myself if I read those rotten books. I found one the other day hidden in your history, and I tried to read it; but I chucked it after the third chapter. If Father knew about your reading that filthy rot, Celeste would do a lively hop, skip, and jump out of the house.”

“Nothing of the sort,” retorted Muriel. “Mother says that Celeste is the most wonderful maid she ever had. She is invaluable, and Mother couldn’t get along without her.”

“I guess that’s true,” admitted Dick. “Celeste *is* useful. She does everything for Mother but spit.”

“Dick! you are too disgusting for words!” Muriel tossed her pretty curls and left the room.

Dick sprawled in his chair and thrust his hands into his pockets. His mouth drooped with discontent as he pumped up lugubrious sighs from the bottom of his heart.

“Aw, gee! life’s a rotten sell for a boy like me! I wish we weren’t rich. I wish we lived in a shanty instead of this old toy-shop! I’m sick of watching candy dudes foodling about with a bunch of dizzy

dames. Some day, by gosh! I'll run away, and then,—Oh gee!”

His lithe form straightened, a frank, boyish smile spread over his face, and his brown eyes glowed with enthusiasm as he brought his hands together with a resounding clap.

The first time Dick ran away he went on a ten-day trip in a fishing-smack. A wild, wonderful holiday it was, his first taste of liberty. He returned home sun-bronzed and ruddy with the rough caresses of the wind, gloriously dirty and smelling of fish, his vocabulary enriched with nautical phrases which made his mother wince.

The good-natured fishermen were peremptorily warned not to take him on another fishing excursion, so the second time he broke bounds he boarded a train for New York. Four days later detectives picked him up in the Bowery, hungry, dirty, but defiantly happy in his unwonted freedom.

After these runaway escapades of Dick's, Herr Maximilian von Geyer's position became that of jailer as well as tutor, a rôle in which he demonstrated his national efficiency. Fortunately Dick loved music, and his violin was his “soul-saver,” as he called it. Herr Max was a skilled musician, and he took a keen delight in developing the boy's talent. Music gradually fostered a sense of comradeship between master and pupil, a loyal friend-

ship which was never expressed in words, for Dick would have scorned any display of sentiment, but which they both remembered years later when they met in a German dugout in Flanders. There, in the dim grayness of dawn, a dying Prussian officer recognized his former American pupil in the young soldier wearing a British uniform who suddenly started back and lowered his bayonet.

“Englischer Schweinhund! Ach Dick! Guten Morgen, Knabe! Ach so!”, as Dick knelt in the mud and supported the great, limp body in his arms. “Ach, mein Knabe, das Leben ist—what you said—a rotten sell, nicht wahr? Nun, spielen wir—Ach! Lebe wohl, mein Knabe, lebe ——”

Herr Max shuddered and slipped from Dick’s arms.

When Dick was sixteen his parents were divorced. Mrs. Thorold then married a wealthy South American, and the invaluable Celeste accompanied her to her new home below the equator; but Muriel and Dick remained with their father. If the mother felt any regret over leaving her children, she failed to show it. Indeed, the only emotion she experienced was a sense of relief that her youthful appearance would no longer be contradicted by the presence of “two great, growing children,” which was all that could be expected from a woman whose heart pulsations were merely functional.

Mr. Thorold retired from active business life and settled in his country home where he devoted himself to the costly and fascinating hobby of jewel-collecting. Cedarwold was the scene of lavish entertainments when Muriel and Dick came home for the holidays. There was the same tinsel glitter and unreal glamor about the house of toys as in the days of Mrs. Thorold's supremacy. The place was filled with guests, and there were dances and endless bridge-games where Muriel played so recklessly that her allowance was seldom able to keep up with her obligations.

At the preparatory school where Dick was sent after his parents' divorce he was constantly threatened with expulsion. Then followed a brief, stormy career at college, during which his boyish escapades estranged him from his father, who had apparently forgotten the joyous adventures of his own youth. Through servants' gossip the people of Cassburn learned of Dick's frequent quarrels with his father. The boy was looked upon as a black sheep, and the villagers predicted that he would come to a bad end.

“That boy ain't never been a credit to Cassburn,” said Miss Louella, who had often been a victim of Dick's practical jokes, “an' it's just his father bein' so rich that keeps him out o' Bradbury jail, that's what. Didn't he come into the post-office yesterday, so drunk he could hardly stand, an' talkin' like as

if his mouth was filled with mush. ‘Mish Louella,’ he says, ‘you’re shimplly adorable,’ he says. ‘Oh, lovely Louella, howsh the Day o’ Jushment?’ Then he walks across to Brackett’s store as straight an’ steady as you please, an’ tells Sam Brackett how he’d been shockin’ me into fits pretendin’ to be drunk, an’ makin’ a play-actin’ fool of himself.”

Shortly after a violent scene between father and son, occasioned by a letter from the dean of Dick’s college and the boy’s confession of debts, coupled with a request for money which was refused with the usual recriminations, a valuable emerald ring disappeared from Mr. Thorold’s collection. A house-party was assembled at Cedarwold for Muriel’s marriage, but none of the guests knew of the bitter quarrel that resulted in Dick’s being turned adrift, penniless and blackened with his father’s accusation of theft.

The boy faced his father with a sturdy denial and vehement protestations of innocence until a glance at Muriel’s pale, frightened face, quivering lips, and imploring eyes made him realize that his sister was the thief. He tossed his head back with a contemptuous laugh.

“All right, have it your own way, Dad. Yes, I stole the ring. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

Mr. Thorold sat for a moment in petrified silence,

rigid with fury. The blood mounted to his forehead, purpling his face.

“You dastardly liar, you thieving young scoundrel! Get out of the house,—get out, I say! For your sister’s sake I spare you the disgrace of arrest and imprisonment. Leave the house at once,—you are no longer a son of mine. I’ve done with you!” the father shouted and, tearing himself from his daughter’s detaining hands, he left the room.

Dick shrugged his shoulders and smiled grimly.

“Never mind, Sis!” he said, as the weeping girl clung to him, “it isn’t such an awful fate to be turned out of this house. I’ve never fitted in here, as you know. Buck up, old girl, and work the soft pedal on your card-games in the future. Don’t fret about me, I’ll be all right, never fear! I’d better be off. Er,—let me have a dollar or two, will you? I’m broke. Thanks!” as she thrust a roll of bills into his hand.

“Oh, Dick, how can I thank you? I *had* to have money, and I was afraid to ask Dad; so I took the emerald and pawned it. You’ll write to me, won’t you?” she pleaded, “and some day I’ll redeem the ring and tell Dad all about it. Then he will know you are innocent.”

Dick laughed gaily. “Yes, I’ll write,—if there’s anything to write about. Don’t worry about your good-for-nothing brother, and don’t get yourself in

bad with Dad by fessing up about the ring. Forget it! Let this secret of ours be my wedding present to you. And now, I'm off. I'm nineteen, a jolly age; and the world is wide and open before me. I'm running away again, old girl; and this time I'll manage to earn my bread and salt with my fiddle. Good-bye, Sis,—good luck!"

So Dick disappeared on the eve of his sister's wedding. He fiddled his way through a merry, vagabond existence, drifting into odd corners of the world and winning friends everywhere with his lucky smile, his fund of good-natured humor and drollery, and his honest brown eyes which people learned to trust. There were emergencies when he found his watch useful for other purposes than telling the hour o' day. Many a time he was cold, wet, hungry, and homeless; but his indomitable courage enabled him to laugh at the hardships he encountered, and he kept most of his illusions intact as he journeyed into manhood along the stony road of poverty. He faced the wind and rain of life's buffetings with a song of youth and freedom in his heart.

Muriel came home within a year of her marriage, broken-hearted and dying. A pitiful confession from her trembling lips wrung her father's soul.

"I stole that emerald, Dad, and pawned it to pay my gambling debts, after you had refused to in-

crease my allowance and had forbidden me to play. I was afraid to tell you, for in certain moods you would have denounced me before every one. I was a coward, and Dick took the blame to save me. Poor Dick was always the scapegoat! Find him, Dad,—find him and ask him to come home!”

But Dick was not to be found. He was far away in France with a band of strolling players, giving performances in the courtyards of quaint country inns in peaceful, happy little villages that were to be the scene of a ghastly conflict and become known as the immortal fields of France.

Muriel was laid to rest in the churchyard by the sea. Cedarwold was closed and left a prey to dust and gloom, for its rooms were haunted with bitter memories that drove the lonely, conscience-stricken father forth in aimless wanderings through the countries of the East,—to seek forgetfulness in the lands of flowery charm and ancient wisdom.

And now, after eight years, Cedar Street is a narrow lane of tall, shaggy trees. In shady corners small ridges of snow are melting into the moss, where spring will scatter white violets, and grass is greening over the road. There is a constant repetition of fragmentary notes, like a haunting phrase of a half-remembered song; then a swift whirr of wings and a flash of redbreasts among the dark boughs. Robins are nesting.

CHAPTER III

THE GOSSIP SHOP

THE men of Cassburn regarded Louella Greer with a good-natured tolerance, and condoned their wives' habit of visiting "Watch-and-Pry" Corner on the theory that men must work and women must talk.

The boys, one and all, disliked and feared her. If her all-seeing eyes failed to observe any of their mischievous pranks her ears always heard of them, and her busy tongue never missed an opportunity of enlightening mothers who would otherwise have remained in ignorance of their sons' derelictions.

Many a time boys went supperless to bed and fell asleep wishing that the old-time custom of ducking witches could be revived, so that they might see their enemy gasping, spluttering, and dripping after an ignominious immersion.

One night several lads quietly clambered out of their bedroom windows and slid down kitchen roofs to attend a moonlight meeting which had been planned for executing vengeance on "that hunk o' misery, that gabby old witch Louella."

It was a lovely night of silver magic. The roads were white and glistening, as though covered with

frost, and weird shadows lurked under the trees. The rhythmic murmuring of the sea floated through the air, as if the waves were crooning a lullaby to the sleeping village.

The boys gathered before Miss Louella's door, their chuckles muffled with the handkerchiefs they wore as masks in true desperado fashion. With whispers of caution they carefully propped Jim Deane's ladder, which they had appropriated, against the wall and removed the Post-Office sign from over the door. The moon seemed to smile down at them as they proceeded to paint some sprawling green letters on the back of the sign. Then they restored it to its supporting hooks with the reverse side outward.

“Mean old tongue-wagger! She ought to be muzzled,” muttered one lad.

The next morning—the first of April—when Sam Brackett opened the door of his general store and came out to sweep the steps, he glanced across the way and saw over Miss Louella's door what the “minions of the moon” had accomplished.

Gossip Shop

He called to his wife, who came downstairs in petticoat and curl-papers to share his laughter.

Then he hurried over to the blacksmith's shop where the swelling leaf-buds of a large chestnut-tree were shedding their sticky sheaths, making the ground look as though it were sprinkled with brown beetles.

Jim Deane was starting a fire in his forge when Sam's jubilant shout brought him from his smoke-grimed shop. The two men chuckled with keen masculine enjoyment in anticipation of Miss Louella's chagrin when she discovered the outrage.

"By heck! Louella'll be madder'n a hornet when she sees that," laughed Jim.

Strange to say, several women passed in and out of the post-office that morning without observing the change in the sign. While Mrs. Talbot and Mrs. Hertz chatted with Miss Louella in the bay-window they wondered why so many men lingered in front of Jim's smithy.

"Seems like most o' the men are having tools mended or sharpened to-day, an' they ain't in a hurry to get away either," remarked Mrs. Talbot, during a lull in the conversation after they had hazarded various guesses as to the price of Jessie Neve's new hat; and Miss Louella had declared that it was a shame and a disgrace the way Mrs. Neve indulged that girl, she being just a poor wash-woman and having to work hard for every dollar she earned.

“Huh!” snorted Miss Louella. “Seems like the men’re takin’ a holiday an’ gettin’ their tongues sharpened, that’s what. Jim Deane’s shop is a disgrace to Cassburn. It’s as bad as a saloon, I say. Every day I look over an’ see men hangin’ round an’ gossipin’ when they ought to be home workin’.”

“Jim is real sociable,” observed Mrs. Talbot, “an’ he’s the most popular man in Cassburn. The men like to hear him talk in his slow, wise way.”

Miss Louella gave a contemptuous sniff which removed the moist bead from the end of her nose. “Sociable is as sociable does, an’ I ain’t sayin’ that Jim ain’t popular. But, as the Holy Writ says, birds of a feather flock together, an’ where there are two or three men gathered together in Jim Deane’s shop they ain’t talkin’ politics or crops. An’ that picture that Jim let the circus people paste on his open door last summer ain’t a fit sight for decent folks to look at; with those half-naked women flyin’ and jumpin’ through hoops, an’ hangin’ onto swings with their teeth an’ their toes, an’ wearin’ snakes ’stead o’ clothes. Jim ought to be made to keep his door shut, I say.”

“But that would darken his shop so, his windows bein’ so small an’ cobwebby,” objected Mrs. Talbot.

“Then he ought to be made to tear the picture off,” snapped Miss Louella. “Every time I look out o’ my window I blush with maidenly shame at

the sight o' those brazen hussies. That open door is an insult to Cassburn women, I say."

"There's Nancy Grayson goin' into Brackett's store." Mrs. Hertz peered through the stiff lace curtains. "They're owin' Sam Brackett quite a bill, I hear. Now, I declare that family's a disgrace to Cassburn, as you often say, Louella, with its stuckupedness an' its shiftless ways. They didn't mow their lawn once last summer, an' their front gate has been hangin' on one hinge for months. It's a good thing that old house o' theirs is off by itself in Cedar Street where strangers passin' through the village can't see it. It fairly mortifies me every time I look at it from my back door."

"I called there the other day," Miss Louella's tone implied that her visit was an act of magnanimous condescension, "an' their parlor certainly is a sight! The wall-paper is faded an' shows where the big pictures used to hang. For, as the Holy Writ says,—riches make themselves wings, an' when poverty comes in at the door pictures come down off the walls. You know, every time Mr. Grayson comes home he takes a picture away with him to sell in New York. He's awful particular an' fussy 'bout the way they are packed, Tom Willis told me; has 'em wrapped in old blankets an' screwed into boxes that Tom makes specially to fit, like as if they were coffins for corpses. The pictures are worth a lot

o' money, Harry Grayson told Tom, but I wouldn't give a dollar for any of 'em. They're just old-fashioned men an' women, the Graysons' rich ancestors.”

“Solomon Simpson says they were painted by famous artistses who charged hundreds o' dollars for doin' the job; an' now that the artistses are dead the price o' the pictures has gone up,” volunteered Mrs. Talbot.

“Well, I paid five dollars an' fifty cents for havin' Pa 'n' Ma's photographs enlarged, an' that included the price o' the frames,” said Miss Louella. “The pictures are fine, real natural an' lifelike, an' they look exactly as Pa 'n' Ma did when they were layin' in their coffins. The frames are real handsome—gilt water-lilies with copper-colored leaves, an' a border o' red plush inside. But, as I was sayin', the Graysons' parlor is a sight! The last time Mr. Grayson was home he took away the rugs, an' they ain't bothered since to paint or varnish the floor. I didn't think much o' the rugs, anyhow. They had no sort o' pattern, just twisty-twirly things all over them, like worms mixed with sausage meat. An' the colors warn't nearly as fine as the new velvet pile I have in my spare bedroom, with red and yellow roses an' green vines on a purple ground, an' ——”

“Solomon Simpson says,” interrupted Mrs. Tal-

bot, "that those old rugs was worth a fabulust sum o' money. Some o' them was heathen sort o' carpets for prayin' on."

"Whoever heard o' heathen prayin'?" cried Miss Louella. "Don't we have a collection twice a year at the church for raisin' money so that missionaries can go to Afric's sunny fountains an' India's coral strand, to teach the heathens an' heathenesses to pray properly an' not bow down to wood an' stone, like the hymn-book says they do? An' if the missionaries spend our money in buyin' carpets for the heathen to pray on, when what they need most is clothes to cover 'em, for if they wear anything at all it's only a dish clout round their waists; well,—not another cent o' mine goes to missions, I say! An' as for Solomon Simpson, he thinks he has the wisdom o' the old Bible Solomon 'cause he reads them three Shakesperience books o' his, an' talks poetry like as if he was King David singing psalms. With all his reading knowledge, he's nothing but a village cobbler. As the Holy Writ says, let every man's work be made manifest, an' a cobbler is known by his shoes an', therefore, should he stick to his last."

"Well, I think Solomon Simpson is a real clever man," declared Mrs. Talbot, "he uses long dictionary words an' ——"

"Huh!" interposed Miss Louella, "long words

break no bones. I'm glad the War is over an' we don't have to worry 'bout German spies in our midst an' have Solomon Simpson struttin' about dressed up as a military policeman, an' holdin' himself like a green bay-tree, like as if he owned the village."

"Well," observed Mrs. Talbot tilting her chin aggressively, "I think it gave the village style and distinguishment to have Solomon walkin' about in his khaki union suit. I vow he was a credit to Cassburn, like the Statue o' Liberty is to New York."

"He was a statue of oddity, that's what!" sneered Miss Louella, "a short, thin man with his white hair an' rosy cheeks like a healthy baby."

"Louella, you certainly do snap up wrong ideas from what folks say!" began Mrs. Talbot. "I ain't sayin' that Solomon was *like* the Statue o' Liberty, an' you're makin' out that I am."

Before Miss Louella could reply, Mrs. Hertz steered the discussion from the dangerous reef of argument into a calm sea of general disapproval of the Grayson family.

"The Graysons ain't had meat on their table for quite a spell. Every day, just before I dish up my dinner, I go down to my back fence an' sniff as hard as I can, an' I ain't smelled meat cookin' in their kitchen for more'n three weeks. They must live

awful skimpy! Last year I often saw the Grayson twins climbin' into the Thorold orchard an' stealin' the fruit; an' I s'ppose they'll do the same this year to help out with their vittles."

"The way those Graysons are growin' up is something scandalous, that's what!" pronounced Miss Louella, "an' the names they call the twins is an insult to the church where they were properly christened Philip and Florence. The idea o' turnin' those Christian names into Flip an' Flop! Sounds like a pair o' clowns in a circus, I say!"

"Just so," added Mrs. Hertz. "The good-for-nothing Graysons is too fresh an' free with their nicknames. The other day the twins called my Eric 'Earache Hurts.' Think o' that now! An' I had my Eric christened after a hero in a book, an' he lived in a castle with glowin' dark eyes an' magnificent marble stairways an' a black mustache; an' he married a Gipsy girl with a mole on her arm, which proved in the last chapter that she was a real countess, but she'd been stolen from her cradle when she was an infant."

"Eric is a real stylish name, an' it's just like the Graysons to make a joke of it," remarked Miss Louella. "An' I'm not a bit surprised to hear that they steal fruit from the Thorold place. That whole family'll land in jail, that's what!"

"I don't know as I blame Flip an' Flop for

helpin’ themselves to fruit in the Thorold gardens,” argued Mrs. Talbot. “It’s just goin’ to waste with that place bein’ closed for so long. I wouldn’t call it stealin’.”

“Stealin’s *stealin’*, whichever way you look at it,” asserted Miss Louella, “an’ when the Lord went to the trouble o’ thinkin’ out the Ten Commandments He carved them on tables o’ *stone*, Melissa Talbot, so that you an’ Moses couldn’t change ’em to suit the Graysons. An’ He said as plain as plain,—‘Thou shalt not steal.’”

“Maybe He’d have said more, if there’d been room enough for extra words,—explainin’ that stealin’ things that’re goin’ to waste ain’t really a sin,” suggested Mrs. Talbot.

“There you are, Melissa!” ejaculated Miss Louella, “puttin’ ideas into the Lord’s head that He’d blush to think of; an’ you a member o’ the church!”

Mrs. Talbot cleared her throat for a spirited retort, but Mrs. Hertz quickly intervened with a remark which was like oil poured on the troubled waters.

“It does seem a pity that the Thorold place should be shut up all these years. I wonder what’s become o’ Mr. Thorold an’ Dick, an’ why they ain’t never come back! It’s a shame for families to break up like that, divorces an’ death an’ quarrels, an’ them so rich, too.”

“That whole family o’ Thorolds’ll make a poor showin’ on the Day o’ Judgment,” announced Miss Louella. “As the Holy Writ says, the parents did eat of sour grapes, an’ what’s one man’s meat is another man’s poison; an’ a boy brought up in a divided house, like Dick was, is sure to be a prodigal son, I say!”

“Just so. You certainly have a powerful memory for Scripture, Louella!” said Mrs. Hertz admiringly.

Miss Louella smiled complacently. “Yes, Susie, I keep my lamp lit an’ my loins girded by readin’ two chapters o’ the Holy Writ every night before I go to bed; an’ when I express my opinions I can always do it with the knowledge that the Holy Writ’ll back up what I say. An’ when the Bridegroom cometh on the Day o’ Judgment, I’ll not be a foolish virgin with no oil in my lamp of understandin’. I shall approach the Throne o’ Grace with a sure an’ certain hope of a joyful reception.”

“Just so,” nodded Mrs. Hertz.

“There’s Nancy Grayson comin’ out o’ Brackett’s now,” said Mrs. Talbot. “I wonder what she an’ Sam’s laughin’ at! They’re lookin’ over here an’ laughin’ like they’d split.”

“Nancy always has a smile on her face,” sniffed Miss Louella, “an’ a smilin’ countenance showeth a mind void of understandin’, I say.”

“Well, Louella,” Mrs. Talbot welcomed another opportunity of disagreeing with the postmistress, “it ain’t no crime to smile. I think Nancy’s real good to look at, always bright an’ cheerful; an’ her hair an’ complexion just matches the girl on the calendar I got with John’s tobacco coupons las’ Christmas.”

“Complexion!” cried Miss Louella, “any girl, if she wants to, can have a calendar complexion these days, even if the Lord hasn’t seen fit to give her one. Speakin’ for myself, I say a right-minded female would scorn to make her face different from what the Lord intended it to be. An’ as for Nancy’s hair, it’s brazen enough to make the sun stand still; but all is not gold that glitters these days, an’ hair bleach is cheap an’ often advertised.”

Mrs. Talbot was about to vouch for the genuineness of Nancy’s hair and complexion when the girl hurried across the street and entered the post-office with a cheery “Good morning!”

“What were you an’ Sam Brackett laughin’ about?” asked Mrs. Hertz.

Nancy’s face dimpled with a mischievous smile. “Just an April fool joke he told me about. Is there any mail for me, Miss Louella?”

“No,” answered the postmistress, “there’s nothing for you to-day; but you’re mentioned on a post-card I have here for Mrs. Hale.”

“Am I? How—er—interesting! Thank you for telling me.”

“You ain’t heard from your father for a long time, I’ve noticed,” continued Miss Louella. “I s’pose he’ll be payin’ you a visit soon.”

“Perhaps. Two stamps, please.”

Jim Deane came in breathlessly. “How’s this, Louella? Hev you quit runnin’ the post-office? Cassburn’s all stirred up over your new sign. Did you paint it yourself?” he winked at Nancy.

“My new sign? You needn’t try to get off any o’ your April fool jokes on me, Jim Deane. While the Lord gives me strength to serve the Government, an’ the Government treats me on the level, I’ll run this post-office; an’ the only new sign you’ll ever see on my door’ll be a streamer o’ crape, that’s what.”

Jim scratched his head dubiously. “Well, Louella, I guess my eyesight’s failin’ me, but there’s quite a crowd over at Brackett’s an’ I bet a dollar to a hole in a doughnut that they’re passin’ remarks on your new sign. Jes’ step outside an’ see for yourself.”

“I vow there’s something up, an’ I’m goin’ out to see what it is.” Mrs. Talbot hurried out to the street.

“My grief an’ patience!” she exclaimed. “Louella, come out an’ see what’s happened!”

Miss Louella and Mrs. Hertz joined her, and several villagers crossed the street to form a laughing group about the postmistress. Her tall, gaunt form grew rigid, an angry flush suffused her thin face, and she had the peculiar, agonized expression of a person about to sneeze.

Among the spectators was Jerry West, a tall, broad-shouldered, smooth-faced man with a nimbus of reddish-gold hair; a crown of glory like that worn by Paderewski when he first startled the world with his wizardry on the ivory keys. There was nothing repulsive about Jerry, although he was simple-minded and was often called the village idiot. His features were finely chiseled, his smile was childlike in its sweetness, and his blue eyes had the rapt, dreamy gaze of a visionary. Simple Jerry always laughed when others did, and it was his deep, booming mirth that roused Miss Louella from her speechless amazement.

She loosened her jaw with a grim smile of virtuous superiority. “If you folks can see a joke in what is an insult to the Government, laugh if you like. But the Holy Writ says,—as the cracklin’ o’ thorns under a pot, so is the laughter o’ fools; an’ he who laughs the longest laughs last. Jerry, you go an’ get my ladder an’ turn that sign.”

She flounced into the house and closed the door with a resounding bang. The three green shades of

her bay-window were pulled down with rough jerks that almost tore them from their poles and weakened the springs.

For several days Miss Louella maintained a chilly aloofness of manner and greeted her visitors with a frosty smile. The women were not encouraged to linger for their customary interchange of gossip and, after brief remarks on the weather, they departed wishing that poor Louella would soon recover from the April fool joke which they did not venture to mention in her presence.

Jim Deane was irrepressible and, one morning after receiving his mail, he spoke to her with a tender solicitude which was belied by the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Say, Louella, I’m worried ’bout you, really I am! You ain’t yourself these days. You act as if you hed paralysis o’ the tongue. An’ your business seems to be fallin’ off. You ought to advertise your Gossip Shop, really you ought, Louella. It pays to advertise, you know.”

Miss Louella’s dry lips curved with a disdainful simper. “As the Holy Writ says, Jim Deane, you multiply words without knowledge, an’ it’s not for me to answer a fool accordin’ to his folly. But a word spoken in due season is like a stitch in time: so I’ll say right here an’ now that, when the last trumpet soundeth on the Day o’ Judgment, you’ll

find yourself among the brayin' goats an' not with the ninety and nine that are sittin' high an' dry on the starry throne. An' when it comes to gossip,—well, let him that is without guile live in a glass house an' throw stones; but your gossipin' tongue don't hide its light under a bushel or its needle in a haystack, that's what!”

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF MISRULE

FOR over three weeks April was in a good humor and pretended she was May. There were occasional showers of warm, gentle rain, like silver beads strung on threads of sunlight; showers that coaxed the leaves from the bare branches of the trees and played "I-spy" with the flowers, routing them from their winter hiding-places.

In the woods the pale, delicate clusters of the trailing arbutus bloomed shyly under their coarse, rusty leaves, hepaticas raised their downy heads, and trilliums opened their white chalices. Masses of violets appeared in the meadows, like splashes of blue paint.

In the gardens, tulip-beds were a riot of color, the lilacs wore their purple plumes, apple-trees were flushed with pink-tipped buds among their snowy blossoms, and the chestnuts, with their fanlike leaves spread out, disclosed their flowery cones and looked like Christmas trees decked with candles.

Every one exclaimed about the weather,—
"April's surprise party," Jim Deane called it.

April grew tired of hearing herself praised, and one Saturday she gave way to a tantrum in which

she revealed herself as the fickle jade that poets have immortalized. The sky was covered with gray clouds, low and menacing; a cold, boisterous wind raced off the leaden sea and the waves lashed the shore, tossing spray and pebbles over the rocks. Then came a deluge of rain, whipping the trees and pelting the tulips until they were prostrate, like a vanquished army, their green uniforms and brilliant banners of crimson, yellow, and white, torn and spattered with mud.

On this stormy afternoon the Graysons were gathered in the library. It was a nondescript, dingy, untidy room lighted by four recessed windows, and it served as a workshop and general living-room. Near one of the windows was a plain table littered with a large lump of damp clay, blocks of wood, drawing-pads, pencils, and painting materials. A larger table of scratched and dented mahogany stood in the centre of the room. The walls were lined with bookshelves filled with worn volumes and unbound magazines. There were loose piles of books on the floor, which Joan had taken from the shelves and neglected to replace.

A cheerful fire of driftwood burned in the grate,—a battlefield of flames roaring and crackling with frequent explosions that sent volleys of sparks skyrocketing up the great sooty chimney.

In a dim corner of the room stood an old grand-

father's clock, ticking solemnly and striking the hours when the hands indicated the half-hours. A cuckoo-clock in the hall chimed melodiously but never in unison with the living-room clock, for it was an advocate of daylight saving and gained twenty minutes each day. The stubborn irregularities of these two guardians of time had caused Harry Grayson to name them Ananias and Sapphira.

Nancy sat by the large table darning stockings. The mending-basket on the floor beside her chair was overflowing with loose hosiery, although neat little black, white, and tan piles on the table showed that she had already mended several pairs.

Nancy was the eldest of the Grayson family. Her twentieth birthday was only a few weeks away, Midsummer Eve. She was a small, slender girl with crinkly, copper-tinted hair, radiant complexion, and dark-lashed eyes which had a chameleon power of changing their color. When they sparkled with twinkles, their usual habit, Nancy's eyes were green; but a frown of worry turned them gray, excitement dilated their pupils until they appeared black, and when she wore her old velvet dress they mirrored its blue. To-day her eyes had a hazel gleam which they stole from her brown serge dress and the pretty topaz brooch that fastened her lace collar.

Her father had sent her the brooch with his merry greetings on the previous Christmas. The price of it would have paid the long-standing account at Brackett's store and thus relieved Nancy of considerable anxiety. It would also have enabled the family to celebrate the festive day with better fare than the boiled salt pork and baked potatoes which, owing to a depletion of Nancy's funds, assumed the leading rôle of their Christmas dinner instead of the seasonable turkey.

Sixteen-year-old Joan was huddled on the floor in a shadowy corner of the room where she was looking through old magazines, her favorite rainy-day occupation. She was barricaded with piles of torn, dusty Harpers, Centurys, Atlantics, and Scribners, so ancient that they antedated her birth. Ungainly shoulders and one leg stretched out to full length showed that she was a lank, overgrown girl. She frequently tossed her head to throw back her straight black hair which was at the awkward stage between Dutch-cut and shoulder length. Joan's eyes were gray and peered short-sightedly through gold-rimmed spectacles. She was an omnivorous reader. Anything in the shape of a book,—history, biography, essays, novels, even the frothiest of light fiction—was fodder for Joan's mind.

Skimpy meals and shabby clothes never bothered Joan. All she asked of life was to be allowed to

read and suck her thumb, a habit she had acquired in babyhood. Years of family teasing had failed to cure her of this infantile trick which she declared she would abandon on her eighteenth birthday, for when she reached that mature age she intended to smoke a pipe.

Harry was seated beside his work-table painting a water-color sketch of Monica, who sat patiently still on a carved, high-backed chair near one of the windows. He was just an ordinary growing boy of fourteen, with thick hair of dull brown, pleasant freckled face, and twinkling gray eyes.

Monica was a frail little creature of eleven, with silver-blond hair, wistful blue eyes, and pale, thin face. A pathetic little hunchback was Monica, patient, gentle, and uncomplaining; spending many sleepless nights in pain, but smiling with tear-filled eyes and insisting that she felt "just a little tired, and you go to bed, Nancy. I'll be all right in the morning, but please pray that morning will come very soon!"

Oonah Kelly, the faithful old Irish servant, often declared in a husky whisper, after she had crooned and rocked the suffering child to sleep in her great strong arms:

"Shure there's miny a saint in Hivin that'd be losin' his halo iv he had to pass an ixamination in swate, sufferin' patience wid our Monica!"

Oonah had an explosive temper. When work piled up alarmingly, or the kitchen stove balked, or the clothes-line weighed down with the week's washing broke, she could give a good imitation of Mount Vesuvius in action; but if Monica were near the whole world might turn askew and not a rough word would escape from the Irishwoman's lips.

"Och! Nancy, me darlint, I couldn't let a cuss fall out av me mouth wid that angel-child to hear me, though me tongue's fairly swellin' wid strong langwidge. Accordianly, I just *think* me swears an' cross mesilf. Howandiver, I send her away wid a lyin' excuse whin I get desprit; and then, wid the help o' God, I cuss till I'm cross-eyed. It's miny a pinance I'd be doin' iv I wint to confession which, saints be praised! I don't.

"Some wan's always playin' tricks wid the worruld, an' it's hard tellin' iv it's the Lorrud or the divil himsilf. Whin the Lorrud planted that tree av knowlidge in the Garden av Aden it was a trick; an' iv y'ask me, I'll say it was done wid a mane intintion. An' the divil followed the Lorrud's ixample by givin' Adam an' Ave a taste for the fruit. (A divil a chanct did they have, poor sows! Since thin, loife has been just wan trick afther another: so what's a cuss here an' there whin the worruld is just a bag av tricks?")

Oonah Kelly had lived with the Graysons ever

since Nancy's birth, in spite of the hard work and irregularly paid wages. She was devoted to the children and had worshipped their mother, "a saint on earth iv iver there *was* wan!"

Mrs. Grayson had died with a vision of Heaven in her eyes and a faint smile on her lips, knowing that the faithful Irishwoman would stand by the motherless children, whose handsome father, with his selfish, irresponsible gaiety, had allowed all the cares of the household to rest upon his wife's frail shoulders.

"His heart, iv he *has* wan, is signed wid the divil's monnygram, like the Chinese laundry marks on the tails av his shirrut, there's divil a doubt av that!" Oonah often declared to herself. "An' iv I c'd baste his handsome mug wid me broomstick it's niver a blarneyin' smile that'd light up his face agin, bad cess to him,—God forgive me for sayin' it!"

"Handsome Hal Grayson" spent most of his time in New York, where he was a popular clubman and a welcome guest in wealthy homes. He was a witty raconteur, a graceful dancer, and an ardent as well as successful devotee of society bridge-tables. A spicy, blackmailing column in *The Glass of Fashion*, a weekly magazine dedicated to the doings of society, was, according to whispered rumor, edited by Handsome Hal. The para-

graphs under the heading, “ *On Dit,*” were eagerly read. They were so cleverly worded that the identity of the victims of the delicately-veiled innuendoes was readily detected; but the publishers of the magazine escaped actions for libel because of the half-truths which underlay *On Dit's* scurrilous flippancies.

Many an exclusive hostess, whose private cupboard had its topmost shelf filled with dry bones of secret scandal, feared Hal Grayson, knowing that he could, and would gather up the loose bones, articulate them, and produce a full-sized family skeleton for the public to gloat over, if they overlooked his name in sending out their invitations. Consequently, his life was filled with trips to Palm Beach in the winter, lengthy visits to Newport and Bar Harbor in the summer, cruises with yacht-owning friends, and numerous Long Island house-parties.

He seldom visited his home, and it was not a desire to see his children that brought him to Cassburn. When his phenomenal luck at bridge failed him, as it occasionally did, his income depended on the sale of a family treasure. The old, neglected house had been gradually denuded of its portraits, tapestries, porcelains, and antique furniture, to satisfy Handsome Hal's craving for an idle, care-free existence.

His children dreaded the visits of their "intermittent father," as Harry called him. Ill-luck at cards made him irritable, and when he was at home he made no effort to conceal the inherent selfishness and tyranny of his nature. The charming manners and fascinating gaiety which had established his popularity in New York were unknown to his family.

During meals he read his newspaper, and if he deigned to speak it was only to sneer at their silence or their timid efforts at conversation; to grumble about the food, or to rebuke Nancy for the table solecisms of the twins, who were awed into frightened silence by his presence and seemed more awkward than usual in handling their knives and forks.

At the end of each meal the younger children always scampered away. Joan, with an armful of books, would disappear, going up to the attic or climbing an old apple-tree at the end of the garden. Flip and Flop would give way to their pent-up feelings with a wild whoop of joy when they reached the street, and then hurry off in search of new mischief to scandalize the villagers. Sensitive little Monica, who had once overheard her father make a heartless remark about her misshapen shoulders, would seek refuge and comfort in Oonah's kitchen. Harry, with a sturdy loyalty to Nancy, always re-

mained to share their father's abuse and assist in crating a valuable portrait or a piece of rare Chinese porcelain.

There was a general family rejoicing when Mr. Grayson departed for the station in Jim Deane's old Ford which was known as the Peace Ship, and which met the two daily trains for the purpose of conveying the mails to and from the village. Flip and Flop would turn somersaults, Harry and Joan would cheer lustily, and Monica would cling to Nancy, murmuring:

“Oh, I'm so glad we are alone again!”

As for Oonah, she would whack the kitchen table with her rolling-pin, or wave a dripping dishcloth in the air, and give vent to language so violent and sulphurous that Harry called it “poison gas.”

“My sowl to glory!” exclaimed Oonah, when Nancy once remonstrated with her over her habit of swearing. “It would puzzle a saint to live in this house widout the consolation av cussin' wance in a while. There's nothin' loike a good, hearty cuss for airin' the lungs an' relavin' the moind; an' I'll take all the quinsequences av me cussin' whin the toime comes. Whin the Lorrud made the Irish, He filled their sowls wid the divil's gunpowder, He did that! So it's not to be ixpicted that the Irish'll ixplode only wance a year, loike a Fourth av July cilibration. An' the short length av it is that whin

I cuss, it's wid the good intintion av purifyin' me sowl an' gittin' rid av the divil's gunpowder. Whin me sowl goes to glory the divil'll be wishin' I'd niver opened me mouth wid a cuss-worrud."

When Mr. Grayson's negotiations with a New York art dealer were concluded, a check for household expenses would come to Nancy. Later on, an express parcel would arrive, charges collect, containing presents for the children. In this way Handsome Hal acquitted himself of all responsibility concerning his family, "tiresome little beggars," as they were catalogued in his mind.

There would be expensive toys for the twins who needed shoes; some dainty trifle of adornment for Joan who scorned such feminine fripperies and longed for recently-published books; ties, kid gloves, and silken hose for Harry whose trousers Nancy had patched so often that he trembled to lean over and reveal the region of his anatomy which was mercifully concealed when he stood erect; a gorgeous, befrilled doll for Monica who had a bureau drawer filled with belles of dolldom which her father had sent her at various times, and who needed warmer clothing than what she was wearing; and lacy lingerie or a bit of jewelry for Nancy whose dresses were faded and threadbare.

The opening of Mr. Grayson's parcel and the distribution of the contents always brought forth ex-

clamations of disappointment, a chorus of disgust beginning with “Aw shucks!” from Joan and ending with “*Another* doll, oh dear!” plaintively uttered by Monica.

Nancy’s efforts to mother her brothers and sisters and keep them in order, so that the gossiping villagers might have less to say about the good-for-nothing Graysons, were futile. Harry and Joan did as they pleased in their happy-go-lucky way, in spite of her anxious protests. They had a blithe indifference for “Old Vox Pop,” as they called public opinion of Cassburn, which was shared by Flip and Flop whose mischievous pranks did much to tarnish the family’s reputation. Occasionally Oonah read the riot act when a fresh outbreak of mischief set the village chattering; but the Grayson home was, as Nancy often despairingly declared, “The House of Misrule!”

CHAPTER V.

THE ANGELIC IMPS

THE ticking of the clock, the crackling of the flames, and the occasional rustling of Joan's magazines were the only sounds within the living-room, which seemed to be wrapped in a dull, drowsy peace undisturbed by the wind and the rain outside.

Nancy sat frowning over her mending, Joan was literally buried in the magazines, Harry was absorbed in his painting, and Monica repressed her sighs of weariness as she sat erectly still with her chin tilted at the proper angle.

Gusts of wind battered the windows with loosened strands of Virginia creeper, and slanting rain-drops beat a ceaseless tattoo on all the panes.

Oonah entered the room with a log which she dropped into the grate, scattering ashes and sparks.

Nancy glanced up anxiously. "I wonder where Flip and Flop can be in this awful storm! Did they tell you where they were going, Oonah?"

"Niver a worrud did they say, but rushed off in a murderin' hurry before their breakfasts had toime to reach their stomachs. They're snug an' warrum somewheres, you may kiss the Book on

that; tellin' all the family hist'ry an' sacrets, for folks to twist into scandal. The saints forbid that they're housin' wid that Louella Greer! It's puttin' butter on bacon to tell you, for you know it alriddy, but that woman has the manest, longest, an' sharpest tongue that iver wagged in a mouth since Adam was a boy, an' that's a long toime since. Whin the Lorrud made Louella Greer He played a trick wid the worruld that the divil himsilf'd be proud av, I'm tellin' yuh that. God bliss the day! I niver saw such a rain. The ocean must have changed places wid the sky, an' it's all comin' down to wanct!" Oonah left the room with a noisy bang of the door.

"Don't worry, Nancy," said Harry; "those little imps can be safely trusted to look after themselves, never fear."

Joan had risen from the floor and was pulling down an avalanche of magazines, with a shower of loose pages, from a high shelf.

"They are probably tramping about in the rain, wading through puddles and wallowing in mud," she observed, as she wiped her dusty hands on her middy. "It's just the sort of lark they'd enjoy. They'll come home drenched to the skin, and tomorrow we'll have two pneumonia patients in the house. Then there'll be big doctor's bills and funerals and,—things," she finished lugubriously.

“Just listen to the wailing banshee!” scoffed Harry. “You’re a croaking raven, Joan, as cheerful as Mrs. Gummidge. Boil your head or go into a trance.”

Joan shrugged her shoulders awkwardly as she settled down among the magazines.

“I may be a croaking raven, but I know we’re going to have trouble in the family; sickness or death or perhaps a murder. Last night I dreamed that I was lying in my coffin, and ——”

“Aw! swallow your tongue!” interrupted Harry. “There, Monica, me darlint, the job’s done!” he held up the picture very carefully. “I’m sorry I kept you sitting so long, but I wanted to finish it to-day. I hope I haven’t tired you too much.”

Monica stood up, pressing her fingers on the back of her neck. “I’m not tired really, but my neck is stiff and achey. Oh! am I really like that? How nice!”

“I’ll leave it here to dry,” he laid the sketch on the table, “and to-morrow you shall give it to dear old Oonah for a birthday present.”

“Oh, Harry! may I?” her eyes sparkled with excitement, and a faint flush tinted her delicate face. “Oonah will be so glad to have it, because it will remind her of how kind she is to me and how much I love her.”

Nancy made room for her in the great armchair,

and the child nestled cosily with her head resting on her sister's shoulder.

“You have so much to do, Nancy,” she murmured, “I wish you'd teach me to darn stockings, then I could help you. I never seem to do anything useful.”

“You help me by being,—*just you.*” Nancy squeezed her affectionately.

A rapid, noisy rustling of leaves made Nancy turn to Joan.

“You'll strain your eyes if you read in that dark corner, Joan. Do go over to a window! And *please* stop sucking your thumb! Your hands must be filthy with the dust of those old magazines.”

“Aw! don't be so stuffy, Nance! I can see all right over here, and I like the taste of dust. Let me alone!” Joan sucked her thumb audibly in defiance of her sister's behest.

“Here come the angelic imps!” cried Harry from one of the front windows. “Gee! they're a funny sight! They're both tied together in one coat!”

The girls joined him and watched the twins come splashing through the puddles from the gate. They were enswathed in a long, yellow oilskin coat which was held up in stiff, billowy folds by a piece of clothes-line, twined about them and holding them together. As they wobbled along under a large

brown cotton umbrella, they resembled a huge mushroom.

Nancy hurried to the front door and led the children to the living-room, where she hastily unwound the rope and divested them of the dripping coat.

“We’re just wet in the feet,” announced Flip, “’cause we got to Solomon Simpson’s when it started to rain, and we’ve been there ever since. So we haven’t a damp thing on us.”

“And he tied us together in his rubber coat so that we could come home in the rain, ’cause he thought you might be worrying about us,” added Flop.

The twins sat on the rug before the fire and began to take off their shoes and stockings as they proceeded to relate their adventures.

“We had dinner with Solomon Simpson,” said Flip.

“Hamandeggs,” explained Flop.

“And he showed us his books and told us stories about the pictures in them,” continued Flip.

Flop leaned back with her arms propping her small body and held out her feet towards the fire, resting her heels on the brass fender.

“Ooh! we had a spiffy time!” she sighed blissfully, curling her pink toes.

“But where were you all morning?” questioned Nancy.

The twins looked at each other dubiously.

“It’s a secret, a deadly secret,” said Flip mysteriously.

“Yes,” agreed Flop, “it’s a sacred word of honor secret ’tween us two, and we’ve promised not to tell; and it’s a wicked, bad sin to break a promise. But I sort of *want* to tell ’cause it was e’citing what we did, and a secret makes me feel squidgy inside. We made an ad-adventure.”

“Let’s tell!” chuckled Flip.

“But Nancy’s got to cross her heart and promise not to object and scold when she knows!” declared Flop.

“Go ahead, Nance, cross your heart,” urged Harry. As Nancy complied, he continued, “Now, spill the beans, kids. I’m all ears.”

“First, we broke our savings bank ’cause we wanted to buy a birthday present for Oonah,” began Flip.

“Not so bad,” said Harry.

“Then,”—the little lad looked warily at Nancy, “we went over to Bradbury to get it!”

“Now, you promised not to object, Nancy!” cried Flop, observing Nancy’s frown, for the trip to Bradbury was breaking bounds. “We got a beautiful pitcher, but on the way home Flip broke it, so we took it to Solomon Simpson to be mended, and we’re going over to-morrow morning to get it

when it'll be dry and stuck together so's the break won't show."

"We just *had* to be disobeejinet and go to Bradbury," Flip continued, "but it wasn't a *wicked* disobejinance 'cause we went to buy the pitcher and it was a Holy Bible one,—Rebecca at the well. The holding part of the pitcher is the well and the handle is Rebecca, only I dropped it and Rebecca broke herself off."

Nancy, with a despairing shake of her head, selected two pairs of mended stockings and gave them to the twins. To remonstrate with them over the trip to Bradbury would be useless, for they would cry shame upon her if she repudiated her "cross-my-heart" vow and ventured one word of disapproval. They had confessed their "disobejinance" so there was nothing more to be said.

Flip and Flop were honorable little souls, sticklers for observing promises, and rigid truth-tellers; but for wayward, original mischief they were, as Oonah frequently declared, "the divil's own."

They were lovely children, nearing their eighth birthday. Even Miss Louella had to grudgingly admit that they were beautiful.

"Those twins, with their curly hair like golden halos an' their blue eyes like saints sayin' prayers, look like as if they were angels smellin' lilies on Easter cards, which they ain't," she said once to

Mrs. Talbot who, having buried her dreams of motherhood in two little graves, had a warm tenderness in her heart for all children.

“An’ their sweet, innocent faces,” continued Miss Louella, “are nothin’ but a wile o’ Satan to deceive folks that are rightfully suspicious. As the Holy Writ says, an’ it certainly holds good with those twins, beauty is a whited sepulchre that’s only skin deep, an’ it covereth a multitude o’ sins, for it’s filled with bones of iniquity.”

CHAPTER VI

NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS

THE storm increased as the afternoon wore on. Flip and Flop were crouched on a wide window-seat, exhaling vigorously and making little breath-clouds on the rain-splashed pane on which they tried to write their names with the tips of their tongues.

“Oh say!” Flip nearly fell off the seat in his excitement, “Jim Deane’s Peace Ship is stopping at the Thorold gate and some people are getting out ’cause they can’t make the gates open wide. There’s a lame, stoopy man wrapped in a rug, with a green awning shade over his eyes, and a big dog, and two, no *three*, real live Japaneezers!”

Flop drew in her tongue and flattened her nose against the pane.

“And there’s a wagon coming down the road with mountains of trunks and big boxes!” she cried.

Nancy, with the others, rushed to the window.

“The Thorolds have come back!” she exclaimed. “At least that must be old Mr. Thorold. How strange that he should return in this way without any preparation! I can remember when the family

used to come here every summer. There would always be an army of servants sent in advance to get the place ready. And now, that poor old man has come back alone after all these years! What an awful day for a home-coming!”

“He must be terribly old. See how he leans on his cane, and he can scarcely walk,” said Monica. “And there’s no one in that big, damp, dusty house to welcome him. Poor old man! I wish we could invite him here to supper. We ought to, because we’re his only next-door neighbors.”

“The good-for-nothing Graysons invite the rich Mr. Thorold to supper?” laughed Harry. “That *would* be a stunt; a sort of hidalgo’s dinner,—little meat and a great deal of table-cloth! What should we give him to eat? Oatmeal porridge, or our old standby,—boiled rice?”

“The Japaneezers would like rice,” said Flip. “Let’s ’vite them all over!”

“Oonah’s making raisin buns, I can smell them baking,” cried Monica eagerly. “I think we ought to forget that he’s so rich and we’re poor, and be friendly neighbors on a day like this, don’t you, Nancy?”

“Family,—I’ve an idea!” Nancy’s eyes flashed and her cheeks glowed.

“An *idea*?” Harry registered mock amazement. “What?”

“I’m going over to the Thorold place with some hot buttered buns and father’s little alcohol stove,—there are two tins of canned heat left; and I’ll make a cup of tea for that poor old man right away.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” gasped Joan.

“Oh, do go, Nancy!” Monica clapped her hands.

“I dare you to!” added Harry.

In a short time Nancy was ready, clad in Oonah’s plaid coat, which was known as *The Ark* because of its antiquity and its use by Nancy and Joan as their refuge in stormy weather. A slouchy waterproof hat was pulled down over her curls, and her feet were encased in Joan’s rubbers. They were too large, but Nancy had none of her own. She carried an old basket covered with a piece of blue and white oilcloth borrowed from one of the kitchen shelves.

“Wish me luck!” she laughed merrily, although she was beginning to have qualms of shyness. “‘I’m as valiant as a wrathful dove or most magnanimous mouse.’”

“You’ll never do it. I know you’ll turn back when you reach the door,” declared Joan.

“Go to it, old girl,” urged Harry. “You’re in for grief or glory. We’ll probably see the Japs chasing you out of the gate and hurling the buns at your head.”

Nancy splashed along the path, occasionally stooping to adjust her loose rubbers which the mud sucked from her feet. She turned at the gate and waved to her family whose excited faces were filling the window, and presently they saw her disappear through the lilacs that embowered the gates of Cedarwold.

A smiling Japanese answered her ring and found her blushing nervously in her struggle to overcome a desire to take to her heels and run.

“I’ve come—er—I thought that Mr. Thorold might like a bun,—er—some hot cups and a bun of tea,” she stammered.

“Much obliged! Come inslide. Mlister Torrold some slick bloss, velly slick, and stoves no glood. Fires not burn. Come inslide.”

He ushered her into a damp, gloomy room where the furniture, pictures, and chandeliers were enshrouded in dusty linen coverings. A dismal fire was burning half-heartedly in the grate, the logs oozing moisture and emitting puffs of rank, stinging smoke.

Mr. Thorold, wrapped in a tartan rug, was seated in a deep armchair near the fire, holding out his shivering hands. Nancy’s heart was thrilled with pity for the old man, and her shyness left her as she hurried forward into the room.

“I’m Nancy Grayson and I live next door.

Please don't get up!" as he made an obviously painful effort to rise. "I've brought some hot buns and an alcohol stove, and I'm going to make you a cup of tea. We knew your house would be damp and cold, and fires *never* burn without a lot of coaxing on a day like this."

"You are very kind to welcome a wanderer in this way. Did the fairies tell you that I was longing for a cup of tea?"

The voice startled Nancy. She had expected to hear the quavering tones of weak old age; but this,—it *couldn't* be old Mr. Thorold! The voice was rich, vibrant, youthful! The face, partly hidden by the green shade, was young, bronzed with exposure and pallid with suffering. A hint of a black mustache shadowed the upper lip, as though a finger dipped in tar had been drawn across it.

"Oh!" she faltered. "We thought, when we saw you arrive, that you were old Mr. Thorold who used to live here; that you were a weak old man!"

"I am Mr. Thorold's son Dick; but I'm hungry and cold, and I feel old and weak. My Japs are having difficulty with the fires, and ——"

"Then I'll make you a cup of tea at once!" she cried, tossing her hat and coat onto a chair and slipping off her rubbers.

She poked the sulky log in the grate until it blazed up with a cheery glow. Noki filled the little

kettle, when she unpacked her basket. The tea-pot and covered plate of buns were placed on the hearth, and she lighted the alcohol stove.

Dick Thorold raised his green shade for a brief glance at the girl, as her hands hovered over the table in setting out the things.

“I remember you now!” he exclaimed boyishly. “You used to be the little red—er—*bright*-haired girl in the garden next door!”

“Be truthful and stick to red,” laughed Nancy. “My hair was a horrible, fiery red in those days. It isn’t so bad now, but I’m used to my family’s teasing about it. I remember you,—a great, tall boy in white flannels playing tennis. I often threw the balls back to you when they came flying over the hedge; and once you filled my hat with crimson cherries and said that they matched my hair.”

Dick joined her in a merry laugh, but his ended abruptly in a strangling cough which shook his gaunt frame and made Nancy want to pat him on the back, as though he were a choking baby.

“Sugar? Cream?” she inquired with a pitying glance as he sank back in his chair, limp and gasping.

“B-b-both, please.”

He drank his tea with evident enjoyment and took the second bun she handed him without any hesitation.

“I can’t begin to tell you what a godsend this visit of yours is,” he began. “I was sitting here in this dreary room, listening to the storm and wishing myself back in the nursing-home in England that I left so gladly a short time ago. I didn’t intend to come to Cassburn so soon; but when I landed in New York the other day, I felt impelled to get home at once. Day before yesterday I startled Noki by telling him to engage a cook and assistant and get ready to leave the city immediately. It was a foolish impulse. I should have waited until the place was made more habitable; but I had a wild, unreasonable longing to get here in time to see—white violets. I dreamt about them last week, and as soon as my feet touched American soil I simply *had* to make the dream come true. Tell me, do white violets still grow in the moss under the cedar at the turn of the road?”

“Yes, we gather them every spring. You have come back in time for them.” She reached for his empty cup and refilled it. “I wish you had returned a day or two sooner. The weather has been glorious all month until to-day.”

“But had I arrived on a bright, sunny day you wouldn’t have called to welcome me with tea and hot buns. I’ll have another, please. My third,—or is it my fourth? They are scrumptious!”

She laughed and passed the plate to him.

“My father, whom you expected to see, died over five years ago. We were together in England, and I intended to come back to America immediately after his death. But the War broke out and I went over to France with the Tommies,—God bless ’em! It was a glorious chance for me to straighten out the tangle I had made of my life. Of course, you have heard stories of my wild youth?” he turned to her with a quizzical smile.

She nodded and chuckled. “Yes, I have been told that an ill-directed stone from your catapult broke Saint John’s nose in one of the stained-glass windows of the church. Jim Deane repaired the wounded saint, but, unfortunately, he used a piece of red glass he happened to have, and now the Beloved Disciple has a ruby-tinted nose which gives him the appearance of a wine-bibber.

“Another time you sneaked into Miss Louella’s house and nailed a fish under the top of her parlor table. It wasn’t discovered for several days and it gave the place a ‘very ancient and fishlike smell.’ Poor Miss Louella was distracted. She had Tom Willis take up the parlor floor, thinking there might be something dead and decaying under the boards. Of course, nothing was found there; but when Tom was carrying the table back to the room, he tipped it and then your crime was discovered. You see, it is difficult to live down one’s youthful

follies in a place like Cassburn, especially when one's evil deeds are written in the brass of Miss Louella's memory."

"Louella Greer!" he exclaimed. "Is that vinegar-veined old vestal still living? How well I remember her! Is she still running the post-office and the Day of Judgment? And does she still speak with authority on the views of the Almighty? Oh lor'!"

Nancy gave an affirmative nod, and a chuckling laugh rippled from her lips. "Yes, she's still 'on the job,' quoting the Holy Writ and mixing texts with every-day aphorisms. Her quotations are an abiding joy."

"And Solomon Simpson,—dear old soul! I hope he hasn't gone to his reward."

"No, Solomon is still mending our shoes and reading his beloved Shakespeare. His sign-board is worth seeing. He painted it three years ago, after reading Julius Cæsar. Imagine one long capital S serving as the initial letter of all the nouns:—Solomon Simpson, Surgeon to old Shoes. But it has to be seen to be appreciated. Most of the prominent Cassburnites of your day are still here, and there are only a few newcomers. The Leavitts are the latest arrivals. They came from Boston last year. Mr. Leavitt is a sort of Pooh-Bah. He's a lawyer, banker, real estate dealer, life

and fire insurance agent, and Sunday-school superintendent. He is also a personally conducted husband, so he is always spoken of as ‘Mrs. Leavitt’s husband.’ ”

“Ah! What is she like?”

“She’s a very superior person, thoroughly convinced of her own importance in the universe. She likes to display her knowledge by using long words, and when she speaks of diseases she always employs technical terms, like ‘idiopathic parotitis’ and ‘urticaria,’ which are our old childhood enemies in fancy dress,—mumps and hives.”

“How does she hit it off with Miss Louella? Don’t they clash?”

“Miss Louella is somewhat awed by Mrs. Leavitt’s weighty diction and condescending manner, and regards her with a dumb wonderment, as though she were a double-tailed dog or a triple-headed cat. Mrs. Leavitt, by the way, is a Theosophist and goes in for esoterics. She claims that her soul-vision is so highly developed that she can visualize our auras and see the colors of our moods. Shall I make you some fresh tea?”

“No, thanks,—but don’t go yet!” he pleaded, as she rose to pack the tea outfit in her basket. “You have brought so much cheer into this wilderness of dust and gloom. It is interesting to hear about the villagers after my years of absence. I am going

to stay here all summer,—to loaf and get my mind and body in tune. Tell me about yourself, your family. ‘Sisters and brothers, little maid, how many may there be?’”

“‘How many? seven in all, she said,’” finished Nancy. “That includes dear old Oonah Kelly, who scolds and loves us and tries to keep us going. I’m the eldest of the family. Joan is next. She’s clever and queer, so she’ll probably become famous. Harry is going to be an artist. He has great talent for drawing and painting, and I hope he will have a chance to study art some day. Monica is a darling little dreamer, full of quaint fancies that, I think, will blossom into poems when she is older. She has a marvelous memory and knows miles of poetry by heart. Our family ended with twins, and they are a pair of pickles. They are sure to go through life with a hum and a buzz and turn the world dizzy.”

“And you?” questioned Dick. “What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I’m just an ordinary, half-educated girl. The fairies who attended my christening didn’t bestow any talents on me as they did on the others, so I shall probably be an old maid teacher of an infants’ Sunday-school class. Perhaps, in time, I may qualify as Miss Louella’s successor and become the leader of the village gossips.”

“ Heaven forbid ! ” cried Dick.

“ Oh ! it has actually stopped raining ! ” Nancy crossed to one of the windows and drew aside the dusty curtains.

Dick rose with painful difficulty and hobbled with the aid of his cane to her side.

“ See, there’s a rainbow to welcome you ! ” she exclaimed. “ A glorious ending to this gloomy day, — a lucky omen, isn’t it ? ”

He looked down at her eager, happy face. “ Will you let the rainbow be a sign, a covenant of our friendship, Miss Nancy ? Let us be friends, as well as next-door neighbors. ”

“ I’d love to be friends, but —— ” She hesitated, and a flush of embarrassment crept over her face. “ You see, we’re known as ‘ the good-for-nothing Graysons, ’ and nearly every one disapproves of us. We’re not desirable neighbors, as you’ll find out before you have been here very long. Our friendship isn’t worth having, really it isn’t. ”

“ In the old days I was ‘ good-for-nothing Dick Thorold. ’ So we are quits in that respect. And now, I’m a battered, useless bit of humanity, lonely and friendless ; so, let us form a little society of ‘ good-for-nothings ! ’ Come, promise before the rainbow fades. ” He held out his hand, so white and thin with suffering that it was more eloquent than his words.

Nancy grasped it in both of hers. Her eyes were softened with a hint of tears and her lips curved with a tender smile of sympathy.

“I promise,” she said shyly.

“And you’ll come again soon,—to-morrow?” he urged. “And bring the others with you. I want to know them all. Let us hold a general meeting of our society to-morrow.”

“But they’ll bother you to death with questions about the War,” she objected. “The twins will be sure to ask about all sorts of ghastly details; and you won’t want to talk War. You must have suffered so horribly!”

“It will be a good way to get my hideous memories talked out of my system,” he declared. “I have a feeling that the twins are going to do me good.”

“Very well, we’ll all come if you’ll agree to shoo us off as soon as you tire of us.” She enveloped herself in the great coat, and pulled her hat down over her ears so that the brim turned back from the clustering curls on her forehead.

“Wait a moment, please. I want to introduce you to a pal of mine,—a real war hero.”

He gave a shrill, clear whistle. There was a rush of padded feet along the hall, and a German police dog came bounding into the room, to fawn at Dick’s feet with whines of joy.

“Bobs, this is a friend.” Dick placed Nancy’s hand on the animal’s head. “He’s a German dog, Miss Nancy, but he’s lived it down.”

Bobs, after a short, friendly bark, licked her fingers.

“Is he a war dog?” she asked. “Where did you get him?”

“I found him badly wounded among a heap of dead Huns in a German dugout. We were driven out, but I managed to get him over to the British lines and had him treated by one of our surgeons. He soon adopted me as a pal, and I called him after that great little Britisher,—Lord Roberts. He is worthy of his name. He was mentioned in dispatches several times, and decorated for bravery and distinguished service.”

“I am very proud to know him, and I hope we shall be friends, eh, Bobs?” She took the dog’s head between her hands and gazed into the limpid brown eyes.

“He accepts you without demur,” said Dick.

Nancy hooked her arm through the handle of her basket and left with a promise to come again very soon and to bring the family. Dick remained at the window and watched her carefully pick her way along the muddy driveway. She was a grotesque little figure in the huge, clumsy coat and shapeless hat.

The rain-drenched garden sparkled, birds flashed through the air, and a robin swooped down to the grass beneath the window. It looked up at Dick with a saucy tilt of its head and chirped gaily, seeming to say:

“Welcome home! I’m another next-door neighbor!”

CHAPTER VII

PAN'S BROTHER

THE people of Cassburn were gregarious and hospitable, and when they learned of Dick Thorold's arrival they were eager to greet him in the wholehearted, neighborly fashion that prevails in country places. The fact that he was a returning soldier gave a zest to their welcome. Moreover, he was ill and alone, and the simple villagers were moved to pity over his dismal home-coming.

The women let their memories drift back beyond his black-sheep days to the times when he had sat, dirty and disheveled after a runaway woodland outing with the village boys, on their back-doorsteps and crunched cookies or smacked his lips over a hot turnover.

The men remembered him as an eager, questioning lad, digging his toes ecstatically in the dirt with unwonted barefooted freedom, as he listened to their yarns.

"The Thorolds didn't know how to manage that boy o' theirs," Jim Deane said to the men who were gathered, according to Saturday night custom, at Brackett's store on the evening of Dick's return. "He was a great kid, he was, always ready for a

lark an' never lettin' our boys be blamed for his mischief; but owning up to everything with a steady look in his eyes an' a fearless smile that made you end in pattin' him on the head, when you'd had the intention o' lickin' the hide offen him."

"That's true," agreed Sam Brackett, as he weighed Mrs. Neve's pound of sugar and generously disregarded an overweight of two ounces. "With his proud lady mother an' his father who was soft an' easy one minute and over-strict and harsh the next, the lad hadn't much chance to be other than he was,—a bit wild and foolish."

Solomon Simpson rose from the packing-case on which he was sitting. "Neighbors, I move that we forget Dick's family and their ways, and overlook his mistakes which were the results of his bringing-up, and give him a hearty welcome that'll blot out the past. When all's said and done, he's one of our boys. He's done his bit in the War, and now he's come back to us, crippled and alone. So, let us give him a welcome that'll make him feel that he belongs to us!"

Solomon's motion was carried without a dissenting voice, and the erstwhile black sheep emerged from a bath of public opinion with whitewashed fleece that placed him in the same class with Mary's little lamb.

Several women were late for church the next

morning. They had hurried to Cedarwold with contributions from their pantries: a pie, a cake, a pan of biscuits, fresh butter, cream, and eggs. As Mrs. Talbot observed, “Folks movin’ into a house always need extra vittles;” and she remained away from church to roast a chicken with all the savory trimmings of a home-cooked dinner, which her husband carried over, hot and steaming, for Dick’s midday meal.

During the afternoon several men drifted in to talk with Dick and smoke his tobacco. They stayed on until the watchful Noki, with his bland smiles and smooth tones, informed them that it was time to go.

“Long tlalk make bloss too much tired. Ttime for his day-sleep. Come aglain, much obliged.”

On Monday morning Mrs. Neve, the village char-woman, began house-cleaning at Cedarwold. The doors and windows were opened wide to the sun-warmed air, and a brisk wind blew in from the sea, chasing the damp, musty odors from the rooms. Jerry West was put to work in the garden, which years of neglect had made a tangled wilderness.

“Jerry ain’t what you’d call a landscape gardener,” Jim Deane informed Dick on Sunday afternoon, “but jes’ turn him loose in your garden an’ you won’t know the place a week from now. He has a wonderful way with growin’ things, has

Jerry. He's a sort o' nature wizard. By heck! I b'lieve he could turn the Desert of Sahary into a Garden of Eden!"

"I don't remember him," remarked Dick.

"Maybe not. You only come here in summer time, and Jerry was always wanderin' off by himself. He always kept away from strangers," was Jim's response, "but he's a natural wonder, he is! He's got a way with animals that jes' passes understandin'. He can cure the sick ones an' tame the wild ones. I bet if he was put into a cage o' roarin' lions he'd have 'em cooin' like doves in a few minutes.

"Whenever I have a bad-tempered horse to shoe I jes' natcherly send for Jerry, seein' as how I don't want my shop to be kicked to pieces an' look as if a Zeppelin had passed by an' dropped a bunch o' forget-me-nots on it. An' while I'm livin' in hopes o' goin' to Heaven some day, if only to spite Louella Greer, I ain't in such a hurry that I want to be kicked up there by a horse that has hell-fire in his eyes an' the devil in his heels."

"What does Jerry do?" asked Dick.

"Do? Why, nothin' much. He jes' smiles like a baby an' walks up to the cussed critter, strokes it an' whinnies like he was a horse himself. Then the horse whinnies too and nozzles against Jerry's shoulder; an' I get busy with my hammer, an' the

shoe's on before the animal knows I've drove a nail. Jerry's a wonder! We call him Simple Jerry, but I sometimes think he's the wisest man in the village.

“ He seems to be deaf at times, but I sorter feel it's 'cause he doesn't always *want* to hear; like his mind was too busy to be bothered listenin' to what folks hev to say. Mostly he understands real well what is said to him, an' if he *is* deaf he's a mighty good mind-reader!

“ Of course, he's dumb, which makes him seem stupid, maybe, but his eyes hev a look in them as if he had great thoughts; an' I often wish he could speak for half an hour. I bet we'd hear something worth while.”

Jerry's utterance was limited to feeble, inarticulate sounds and deep-toned, rumbling laughter; but he had a wonderful faculty for imitating birds and animals, and a magic power of attracting the furred and feathered creatures of forest and garden. At his summons squirrels, skunks, and rabbits would cluster about him and eat from his hand; and birds would flutter down and perch on his shoulders. Jim Deane often said it was a wonder they didn't build nests in his hair.

Jerry's story was a sad one, a sordid village tragedy. His poor, frail mother, starved, neglected, and beaten by a brutal, drunken husband had died when Jerry came into the world too soon.

Her bleeding, swollen lips tried to smile when her baby was placed beside her, and they uttered no word of what had happened before she had called to her neighbors for help in her extremity; but her bruised body and broken arm told a pitiful tale to the two women who closed her eyes and prepared her for burial.

Mrs. Smellie went into the kitchen to give Bob West a liberal piece of her mind; but Bob, who had exhausted himself in his savage attack on his wife, lay on the floor in a drunken stupor, his left hand clutching a tangled tress of soft brown hair.

Mrs. Smellie cared for the little motherless Jerry until a strange woman appeared at Bob West's home, a slovenly creature who seldom showed herself in the village. After three years the woman disappeared from Cassburn, but she was occasionally seen in Bradbury, the nearest town, in the company of drunken sailors.

One night, when Jerry was almost five years old, the Smellies were roused by sounds of screaming and swearing in the house next door. The noise suddenly subsided. Jerry, as they rightly supposed, had taken refuge in the barn. The child had the agility of a monkey in climbing to the rafters beyond his father's reach, and thus escaped many a brutal flogging.

A little later the wakeful Smellies heard a man's

voice in agonized cries for help, mingled with a loud pounding and hammering.

“ Bob’s havin’ the D. T.’s again an’ smashin’ up the furniture,” said Walter Smellie. “ But I guess the kid’s all right an’ safe in the barn, so I’ll let Bob fight his snakes by himself.”

The next morning revealed a tragedy. Bob West had followed Jerry into the barn and had been kicked to death by his horse whose temper was as vicious as his own. The child, unharmed except for the bruises caused by his father’s beating, was sitting on the floor beside the battered body. His blue eyes blinked in the sunlight that poured into the gloomy barn when Walter Smellie opened the door. The great horse, whose hoofs were clotted with blood, was whinnying gently and rubbing its nose on the boy’s golden hair.

Little Jerry was now alone in the world, but he was cared for by the women of the village, who took turns in mothering him. Being docile and healthy, he was no trouble, and he showed a dog-like affection for all who were kind to him.

When he was ten years old his uncanny kinship with nature proclaimed itself, and he would disappear into the woods for days at a time. He never cared to remain indoors. In summer, he would eat his meals under the trees and sleep under the stars. In winter, he would take the food given him to the

barn, and his bed was a pile of hay. The villagers wisely allowed him to indulge in his "queer ways," and placed no restraint on him.

"There seems to be a prayin' silence 'bout Jerry," said Mrs. Talbot, "an' he watches a sunset as if he was lookin' right into heaven an' smilin' at the angels. He stands in the pourin' rain with his face turned up to the sky; an' he holds his arms out when the wind is blowin', lookin' so happy that it seems like he was listenin' to the voice o' God!"

Jerry grew up to a sturdy manhood, gentle and tender as a woman, sweet and affectionate as a child. The men provided him with clothes which the kindly women took turns in washing and mending. Every Monday morning Jerry would appear at a kitchen door with a bundle which was consigned to the family wash-tub. Then he would chop and pile wood, dig and weed the garden, beat carpets and clean windows: for Jerry was a grateful fellow, always anxious to do something in return for any kindness shown to him.

Louella Greer disapproved of Jerry, and he showed his dislike for her in an obstinate refusal to accept anything from her hands, although he always complied with her orders when she wanted any chores done.

"That simple-minded Jerry gives me the creeps," she said one day to Solomon Simpson when she

brought a pair of shoes to be resoled. “He stares at me in his silly way, like as if I wasn’t there at all. This morning he did some odd jobs for me, an’ when I took his dinner out to him he wouldn’t touch it, but shook his head, like as if it wasn’t good enough for him. He’s just a plain fool, I say.”

“That’s as you see it, Louella,” replied Solomon, “but I’d call him ‘God’s fool.’ It seems to me as though God’s hands were resting on Jerry’s soul, to keep him like a child and to save him from becoming the sort of man his father was. He has the body of a strong man, but his soul is as sweet and innocent as a child’s. He has been given something that the rest of us have missed,—nature’s wisdom; and that keeps him very near to God, I think.”

“Well, man’s wisdom is good enough for me,” said Miss Louella, in a tone of satisfaction that implied her possession of a goodly share. “An’ bein’ born a human, I’d rather talk an’ act like other humans than be different. As for God’s hand restin’ on Jerry’s soul, that’s just one of your poetry notions; an’ there’s nothin’ in the Holy Writ to prove it, that’s what.”

Solomon smiled and his eyes shone with a tender light. “You forget, Louella. Jesus said: ‘Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them

and blessed them.' He also said, 'Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones.' Jerry is one of God's 'little ones,' Louella."

"You're misusing the Holy Writ, Solomon, twistin' it to fit your own ideas, which ain't what the Bible was made for, I say." With this emphatic remark, Miss Louella departed.

All the children loved Jerry and never dreamed of teasing him. They laughed at his clumsy antics when he joined in their games, but he considered their laughter part of the fun, as indeed it was.

There was a sweet comradeship between the gentle, childlike man and little Monica Grayson. He was always bringing her gifts from the woods; rare wild flowers that the children were never able to find, lacy skeleton leaves, or a shining stone embossed with a delicate mosaic of silver-green lichen. In March he would scrape away the snow on a sunny hillside to find a few pale green blades of grass, and bring them to her as his first spring offering. He knew where to find the earliest pussy-willows, where the trailing arbutus bloomed in secret beauty under the dead leaves, and where the violet buds, too shy and timid to open, lurked in the shelter of an old oak's twisted roots.

He would mumble in his vague, inarticulate way, as though he were trying to tell her that these little gifts he brought her were messages from the woods,

—glad tidings of the coming of spring, treading unsuspected on the heels of relentless winter.

“God gave Jerry a crooked mind and me a crooked body,” Monica explained to Oonah, “so I am sure He intended us to be good friends.”

“My sowl to glory! I don’t see how you can love that great galumphin’ man, Monica darlint, an’ play wid him loike you do, trimmin’ his head wid a grapevine so that he looks loike the pickshure on the kiver o’ that wine cattylog your father left behind,—Batchus it was called; an’ sittin’ on his knee an’ lettin’ him carry you.”

“But you know, Oonah, my pain often goes away when Jerry holds me in his arms; or, at least, it doesn’t seem so hard to bear. He is so big and strong, and he seems able to give me some of his strength. When he looks at me his eyes haven’t pity in them like other people’s eyes. Pitying eyes hurt me,—they make me remember my crooked shoulders. Jerry’s eyes are filled with love. And he always smells so nice and woodsy, like pine-needles and sweet fern and clean, damp earth. Jerry is really a very wonderful fairy person. He’s Pan’s brother.”

“Pan? Who the di—er,—who’s he?”

“Pan is a nature saint, the one that animals, trees, and flowers pray to; just the way you do to your church saints, Oonah.”

“May the divil fly,—I mane the saints presarve us! Shure, Monica, it's nonsince you're spakin'. Trees don't pray, trees don't talk.”

“Oh, yes, they do! They have a wonderful language all their own, which people are too stupid to understand. But God has taught Jerry to understand and speak it. That is why he doesn't trouble to talk the way we do, and people call him dumb. You believe in fairies, Oonah, so you ought to believe in Pan, the fairies' god.”

“Shure I belave in fairies, Irish fairies!”

“I remember your telling me about the fairy doctors in Ireland,—the people whom the fairies love and carry away and keep with them for seven years.”

“Shure I did, an' there was divil a lie in that,—savin' yer prisence!”

“You said too, Oonah, that those whom the fairies love are not always carried away, but they become different from ordinary people, and grow silent and strange, and take to wandering about alone in fairy places; ‘gentle places’ you called them. I love your Irish way of calling fairies *gentle* people. Jerry is different and ‘gentle.’”

“Shure, I niver thought av that! You're a wise child, Monica darlint. Maybe it's true, as you say, that the fairies have a claim on Jerry. Think av that now!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE "CHEER-UPPERS"

NANCY'S announcement of Dick Thorold's wish to meet her family was received in various ways. There was noisy jubilation from Flip and Flop, and shy delight from Monica, but Harry and Joan were scornfully indifferent.

"And he wants us all to go over to-morrow afternoon," finished Nancy.

"Deedle, deedle, deedle!" sang the twins in unison.

"The whole gang? Not much!" said Harry. "We'd look like a delegation from an orphan asylum, or a visiting committee of the Ancient Order of Scarecrows. Count me out."

"I'm not going, that's flat!" declared Joan. "I hate meeting strangers, never know what to say, always stammer and splutter, and I can't speak the truth when I try to be polite and proper. Social stunts aren't in my line."

"Or mine," added Harry. "And with a crippled host I shouldn't know what to talk about; whether to appear stupidly oblivious of his damaged condition, or to turn on the weeps and pump up sympathy. I'm not taking any, thank you. I stay at home."

Flip and Flop were reduced to tears and mournful wails of expostulation on Sunday afternoon when Nancy decided to postpone their visit until the following day.

"There are so many men calling on Mr. Thorold to-day," she said. "He must be worn out with seeing all those people. We'll go over to-morrow afternoon, instead."

This was one of the rare occasions when Nancy's determination withstood an onslaught of pleading from the twins. She usually surrendered when attacked by vehement embraces, tearful kisses, and wheedling tones; but this time she was adamant.

"You'll really and truly take us over to-morrow?" asked Flip, with a deep sigh of resignation.

"Really and truly, I will."

"Is it a 'cross your heart and hope to die if you don't' promise?" wailed Flop.

"And sacred word of honor?" supplemented Flip.

"On my sacred word of honor!" repeated Nancy solemnly, with uplifted hand.

Monday, however, was one of poor little Monica's bad days. Pain gnawed incessantly at her back, and she lay weak and helpless on the couch in the bedroom which she shared with Nancy. The mute agony in her eyes deepened, as she tried to smile.

"You go with Flip and Flop, Nancy. I won't

mind being alone. I'll try to sleep. Do go! I'll be all right," she pleaded.

"No, Monica dear, I won't leave you. We'll all go over another time, when you are feeling better."

"But you promised on your sacred word of honor to take them to-day!" protested the child, "and if you break your promise, it will be my fault."

Nancy puckered her brow with a little frown of perplexity.

"I know what to do!" she cried. "I'll let them go by themselves. I'll run downstairs now and tell Oonah to get them ready when they come from school."

She went to the kitchen where she found Oonah in the midst of a wash-day chaos.

"Save us an' bliss us! Are you tellin' me that you're goin' to let thim little divils go to call on that young man by thimsilves? They'll disgrace the family intoirely, they will; for niver a wan can get next to the near av thim for diviltry, an' more's the pity!"

"I know it," sighed Nancy. "It's a terrible risk, but I can't leave Monica alone; and if I don't let them go, as I promised, there'll be a houseful of trouble. So, please see that they are washed and brushed and properly dressed, Oonah, and we'll hope for the best."

"Hope for the best, as you say; but that's not so

aisy whin your ixpictations are for the worst, there's divil a doubt av that!"

When the twins returned from school in the afternoon they submitted to Oonah's ministrations with unusual docility. There were no squirming protests over the combing of unruly curls, and no lusty howls when a soapy cloth drew tears from their eyes.

Washed, combed, and arrayed in spotless white duck, they looked, as Dickens's immortal Mrs. Kenwigs might weepingly declare: "Too beautiful to live!"

"There!" Oonah surveyed them with grim satisfaction. "You look as prim an' proper as a pair av saints pickled in Howly Water! The divil himself wouldn't know his own, iv he could see you now. But I throw it out as a hint,—thim three Jap haythens over there are liable to make a meal av you if they get the chanct, which they will iv I hear av you not behavin' yoursilves. For I'll sell the both av you to thim for fifty cints, I will. You may kiss the Book on that!"

Flop rang the Cedarwold bell, and when Noki opened the door Flip assumed the duties of spokesman.

"How d'ye do? We hope you're well and glad to see us! I'm Flip and she's Flop, and we're calling on Mr. Thorold."

“Much obliged,” smiled Noki.

Dick was playing his violin when the sedate little visitors were ushered into the room.

“The honorable Flip-Flops,” announced Noki.

Dick laid the violin and bow on the table beside his chair.

“Ah!” he smiled, as he pushed up his green shade for a momentary glance at his guests. “You are the Grayson twins, aren’t you? I am delighted to see you.”

The children came forward very slowly until they were about three feet from Dick’s chair. Then Flip, with his right hand pressed over his heart, made a very elaborate bow; and Flop, daintily holding out her stiff skirt, dipped in a low curtsy.

“No one taught us to do that, we copied it from an old valentine,” Flop informed their host. “And we’ve brought calling cards, ’cause this is our first grown-up call; and we stole them from Oonah’s pack that she plays solitude with.”

Very solemnly they each presented Dick with a card on which they had written their names in wobbly calligraphy. Flip’s card was the ace of diamonds, and Flop’s the ace of hearts. Dick received the offerings with proper decorum and indicated seats near him.

“Pray be seated,” he restrained a smile. “I trust your family are all well.”



“WE’VE COME TO CHEER YOU UP, YOU KNOW.”— Page 101.

"Thank you for asking," replied Flip. "We're all feeling quite chipper, except Monica. That's why she couldn't come this afternoon, and Nancy had to stay with her 'cause Oonah's busy at the wash-tub. Joan and Harry *wouldn't* come 'cause they don't like going into society; but we thought we'd like to try it. We've come to cheer you up, you know. We're very good 'cheer-uppers,' so we hope you need 'cheer-upping.'"

"I am sadly in need of 'cheer-upping,' and I am very grateful to you both for coming," replied Dick heartily.

"Feeling blue and lonely?" inquired Flop.

"Terribly so." Dick stroked his mustache to conceal his smile.

"That's good!" Flop's face beamed with an angelic smile. "I like your manners, you make me feel grown-up and importnit. Most grown-ups are so sniffy, but you are a polite sort of gentleman, and ——"

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" interrupted Flip.

Flop glared at her brother. "You shut up! I was to begin the polite conversation with a weather remark, and you were to have the War; and now you've poked in and said what I was going to say,—you mean, silly gump!"

"Well, you gab too much," retorted Flip. "Shut up yourself! Give me a chance to get at the War."

“Oh, take your old War!” scoffed Flop.

“Ahem,” Flip crossed his legs and almost fell off his chair. “Er—what—er—how did you like the War?”

“The War?” Dick paused, as though giving the subject deep consideration. “I must confess that on the whole I didn’t like it at all. Nevertheless, there were times when I found it very exciting.”

“I call that *extra-citing*,” put in Flop.

“Er—I must confess that I don’t think much of the way you ended it,” began Flip. “If I’d been General Perishing, I wouldn’t’ve let the Germans have any armysticks or Legs of Nations. You and Perishing quit too soon.”

“You see, old chap, we were ordered to stop fighting, and we had to obey,” explained Dick apologetically.

“Obeejinence is a very tiresome thing,” sighed Flop. “It’s like being shut in a trap.”

“Exactly,” assented Dick.

“Obeejinence is our virtue this week.” Flop smoothed her stiff skirt as she spoke. “We go every Friday afternoon to Mrs. Leavitt’s class. She’s a Therlossyphist, and she calls her class the Lowcuss Group, ’cause it makes us holy. Lowcuss is a holy flower, you know.”

“Lowcuss? A flower?” questioned Dick doubtfully.

"Yes, a sort of lily thing, a Therlossyphist flower."

"Ah!" Dick's mind promptly identified the mysterious blossom as a lotus.

"Every week we study a new virtue and try to stick it on our souls," said Flop.

"We're awfully virtuous," added Flip.

"Mrs. Leavitt calls it character building. Last week we had honesty, and couldn't tell lies. We have all sorts of virtues stuck on our souls." Flop smiled blissfully.

"Sounds rather like stamp-collecting," observed Dick.

"Erzactly, old chap," agreed Flip.

"Mrs. Leavitt says we are little lowcusses," continued Flop, "little unfolding flowers, and our virtues make us smell sweet, and our goodness spits out of us like perfume from a bottle that has a squeeze-ball on it. We have to squirt kind thoughts out of ourselves over all the queer things we notice about other people. F'rinstance, when I look at Susan Avery, I pretend that her scarred lip is a smile turned wrong-side out. Mrs. Leavitt says we must have kind thoughts about every one, even the Germans!"

"The divil fly away wid them!" Flip smiled benignly.

Dick smothered his laugh with a cough.

“ Er—quite so,” he gasped.

“ Did you kill any Germans in the War? ” asked Flip.

“ I believe I killed a few, but ——”

“ Did you get any ribbons and medals and things? ” cried Flop.

“ I did get a medal, but I ——”

“ Oh! tell us what you did, and how you got it! ” exclaimed the two children.

“ I don’t quite remember,” said Dick diffidently. “ Whatever it was, it was only what thousands of others did throughout the War. But some one happened to see me do it. You see, it isn’t so much what you *do* that gets a medal, it’s the luck of having some one see and remember.”

“ Aw-w-w-www! ” Flip’s disappointment prolonged the monosyllable into a drawl. “ I thought getting medals was like this: you’d see a chance of doing a brave deed and do it quick before any one could sneak the chance away from you; and then you’d rush over to a General or any King that happened to be around, and say: ‘ Here, gimme a medal,’ and all the army would cheer and clap their hands.”

“ It seems to me,” Flop gazed steadfastly at Dick, “ that you’re rubbing your mustache a nawful lot. There isn’t much to it, is there? It looks like a little black caterpillar crawling over your lip. Do

you stroke it to make it grow, or because it is itchy?"

Dick, who had frequently hidden his smiles with his hand, now laughed outright.

"Personal remarks, personal remarks; somebody's making personal remarks," sang Flip.

Flop clapped her hand to her mouth. "Oh, I forgot we were talking to a grown-up! Personal remarks aren't polite. Excuse me, but I'd really like to know if your mustache *does* itch, and why your lips are so twitchy."

"You're personal-remarking again," warned Flip.

"Oh dear!" sighed Flop. "Personal remarks are always so int'resting, aren't they? Jim Deane says he wears a mustache to keep his teeth warm, but yours isn't big enough for that."

Dick rang a bell and, when Noki appeared at the door, he gave a brief order.

"Since this is your first grown-up call we must have afternoon tea in real, grown-up fashion," he explained to the children.

Flop danced on her toes. "Ooh! deedle, deedle, deedle!" she cried.

"You're not acting like a grown-up," Flip frowned at his sister.

She answered him with a grimace, and then she turned seriously to their host.

“This isn’t meant for a personal remark, but I want to know what we are to call you. Plain mister is so common, and any one can be a mister, except ladies; and they have to be misses or missuses. Have you any—er—sort of button to your name, like General or Admiral, or are you just a pufft?”

“I’m a captain,” admitted Dick. “But, may I ask, what is a pufft?”

“A pufft is a man in the army who’s just a—well, he’s just a pufft, that’s all,” she vaguely explained. “I saw in a newspaper once a long row of names of killed soldiers,—‘Our Gallant Dead’ with a black border. There were three captains, a couple of loots and four corpses; but all the others were puffts. A nawful lot of puffts were killed. It’s a funny little word spelled with three letters,—p-v-t.”

Flip forestalled Dick’s reply. “I think we’ll call you Captain Dick. That’s a chummy sort of name, and we’re going to be chums, aren’t we?”

“We *are* chums, I hope,” said Dick, holding out his hands.

They responded with vehement grips.

“I wish,” Flop hesitated, “that we could see your eyes. I’m not being personal-remarky, but I’d like to look you square in the eye with a man-to-man look.”

Dick raised his eye-shade.

"Oh! Your eyes are like brown velvet!" she exclaimed, "and they're *seeing* eyes! You're not going to be blind, are you?"

"No," replied Dick soberly, "I have escaped that."

Noki came in with a tray which he placed on the table beside Dick, who turned to Flop with a friendly smile as the servant withdrew.

"Now, Flop, I hope you will pour the tea for us."

"Oh! may I, Captain Dick?" Her face glowed with delight at the honor thrust upon her. "I've never poured tea before, and I've always wanted to. It's such a grown-uppy thing to do!"

She stood on tiptoe, the end of her tongue peeping through her puckered lips, as she lifted the teapot with both chubby hands.

"There!" she breathed deeply, with blissful content. "I didn't spill much on the tray-cloth, and I hope you don't mind a sloppy saucer. Do you take sugar and cream, Captain Dick?"

"Both, please, and two lumps."

"There isn't much room for *much* cream, and you'll have to drink very carefully 'cause the cup is too full. Just hold the cup and saucer to your lips and suck your tea in at first. That'll make a noise which isn't polite, but we'll excuse you and pretend you don't know any better."

Dick received the wobbly cup and saucer from her hands, and then she proceeded to fill two cups with milk.

"Flip and I take mostly milk with just a splash of tea," she explained, as she gave a realistic demonstration of the splash, "and lots of sugar. Flip's very piggy with sugar."

"I'm not any piggier than you are yourself," protested Flip stuffily, munching his sandwich.

"You're talking with your mouth full,—bad manners!" she admonished her brother. "Piggy-wiggy!"

"Huh!" snorted Flip. "I'm not spilling tea on my dress,—*piggy-wiggy!*"

"You're not wearing a *dress!*" her cherubic face was distorted with a diabolical grin.

"Well,—*pants*, smarty!"

"Have another sandwich," interposed Dick pleasantly.

"Now that we've eaten all your food," observed Flop after a pause, "I s'ppose we'd better leave or you'll think we are greedy enough to want more; but I couldn't eat another crumb."

"Neither could I, my stomach's stiff and tight," said Flip.

"It's been a lovely tea-party," declared Flop. "May we come again?"

"I hope you will," responded Dick with fervor.

"I've enjoyed your visit, and you've cheered me up immensely."

The twins shook hands with their host, and when they reached the door they turned and repeated their valentine bow and curtsey.

"Do come again, and soon!" smiled Dick.

"You betcha!" replied Flip, as he bowed himself out of the room.

When Noki came in for the tray he found Dick laughing heartily.

"Honorable Flip-Flops glood mmedicine for slick blossom," he remarked.

"Indeed they are! I feel better already. Cassburn is going to cure me, Noki."

CHAPTER IX

THE GHOST VOICE

DICK THOROLD'S first month at home passed quickly. The warm weather was pleasantly tempered by a buoyant wind, and there was a magic healing in the sparkling sunlight, a life-giving tonic in the trenchant air that set his veins tingling with exhilaration. His days were no longer measured by the foot-rule of time; they flitted by carelessly, like a handful of leaves torn from a calendar and blown away by the wind.

His nights ceased to be a tangled thicket of ghastly war-dreams, through which he struggled, to emerge gasping, shuddering, and weighed down with chains of lassitude and dejection. He slept soundly, and every morning he awoke to a sense of renewed energy, a joyful realization of increasing strength.

There was a strange, haunting memory that frequently assailed him during his waking hours, a vague echo of a woman's voice that seemed to lurk in some obscure corner of his mind and then, without warning, would suddenly intrude on his consciousness, confusing his thoughts and puzzling him into exasperation over his inability to remember when and where he had actually heard the voice.

There was no distinct utterance, merely the *sound* of a voice,—smooth, insinuating, drawling tones, that made him think of thick, half-crystallized honey. The persistent recurrence of the “ghost voice,” as he called it, was always accompanied by a mysterious physical sensation, as though a large hand were softly, yet firmly, pressing on his left arm, urging, compelling him to do something against his will.

“Confound the woman!” he would exclaim, jerking his arm roughly to push aside the invisible hand. “Who the deuce is she, and why should she torment me like this? Did I ever meet her? If I did, why can’t I visualize her? I’ll wager she has a Mona Lisa smile, with a voice like that! Why can’t I remember her name? Confound her!”

In his futile efforts to establish the identity of “that Mona Lisa woman,” he would recall his life in France. Certainly he had not met the creature before the War, during his years of vagabondage when he had drifted about with strolling minstrels; and among the nurses, ambulance drivers, Y girls, and canteen workers, he remembered no one with a personality to fit the mysterious voice. Frank and friendly they all were, those women war-workers, with a sturdy, masculine courage that did not rob them of their femininity.

There were blank spaces in his recollection of the

War, when wounds and shell-shock had sent him to Blighty. Of his last sojourn in a hospital, extending over many months, his memory was chaotic. That period had been a veritable trip through hell, and he had crawled out at the other end to realize his blindness, which he did not know was to prove temporary, to learn that the War was over, and to discover with fumbling fingers that his seal ring was missing from his left hand. He had laughed bitterly over his blindness, had cursed the armistice vigorously in three languages, and had wept with childish rage over the loss of his ring, accusing Wilhelm Hohenzollern of the theft.

In some strange way, whenever “that Mona Lisa woman” bothered him with her insistent, wordless voice, his mind always reverted to the missing ring which had belonged to his father, and which he had worn since Mr. Thorold’s death as a tender memento of their reconciliation after years of estrangement.

One day, during Dick’s first week at Cedarwold, Nancy hurried up the drive and joined him on the terrace where he was reclining on a willow couch, well fortified with cushions.

“Captain Dick,” she began joyously, “you dreamed of white violets when you were in England, and see! your dream has come true!”

“My dream has come true!” echoed Dick, as she

laid a loose bunch of the fragile blossoms in his outstretched hands.

“Um-um-ummm!” he inhaled deeply.

The table beside his couch was littered with books and magazines.

“Surely you haven’t been reading!” she exclaimed. “Oh, shame on you!”

He shook his head. “Not guilty! though I admit I must appear red-handed. But, honor bright! I am only pink-fingered. I have been merely handling the books, wishing I might read, but only pretending to by turning the leaves. Noki, good soul! attempted to read aloud to me, but his tongue was not equal to the promptings of his heart; so I told him I felt drowsy and sent him away.”

“Let me read to you,” she offered eagerly. “I am used to reading aloud to Monica, so I’ll be better than Noki. I’d love to come over and read to you every afternoon.”

“It would be a boon to me, manna to a starving man,” said Dick, and he raised his shade for a glimpse of her eager, flushed face. “But you are a busy little person, I know; and ——”

“My afternoons are free,” she interrupted, “at least, I could make them so until your eyes are strong enough for you to read yourself. Do let me do it!”

Nancy was young for her years, and divinely in-

nocent. Her girlish philosophy of life was embodied in the old verse:

“Do the good that’s nearest
Though it’s dull at whiles,
Helping, when you meet them,
Lame dogs over stiles.”

To her, Dick was simply a “lame dog,” and she sought to help him in the only way she knew.

During a month of golden weather they spent every afternoon in the Cedarwold gardens. Dick lay in the sun on an extended steamer chair and listened to her clear, low-toned voice with its musical inflections, often peeping furtively from his green shade to steal a glance at her face which mirrored the mood and meaning of what she read, and to admire her crinkled hair which was a trap to catch the sunbeams that sifted through the breeze-fluttered leaves overhead.

“We are going to change our program to-day,” he announced one afternoon when she appeared at the usual hour. “I’m tired of toddling about the garden like a two-year-old infant on a leading-string. I’ve almost forgotten that I have a game leg, so we are going down to the shore for our reading.”

“Then we’ll take this magazine and finish that interesting article on the League of Nations.” She selected a magazine from the pile on the table.

“Oh, blow the League of Nations!” he laughed. “We’re going to be young and merrily foolish to-day and forget the world and its worries. We’ll read ‘Alice in Wonderland.’ I have the book in my pocket.”

It was a short, easy walk through the garden to the beach, where wind and waves were making holiday in honor of the sun.

Dick lolled on the sand while Nancy, with the book resting on her lap, sat near him among the tufts of beach-grass. The coarse, green spikes were blue on their under sides, as though some indefatigable fairies had painted them to match the colors of sea and sky. He envied the wind that deepened the pink of her cheeks and teased the loosened tendrils of her hair. His hand rested on her shabby green sweater which she had carelessly tossed on the sand, touching it gently from time to time, as though the mere feeling of its texture gave him pleasure.

When they had laughingly followed Alice’s adventures to the end of the Mad Hatter’s tea-party, she rested from her reading, and sat with her hands clasped about her knees, watching the seagulls wheeling and dipping above the waves, and looking across the water at the sails that glistened whitely against the hazy distance of the horizon where sea and sky melted into one.

Dick's fingers tightened on the folds of the old sweater, tumultuous thoughts leaping in his heart as he watched her. She was quite unawakened, a little maiden of dreams whose childlike frankness and unselfconsciousness kindled in him a mood of exaltation, a wonderment that reached the stars.

It thrilled him to imagine the dawning of her womanhood. There would be a startled look of bewilderment in her eyes, a flush of shyness, and then love would flower in her face like the opening of a rose. In his heart was the tender assurance that she would be his. It was foreordained that his love should enclose her life like a wall around a garden of flowers.

Thank God, there were no soiled pages in the past chapters of his book of life! As a youth he had been headstrong, wild, and rebellious, but he had kept his manhood clean. His wanderings in France with strolling players had been a healthy, outdoor life, full of the glamor and gaiety of youth. The careless intimacy of those wayfaring days might easily have led to besmirching episodes, but the inherent fastidiousness of his nature had been his safeguard.

He closed his eyes and thought of Pierre Fauvel and his daughter Miette with whom he had traveled one summer, the year before the Great War; little Miette who had sung like a lark and danced with

the grace of a breeze-stirred poppy; whose dark beauty had come from a Gipsy mother. Her father was gruff, uncouth, with a slight lameness that gave his bulky form a shambling gait like that of Toto, his performing bear. He had more regard for the safety and well-being of his animal, than for that of his daughter.

“Mon père, he is a great bear of a man, like Toto,” Miette once laughingly said. “Toto and I are Beauty an’ ze Beast; an’ you, Monsieur Deeck,” her voice melted into tenderness, “are ze Prince Charming. But, zis time, it is not ze beauty zat sleeps,—oh, no! It is ze Prince. Some day, mon Prince, you will wake up, and zen,—Ooh la-la!”

She tossed him a kiss on her finger-tips, and then whirled in a series of pirouettes until she sank, breathless and laughing, on a rustic bench.

One hot September afternoon they had walked from the village, where they were to give a performance that night, to visit a woodland shrine in honor of her fête-day. It was to be their last ramble together. The next day he was to leave for Paris.

The air was sultry, although the woods were touched here and there with autumn tints. The fields were golden with ripened grain and splashed with clusters of late-blooming poppies, as though foretelling the crimson carnage that was to happen before the ending of another year. A sudden storm

had sent them rushing for shelter into an old barn. The place was gloomy and dusty, filled with the rank smell of rotting hay that stung their nostrils. Through the open, sagging door Dick watched the storm, fascinated by the lightning that seemed to tear the sky to shreds, and quite oblivious of his trembling little companion. A blinding glare and a terrific clap of thunder made Miette cling to him in an abandon of terror, and he held her protectingly in his arms.

"Oh, Monsieur Deeck!" she murmured and drew his face down to hers, "I love you so! Take me with you to-morrow! I cannot live without you, I love you so!"

For one mad moment his arms tightened about her slender form and his blood surged hot and tingling through his veins, so that his heart seemed to defy his reason. Miette was sweet and lovable, a good little soul! In her artless, girlish way she offered him her love. Why not marry her and save her from the perils of this wandering life she led with her father? He had no intention of returning to America. Just as he was about to speak, he was suddenly torn from her clinging embrace by a prolonged sneeze that shook him as a terrier does a rat. Once, twice, thrice, he sneezed. Then he turned to her, laughing and gasping, his eyes streaming with tears.

“This hay is horribly dusty—Ah-chee-hoo! See, it is clearing up! Ah-chee-hoo!”

The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. A burst of sunlight swept the clouds from the sky, but Miette shivered as they walked along the narrow path to the shrine, and glanced at him timidly from under her long lashes when he drew the dripping branches aside. She knelt at the feet of the Madonna and prayed in silence, fingering her beads. The sacred image was wet and glistening. Raindrops dripped from the outstretched hand onto the girl's hair, like a benediction of tears from the Mother of Sorrows. Dick bared his head.

“Thank God for that sneeze!” he murmured, and not irreverently.

Poor little Miette! He had never seen her again after her tearful farewell the next day; but, three years later, he heard of her from her father, whom he met in a ruined French village which had recently been evacuated by the Germans.

Pierre Fauvel was gaunt and haggard, and pitiful as a hurt child.

“Toto is dead,” he mumbled, “and Miette, I hope she is dead too! Yes, Monsieur Deeck, I hope she is dead! She was deported. Ze dead, zey are ze lucky ones now, and death is a great kindness to girls like Miette.”

So, through the providential interposition of a

sneeze, Dick's memory of little Miette was like a pressed flower in his book of life.

“Yes, *thank God for that sneeze!*” he thought, as he opened his eyes and looked at Nancy who was still gazing, in her dreamy, unconscious way, over the great green highway of the waves.

Suddenly the disturbing voice of “that Mona Lisa woman” echoed in his mind and routed his tender thoughts. An impatient exclamation burst from his lips.

“Chut!”

Nancy turned to him quickly, and a frown of pretended severity chased the smile from her lips.

“Transgressing again! Really, Captain Dick, you are incorrigible. If you raise that shade again I shall insist on your wearing great, ugly green goggles, and I shall have them screwed onto your nose.”

She stood up and held out her hand to assist him. “Come, it is getting too cool for invalids to be out, and it is time for you to take that tonic. We must go home.”

Dick gave a rueful smile. “Must we really go? No!” he pleaded, “let us have one more chapter of ‘Alice’! Then I’ll go home as meekly as a lamb and take my medicine with a smile.”

“No,” she shook her head, “Medes and Persians, you know. My mother used to say that to me when

I was a youngster and objected to bedtime and oatmeal porridge and having my curls combed. How I hated the Medes and Persians! I imagined them as a pair of bogies. Medes was a towering giant with hideous tusks and fiery eyes; and Persians was a horrible, grotesque dwarf with a leering grin and long, sharp claws. Ugh! I warn you," she glanced at him mischievously, "the Medes and Persians will get you, if you don't watch out!"

CHAPTER X

THE SLEEVE OF CARE

NANCY parted from Dick in the garden of Cedarwold and hurried home through a gap in the hedge, which had been made, by Dick's orders, to form a short cut for the Graysons.

By this time, the entire family were daily visitors at Cedarwold; Harry to gloat over the fine collection of paintings and books on art; Joan to browse in the library and borrow armfuls of books; the twins to cheer up Dick and talk with Noki and his assistants; and Monica, who often accompanied Nancy when she came for the afternoon reading.

Mrs. Neve was waiting on the Grayson verandah, and she rose stiffly and awkwardly from an old willow chair as Nancy ran up the steps. She was a tall, gaunt, sandy-haired woman with a thin, long face, besprinkled with freckles and furrowed with lines of care. In her gnarled, reddened hands she held a parcel, loosely wrapped in white tissue paper.

"I'm makin' a waist fer Jessie," she began. "A sorta surprise; an' I thought maybe you wouldn't mind tryin' it on, so's I can see if the sleeves set right. You an' her's the same size, an' I don't want her to know 'bout it till it's done. I hate to bother you, Nancy."

“It’s no bother, Mrs. Neve,” Nancy assured her. “Come up to my bedroom.”

They went upstairs and Nancy hastily removed her gingham dress, exclaiming rapturously when Mrs. Neve unfolded the tissue paper and held up a dainty white lawn waist, beautifully embroidered. The poor charwoman, whose hands were calloused and wrinkled with daily washing and scrubbing, was an artist with her needle.

“How lovely! Jessie will be delighted, and I’m glad to have the pleasure of trying it on!” Nancy tossed her dress over the footrail of the bed and slipped the filmy waist over her head, smiling at her reflection in the mirror as Mrs. Neve adjusted the shoulder fastenings.

“I like makin’ pretty things fer Jessie, though I guess folks like Louella Greer think I’m foolish. But Jessie’s all I have, an’ she likes nice clothes. I got the lawn over to Bradbury. It cost quite a bit, but I wanted a fine piece. Workin’ regular at young Mr. Thorold’s helps a lot, fer he pays real well. It seems kinda queer to be workin’ ’longside of them Jappers. They don’t talk much; but they’re real polite, an’ always smilin’ like their faces was spread with butter.

“There! If you don’t mind standin’, I’ll jes’ shift these gathers while the waist’s on you. They don’t seem to set right, but it won’t take long.”

“ Take all the time you wish, Mrs. Neve. I love to stand here admiring myself.”

“ I’ve hed to work at this nights after Jessie was in bed, so’s she wouldn’t know ’bout it. It’s real good in you to do this, Nancy. I’ll come an’ do some cleanin’ nex’ week to pay fer the trouble I’m givin’ you now.”

Nancy made a deprecating gesture. “ It’s no trouble at all, and I don’t want you to think of *paying* me. I haven’t forgotten how good you were to us last winter, when we all had the flu. You came to help Oonah every day, and we weren’t able to pay you for it.”

“ That was jes’ bein’ neighborly, Nancy.”

“ Then you must let me be neighborly, too. I envy Jessie having this lovely waist! She will look so pretty in it. I hate to take it off.” Nancy carefully drew her arms from the sleeves. “ You’d better stitch those gathers before you go. Sit down and let me watch you do it.”

They sat together on the couch which stood near one of the windows.

“ I wish I hed money so’s I c’d send Jessie away to a boarded school where they learn girls to play the piano an’ be real ladies,” said Mrs. Neve as she sewed. “ She has the makin’s of a lady, she’s so pretty an’ refined; an’ her hands is soft an’ white ’cause I don’t ever let her do ’housework. If she c’d

go where folks didn't know I was her mother, they'd think she *was* a lady. It's hard fer a girl to hev a common washwoman fer a mother."

"Oh, Mrs. Neve, I think Jessie is lucky to have you for a mother! You aren't common, you are gentle and kind, and so good to Jessie."

The harsh, unlovely face was softened with a pathetic, twisted smile. "Jessie ain't never acted like she was 'shamed o' me, I'll say that," she said bravely. "An' she learned lady manners when she boarded over to Bradbury that winter she went to high school. I'd saved up enough money fer that. But you see, I've always wanted to be a lady myself, like the pictures in books; but I ain't never hed a chance to be anythin' but a drudge. My folks was terrible poor an' they died when I was young, and I never hed nobody to learn me manners."

Nancy touched the woman's arm with a gentle caress. "You have something better, far better than manners,—a kind heart."

"When I married Jack Neve I thought as how I c'd be happy. He was good-lookin', real handsome; an' I'm glad Jessie favors him 'stead o' me. I met him in the boardin'-house over to Bradbury where I was workin'. He'd been a sailor an' hed traveled the world over; an' when he come to Bradbury he was sickenin' fer a fever he'd caught down in Cuber. He was laid up fer a long spell, an' I helped nurse

him. He seemed real fond o' me, an' thought he'd like to settle down an' give up his rovin' life.

“So we was married, an' he was a real good husband; but I c'd see as how he was growin' tired o' the quiet life. He'd hev restless spells, an' sometimes he'd go out an' walk 'bout all night long. Then he was always quarrelin' with his boss an' changin' his jobs. He was so hot-tempered that he couldn't seem to get along with folks; but he always spoke gentle an' soft to me; an' he give me his wages regular, 'cause he said he was a spender an' I c'd save.

“Well, he went off one day to his work, an' I never heard tell of him since. He called out ‘good-bye’ an' waved his hand at the gate, like he did every mornin' when he went to work; an' all day long I was busy an' happy, plannin' how I'd tell him when he come home fer supper that there was a baby comin' to us. I thought, maybe, a child'd be a sorta anchor to him an' hold him down contented-like. But that was the last I ever seen of him—jes' a wave o' the hand an' a smile.

“It seemed like I'd gone crazy till Jessie come. So my girl means a lot to me. She's,—well, I don't think any real lady c'd love her girl more'n I love my Jessie. But a lady c'd do lots that I can't do fer her. I'm such an ugly gawk, an' I've got no manners. I'm common.”

Nancy's eyes were misty with tears. "You're a wonderful mother, Mrs. Neve. Every one knows that."

The woman sighed. "I was kinda worried 'bout Jessie las' winter. When Sid Hale was home for Christmas he seemed like he was courtin' her; but, you know he's a bit wild an' a trouble to his folks. I'd be feared to hev Jessie marry him. He used to send her letters when he went back to Boston, but they ain't corresponded lately, so I'm hopin' it won't come to anythin'. I want Jessie to be happy when she gets married, and Sid,—well, he ain't steady and I don't think he'd be kind to her. Bein' in the army warn't so good fer him, like his father thought it'd be, 'cause he was so mad 'bout not gettin' over to the French country where all the fightin' was goin' on, that it made him more wild-like."

"I know Sidney is a worry to his parents," said Nancy. "It's a great pity, for they are such dear people. But he is at the selfish, thoughtless age when many young men seem to glory in being foolish and reckless. Perhaps, when he is older, he will settle down and be a fine, noble man like his father."

Mrs. Neve rose with a heavy sigh. "He'll be comin' back soon, an' I wish I c'd send Jessie away somewheres, so's there'd be no chance o' them seein' each other. It's been real comfortin' to talk to you, Nancy. You're a dear, sweet girl! If your

mother'd lived, she'd've been proud an' happy over you.”

Nancy accompanied her to the gate, pausing on the way to gather a bunch of flowers which she placed in the woman's hand.

“ They're real pretty, Nancy. I love flowers, but I ain't got time to tend them, an' Jessie don't seem to care 'bout our little garden this year. She used to spend a lot o' time with the flowers but, somehow or other, she's kinda lost interest. I hope she ain't carin' fer Sid Hale, an' frettin' 'bout him not writin'.”

“ Do you know, Mrs. Neve, I think you ought to let Jessie do some housework so that she wouldn't have time to mope or even think about Sidney. Whenever I feel like grizzling, I find something to do,—sweep the living-room or bake a cake. Work is a wonderful cure-all. Let Jessie try it!”

CHAPTER XI

CHECK AND "CHECKMATE"

THE rain was settling down into a clammy mist, which drifted through the open windows into the living-room where Nancy sat with her mending-basket beside her. She was ripping the hem of Joan's pink gingham dress, which had so frequently renewed its youth in Oonah's wash-tub that it had faded into the unmistakable pallor of old age.

Monica was helping Flip and Flop to arrange their geographical puzzle blocks in a map of North America. They were grouped at one end of the large table, which was still partly set for breakfast, to accommodate Joan who had not yet made her appearance.

Joan had indulged in midnight reading since Dick Thorold gave her the freedom of his library. Nancy's remonstrances over this unhealthy habit were unavailing. Joan would only shrug her shoulders and murmur, without raising her eyes from her book, "Aw, ring off, the line's busy!"

And now, as usual, Joan's cold breakfast awaited her. A rasher of bacon was embedded in congealed fat, the loaf of bread was growing dry, cream was forming on the top of a glass of milk, a pat of but-

ter was dissolving into a golden pool, and a fly was struggling to extricate itself from an uncovered jar of strawberry jam.

Oonah entered the room and stood, arms akimbo, looking at the table with grim disapproval.

“Whin the divil comes to look fer his own he’ll find that Joan-girl in bed, he will. Wid a heart an’ a half I could bate the laziness out av her. I’ll bet she’s layin’ in her bed, slapin’ loike a corpse wid the flies holdin’ a wake over her; an’ her lamp as dry as prohibition’ll be, wid the wick burned to a black crisp. Take it or lave it, the truth is, she’ll be settin’ fire to the house some night an’ burnin’ us up in our beds; an’ a pleasint divarsion that’ll be! Fallin’ aslape over her books, bad cess to thim! An’ lavin’ the lamp lighted an’ smokin’ till it goes out av its own will! Say the worrud, Nancy, an’ it’ll give me hell’s delight to go up wid the broomstick an’ let her have a taste av a last-day resurrection!”

At that moment Joan came in, yawning audibly. She looked pale and owlish, and carried a book in the crook of her elbow, with her thumb inserted as a marker.

“So!” Oonah’s tone was truculent. “You’ve condescinded at last, hev you, to let the light av your prisence shine on the family? It’s divil an egg I’ll bile at this hour for a lazy bit av baggage

that slapes while others is worrukin' their heads off!"

"Thanks awfully," drawled Joan, as she propped her book against the sugar-bowl and proceeded to cut a thick, crooked slice of bread.

"I don't believe in early rising," she continued. "It's a custom of the barbarous ages. I'm no sun-worshipper." She helped herself to jam and began to spread it, nursery fashion, over her bread.

"Sun-worshipper, indade! It's a sun-*dodger* you are, wid your laziness."

Joan licked a finger-tip and proceeded to munch a liberal bite of bread and jam.

"Oh, say!" cried Flip, starting up from his seat and upsetting the continent of North America,—sending Florida into Canada and Michigan into the Atlantic Ocean, while Texas turned a somersault and became the Desert of Sahara separating Maine from New Zealand. "Joan, you've swallowed a fly! I watched you spreading it on your bread. Its wings shivered, but you didn't notice, and you flattened it down. And now you've *eaten* it!"

Joan smiled imperturbably and helped herself to more jam, which seemed to Monica's eyes to be a mass of sticky flies. The child, feeling sickened and disgusted, left the table and went to the front window.

"Aw well, a few flies won't hurt me," observed

Joan tranquilly. “I’ve often swallowed worms when eating apples,” and she slowly turned a page of the book before her.

Oonah reached out and seized the volume. “Radin’ an’ atin’ all to wanst, an’ too lazy to know what you’re puttin’ into your mouth. What’s this you’re radin’? M-A-R-E, that’s a horse. N-O-S-T-R-U-M, that’s a medicine. My sowl to glory! *Horse Medicine!* What nixt? The other day it was ‘The Four Horsemen wid the Apoplexy.’ Is it studyin’ to be a vet’inary doctor you are? Shure, you’re the wondher av the age, there’s divil a doubt av that! While grass grows an’ wather runs there’ll niver be another to bate the loikes av you for book nonsince.” She threw the book on the table.

A fragment of a smile flickered across Nancy’s face. Joan, her complacency unruffled, picked up her book, turned to the right page, and resumed her reading.

“Here’s Harry!” exclaimed Monica, “and he has a letter.”

A moment later, Harry appeared.

“From Father,” he announced briefly, as he tossed the letter to Nancy.

She opened it with eager, fumbling fingers. “A check at last!” she cried, waving a strip of yellow paper.

Then she read the accompanying letter. A be-

wildered frown dented her forehead as she turned to the second page. She read to the end, and the letter fell among the folds of Joan's dress, which was gathered into a heap on her lap.

"What's the news, Nance?" asked Harry.

"Oh!" she looked at the others, "Father's,—*Father is married!*"

Stunned into silence, they gazed at one another with wide-eyed, breathless dismay. The clock ticked with loud monotony and seemed to perforate the stillness of the room, like a pin being jabbed through a piece of parchment.

Oonah spoke first. "Well! the soot's in the stew-pot now!"

Nancy was impelled to an outbreak of hysterical mirth, as the others besieged her with questions.

"Who is she?"

"When were they married?"

"Does Father say what she's like?"

"Are they coming here to live?"

"Who is she, indade?" Oonah asked scornfully. "She's your stepmother; an' I'll say she'll niver suffer wid brain fever iv she was foolish enough to be taken in wid your father's blarney so that she married him wid a hope av happiness in her heart. An' it's hopin' I am, that she's a tartar an' he'll get what's been long in comin' to him!"

Monica clung to Nancy. "Will she be a cruel,

fairy-tale stepmother? What shall we do if she comes here?”

Nancy drew the trembling child onto her lap.

“I don’t think Father will bring her here. She’s very wealthy, he says, so I am sure she won’t bother about us.”

“Wealthy, is she? Then the fools ain’t all dead yit,” declared Oonah.

“Fancy Father in love!” giggled Joan.

“I bet he’s married her for her money,” remarked Harry soberly. “He’d never fall in love; there’s no fool-flummery about Father.”

“An’ I’m hopin’ she’ll soon find it out, an’ act accordianly,” added Oonah. “Save us and bliss us! The Lorrud, wid some trick in His moind may’ve made this marriage; but iv He did, I’ve a strong guess that the divil is wearin’ a grin on his face that’ll make the angels in Hivin sing out av chune for miny a long day. Well, well, the worruld is full av tricks!”

“Anyway, Father has sent a check,” said Harry, his practical mind emerging from a haze of bewilderment. “I suppose it is that woman’s money. Father will find her useful, if she’s generous with her checks. I suppose that’s why he married her,—to have a ‘checkmate.’ What’s the check good for?”

“Two hundred dollars,” answered Nancy. “I’ll

endorse it so you can take it over to Sam Brackett right away, Harry. Pay that awful bill of his, poor man! And buy yourself two pairs of khaki 'trousies.' "

"Two pairs?" Harry gave a whoop of delight. "Oh, my eye!" His rapture changed to startled dismay. "Something has happened to my long-suffering pants! The hour of dissolution has come! My joy has busted them. Just give me the once over, Nance, and see if I'm fit to appear in public."

Nancy surveyed him, as he turned slowly. "They'll hold together until you get home with the new ones," she assured him, as she crossed to her writing-desk which stood near one of the windows.

"Can't we go with Harry and get some new shoes?" asked Flop plaintively. "Mine squeeze my feet and my little toes are getting sore, and Flip's have holey soles."

Nancy nodded acquiescence, as she blotted her signature before handing the check to Harry. The twins scampered off with their brother. Oonah cleared the table and carried the dishes to the kitchen.

Joan, her book forgotten, began to speculate about the unknown stepmother. "Suppose she turns out to be a decent sort and takes a fancy to us, and acts like a fairy-godmother! Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Nancy smiled skeptically. “I can’t imagine Father marrying a woman like that. His letter says that they have been married over a month. If she felt any interest in us she would have sent us a message, or enclosed a little note with his; but there isn’t a kindly word from her. She evidently intends to ignore us.”

“I guess that’s right,” agreed Joan. “Perhaps she didn’t like his sending us the check. She’s probably a handsome, selfish creature, fond of dress and show, with a yapping little poodle; the sort of woman who thinks children are a nuisance, just as Father does. Oonah’s right, the world *is* full of tricks; and Shakespeare backs her up with Horatio’s lines about Ophelia: ‘She speaks much of her father; says she hears there’s tricks i’ the world.’”

Mr. Grayson’s check, lighted at one end by the payment of long-standing debts and at the other by the purchase of urgent necessities, soon burned out like the proverbial candle. There was no further word from him and, after a time, the stepmother became a sort of myth to the family. There was the usual nine days’ wonder in Cassburn over the marriage; but, when it became apparent that the event had created no change in the home of the “good-for-nothing Graysons,” the villagers ceased to discuss it.

After a brief visit to New York, Dick Thorold

returned in his new touring car. It was Harry who reported his arrival to Nancy.

"Gee! I hardly knew him. He looks awfully fit, and he's wearing a pair of rubber-tired spectacles that make him look like an owl or a college professor. He's got a dandy car,—a seven passenger; and he says he wants to take the whole caboodle of us out on picnics and trips. And he's offered to teach me to run the car. Isn't he bully?" The boy's face was flushed with excitement. "And say,—Sid Hale's come back. I saw him and Jessie Neve on the shore this morning. He was all dolled up in a new suit,—a real candy dude. They seemed to be quarreling. He was red in the face and looked mad enough to bite her; and she seemed to be petting a grouch, although she was a bit weepy."

Dick, without his green shade, was a strange Dick to Nancy. She found his gaze through the shell-rimmed spectacles disconcerting, and her frankness and unconsciousness of manner were chilled into a shy dignity and reserve. There was a whimsical tenderness in his brown eyes that puzzled her, and the gleam of humor, that matched his boyish smile, made her restless and ill at ease. With their first meeting the easy familiarity of their comradeship merged into something different, and a subtle suspicion of change crept into their intimacy.

Early one evening Dick strolled along the shore. The tide was out, and sea and shore stole an opalescent shimmer from the sunset colors that lingered in the sky, where daylight had faded into a pale, lucent green.

“She’s growing up,” he mused, “and it frightens her. I wonder,—no, it’s too soon for me to speak. We’ve known each other only a few short weeks. ‘Watchful waiting’ isn’t as easy as it sounds, but it’s the best policy. There’s no hurry, my time will come.”

It was late when Dick returned to the house. He went up to his den and played softly, drawing from his violin tender melodies that stole through the night “like the sweet south that breathes upon a bank of violets,” and reached the ears of Nancy, who lay restless and wakeful, staring towards the open window. From the garden came dewy fragrances, the songs without words of the flowers; and the moon, now risen high, poured its pearly radiance over the world, making the night seem like the silvery ghost of a day.

CHAPTER XII

JOAN PUTS A FINGER IN THE PIE

JOAN tripped awkwardly over the door-sill when she entered the post-office, and found the usual gathering of women in Watch-and-Pry Corner. She gave them a brusque nod of greeting as she produced three pennies from her middy pocket and asked for a stamp.

“I s’pose,” Miss Louella’s smile was flavored with vinegar, “that we’ll soon be hearin’ of another weddin’ in your family. The whole village is jes’ holdin’ its breath, waitin’ fer an announcement. Or, maybe, Nancy’s goin’ to surprise us, like your father did, an’ get married on the Q. T.”

“Nancy!” gasped Joan, and in her amazement she licked the stamp before dropping it into the little upper pocket, which looked as though it had been patched on her middy to protect her heart. “Nancy isn’t going to be married!”

“Well, we’re all thinkin’ that it won’t be her fault if she *ain’t* married sooner or later. An’ I don’t know as I blame her for runnin’ after young Mr. Thorold the way she does. It’d be a great thing for your family if she got him, he bein’ so rich. But it seems like as if he’s mighty slow in pro-

posin', 'nless you're keepin' the engagement a secret.”

Joan paled with fury. Her heart flamed with impotent resentment as she saw the women in the bay-window nod and smile with sly meaning. She dashed out of the post-office. The houses, sky, and landscape were jumbled together into a topsy-turvy mass before her anger-blinded eyes. She ran along the street, which seemed to rise and fall like waves under her feet. When she reached Cedar Street she stopped, panting with heat and rage.

“The devil-cats! If Nancy knew what that old drip-nosed Louella is saying, she'd throw herself into the sea. I wish I could cut out Louella's tongue and make her eat it! And Captain Dick,— does he think our Nancy's running after him? That we want her to marry him because he's rich? Oh!”

Her tears mingled with perspiration as she tossed her hair from her burning cheeks.

“‘Slow in proposing’! Perhaps he's laughing at us, thinking we're throwing Nancy at him, and that she's trying to catch him! Ugh! I'll enlighten him!”

Her determination crystallized into action. Half an hour later she crossed the lawn of Cedarwold, carrying an armful of books. For once Joan had dressed herself with care. Her hair was smooth



“I S’POSE THAT WE’LL SOON BE HEARIN’ OF ANOTHER WEDDIN’
IN YOUR FAMILY.”—Page 139.

and shining from a vigorous application of a wet brush, and neatly held back by a band of black velvet ribbon; her gingham dress was fresh and all the buttons were inserted in their respective buttonholes; her shoes were properly tied, and her face glowed from its recent immersion in cold water.

Dick was seated under an oak at the end of the garden. Bobs was stretched on the grass at his feet, dozing lazily and snapping at intervals at teasing flies, and occasionally licking his master's boots. Joan, on seeing Dick, turned and approached him slowly.

"What a voracious reader you are, Joan!" he observed, as she laid the books on the rustic table and sat on the grass beside Bobs, folding herself up with her chin resting on her knees and her hands clasping her legs.

"I'm tired of fiction," she announced. "There are so many silly love stories,—all bosh! Books aren't true to life, they're just plots. Things never happen in life as they do in books, for life isn't plotty, it's patchy."

"'Oh, wise young judge!'" murmured Dick.

"Fate is just a scrap-bag," she continued, "filled with odds and ends, mostly rubbish; and we pull out shreds and patches with our eyes closed; and then we have to join them together into a crazy quilt. That's life,—a patchwork quilt, a *crazy*

quilt!" She plucked a long blade of grass, and began to chew the end of it.

Dick smiled at the girl's vehemence. "And sometimes, after blindly selecting our scraps, we find it hard to fit them together, eh, Joan? And often we have to snip and trim off the pieces we treasure most, to fit them into the motley design. That's a thankless task."

"Take love, for instance." She tossed the blade of grass aside.

"Ah!" Dick laughed, "that's the prize in Fate's scrap-bag, a choice piece of velvet or brocade!"

"Huh!" grunted Joan, "with a cotton back and it soon gets shoddy. Now,—Nancy's—er—*quilt* is covered with such pieces. I never knew a girl like her for love affairs! Every time she puts her hand into the bag she draws what you call a prize."

She leaned over and appeared to be searching diligently for something in the grass.

Dick frowned. "Love affairs? Nancy?"

"Uhuh," the tone was casual as she plucked three blades of grass, tied them into a knot, and began to braid them. "It's just a habit she's got. Nancy isn't as green as she looks. Sweet, bashful innocence is her game. People often think that she's just come out of the shell and hasn't scratched yet; but they've got another guess coming."

Joan was braiding the grass very slowly and

deliberately. She was so absorbed in her work that she did not look up at Dick.

“Of course,—er ——” she hesitated. “Nancy has one truly lasting affair, a wonderful romance. She’s—er—really engaged, you know.”

“No, I didn’t—know.”

“Oh! It’s frightfully romantic! Like Romeo and Juliet, they fell in love at first sight. You know the way it works,—one look, and then the lightning strikes. She wears his ring on a cord made of her hair around her neck. Silly, isn’t it? But the engagement is a secret, and I suppose she thinks that wearing the ring on her finger would be like pinning her heart on her sleeve.”

“Where is—the—lucky man?”

“He’s in Patagonia,—no, I mean Cuba. He’s awfully poor, but Nancy loves him. She wouldn’t dream of marrying a wealthy man; she hates money. Her ideal is love in a cottage with a honey-suckle porch, bread and cheese in the pantry, and a smoky stove in the kitchen.”

“It must be hard for Na—your sister to be separated from her fiancé,—to have him so far away.”

“It is, but instead of letting her heart thump out dirges, she consoles herself with running around with any man who happens to come along. People sometimes get the idea that she’s chasing

them, throwing herself at them; but she isn't. She's just keeping her heart wound up like a phonograph so that it will be ready for the grand, sweet song of her life,—the wedding march. I'm ashamed to say it, but Nancy's a terrible flirt. And she does it well, don't you think?"

"Very well."

Joan unfolded herself, rose to the full height of her long legs, and gathered up the books from the table. Her face was flushed, and she still avoided looking at Dick.

"I'll take these books in and help myself to some more, may I?"

"Certainly,—the library is yours, as you know, Joan."

"I did that rather neatly," she observed to herself as she crossed the garden to the house. "Now he won't think that Nancy is running after him, trying to catch him because he's rich! I wonder if I hurt his feelings, he seemed to be so quiet about it all!" A tiny thorn of doubt began to prick her mind. "He's a dear old thing, and perhaps he *does* care. Oh, well! men are so stuck on themselves, and girls are such ninnies,—ready to flop into any man's arms before he even begins to pop the question. And it's a good thing for any man to have a crimp put into his conceit!"

"Nancy engaged?" Dick clenched his hands,

making the knuckles white. His throat worked convulsively. The sky was high and dazzlingly blue, but it seemed to turn into a lowering black mass before his eyes.

Nancy engaged! That was why she hadn't troubled to answer the letter he had sent her from New York! She was too busy writing to that chap in Cuba.

He did not know that his unanswered letter, still unopened, was in one of the books which Joan had borrowed and was now replacing on his library shelves. After bringing the letter from the post-office she had forgotten to give it to Nancy, and had used it as a bookmark,—a thoroughly Joanesian blunder.

Nancy engaged! The thought shattered Dick's dreams and buried his heart in the ruins.

Bobs sniffed at him anxiously. With a deep sigh that shook his great body, he placed his head on Dick's knee and looked up mournfully. His master did not stroke him, did not see the dumb affection in the pleading eyes.

That night a clammy mist crept in from the sea and smeared the light that gleamed from Dick's bedroom windows into a pale yellow blur. He had finished a hasty packing and sat smoking in gloomy silence, brooding over his half-formed plans. On the table lay an unanswered letter which had come

the day before. It was from an old friend of his family, inviting him to visit her home in Newport. He remembered Mrs. Seaton as one of his mother's most popular guests, the only one who had treated him with an affectionate camaraderie when he was in the hobbledehoy stage of his boyhood; and she had written to him in a jolly, friendly fashion which recalled her former kindness to him. He read the letter over again and decided to motor the next day to New York, where he would interview his tailor and telegraph his acceptance of her invitation.

She had promised him hosts of pretty girls to play with, to which she added her assurance that she would protect him from the wiles of worldly mothers who were anxious to transfer their responsibilities to eligible male beings with attractive incomes. Having married off her own three daughters, she knew all the tricks, so he would be safe under her wing.

And now, Dick was running away again, his old-time boyish habit, to forget the girl who had hoodwinked him. The glamor was gone. Nancy was a heartless flirt whose sweet, gracious charm and childlike frankness were nothing more than the tricks of coquetry.

The bitterness of disillusionment swept over him and made him feel like a lonely, hurt child; like

the little wistful lad of long ago whose mother had never visited him for a bedtime cuddle, and had never stolen into his room late at night to kiss him on his sleep-flushed cheek, like the mothers he had marveled at in story-books.

There is always a lonely corner in the hearts of men and women whose childhood has been deprived of a mother's hopes and prayers that weave white dreams over sleeping children; a corner filled with the dust of dreams, where secret longings are stored away and forgotten.

Dawn was stealing over the sea when Dick left Cassburn in his car. On leaving, he gave a note to Noki, instructing him to deliver it during the morning to Nancy. It was briefly worded, a formal expression of regret that he was obliged to leave for New York and would, therefore, miss her birthday tea-party that afternoon.

The whirr and rumble of the automobile, as it glided up the road, woke Nancy. She opened her eyes and gazed dreamily towards the open window, where the white muslin curtains were fluttering in the breeze, showing glimpses of trees and pale pink-flushed sky.

When she went downstairs she found Jerry at the front door, holding an armful of pink roses. The newly-risen sun shone behind him and rested on his uncovered head, making his wonderful hair

seem like golden mist. With a joyous chuckle he held one rose to her cheek. Then, after showing her that he had painstakingly removed all the thorns, he placed the sheaf of blossoms in her arms.

Flip and Flop greeted her with the customary birthday slaps, one for each year of her age and an extra one “to grow on.” With Monica, the slaps were kisses.

“It’s a perfect day for your birthday, Nancy!” she said after the final kiss. “All crisp and clean and shiny! It has been washed by the dew, blued by the sky, starched by the breeze, and ironed by the sun!”

Dick’s note, which came to Nancy after breakfast, rubbed all the gloss from the day, leaving it tarnished and dull. The twenty-third of June,—Midsummer Eve! The one day in the year when the fairies come back to the world and make it young again! But it seemed to Nancy that they had forgotten to come back this time, or perhaps Dick’s note had driven them away!

They had the birthday supper outside, in the front yard which was half garden, half orchard. Nancy sat at the head of the table, her mouth grave and unsmiling, her face touched to a wistful softness. There were twenty lighted candles on the cake, but Nancy’s sighs could not blow them out. So the twins joyfully puffed at the tiny, flame-

tipped columns, and the flames withered into wisps of smoke.

“Monica must cut the cake,” said Nancy.

“But you ought to cut it yourself!” objected the child.

Nancy smiled and shook her head. “No, *you* cut it,—for luck!”

“Then you must have the first piece because it is your birthday. I hope you will get the ring!”

“I’ve got the nickel!” announced Joan presently.

“I’ve got the ring!” cried Flop.

“And I——” Nancy laughed, “I’ve got the thimble!”

“Then you’ll be an old maid, *sure!*” said Flip and Flop.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LOTUS GROUP

THE weather grew warmer and the early days of July staggered by, burdened with a temperature that was almost tropical. Thunder was always threatening, but never came.

Nancy and the twins were walking along Poplar Street towards the red brick house where the Leavitts lived. The tall, slender trees laid narrow strips of shade on the dusty, sun-baked street, but gave no shelter from the dazzling sun. Occasionally, thunder-clouds passed overhead and made the heat more oppressive. The fields and distant woods were mottled with the moods of the sky, now shadowed by the moving clouds, now glaring beneath the unmasked sun.

Nancy was pale and droopy, and the joyous elasticity had gone from her walk. She had spent most of the previous night caring for Monica. Household worries nagged at her mind as she followed Flip and Flop, whose usual loquacity had been reduced to silence by the heat. It was not her wont to indulge in gloomy speculations and forebodings, but her sunny disposition had deserted her and a vague sense of loneliness teased her soul.

She missed the jolly afternoons with Dick

Thorold, for, until his hurried departure, they had continued their readings; and she longed to hear his music again. Dick had an admirable technique, and played with a dash and verve that thrilled her into wakefulness, as she sat each night at her bedroom window. Then, when dreamy melodies stole through the trees, she would creep into bed, to drift on the current of music into the wonderland of dreams.

All unconsciously, she had been creating for herself a new heaven and a new earth, using airy, unsubstantial materials,—“such stuff as dreams are made on”—rainbow bubbles of fancy, too frail for the touch of a word. She had been gloriously happy—just to be alive was a triumph. And now life seemed dull, empty, stripped of dreams; and she could not shake off the strange depression that had clipped the wings of her spirit.

They reached the Leavitt home and turned in at the gate of the white picket fence. A straight, graveled path led to the house, which was glaringly new and stood out among the time-mellowed dwellings of Cassburn like a raw, red sore. The smooth lawn displayed the owner's name, spelled in alphabetical beds of bright geraniums and variegated foliage plants, “like the name of a railroad station,” reflected Nancy with a smile, as she rang the bell.

Mrs. Leavitt welcomed them with her customary impressive manner. She prided herself upon the elegance of her diction, and never used a word of one syllable if a synonym of three could be found in the dictionary.

“It is unspeakably gratifying to me, Nancy, to see your cheerful countenance on this excessively torrid afternoon. And it was exceedingly gracious of you to comply with my request that you should assume my duties at the piano, for which I am incapacitated through the misfortune of having run a splinter into the third digit of my left hand. I appreciate the fact that your incessant and onerous household obligations, which I am sure you most admirably discharge, grant you but slight leisure. Therefore, I feel myself beholden to you to such an extent that words are too feeble to express my sense of indebtedness. The tardiness of your arrival has delayed the commencement of our meeting ten minutes. So, as our little lotus buds are assembled and waiting, we will proceed without further prorogation.”

Nancy's smile winged itself away on a sigh as she sat at the piano and struck the opening chords of “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” which well-known air supported the weak, doggerel verse sung by ten perspiring children as they marched around the room, led by Mrs. Leavitt.

On the mantel-shelf squatted a large bronze Buddha with its placid, imperturbable smile. A table underneath, covered with a green plush cloth, held a small yellow jar, from which the smoke of burning incense curled lazily.

At the conclusion of the hymn the children began to seat themselves, cross-legged fashion, in a circle on the floor, sniffing audibly as the fumes of the incense floated about the room.

“You will ensconce yourself at the other side of the circle, Nancy,—opposite me, and ——”

Here Mrs. Leavitt was interrupted by an outcry from her daughter Elaine, a sturdy youngster whose age was verging on seven years.

“I hate Flip!” she screamed. “He pulled my hair, and I hate him. I hate everybody!”

The other children, roused from their apathy, stared with open-eyed interest.

Mrs. Leavitt turned to Nancy with a deprecatory smile.

“Elaine is so psychic to-day. There are tense vibrations in the atmosphere. She is extremely psychic.”

Flip was ruefully rubbing his legs. “You bet she is sly-kick!” he cried, “but she’s got to stop sly-kicking me on the shins or I’ll pull her hair again. I’ll pull every hair off her head and make her bald.”

Elaine's voice made a rapid descent from screams to whines.

“Mama, he's making me have unkind thoughts. I don't want to have unkind thoughts. I want to be a dear little lotus bud, a theossyphist!”

Flip broke away from Nancy's restraining grasp and shook his hand in dangerous proximity to Elaine's face.

“If you kick me again when we're singing hymns or saying prayers, I won't be a flossy fist,—I'll hit you on your lotus bud nose,—so there!”

Elaine began to inhale a fresh supply of breath for her forthcoming scream, but she paused with gaping mouth to listen to her mother, who proceeded to wash away the psychic disturbance with a heavy flow of verbiage.

Mrs. Leavitt then seated herself in the circle, with Flip at her left and Elaine at her right, her lap forming a sort of no-man's-land across which the two belligerents glared and grimaced at each other.

“My dear little lotus buds, sweet little blossoms of my soul's garden,” began Mrs. Leavitt, “I am unspeakably thrilled to see this circle of happy, smiling faces before me, this golden chain of love! My mental vision, which I have developed through study and meditation, is enchanted by your auras which I behold as a beautiful rainbow. I see Hazel

in a pink glow, Flop is radiating yellow, Elaine is enveloped with violet mist, and Eric is green. Yes, Eric is green!"

She smiled graciously on Eric Hertz, whose round, freckled face flamed into an embarrassed crimson which seemed to spread over his scalp and glow through his closely-cropped flaxen hair. The child shuffled uneasily, as though he were sitting on a tack and trying to conceal his martyrdom. A faint giggle enlivened the listless group.

"Yes, I behold this circle as a veritable rainbow," continued Mrs. Leavitt, "a phenomenon which you are deterred from seeing, because your astral bodies have not yet established communication with your physical bodies; but that will eventuate. Now! who can tell me the name of the virtue which, during the past week, we have all been striving to impress upon our souls, so that our characters may rise to the summit of perfection?"

A broad smile of complacency beamed upon Mrs. Leavitt's face as she paused for a reply. The children looked at one another doubtfully and shifted their cramped legs. Georgie Vance exclaimed in a plaintive whisper: "Gee! it's hot!"

"Unselfishness!" cried Flop triumphantly, when the meaning of Mrs. Leavitt's labored phrases had dawned upon her puzzled mind.

"Yes. Now, each of you in turn tell me how you

have succeeded in inoculating your souls with this eminently desirable virtue. Let me hear of your ‘little words of kindness, little deeds of love’ that have helped you to ‘make this earth an Eden like the Heaven above.’”

With self-conscious blushes and hesitant speech, the children told of their efforts to live up to the prescribed virtue. Perhaps the most exalted act of self-sacrifice had been attained by Tommy Buell, who had allowed Georgie Vance to chew his gum for five minutes by the schoolroom clock.

“An’ I hadn’t chewed it myself more’n half an hour an’ Georgie let the teacher see him an’ she made him spit it into the rubbish-box an’ I couldn’t find it afterwards but I didn’t have unkind thoughts of Georgie or the teacher!”

Tommy’s unpunctuated speech was shirred on one breath which gave way suddenly, like the breaking of a tightly-drawn gathering thread in a puckered ruffle.

Mrs. Leavitt’s dissertation on the evils of gum-chewing was interrupted by Hazel Wiggins who, after several uneasy squirms, tearfully announced that Elaine was pinching her leg.

“I was not!” snapped Elaine, and then she added sweetly, “I was thinking a beautiful thought.”

“I am sure Elaine didn’t pinch you, Hazel,” said

Mrs. Leavitt. "She may have *touched* your leg unconsciously, and you misinterpreted her action; but there was no pinch in her mind when she touched you."

"No!" cried Flip, "the pinch was in her fingers!"

Mrs. Leavitt ignored this remark. "We will now discuss our manifold sins and wickednesses. A cognizance of the misdemeanors of others enables us to shun the pitfalls which beset our path. We will begin with Flip."

There were blushing, reluctant admissions of childish faults from every one but Elaine, who beamed with self-satisfaction, exuding spiteful triumph.

"I've been a good girl all week and I've had kind thoughts about every one every day."

Mrs. Leavitt, with a dotting glance at her daughter, corroborated this astounding statement.

"Yes, Elaine has been a good little lotus bud, unfolding day by day, 'all beautiful with the soul's expansion.'"

This was more than Flip's sense of fairness and truth could stand. "What about her pinching Hazel's leg and kicking me on the shins?" he demanded, and his face was fired with a flush of indignation.

"Ah!" Mrs. Leavitt turned to Flip, "Elaine did

not *mean* to pinch or kick any one. Those trivial acts were but symptoms of the constant storm and stress within her soul, which is not yet adjusted to the restriction of her physical body. Elaine was only expressing her ego.”

Flip was puzzled and unconvinced, but interested. “What’s an ego?”

“It is the real *you* within yourself,—the shrine, of which your body is the temple.”

“I know! I know!” cried Georgie Vance. “It’s the tumnick!”

“No, Georgie, the stomach is merely a physical organ, the receptacle for food which is necessary for sustaining the body. The ego is the essence of the absolute individual. All say after me,—‘I must be true to my ego!’”

They said it.

Flip thirsted for further information. “How do you spell ego?”

“E-G-O.”

“That’s the way I spell ‘egg’!” exclaimed Eric Hertz. “Only I don’t put an ‘o’ on the end; but an egg is shaped like an ‘o.’”

“He-he!” scoffed Elaine. “Your egg’s bad. Good eggs have two ‘g’s.’ He-he!”

Eric showed symptoms of a coming retort, but its expression was averted by Flip, who sought a clue that would lead him out of the labyrinth of his

puzzled thoughts. "What does 'be true to my ego' mean?"

"It means not to suppress the impulses that stir your soul,—to do whatever you feel constrained to do."

"I see!" Flip gave a smiling nod of understanding. "If you always do what you *want* to do, you're being true to your ego!"

"But you must always be sure that what you want to do is right," amended Mrs. Leavitt.

Eric Hertz raised his hand. "Please, Mrs. Leavitt, whenever I play with Elaine she always wants her own way, an' she gets it too, an' my ego just never has a chance! I'd like to be true to *my* ego sometimes, but Elaine's awful bossy when she plays. She's got a selfish ego; she's selfish, that's what she is!"

"No, Eric, it isn't selfish for Elaine to want and insist on having her own way. Her character is abnormally developed by a tenacity of purpose which refuses to be swept aside by the conflicting desires of other people. It might be selfishness with other children; but, you see, Elaine is a born leader. Thousands of years ago she was probably a great ruler, a renowned general. Perhaps she was Julius Cæsar!"

"Gee! ain't she old!" said Georgie Vance in an awed, piercing whisper.

Eric retired into an abashed silence with a wilted ego, looking as though he had been vanquished by Cæsar's legions.

A mild game of blindman's buff ensued, during which Elaine tripped on a rug and fell. Nancy rushed over to help her to her feet, and the child immediately screamed:

“Nancy pushed me and made me fall. I hate Nancy!”

“That's a lie!” shouted Flip. “Nancy wasn't near you when you fell down. That's a big lie!”

“No, no!” exclaimed Mrs. Leavitt, as she patted her darling's shoulder consolingly. “Elaine wouldn't tell a lie. Her remark was merely a slight exaggeration.” She turned to Nancy. “You see, her physical body is so delicately organized. Her nerves are situated very near the epidermis, which renders it supersensitive; so that a fall, or even the slightest tap, gives her astral body a psychic jar, a jolt that creates a disturbance of thought. Her mind could conceive no reason for falling, and so her surprise and pain caused her vivid imagination to grasp or formulate the idea that you had pushed her down, when in reality you had assisted her to regain her equilibrium.”

Nancy smiled vaguely as she listened, and Mrs. Leavitt went on complacently.

“In a few weeks Elaine will be seven years old.

Before that age the child's soul is still adjusting itself to the physical body; and the imagination, groping into the inscrutable purpose of life, is apt to take psychic leaps into the unknown, which sometimes results in what the untutored call lying. By accusing Elaine of a lie, Flip, you have started the vibration of a lie in her mind. She is so sensitive to suggestions. But we will forget this unpleasantness, which has caused a friction between your auras, by vibrating to beautiful thoughts.

“I will now announce the virtue for next week's study,—cheerfulness! You must all endeavor to be merry and bright under all circumstances. When you have a toothache or a cut finger or fall down and hurt yourself, just smile and be happy. Scatter cheerfulness wherever you go, smile on every one you meet. We will now conclude our meeting with that dear little song which so perfectly describes our Lotus Group.”

The children stood in a circle with clasped, perspiring hands, and laggingly sang the following words to Nancy's accompaniment:

“Happy little sunbeams darting through the blue,
Even little sunbeams have a work to do.
Shining at our brightest, we with radiance clad,
Make this life a rainbow, make the great world glad.”

CHAPTER XIV

GUESSES AT HEAVEN

THE next day several Cassburn mothers met at the post-office and discussed the Lotus Group in Miss Louella's Watch-and-Pry Corner.

Miss Louella was engaged in distributing the mail, and was unable to join them; but she listened so attentively that she neglected to read the post-cards before putting them in the boxes to which they were addressed.

"I ain't goin' to let my Georgie go to that Lowfuss Group no more," announced Mrs. Vance. "For a while it did seem to do him good, I'll say that. He'd weed the garden when he was told, an' go to bed without a fit o' temper, an' he took his calomel calm-like, 'cause he said he wanted to tell at the Lowfuss Group that he was virtuous."

"Just so," agreed Mrs. Hertz. "My Eric was so good an' obedient at first that I didn't know him. I thought, maybe, he was sickenin' fer something, and I was kinda worried. But Lemuel said that so long's he kept his color there was no need to get fussed up about it. But yesterday Mrs. Leavitt told my Eric that he was *green!* Now, no mother is goin' to stand fer that! *Green!* My Eric's complexion is as good as any in Cassburn. *Green!*"

“It was jes’ the same way with Hazel,” remarked Mrs. Wiggins, “an’ I was glad an’ willin’ to have her belong to the Lowfuss Group, ’cause it kep’ her out o’ mischief an’ she always came home from the meetin’s neat an’ clean, which is what she never does when she goes to school or to a party. I never knew the like o’ her for wearin’ out shoes and gettin’ clothes torn an’ dirty! So, as I say, I thought it was a good thing for Hazel to be a Lowfusser. But, las’ night, at the end o’ her prayers she said, ‘God bless my little ego.’ I asked her what she meant, but she didn’t seem to know what her little ego was, except that it was something inside her insides. As far as I could guess, Mrs. Leavitt’s been tellin’ her that it’s every one’s duty to lay an egg! I’m not goin’ to hev such crazy notions put in my child’s head. That ain’t the sort o’ religion for me an’ mine!”

“You’ve said the very thing that’s in my mind,” declared Mrs. Vance. “This morning Georgie wouldn’t eat his oatmeal. ‘I don’t like oatmeal,’ he says. ‘I’ve got an ego inside o’ me, an’ Mrs. Leavitt says I must be true to my ego; an’ if I eat this oatmeal I’m not being true to my ego, ’cause me an’ my ego don’t like oatmeal.’ He wouldn’t tell me what his ego was. He jes’ kept on sayin’, ‘I must be true to my ego.’ Now, Louella,” she turned to the postmistress who had joined the

group in the bay-window, “you search the Scriptures an’ you’re filled with the grace o’ understanding. *What* is an ego?”

Miss Louella simpered and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “As you say, Polly Vance, I’m filled with the grace o’ understanding, an’ I’ve read the Holy Writ through twenty-three times, not even skipping the begats. But I’ve never come up against an ego in the Bible. It must be a kind o’ germ, that’s what. Germs is popular these days. An’ Mrs. Leavitt, who thinks she speaks with the lips o’ the wise that disperse knowledge, is so full o’ pride an’ vainglory that she would give a germ a fancy name an’ call it an ego.”

“Well,” Mrs. Vance’s voice was like the crack of a whip, “a child that is dosed regular with calomel like my Georgie is, couldn’t get no germs in his internals, I’ll say that. An’ I’m goin’ to give him a stiff dose to-night an’ get rid o’ that ego, if he *has* one. I won’t stand fer any woman sayin’ that my Georgie has anything inside o’ him!”

“Just so,” purred Mrs. Hertz.

“I don’t believe in these fancy religions,” declared Miss Louella. “The Holy Writ is a lamp unto my feet an’ a light unto my path, so I don’t think much o’ this Theosophy or that Esoteric Society that Mrs. Leavitt belongs to an’ gets magazines an’ papers from every week; fillin’ up her

letter-box with trash, I say. The old-time religion's good enough fer me."

"Mrs. Leavitt's religion may be all right when viewed from the Throne o' Grace," Mrs. Vance conceded magnanimously. "An' I'm not sayin' that she ain't a handmaid o' the Lord; but that's as may be. I don't believe in religious societies, anyhow, an' that hysteric society of Mrs. Leavitt's ain't fit an' proper to my mind, if it teaches its members to put egoes inside o' children, fillin' them with germs folks never heard tell of."

"There ain't no mention of esoteric in the Holy Writ," Miss Louella sniffed up her nasal dewdrop, "an' I couldn't find the word in my little dictionary book. The nearest word like it was 'enteric,' which ain't no name to give a religious society, I say. I'm mighty sure the Lord don't favor these fancy religions. As the Holy Writ says, beware o' false prophets, an' new brooms sweep clean; but that which seems a pillar o' fire in the night of ignorance is nothin' but a cloud o' dust by day, that's what!"

Mrs. Talbot had remained silent throughout the debate, feeling like a solitary hen watching a group of ducks swimming about in a pool of discussion while she stood on the brink, wondering, puzzled, and not daring to thrust in a remark. She left the mothers on the steps of the post-office, where they

lingered to hear the parting shots fired at Mrs. Leavitt by Mrs. Vance.

"I'll jes' step into Solomon Simpson's an' ask him over to supper," she said to herself as she walked along the street. "Maybe he can tell me something 'bout these new religions, an' then, when I hear folks talkin' 'bout 'em, I'll be able to pass a remark without showin' off my ignorance. He knows something 'bout everything, Solomon does."

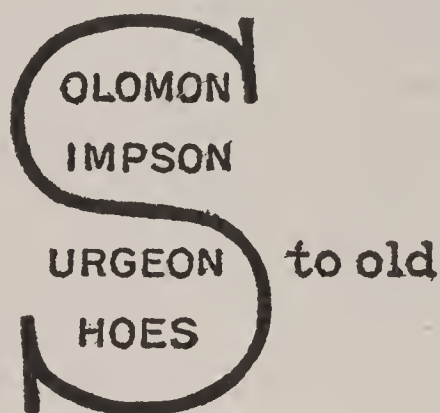
Her steps quickened as she imagined herself taking part in an animated discussion, prefacing her remarks with the introductory phrase, "Solomon Simpson says."

Solomon Simpson's cottage stood in a little hollow which seemed to have been scooped out of Maple Street. It was a low, casement-windowed dwelling, rather primitively built, and its gambrel roof gave it a pressed-down appearance. The walls were painted a pale yellow, and the shingles were stained with a motley of greens and browns, like a thatching of moss.

Solomon had built the house himself, many years ago, and, while he worked, the girl who was to become his wife would sit with her sewing in a shady corner to watch him. They dreamed of a long, happy life together in their little home, but only a fragment of the dream was granted them. In less than two years Mary Simpson and her baby son

were carried to the churchyard. But the dreams they had shared together still lingered in Solomon's heart, filling the place with memories that were as sweet and fragrant as the flowers in his garden.

After thirty years, the house in the hollow was just as he and Mary had planned,—homelike and flowery. A thick, closely-clipped cedar-hedge separated the garden from the street and a green gate, arched with a rose-trimmed trellis, opened onto a flower-fringed path leading to the door, over which was suspended the Shakespearean sign:



Two old apple-trees, with rustic benches encircling their gnarled trunks, shaded the garden which was laid out with prim borders and beds of old-fashioned, sweet-smelling flowers. Gooseberry, currant, and raspberry-bushes, trimly supported by slender, green-painted sticks, mingled with clove-pinks, stocks, mignonette, lupins, pansies, roses, and larkspur. Here and there were little cedars, fantastically clipped, and vine-covered posts

crowned with bird-houses. A small mound of rocks and ferns held a bathing and drinking pool for Solomon's feathered friends. The house and garden were quaint and charming, like a Kate Greenaway illustration.

The door was opened wide to breeze and sunlight, and Mrs. Talbot entered Solomon's workshop without knocking. He looked up with a welcoming smile, its sincerity attested by the friendly gleam in his eyes.

He was a small, slight man with a clear, rosy complexion, silvery hair, and soft, luminous blue eyes whose expression changed with his thoughts, now grave, now humorous, but always kind.

A small, low table beside his bench held a three-volume edition of Shakespeare, one of which was opened at Portia's Mercy speech, which Solomon was memorizing while he worked.

“Solomon, you read a lot,” began Mrs. Talbot, as she seated herself in a Windsor chair, “an' I'm wonderin' if you can tell me 'bout this new-fangled religion that Mrs. Leavitt's been teachin' the children. Theosophy, it's called.”

Solomon, looking up from the shoe he was mending, smiled and shook his head. “Melissa, the only religion I know has no name. It is expressed in three short words,—‘God is love’; and my homely wits are not given to exploring beyond that.”

“I vow it don’t seem right to me for folks to take up these queer religions,” the woman volunteered. “They’re jes’ fads an’ notions, like doctorin’ ; an’ every one thinks he has the only right idea, whether it’s religion or doctorin’. The different kinds o’ doctorin’ seem to be jes’ guesses at curin’, an’ all the different religions are jes’ guesses at heaven. It must puzzle God a heap to see how people fuss an’ change. If folks’d all have one religion an’ go to the same church, it’d save a lot o’ trouble an’ hard feelin’, I think.”

“There is some truth to be found in all of them,” remarked Solomon. “They are all roads leading to the same goal.”

“Well, anyway, religion’s a puzzle ’nless you’re like Louella Greer, an’ have the Holy Writ at your tongue’s end to give you a sure feelin’ o’ bein’ right, whatever you think or say. You might drop over to supper to-night, Solomon. John an’ me’d be glad to hev you; an’ I’ll make a batch o’ scones, that you like so much.”

“Thank you, Melissa, I’ll come with pleasure.”

“We’ll expect you early,” said the simple, kind-hearted woman as she passed out the door.

Solomon’s hands lay idly on his leather apron, as he gazed abstractedly through the open window near his bench. The tall hollyhocks, with their frilled blossoms bursting from the tight, green buds,

swayed in the breeze, as though nodding at him to attract his attention; but Solomon's thoughtful eyes were fixed on the sky where soft, white clouds were slowly drifting towards the west to attend a sunset convention.

“You're right, Melissa,—religion's a puzzle,” he murmured.

“ ‘ So many Gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
When just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs.’ ”

CHAPTER XV

CONCERNING SUSAN

THE Sunday evening service was ended and the congregation, dispersing in small groups, passed through the churchyard to the street.

Daylight still lingered in the sky, although the west was strewn with pink cloud-fleeces, loosened petals scattered by the sun which had faded like a crimson rose. The churchyard sloped to the shore, where the waves crept in gently with a sound as of deep-drawn sighs.

Nancy had come to church alone, and now she lingered in the peaceful churchyard. Its "solemn stillness," filled with the mysterious hush that comes between the daylight and the dark, made the world and its worries seem far away. She sat on the grass beside her mother's grave, over which a thick growth of ivy had woven a tapestry of sombre green.

Grass-muffled footsteps behind her caused her to turn quickly, and her face brightened with a smile of welcome when she saw Susan Avery approaching.

"I hope I didn't startle you, Nancy."

"Just for a second. People seldom loiter here at this hour, but I love it. Sit down, Susan."

“I saw you sitting here, and I hoped you wouldn’t mind if I joined you.” Susan’s voice was wistful.

“I’m glad you came.” Nancy laid her hand on Susan’s arm with a friendly pressure, as the girl sat down beside her.

Susan Avery was twenty-six, but her small, nimble body, straight and slim as a boy’s, made her appear much younger. Her head was proudly poised on her slender neck, as though to balance the weight of her luxuriant hair which had the glossy tint of a ripe chestnut. Her clear olive complexion was warmed with a glow of rose in her cheeks, and her dark brown eyes held the pleading, wondering expression of a shy, wistful child who feels unwanted and unloved.

Louella Greer once remarked, “Susan has the makin’s of a beauty, an’ she’d be a real pretty girl if her face wasn’t spoiled with a harelip.”

Poor Susan was sensitive and given to brooding morbidly over her disfigurement, which had made her the butt of her schoolmates’ ridicule when a child, and had filled her life with the misery of balked ambition. Her determination to become a school-teacher had helped her to rise above the degradation of her poverty-ridden home and shiftless family.

By working in a boarding-house at Bradbury,

she had managed to attend the high school for four years, passing all her examinations with honors; but when she applied for a country school the inspector bluntly told her that she was disqualified for teaching.

“ I don’t see as how I c’d appoint ye to teach at Gardendale,” he said, as he pared his nails with his pocket-knife. “ The children’d be thinkin’ more of yer twisted lip than their lessons. Yer record as a student is fine; but, with a teacher, the discipline’s the great thing. An’ how’d ye ever keep the discipline among scholars that’re makin’ jokes ’bout yer face? Learnin’ ain’t nothin’, ’thout the discipline!”

Susan winced. “ But, Mr. Simpkins, after a time the pupils would become used to my scarred lip. I’m fond of children, and they like me. I am sure I could win their respect and obedience in spite of my—disfigurement. Please give me a chance, Mr. Simpkins! I’ll try so hard!”

Hosea Simpkins closed his knife with a click which sounded to Susan like a key being turned in the door that shut her out from the attainment of her heart’s desire.

“ It’d be too risky. It don’t do to put girls an’ boys under a teacher they c’n make fun of. A teacher’s face goes a long way to-wards the discipline. I’ve been inspector o’ schools in this dis-

trict fer nineteen years, an' I know what I'm talkin' 'bout. The discipline's the great thing!”

So Susan became a dressmaker, and was now employed in the establishment of Madame Geraldine Foy at Bradbury. Most of her salary was contributed to the support of her family who lived in Cassburn; but her sacrifice earned no gratitude or affection from her father and stepmother and their brood of children.

Silas Avery was idle and shiftless, given to lounging near the kitchen stove in winter, smoking his pipe, bemoaning his ill-luck, and declaring himself a victim of life's “mean cussedness.” In the summer he would doze in a hammock crudely made of barrel-staves, which hung under a chestnut-tree in the untidy front yard. He neglected his small farm. The fields, overgrown with weeds, yielded scant harvests; the orchard was seldom pruned or sprayed, and no young trees were planted to replace the old ones that gradually gave up their yearly struggle to blossom and bear fruit. The rotting fences were seemingly held together by a luxuriant growth of poison ivy, which the neighbors execrated in good set terms when the pestiferous vine invaded their premises.

“Silas Avery hed a fallin' out with work when he was young, an' they ain't been on speakin' terms since,” Jim Deane once observed. “He's a mem-

ber o' the Do-nothin' Club, whose motto is 'Rest'; only they ought to spell it,—R-U-S-T. At the sight of a chair Silas gets weakenin' o' the spine, so he has to sit down, an' he's 'most ready fer being the world's champion in sleeping sickness."

Mrs. Avery was a patent medicine fiend. Several shelves in a small shed adjoining the kitchen were filled with empty bottles and pill-boxes, ghosts of the various concoctions she had taken from time to time. She had a library of advertising booklets, and spent many hours in reading descriptions of diseases, glowing with satisfaction when she recognized her own imaginary symptoms, and gloating over the testimonials from suffering women reporting miraculous cures of their ailments, of which they gave intimate details.

Every Saturday afternoon Susan walked home from Bradbury, sacrificing her free time to the needs of the sordid household. She would do the week's washing and then attack the accumulation of dirty dishes in the slimy, greasy sink. Supper was followed by a wholesale bathing of the children. Then the bread was mixed and set to rise, and the clothes were brought in to be sprinkled and folded. Sundays were devoted to ironing, house-cleaning, baking, and mending. Mrs. Avery never offered to help her stepdaughter. She would rock back and forth in a creaking chair, her whining

voice bewailing her invalidism and her inability to afford an operation.

In stormy weather, Jim Deane and his Peace Ship always appeared at the Avery gate on Sunday evenings.

“I’m jes’ runnin’ over to Bradbury, Susan,” he would say in his offhand manner, “an’ I thought maybe you’d like a lift.”

Grateful Susan recognized the kindly subterfuge and wisely played up to it. In his youth Jim had been engaged to Susan’s mother, until a foolish lovers’ quarrel separated them and pretty, vain Sue Gardiner, in a fit of spiteful independence, married Silas Avery.

Silas, in those days, was looked upon as a model young man. He was handsome in a big, blond way, cheerful and easy-going, and never smoked or drank a social glass. Jim had a temper which blazed up like the fire in his forge. He also resembled the fire in his habit of smoking, and he was known to enter the saloon at Bradbury for a “nip o’ cheer.” Sue’s objections to Jim’s harmless indulgences goaded him into a display of temper that ended their engagement; and, before he had cooled off sufficiently to seek a reconciliation, she was wearing Silas Avery’s wedding-ring.

Two years later, Jim stood alone in the rain and mud beside her freshly-turned grave and vowed, in

her memory, that he would look out for the baby Susan she had left behind.

Within a year Silas had married again, and the neglected home was quickly filled with noisy, dirty, uncared-for children.

Little Susan would have fared badly without the shy but determined kindnesses of Jim Deane. When she was a few months old he took her to Boston and paid all expenses at the hospital, where a successful operation was performed on her hare-lip. He saw to it that she was properly clothed and sent to school regularly; and he compelled her father, who had no sympathy with the girl's ambition, to allow her to attend the Bradbury high school.

“Sitting here like this seems to give my soul a bath,” Susan said to Nancy after a long silence. “I hate dressmaking! It is torture to sit day after day, always sewing; and the week's work leaves me feeling dusty and wrinkled. Then I come home and find the place like a pigsty. Every week it is the same old hopeless grind! Father is too lazy and indifferent to care, and Mother's only interest in life is imagining she has a new disease and wishing she could afford an operation. This week she thinks she has either cancer of the stomach or an abscess on the brain; and last week she was sure she was going to die of floating kidneys.

“I took her to see Doctor Gordon last winter. He was very abrupt with her,—you know his way. He told her that there was nothing wrong with her; that the only medicine she needed was a daily dose of housework. As a result of the interview she had nervous prostration for two weeks.”

“Poor old Susan!” murmured Nancy. “I think you do too much for your family. Let them shift for themselves for a change! It would do them good to have their selfishness jolted. You’re entitled to some fun.”

“Fun!” echoed Susan. “In my ‘lexicon of youth’ there’s no such word as ‘Fun.’ I never have any pleasures like other girls, who have friends to take them to dances and movies. I’m so ugly that no man would think of taking me anywhere. I’ve missed all the good things of life, and now I’m twenty-six,—an old maid!”

“You aren’t ugly!” protested Nancy. “Your coloring is lovely,—hair, eyes, and complexion. You’re a ‘nut-brown mayde.’ But you are so sensitive about that scar on your lip that you appear reserved and stand-offish with people who would like to be friendly, so they let you alone. Take my advice, Susan. Shirk your family for a while. Spend your money on some pretty clothes, and go out and mix with people!”

Susan sighed. “For over a year I’ve cherished a

little dream, a foolish bit of pretending; and now, —well, I'm going to tell you about it. I've been an awful fool, Nancy.

“During the War, I did a lot of knitting for the Red Cross. All the girls at Madame Foy's used to write their names and addresses on slips of paper, which they sewed on the inside of the socks. I did it once, and, about sixteen months ago I had a letter from a soldier in France, thanking me for the socks and asking if I would write to him. He said he hadn't any relatives or friends to send him letters; and he'd like to hear now and again from the U. S. A. It was a friendly, boyish letter, and he seemed lonely.”

“Did you write?”

“Yes, and we've been corresponding regularly since then. He is Sergeant Tom McGillicuddy, twenty-eight years old. He owns a ranch out West, miles from anywhere. After we had exchanged a few letters he asked me to send him my photograph, but I was afraid to. I enjoyed his letters so much, and I thought if he knew how ugly I was he wouldn't write any more. So I bought a picture of a pretty movie actress,—her name was Claire Adams—and mailed it to him.

“He sent me such a nice letter of thanks; said I was such a peach that he was afraid to send me a copy of his mug. He's quite slangy, but I liked

his breezy expressions. Oh, I wish I hadn't sent that picture!”

Susan cried quietly for a few minutes. Then she rose, extending a hand to Nancy.

“It's getting dark, and it's time I started back to Bradbury. I'll tell you the rest as we walk along the street.”

The sky was gloomed with night-clouds, and fire-flies were flitting under the trees, dotting the darkness with their transient gleams. Lights shone from several windows, sending shafts of yellow radiance into the dewy, fragrant gardens. Occasionally, they met youthful couples strolling arm in arm under the wide-spreading chestnut-trees.

“They're happy,” whispered Susan, as they passed an amatory pair. “Their love-making may be silly, but at least it is real. My romance, if you can call it that, was just a foolish pretend, the sort of thing a silly girl of sixteen might indulge in; but Tom liked my letters, and I—— Oh! I can't tell you, Nancy, how eagerly I looked for his, until he began to write about returning to America. He said he was coming to Bradbury to meet me; because, if I was the sort of girl he imagined I was from reading my letters, he wanted to know me personally and get better acquainted. He had never had a girl friend before.

“The other day I had a card from him. He had

just landed in New York and was going to Camp Mills. Oh, Nancy! I want to see him, but I'm afraid to! I don't want him to come to Bradbury and find out how I cheated him over that picture! He is the only boy friend I ever had, and when he sees me, he will despise me. Oh, what shall I do?"

"If I were you, I'd write and fess up." Nancy linked her arm in Susan's. "Then he can please himself about coming; and, if he *does* come, you needn't be afraid to meet him."

"I tried to do that. I wrote about a dozen letters, but I hadn't the courage to send them. I tore them up."

By this time, they had reached the corner of Cedar Street.

"Aren't you afraid to walk along that dark road by yourself?" asked Nancy, glancing along the Bradbury highway.

"No, I know every inch of it, I've tramped it so often. Besides, the moon will soon be up. It has done me good to talk to you, Nancy. I felt I must tell some one. I wish I had brought some of Tom's letters for you to read. I've kept them all. They are so jolly and friendly, and not a bit mushy. He likes reading, and he has read all my favorite books; and he's fond of music. He has a Victrola at his home, and says he fills the lonely evenings out on his ranch with music; winds up his 'tune-box,' as

he calls it, and puts on Caruso and Kreisler records. Oh, I wish—but it’s no use! One look at me will be enough for him!”

“Buck up, Susan! Let him come to Bradbury, and don’t be shy about meeting him. Pretend you don’t care a hang whether he likes you or not, and treat the whole affair as a joke. Let him get to really know you as I do. Then, if he *does* like you and you like him,—invite me to your wedding! You’re a splendid girl, Susan. And don’t forget,—‘beauty is only skin deep.’”

“‘But ugliness goes to the bone,’” finished Susan in dismal tones. “Good-night, Nancy.”

Nancy scurried down the shadowy road. At the gate she paused to glance wistfully at the house next door, all dark and silent, no light in the upstairs den, and no music filling the night with enchantment.

She began to hum a faint minor tune, a wisp of a melody like sighs set to music. Then, as she strolled along the path to the house, the words were woven into the little song.

“ ‘ Oh, love, love, love!
Love is like a dizziness,
That winna let a poor body
Gang about his business.’ ”

CHAPTER XVI

JOAN'S CONFESSION

HARRY and Joan had been swimming out to Lion Rock and back, burrowing their way through the leaping waves, and now they threw themselves on the hot sand, breathless and exhausted with fighting the undercurrent of the outgoing tide. Harry lay on his back, his sunburnt arms and legs outstretched, and Joan was sprawling beside him, her elbows embedded in the sand and her hands supporting her chin.

"Say—er—Jo—Ann," Harry's hesitation showed that he was approaching his subject warily, "what's biting Nancy these days? You must have noticed that she's been looking awfully spinked lately. What's the matter with her? Put me wise."

"There's nothing the matter with her,—you're loony. Nancy's all right."

"She *isn't* all right. She's off her feed and looks peckish. If you weren't such a bat-eyed chump, you'd see it yourself. Monica told me this morning that she's caught Nancy three times lately dewing her pillow with tears at night. I wonder if—she's in love!"

"Nancy in love?" Joan sat up. "Oh, you've

gone cuckoo! There isn't any one for her to be in love *with!*"

"Well," Harry also sat up and began to bury his legs in sand, "what about—Captain Dick?"

"Captain Dick? Huh! your headlight's gone out. Light up and think again," sneered Joan.

"He seemed awfully gone on her before he went away, and he hasn't written to any of us since he left, except those cards he sent to Monica and the twins from Newport. Looks queer to me."

"Pooh!" scoffed Joan.

"Pooh to you!" returned Harry. "You know Nancy and Captain Dick were great pals. I often noticed him looking at her like a sick fish, and the sight of him always set her eyes dancing. Something's happened to switch him off the track. Help me dope it out."

"My sowl to glory!" Joan gave an admirable imitation of Oonah's favorite exclamation. "I didn't think it was serious! I thought he was just fooling with Nance because she was the only girl in sight. Louella Greer said that every one thought Nancy was running after him, and he seemed mighty hard to catch; and I felt that perhaps it was true, and he was laughing at Nance, thinking her a bally little idiot. So I reeled off a mile of fibs to him about her being engaged to some chap in Abyssinia or somewhere. I told him that her

guileless innocence was a trick for fooling men; that she was a regular little flirt-fiend. I didn't want him to think that she was 'a violet by a mossy stone,' just waiting for him to pick and throw away."

"Slow music and a soft place for me to fall!" groaned Harry. "What did he say to that? Did he clutch his heart and roll his eyes to heaven?"

"He didn't say much, and I didn't look at him. I pretended I was talking to him through a telephone. I can't lie when I look at people; but telephones were invented to make lying easy. I remember now, he went away the very next day, sneaked off and missed Nancy's birthday-party. Do you think he really cared? Oh, my eye! I've made a mess of it!"

"You sure have," agreed Harry. "Of course he cared! That's why he turned snooty and rushed off to Newport where he's probably drooling love-talk to some razzle-dazzle society-girl, while Nancy's breaking her heart and letting something or other feed on her damask cheek like a worm in the bud. You've blighted your sister's life! There's a hook for you to hang your hat on."

"You've got cobwebs in your attic, sneeze and blow them away!" snapped Joan. "Anyway, if they're really and truly in love, there's no harm done. I can easily set things right. I'll write to

Captain Dick and tell him that the man in Tierra del Fuego is dead, and ——”

“Tierra del Fuego? You said at first it was Abyssinia,” corrected Harry.

“Did I? I know I didn’t tell Captain Dick that it was Abyssinia. I’m sure I didn’t. I’ve forgotten where I said the tiresome man was. Oh, well, it doesn’t matter; he’s dead, anyway. I’m going to kill him, have him murdered, and eaten by cannibals.”

“That listens fine!” declared Harry. “Do you think Captain Dick will swallow a yarn like that? Who’s loony now?”

Joan flushed with vexation. “Why not? He swallowed the other story easily enough. Why should he choke on this one? If he’s really in love with Nancy he’ll come back lickety-split when he hears that the other fellow is dead; and he’ll appreciate her all the more if he thinks she had a chance of marrying some one else. It does a man good to learn that he isn’t the only star in the sky. Men are all so conceited, especially about girls being in love with them.”

Harry kicked away the sand in which he had buried his legs and stood up. “It’s a dead cert that you’re a lulu,” he said with commiserating scorn. “Your stupid meddling and muddling has put Nancy’s romance on the blink, so it’s up to you

to square the whole caboodle and set things right. Do it your own way; but here's a piece of advice to paste on your brain,—‘Mind your own business!’ ”

Two days later Dick received a letter from Joan, which caused him to break away from Mrs. Seaton's entangling net of social engagements. He swamped his hostess's remonstrances with voluble excuses, summoning many fibs to his aid in giving plausible reasons for his hasty departure.

Then, with hurried wholesale orders at a florist's and confectioner's, he buried half a dozen summer flirtations beneath a bushel of roses and a ton of chocolates. Charming, regretful notes of farewell were sent with the roses and chocolates to a group of society belles with whom he had danced and dallied in brilliant ballrooms, dimly-lighted conservatories, and on moonlit decks.

To him these fashionable girls were all alike, living for the excitement of the hour and craving constant diversion in their search for pleasure. They had all the parlor tricks of coquetry, sham demureness and challenging smiles. Surrounded by an atmosphere of little conventional lies, they lived a showcase existence, slavishly obeying the whims of dressmakers, modifying their figures and their gait in their submission to the tyranny of fashion. They were young, but their youth was contradicted

and robbed of enchantment by the sophisticated boredom written in their eyes.

How different they were from Nancy, the shabby little Cinderella! Her eyes had the innocent candor of a child, with glints of mischief when she smiled. She wore no mask of conventional politeness to hide her varying moods; they flitted over her face in sweet alternation from grave to gay, making him long to kiss the dimple that lurked in the corner of her smiles or the little perplexed frown that sometimes ruffled her forehead. Winsome Nancy! The thought of her sent his heart soaring like a singing lark.

During the journey to New York he frequently glanced at Joan's letter, his face puckered into comic wonderment over her ill-formed writing which was interspersed with dashes, blots, and erasures, which she had made by rubbing a finger over the deleted words. By the time he reached New York he had practically memorized the following rambling epistle which had brought heaven down to earth.

“ MY DEAR CAPTAIN DICK :

“ Sometime, somewhere, somebody—I suppose it was a Pope—said that confession was good for the soul. So, pretend you are a Padre and hear me confess.

“ Imagine me draped in sackcloth and smeared

with ashes, while two scorpions—remorse and anguish—are stinging, biting, or tickling my soul. I'm not certain what it is that scorpions do; but they are doing it to me, and my soul feels awfully uncomfortable.

“What I told you about our Nancy being a flirt and being engaged to some chap in Madagascar or Siberia—or wherever he was—was a figment of my imagination. She isn't a flirt, and she never was or will be engaged, unless you hurry back and propose to her before she dies of a broken heart.

“The reason I fibbed to you was this: I was hopping mad over something that old hag-cat, Louella Greer, said about your being slow in proposing to Nancy, although she was running after you and trying to annex you. Now, you *were* slow in proposing, you must admit that; and I thought you were a heart-trapper, amusing yourself with Nancy, leading her on to fall for you. So I decided to put your game to the bad.

“Harry says you are a decent sort, and I have the same idea in my think-box. He says you are loony with love for Nancy and she's got a weak heart over you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have sneaked off the way you did, and she wouldn't look droopy and wilted, like a flag at half-mast.

“We all miss you dreadfully, especially our Nancy. She doesn't say so, but she has the air of one who has looked into the depths of life and found it a hollow thing. Last night she sat at the piano, like the picture of Saint Cecilia with fat little angels chucking roses down from heaven, and played Chopin Nocturnes—worm-eaten, lovesick tunes—for over an hour. By the time she had finished, and she had ended with the long, dreary

whine of the Funeral March, I was covered with mildew.

“ Do come back soon, there’s a dear old thing! If Nancy turns snooty about your going off the way you did, you can square the whole gazookas by telling a few lies. As the poets say, ‘ All’s fair in love and war ’ and ‘ It’s better to have loved and lied, etc.’ So, go to it, old dear!

“ After you’ve popped the question, we’ll all be awfully tactful and considerate. At your approach we’ll fade out of the picture, and we’ll whistle when we come along the hall, and cough or sneeze before opening doors. Our home will be a Lovers’ Paradise, so you and Nancy can be as spoony and loony as you like.

“ Yours considerably,

“ JOAN.”

CHAPTER XVII

A LOVER AND HIS LASS

DICK traveled from New York to Cassburn in his automobile; and the speedometer, dizzyingly recording his mileage, apparently registered his cardiac pulsations as well. Except for a few miles, when he was obliged to proceed warily through splashing mud and rain-pools during a brief, violent thunderstorm, his journey was a flagrant violation of speed laws.

It was mid-afternoon when he reached his destination. The village wore a deserted air, as though all its inhabitants were dozing behind closed doors and shutters. He slowed down to an easy pace under the trees of Chestnut Street, like a person cautiously entering a sickroom and fearful of disturbing a sleeping patient.

The automobile nosed its way down the narrow, winding road of Cedar Street and glided between the stone pillars of the gates of Cedarwold. Dick's approaching signal of three short honks brought Noki to the door just as the car came to a standstill before the steps.

For a moment the Jap's bland smile was wiped out by a look of astonishment as he exclaimed over Dick's grimy, unshaven appearance.

“ Muddy tlip! Bloss needs sclaping! ”

Then the smile returned as he added, “ Bloss come black,—much obliged! ”

“ A hot bath, Noki, and a clean outfit. ” Dick emerged from his mud-encrusted coat like a snake sloughing its skin.

“ And blite to eat,—bloss hungly? ”

“ No time to eat. I’m in a hurry. ”

In twenty minutes Dick was ascending the sagging steps of the Graysons’ verandah. His hurried jerk of the bell snapped the wire, and when he released the handle it dropped to the floor and rolled down the steps.

The doors and windows were wide open, but there was no sign of life about the place; house and garden seemed to be sunk in deep slumber, like the castle of the Sleeping Beauty. No one came in response to his vehement knocking. He entered the hall and glanced about. It was shadowy and cool, a refuge for flowery breezes from the brazen heat outside. A bee hovered with drowsy murmuring over the table where a bunch of sweet peas was cradled in a flat green bowl.

Dick whistled. There was no reply, only a louder buzzing from the bee.

“ Where the deuce has every one gone? ” he exclaimed impatiently. Then he called aloud.

“ Harry! Joan! I say,—is any one at home? ”

Silence! He went through the long hall and opened a door, starting back as a hot, withering blast greeted him from the kitchen where Oonah was ironing. Lines strung across the room were hung with crisp, freshly-ironed clothes. The top of the stove, where the irons were clustered, glowed a dull red, and, at the back, a large iron kettle was spouting clouds of steam and spitting bubbles of water which hissed and spluttered on the stove.

“God bliss the day! Is it Captain Dick or his ghost I’m seeing?”

“Where’s the family?” he inquired.

“Divil the fill av an eye have I seen av thim since dinner. Joan an’ Harry’s down on the shore swimmin’ an’ clammin’; Monica’s in the garden somewheres; an’ thim little hell-raisers, the twins, is off to the divil knows where.”

“Er—where’s Miss—er—where’s Nancy?”

“My sowl to glory! What’s the matter wid yer face? Is it fightin’ you’ve been? An’ how’d it happen that a man wid a physick loike yours’d let another feller make mince mate av his face? You look loike a map av the City av Dublin afther a Sinn Fein rebellyun, there’s divil a doubt av that! Yer face’d make a good sign fer a butcher’s shop.”

“I shaved in a hurry and cut myself. Where’s Nan ——?”

“Shure it’ll take a mile av court plaster to mind

that face; an' whin it's done you'll have a cammy-flagged face loike the battleships in the War.”

“Where's Nancy?” asked Dick in desperation.

“Oh, it's Nancy you're wantin', an' where is she? Well, she's gone over to rade aloud from the newspapers to old Mr. Wiggins, an', maybe, she's comin' back now along the cliff-path. The poor man's eyesight is failin' an' his folks is too busy to rade to him. So Nancy goes over wance a week to rade 'bout politics an' accidents, an' murders, an'——”

At the mention of the cliff-path Dick left the kitchen, making his exit through the back door; and Oonah's garrulity ended abruptly when, seeing him rush past the window, she realized that he had deserted her.

“A divil av a hurry he's in, runnin' out wid me worruds trailin' afther him loike a piece av string caught on one av his buttons an' unwindin' from a ball in me hand.”

Dick, in his eagerness to reach the cliff-path and meet Nancy on the way home, scorned the usual route through the Cedarwold gardens and thence along the shore. He went through the back yard and vaulted the stone wall which separated it from Lemuel Hertz's orchard, disregarding the sign, “No Trespassing.”

A narrow path followed the irregular, jagged outline of the sandy cliffs, beneath which lay the

shore where the waves crept in among the boulders and receded with a grating sound of pebbles. The fields were a shimmering green under the golden glance of the sun, dappled with moving shadows cast by the white, woolly clouds that drifted across the vivid blue sky.

Feathery grasses, fringing the path, clutched at the buckles of Nancy's shoes as she walked, and powdered her feet with seeds. Presently she left the path and waded through a thick growth of sweet fern, which clothed a gently rising slope, to a group of hoary pines that crowned its summit. The lichened, gray-brown trunks of the trees were jeweled with amber beads of oozing resinous gum, and a brisk, salty breeze stirred among their plumed branches, letting thin gleams of sunlight sift through the green dusk.

Nancy stood, hat in hand, on the springy, dusty carpet of pine-needles and gazed across the sea which mirrored the sky with sparkles of the sun. The world about her, waves, wind, and sunlight, seemed to be dancing joyously; but her jaded spirits refused to keep in step with nature's march of triumph.

Dick had seen her climb through the sweet fern, and had hastened across the intervening fields and swampy meadows. He now approached her eagerly, his footsteps making no noise on the padded

ground until the exposed, snakelike roots of a tree caused him to stumble.

She turned quickly, dropping her hat.

“Captain Dick!” her face flushed beneath his eager, ardent gaze. “I thought you were in Newport. When did you get back?”

“I *was* in Newport, but I couldn’t stay away from you any longer, Nancy. I got back half an hour ago, and I rushed here to find you. Nancy, I——”

“I’m hurrying home,” she declared. “This is Oonah’s busy day and I promised to get supper ready.”

“Oh, blow the supper! It can wait.”

“But the family’s hungry appetites can’t,” she protested, as he seized her hand in a firm, detaining grasp. “I must go.”

“You must stay! I’ve scaled a stone wall, I’ve trespassed in an orchard, I’ve tramped through a bog to reach you. Look at my muddy feet!”

“Yes,” her roguish smile became audible in a low, musical laugh, “I’m looking at your muddy feet,—they’re both on my hat!”

“And your feet, Nancy, are on my—heart!”

There followed an impetuous rush of words from his lips, as he held her closely in his arms. Nancy, with her freedom from pretense and coquetry, was simply and transparently happy. She had never

seemed so adorably lovely as now, when she nestled in his arms with the confiding surrender and winsome wonderment of a child.

Gulls swooped by, wheeling in circles, dipping and rising, and uttering shrill cries.

“Those birds are crying shame upon us for being so foolish,” she chuckled. “I must go home, I really must, Dick!”

“May I come for supper? I’ll help you to get it ready, and it will be the best supper your family ever ate. Let me come!” he urged.

“No, no!” she shook her head. “I don’t want them to guess our secret so soon. Let’s hide it in our hearts until ——”

“To-morrow, no longer!” he finished. “I want every one to know. Shall we drop in on Miss Louella in the morning and receive her blessing with a sprinkling of Holy Writ?”

Suddenly he started slightly and his arms tightened about her. His forehead was cleft with a frown, his mouth set in grim lines, and his eyes partly closed. Without warning that strange, baffling voice had come forth from the oblivion of several weeks’ forgetfulness; and that mysterious hand, pressing upon his left arm, seemed to be pushing Nancy away from him. A smothered ejaculation burst from his lips.

“Dick, what is it?” Nancy looked up, with eyes

dilating and a quick indrawing of breath. “What is wrong?”

“For a moment a little devil perched on my shoulder and whispered that I was going to lose you. Nancy,” he held her back, grasping her hands tensely, “you won’t let anything come between us? Promise me you won’t!”

“Of course not, you dear, silly old thing! You can’t lose me, and I *won’t* lose you. We belong to each other for keeps.”

Leisurely and happily they walked homeward along the cliff-path, which presently descended to the shore and ended at the garden of Cedarwold. They lingered by the gap in the hedge, unaware that a pair of wondering blue eyes was watching them through a leafy screen of lilacs until a penetrating whisper startled their ears.

“Flip,—Flip,—just look! Captain Dick’s hugging Nancy an’ kissing her; an’—*she’s letting him do it!*”

“May I come to supper now?” questioned Dick, his eyes twinkling at Nancy’s dismay.

She struggled to free herself from his restraining arms.

“You *must* come now. I couldn’t face the family alone.”

Nancy broke away and ran to the house, leaving Dick to face Flip and Flop, who slowly emerged

from the lilacs. For fully three minutes the twins stood looking at him solemnly, scornfully, silently. Then Flip spoke.

“My eye! hugging an’ kissing a girl!”

“Are you Nancy’s sweetheart?” asked Flop, more in sorrow than in anger.

“Such is my fond illusion,” answered the culprit with mock seriousness.

“Well, I s’pose it’s time she had one, but I’m sorry it’s you!” Flip sighed. “You’re too nice to be wasted on sweethearting. Now I s’pose you’ll have to kiss Nancy an’ hug her every day.” He regarded Dick with commiseration.

“Er—I’m afraid so,” replied Dick mournfully. “I’ll have to keep to the rules of sweethearting. Yes,” there was hopeless dejection in his voice and attitude, “I shall have to kiss Nancy every day of the week and twice on Sundays!”

“Huh!” grunted Flip, “you’ll soon wear off your mustache if you aren’t careful.”

“Perhaps Nancy wants it off,” observed Flop sagaciously. “Mustache kisses must be awful tickly. When I’m a sweetheart I shall have a smooth man for kissing, an’ the others with tooth-brushy lips will have to keep just to hugging; an’ they’ll all have to do it only on birthdays an’ Christmas, ’cause I don’t ’spect to be a kissy-huggy sweetheart.”

“When I’m a sweetheart,” began Flip, in tones that implied enforced resignation and disgust, “I’ll have a mustache of barbated wire, and a ’lectric batterum in my pocket beside my heart; an’ if any girl gets too sweethearty with me, her face’ll be scratched an’ she’ll get a shock that’ll knock her silly.”

CHAPTER XVIII

TOIL AND TROUBLE

AFTER a long day's work, Mrs. Neve walked with slow, dragging steps along the street to her home and paused to lean wearily on the gate before she entered.

It was a pale evening, for night was creeping shyly over the dove-gray sky, which was darkened in the west by an ominous cloud shaped like a huge, crouching lion. The landscape, rich in woodland and bounded in the distance by hills, was filled with the quiet hush of drowsy nature. One star shone overhead, gleamed and faded, as though abashed at finding itself alone in the sky before the moon had risen; like the first guest arriving too early at an evening party and before the host is ready.

The gate-chain, weighted with a tin can filled with pebbles, creaked as she opened the gate, which closed behind her with a sharp click of the latch. The small plot of ground before the cottage was uncared for, and straggling weeds overtopped the clusters of sweet william, devil-in-a-bush, live-forever, bleeding-hearts, and ribbon grass.

“I miss the pansies,” she murmured, “they're so pretty an' soft; they make me think o' Jessie. Mis'

Hale calls them ‘heartsease,’ an’ that’s what Jessie is to me,—my heartsease!”

She entered the house which was gloomy with the shadows of the coming night.

“I wonder why Jessie’s sittin’ in the dark!” she whispered, as she felt her way along the narrow hall until she reached the door of her daughter’s bedroom. It was slightly ajar, and she paused to listen.

“Jessie!” she called softly. “Dearie, are you there?”

There was no answer. Peering into the darkened room, she noticed that the bed coverings were raised in a narrow mound. Jessie had gone to bed and was apparently asleep.

“I guess she was too tired with the heat to sit up fer me. Well, it’s kinda late an’ I mus’ be gettin’ my work done. There’s all Mis’ Wiggins’s laundry to be ironed so’s I c’n take it back to-morrow like I promised.”

After making a light in the plainly furnished kitchen, Mrs. Neve washed the few dishes that were neatly placed in the sink, and then proceeded to iron the pile of folded clothes that filled two large baskets.

The room was hot and the night oppressively still. Through the open door and window the sky loomed black and starless, illumined by occasional

flares of lightning, which were like a flaming forth of the smouldering heat that had made the day blaze with a tropical temperature.

Frequent sighs of weariness escaped the woman's lips as she deftly smoothed the snowy, damp clothes into glossy crispness, or tested the temperature of a fresh iron with the tip of a moistened finger.

When the work was finished she sank exhausted into a chair, buried her face in her arms on the table, and drifted into an uneasy slumber which was more a stupor of fatigue than restful sleep.

After a time she was roused by a prolonged peal of thunder, a crackling flash of lightning, and the pelting of raindrops. She hurriedly closed door and window.

“I mus' shet Jessie's window!”

Taking the lamp in her hands, she went to Jessie's room where she found the muslin curtains billowing in and out of the window and dripping with rain.

“An' I jes' washed them curtains las' week,” she said in rueful tones. “Funny the noise didn't rouse Jessie.”

She glanced with a loving smile towards the bed, and then drew back with a start of terror and dismay. Jessie was not lying there, although the bed had been carefully arranged to look as though it contained an occupant.

She pulled aside the covers and saw two rolled quilts. On the pillow lay a folded note of pale-pink paper. With trembling fingers she carried the slip of paper to the bureau, where she had placed the lamp on entering the room. Her haggard, heavy-featured face was distorted, by an agony of dread, into grotesque lines like a grim mask of tragedy, and it showed ghastly white in the small misty mirror, as she turned the flame of the lamp higher. With panting breaths she read the brief lines.

“DEAR MOTHER:

“Don’t be angry with me and hate me, but I am going away. I love Sid, and he says he’ll never speak to me again if I don’t go and meet him in Boston. We have quarreled so often because I wouldn’t go before. It will be all right, for we are going to be married as soon as we get to New York. Don’t be angry.”

The woman staggered to the bed, which creaked and sagged beneath her weight as she sat down and stared with hot, tearless eyes at the smoking lamp.

“I mus’ think,—I mus’ think,” she muttered, as she rocked to and fro in an agony of helpless grief.

“It’s terrible late, an’ if I go an’ tell the Hales it’ll upset Mis’ Hale an’, maybe, bring on a weak spell with her heart. She ain’t strong, an’ Mist’ Hale never lets her be worried ’bout things. I’ll go to the Reverend Niggle; he always sets up late

readin' at his books, an' he'll tell me what to do. O God! take care o' my girl this night an' bring her back to my arms!"

She seized her shabby hat from a nail in the hall and passed out of the house.

The Reverend Nigel Alden sat in his study, reading his beloved and worn copy of Theocritus. He was a tall man, of slender build, with silvery-white hair, sensitive, clear-cut features, and dreamy blue eyes. The War had drained his life of joy,—three of his sons were lying under the lilies of France.

"It brings me nearer to God," he often said, when he spoke of his threefold sacrifice.

Of his fourth son,—his Benjamin,—he never spoke. The wild, reckless, but lovable youth had disappeared two years before the War, to escape imprisonment for embezzling funds in a Boston bank where he held a position of trust. No one knew of the bereaved father's lonely nights in his study where he prayed for the wanderer, his kneeling form shaken with hard, tearless sobs that are only wrung from a man's strong agony. But every one noticed that he became more frail, that his courteous smile was sad rather than cheery, and that his gaze grew more abstracted. The venerable, saintly man ministered to his people, radiating a benign sympathy that scattered flowers of charity and tenderness wherever he went.

His clothes became shabby and threadbare, “a disgrace to Cassburn,” Miss Louella often declared: for he had assumed the responsibility of restoring the funds his boy had stolen, giving up his private income, and taxing his small stipend with yearly payments to the bank. Only Hepsy Strong, his housekeeper, knew of his humble fare, the meagre fires, the discontinuance of subscriptions to his favorite magazines, and all the petty economies that robbed his home of daily comforts.

Mrs. Neve stumbled along the path leading from the gate to the door of the rectory. She timidly pulled the bell-handle, and waited with bated breath for Mr. Alden’s appearance. When he opened the door the light from a lamp he held in his left hand shone upon the woman’s distraught countenance. He gently drew her inside and led her to his study.

“What is it, Mary Ellen? I see you are in trouble. What can I do for you?”

“Mist’ Alden, I’m mos’ crazy! Jessie’s gone. She’s run off to meet Sid Hale in Boston, an’ her so young an’ innocent! He’s takin’ her to New York, so her letter said, an’ I’m feared he ain’t to be trusted. I don’t know what to do!”

“What time did she go?” he asked gently.

“I don’t know. I worked late at Mis’ Vance’s an’ I thought Jessie was in bed when I got home;

an' I didn't find out different till I'd finished a pile o' ironin'. Maybe it's too late to do anythin', now, but I *hed* to come to you, Mist' Alden. Folks always come to you in trouble, jes' like they pray to God!"

The old man frowned in thought. "If she didn't catch the six-thirty train at Bradbury she wouldn't be able to leave until eleven-twenty-two." He glanced at the grandfather's clock in the corner of the room. "It is now twelve-fifteen. I happen to know that Richard Thorold went to Boston this morning, and he will be spending the night at the Touraine. I'll hurry over to David Hale's, and we'll drive into Bradbury where I can get Thorold on the long-distance telephone. I'll ask him to meet the late train and detain Jessie. Then David and I will take the milk train to Boston and bring her home. I know Thorold will do all he can, and I believe we shall be able to save Jessie from this escapade. It all depends on when she left Bradbury."

While he was speaking he had brought his hat, raincoat, and rubbers from the hall and donned them hastily.

"I'll go over to the Hales' with you, Mist' Alden, an' I'll stay with Mis' Hale till Mist' Hale gets back. He won't like her to be alone if she rouses when you get there."

It had ceased raining, and stars were beginning to shine through gashes of the clouds that drifted over the sky.

David Hale was a large, slow-moving man, but Mr. Alden's briefly told story stirred him to rapid action.

“We must save little Jessie!” he repeated over and over, as he dressed and hurried out to the barn.

In a short time the two men drove off to Bradbury. Mrs. Neve was lighting a fire in the kitchen stove, for the night had grown chilly, when Mrs. Hale joined her.

“Mary Ellen, Dave's told me what's happened, and I can't say how bad I feel.” Her face was pinched and wan with anxiety, and she shivered slightly as she drew a small rocking-chair near to the stove. “Sidney's always been hard to manage, but this is the worst thing he's ever done. And he's our only boy,—all we have!”

“I didn't mean to come here an' bother you, Mis' Hale,” began Mrs. Neve, “but the Reverend Niggle said we hed to hev Mist' Hale's help. I'll make a cup o' tea,—it'll strengthen you, if you don't feel like sleepin' again. An' I b'lieve I'll start the washin' now, 'stead o' waitin' till mornin'. It'll help me to keep movin'.”

“No, Mary Ellen, you'll have some tea with me, else I won't drink any myself. I have to talk to

some one while I'm sittin' here, waitin' and wonderin' how things'll turn out. I'm glad you're here. Bring your chair closer to mine, it'll help me to hold your hand."

The two women sat together, their hands clasped and their hearts united in sharing the burden of anxiety. Mrs. Hale's weak voice rambled on, but Mary Ellen sat in stony despair, a statue of grief.

"Your Jessie's a sweet girl, Mary Ellen, just like our Lily was,—pretty and refined in her ways. It was a great sorrow to us when we lost our girl. She was always a comfort to us, up to the day she died; but Sidney is a sore trial to us, as you know. Dave often says that there's no one in Cassburn he respects like he does you, and he thinks the world of Jessie. He won't let any harm come to her. He told me when he was dressing that he'd stand by Jessie and be like *her* father 'stead of Sidney's, if need be."

Dick Thorold had just retired when the ringing telephone on a stand beside his bed shrilled into his ears. As he listened to Mr. Alden's voice, he glanced at his watch.

"If Jessie is on the late train I'll put a full stop to the romantic adventure," he said briskly. "There's plenty of time. I'll keep the girl until you get here, if I have to wring that young cub's neck."

The train from Bradbury had pulled in and was departing when Dick's taxi reached the station. He tossed a bill to the chauffeur and rushed through the gate. Except for a couple of porters, the platform was deserted.

“ Chut! I'm too late!” he exclaimed. “ She must have caught the early train, poor little girl! And now she and Sidney are probably on their way to New York, confound him! I'll have to telegraph Mr. Alden.”

He entered the waiting-room, and his heart gave a leap of exultation when he saw Sidney Hale leading Jessie to one of the long benches. They sat down and Dick took his position behind them, where he was well concealed by the high back of the seat, and where he could hear the young man's sulky responses to Jessie's soft, pleading voice.

“ Sid, I wish you'd let us be married here in Boston and then send a telegram to Mother before we go to New York. She'll be worrying till she hears, and I feel afraid to go so far away without being married. *Please, Sid!* ”

“ Now, see here, Jess, I've made all my plans and we've got to get the next train to New York or everything'll go fluey. What are you in such a wax about, anyway? ”

“ B-b-but,” her teeth chattered, “ I'm afraid to go with you without a ring on my finger; and Mother'll

be worrying till she hears that we *are* married, when she knows I've come to meet you here."

"How'll she know? Didn't you fix the bed the way I told you, so she'd think you were asleep when she got home? If you did, she'll likely go off to work in the morning without disturbing you. Don't be silly!"

"Y-y-y-yes, but she might go right into my room to-night and see the note I l-l-left on the p-p-pil-low."

"You left a note!" he exclaimed. "You little idiot! What'd you do that for?"

Jessie began to cry.

"Come on," Sidney jerked her roughly from the seat, "we'll hustle over to the other station, instead of waiting here." He grabbed her straw suitcase from the floor. "Come on!"

Dick sauntered round the end of the seat and stood directly in their way as they neared the door. Sidney, with one hand grasping Jessie's elbow, made an effort to brush past him; but Dick gently took the girl's limp hand in his, and asked:

"What are you doing here, Jessie?"

"We're in a hurry," announced Sidney churlishly, "and it's none of your darned business, anyway."

"That's just where you're wrong, Master Sidney. I'm here to make it my business, to protect this

little girl until your father arrives to take her home. Jessie,” his voice softened with pitying persuasion, “I’m sure you love that good mother of yours; don’t break her heart by going on with this foolish affair!”

“Look here, Mr. Thorold, I’d like to know why you’re butting in like this!” Sidney blustered. “Keep off the grass! Come on, Jess.”

“I don’t know what to do,” moaned the girl. “I want to go with Sidney, but,—I’m afraid!” Her tear-brimmed eyes looked up appealingly at Dick, and she repeated, “I don’t know what to do!”

“I tell you what to do,” he spoke with friendly assurance. “We’ll all wait here until Sidney’s father arrives,—he’s coming on the milk train; and then you can discuss it with him. Let him decide what is best for you to do, Jessie.”

The girl’s pale face showed wavering indecision for a moment, and then she shrank back before Sidney’s outburst of temper.

“You mean little piker! You’ve balled everything up by leaving that note for your mother. Make up your mind here and now, or I quit; do you hear? *I quit!* If you’re coming with me, stop your sniveling and get a move on!”

The girl’s lips stiffened into a line of stubborn determination, her drooping form straightened, and she pulled her arm from Sidney’s clutching fingers.

“I’m going home,—home to my mother,” she said in lifeless tones.

“Huh!” sneered Sidney. “What’ll you do when the whole village hears about your coming away like this and then having to go back without being married? That’ll make some talk, I’ll tell the world. Come on, Jess.”

“I’m afraid of you now,” she trembled, and again withdrew her arm from his rough grasp. “You don’t love me as I thought you did. I know folks’ll talk if they hear of this, but——”

“They’ll hear of it all right, all right!” broke in Sidney.

“I s’pose they will, and I’ll deserve all they say about me; but,—*I’m going home!*”

Sidney turned to Dick with a look of exasperated fury.

“Some day, Mr. Thorold, I’ll get even with you for this, you——” his words ended with a muttered imprecation, and he left the station.

Jessie obeyed Dick’s kindly urging to drink some coffee, but she tearfully refused to eat or lie down in the rest room, as he suggested.

“I c-c-couldn’t rest. I’d rather walk up and down outside,—if you don’t mind.”

They were pacing the platform together when the milk train from Bradbury arrived. In the early morning sun the girl’s wan, pathetic face was like

a flower that had bloomed too early in the spring and found frost instead of sunshine. She trembled as David Hale approached her, and Dick went quickly forward to Mr. Alden.

“I’m ashamed,—so ashamed!” she whispered, with a shuddering sob.

“Jessie, my little dove,” he tenderly folded her in his great, strong arms, “God has been good to you! It’s a hard thing for a father to say of his boy,” the man’s voice quavered and hesitated, “but Sid ain’t good enough for you, dear. He ain’t fit to marry any girl. He’d break her heart, jes’ like he’s breaking his mother’s and mine.”

Jessie clung to him. “I’m afraid, I’m ashamed to face Mother! Perhaps she will hate me now!”

“No, my dear, you need her love now more’n ever you did, and you’ll find her arms ready for you,—wide open. Mothers are like that, Jessie. Their love never changes, never fails! As long as there are mothers in the world, folks will believe in God’s love!”

Three days later the news of the frustrated elopement reached Watch-and-Pry Corner.

“Great grief!” exclaimed Mrs. Vance, after Miss Louella had ladled out her information. “No wonder Jessie’s never seen out o’ the house, an’ Mrs. Neve putters along the street to her work like she was walkin’ in her sleep!”

“Just so.” Mrs. Hertz blinked and dropped a needleful of stitches in the lace she was knitting for a petticoat.

At this moment Mrs. Talbot entered the post-office.

“Here’s news for you, Melissa!” cried Mrs. Vance. “You’ll never guess!”

Mrs. Talbot smiled serenely. “I s’pose you mean ’bout Jessie an’ Sid actin’ foolish. Mis’ Hale told me ’bout it yesterday. She said that David felt the young folks hadn’t ought to marry so soon, ’cause Sid’s in no position to s’port a wife.”

“Sid’s a wild one, he’s always out of a job,” observed Mrs. Hertz.

“An’ when it comes to marryin’, I guess the Hales ’d think Sid c’d do better’n marry a wash-woman’s daughter,” added Mrs. Vance.

“Just so,” agreed Mrs. Hertz.

“You’re wrong there,” Mrs. Talbot bristled. “They think a lot o’ Jessie. Next week Jennie Hale’s goin’ over to Preston Springs to be treated fer rheumatism, an’ she don’t like the idea o’ bein’ alone amongst crowds o’ strangers in that big place, so she’s takin’ Jessie with her. There now!”

“Well, I never!” gasped Mrs. Vance.

“As the Holy Writ says,” sniffed Miss Louella, “Who hath ears to hear let him hear, an’ a still, small voice tells me that there’s more in this than

meets the eye, with the Reverend Niggle and David Hale rushin' off to stop it. Like a dead fly in the ointment o' the apothecary, it sends forth a bad smell that is a scandal to the minds o' Christian folks, that's what!”

“There you are, Louella!” Mrs. Talbot's voice shook with emotion. “I vow it's mean to be so ready to think wrong o' folks like you do, an' make scandal 'bout everything. What you need, Louella, is a good, stiff dose o' charity that thinketh no evil! That's a bit o' Holy Writ you ought to ponder on, so's your mind could be disinfected. It sure needs it!”

“Just so,” murmured Mrs. Hertz inadvertently, as Mrs. Talbot sailed out of the post-office like a frigate with all flags flying.

Miss Louella's gaping mouth closed with a snap of her teeth, and her nose produced a snort of astonishment. “This day an' this night! The idea o' Melissa Talbot throwin' the Holy Writ in my face like a cup o' cold water! Did y'ever hear the likes o' that?”

CHAPTER XIX

MISS FAIRY GODMOTHER

LOUELLA GREER sat in her bay-window reading the Bible in a desultory fashion, frequently raising her eyes to peer through the lace curtains which, according to her Sunday custom, she had released from the cords that looped them back during the week.

The peaceful dullness of a Sunday afternoon that has reached the hour of preparations for supper was undisturbed by passers-by, and presently she became so absorbed in her reading that she failed to notice the approach of a young man in uniform, with sergeant's stripes on his sleeve, who came slowly along Chestnut Street carrying a small suitcase.

The door was wide open, admitting a flood of sunlight which made the brown-stained floor look as though some careless person had spilled a can of yellow paint over it. The soldier paused before the door and glanced up at the sign.

“A village post-office is always a good general information bureau,” he said, as he nodded at the sign, “so I'll step inside and interrogate.”

His shadow seemed to wipe up some of the sun-

light on the floor as he mounted the steps and entered the post-office.

Miss Louella rose quickly. “This office ain’t open Sundays,” she announced tartly. “You can’t get stamps or send off a telegram to-day.”

The young man gave her a peculiar half-smile, which suggested a good-natured grin; but it was a one-sided smile, because the muscles of his left cheek were partly paralyzed by an ugly jagged scar which extended from his jaw to the empty socket of his eye. He was tall, erect, and well-built, and his bronze face was ruddy with the glow of health. His hair was of a nondescript, sandy tint, closely cropped. His right eye, blue and humorous, had the keen glance of a shrewd observer. He placed his suitcase on the floor.

“I beg your pardon for disturbing you,” he drawled. “The village seems to be lost in an afternoon nap, and your open door was the only wide-awake sign I noticed. So I stepped in to inquire if there is a boarding-house where I could put up for a few days.”

“Where do you come from?” asked Miss Louella coldly.

“For some time past I’ve been attending a sort of finishing school in France, taking lessons in the parley-voo. More recently I’ve been helping out with the new Watch on the Rhine.”

“ Oh, you’re a soldier, ain’t you? ”

“ I’m not denying it,” his lips twitched slightly. “ I guess my uniform tells you that, and my face corroborates it. I’m Sergeant Tom McGillicuddy of the A. E. F.”

“ What’s your business in Cassburn? ”

For a moment he regarded her shrewdly, and when he spoke it was with a cool deliberation that betokened reserve and mistrust.

“ To tell you the truth, I can’t exactly say. You see, I drifted into Bradbury yesterday and I happened to hear some one mention the name of this village. Cassburn’s a nice-sounding name, easy to pronounce and spell, which is a relief after the tongue-twisters I’ve been up against in Europe. You have to tie your tongue in a knot to pronounce most of the French names, and to get the German names out of your mouth you have to swallow your tongue. So I walked over to see what Cassburn was like, and it looks so restful that I feel I’d like to stay for a day or two, if there’s a house where I can find accommodation.”

“ Well, there ain’t any boardin’-houses here,” she informed him. “ When strangers come to Cassburn it’s mostly to visit friends. But I hev a spare room, so I guess I c’d take you in jes’ to be friendly like, seein’ as how you’re a returned soldier an’ hev no-where to go. As the Holy Writ says, I was a

stranger an' you took me in, and money made unexpected is money found, I say!”

“That’s very obliging of you!”

She glanced at the clock. “I’ll show you up to your room, an’ then I’ll get supper ready. I’ll hev to hurry some for I play the organ at the church an’ I don’t want to be late.”

She left him in the neat little upstairs room, which had the temperature of a baking-oven in active service. The window was tightly closed to keep out the dust, and the air was stifling and heavy, as though the heat of the summer sun had been concentrated and packed within the four walls.

“Let me have light and air,” he murmured, as he drew up the shade and opened the window.

“Phew!” he whistled softly. “That woman is a human fish-hook baited with inquisitiveness. She’s stewing with curiosity to know why I’ve come to Cassburn, but she’ll find that I’m wearing a muzzle when she tackles me on that subject.”

While unpacking his suitcase he glanced about the room. There were roses everywhere,—entwining a bright blue trellis on the wall-paper; sprawling in wreaths on the carpet; massed in tight bunches among gilt arabesques on the china set on the wash-stand; and blooming in wax under a glass dome which stood on a table supported by one leg with three feet.

“Some little bower!” he chortled. “I bet I’ll dream to-night that I’m a rose,—a blushing rose!”

The bed was covered with a red-and-white checker-board counterpane. The stiff pillow-shams, edged with fluted frills, preached an allegorical sermon, outlined with red cotton, on the dream and the business of life. On the left one was pictured a sleeping maiden with flowing hair and the text,—“I Slept and Dreamed that Life was Beauty;” on the right the same maiden—presumably—attired in cap and apron, wielded a broom, and the accompanying inscription declared,—“I Woke and Found that Life was Duty.”

He crossed to the bureau and surveyed himself in the small mirror.

“Some map to show a girl,” he observed to his reflection. “Tom, my boy, you’d be good-looking if you wore a gas-mask. I wonder what Miss Susan Avery will do when she sees my handsome mug? Laugh and run, I suppose. I was a fool to come, but I want to see that girl, and it’s hard to pry myself loose from anything I’ve set my mind on. I’ll mosey over to the church this evening. Maybe Susan will be there. I’ll be able to recognize her from her picture; and I’ll get an eyeful of her, without her knowing it.”

The evening service had already commenced and the “Amen” of the opening hymn greeted Nancy’s

ears as she hastened through the churchyard. Hot and breathless, she paused on the steps to compose herself before entering the church. Through the open door and windows came the sound of Mr. Alden's voice, low-toned and reverent, falling upon the stillness of the evening like the light of a star shining on the smooth surface of a pool. The sky was a clear, delicate mauve, deepening towards the horizon into hazy amethyst; and in the west huddled a group of purple clouds, slowly drinking up the crimson sunset.

Suddenly she started as a man, making a hurried exit from the church, brushed against her. She gave him a look of bewildered interrogation as he turned abruptly and stood with his cap tightly clutched in his hand, his face working with emotion. It was Tom McGillicuddy.

“I beg your pardon,” he began. “I was upset and ——”

“Don't apologize,” Nancy smiled at his embarrassment. “I was standing directly in your way. It wasn't your fault.” She turned to enter the church.

“Wait a moment,—please! Had that old gentleman in there,—the clergyman, I mean—a son in the army named Ted?”

“He had three sons in the army. They were all killed in the Argonne. His fourth son, the young-

est—and his name was Ted—disappeared several years ago; and Mr. Alden has never heard from him. Oh! did you know Ted Alden?”

“He didn’t call himself Alden; but—— Let’s move away from the door, do you mind? I want to tell you about the Ted I knew, and make sure. Our talking here may disturb the congregation.”

They walked a short distance from the steps and Tom began to speak, his voice slow and husky with feeling.

“Ted Anderson and I were buddies. We met in camp and palled up from the start. He was a quiet chap. When the other fellows were talking about their homes and families, Ted never had a word to say. The reason he was chummy with me, I suppose, was that I was a shy, lonely bird with no folks to talk about or get letters from; but he never told me anything about himself, though I guessed, somehow, that he had gone wrong in the past.

“I was a greenhorn, unused to mingling with folks, and not knowing my way about. There was many a trap I might have fallen into if Ted hadn’t taken the trouble to give me friendly advice and words of warning.

“Then—one night he spoke. It was at Chateau Thierry. There was a lull in the fighting. The fellows were pulling off jokes about what they were going to do to the Kaiser when they got to Berlin.

The moon was high, shining a ghastly white that made the night seem like the corpse of a day. Ted was next to me, and not saying a word. Suddenly he turned to me with a queer smile.

“ ‘Tom,’ he whispered, ‘I’ve a hunch that this weird illumination is in honor of my finish, but I feel that you’re going to see it through, so I’ve a little job for you.’

“ He took from his pocket a letter and a photograph. ‘That’s my father. I—broke his heart. This letter is for him,—see that he gets it, Tom. It will let him know that I found the way—home at last!’

“ He choked on his words and handed me the letter and the picture. In the white moonlight I saw the face of a saintly old man, and I just had time to think that if Christ had lived to be an old man He would have looked like Ted’s father, when a bomb cut through the air and landed in our trench. With a leap Ted threw himself on the deadly thing, and then,—the world went black!

“ After that I found myself crawling, with some other fellows, from under a mass of loose earth and sand-bags. We were all more or less damaged. There was nothing left of Ted. The letter and photograph were gone; and when I came out of the hospital I had only the memory of that beautiful old face, for I hadn’t seen the address on the letter.

To-night when the clergyman stood up to read the service I—recognized him! It knocked me over,—I felt as though I had seen a ghost!”

“Oh!” Nancy breathed quickly, “God must have sent you here to bring consolation to Mr. Alden,—to tell him of Ted’s brave death. How wonderful!”

Tom nodded. “And I’ve been calling myself all kinds of a fool for coming. I’ve—well, I’ve been corresponding with a girl in Bradbury; had a pair of Red Cross socks given me in France with her name and address sewn on them, and ——”

“You’re Tom McGillicuddy!” exclaimed Nancy, impulsively seizing his hand. “You’ve come to meet Susan!”

“You’ve guessed right. I arrived in Bradbury this morning and learned that Susan’s home was in Cassburn; so I walked over this afternoon. But—I guess I’ll just call on Mr. Alden after the service. Then I’ll beat it to-morrow morning. The bomb that killed Ted messed up my face, as you see. I’m a holy show, with the Kaiser’s autograph on my cheek and nobody home in my left eye. I haven’t the courage to meet Susan after all, so I’ll fade away.”

“No, you won’t!” declared Nancy. “Susan is a splendid girl, you *must* meet her! She’s lonely and shy, and dreadfully unhappy in her home. But she’s afraid to meet you, because—she—she was

born with a harelip, and she's terribly sensitive about it. There was a successful operation performed when she was a tiny child, so it is really only a scar, and her speech is not affected. But she feels ashamed to meet you because of that picture she sent you. It was a movie actress."

Tom laughed. "I'm glad it wasn't her picture, it was such a pippin! Susan's having a scarred lip makes me hope that she'll be able to overlook my frontispiece. Tell me about her."

He listened attentively while she told Susan's pathetic history. "So you see," she finished, "Susan is a wonderful girl. You'll like her, and"—she looked up at him with a frank, friendly smile, "I'm sure she will like you."

"Where does she live?" There was boyish eagerness in his voice. "Where's her home? I want to meet her right away."

"Then you shall, but I don't think you will have to go to her home. She is probably in the churchyard now, over behind those cedars. She usually comes here on Sunday evenings. I'll find her and tell her you are here. Just wait a moment."

Susan was sitting on the low stone wall which bounded the southern end of the churchyard. She had taken off her hat and the sea breeze was ruffling her hair into fine, loose tendrils. The waves swished upon the shore, making a rhythmic accom-

paniment to the monotonous croaking of frogs which came from a pond near by. She turned at Nancy's approach, and a gleam of a smile flitted across her wistful face.

“Susan, I have a surprise for you. I've just been talking with—Tom McGillicuddy!”

For a moment Susan looked at her with startled eyes. Then she buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

“I can't meet him! He mustn't see me!”

“Susan, he's a dear! I've told him all about you, so he knows about your lip. He's shy about meeting you, because he was injured in the War and one side of his face is badly disfigured. Buck up, Susan! Be a sport! Tom's waiting over there, the other side of the cedars.”

Susan tried to break away, but Nancy held her firmly.

“Let me go, Nancy,—let me go!”

“I won't let you go. You'll meet him, if I have to drag you over to him by your hair. Don't be a flabby jelly-fish, Susan!”

“I can't—I can't meet him! I'm afraid!”

“Don't be afraid!” Tom's drawling voice came from the cedars and he appeared before them. “Excuse me for butting in like this, but I grew impatient waiting over there. Those croaking frogs seemed to be calling me in this direction. Just lis-

ten to 'em saying my name over and over! ‘McGillicuddy, McGillicuddy, McGillicuddy’!”

His imitation of the frogs was perfect. Susan’s shamed timidity was lost in the laugh she shared with Nancy.

“Now that the frogs have introduced me, won’t you shake hands with me—Susan?” he asked diffidently.

Susan held out her hand. “I’m glad—you came—Tom.”

Nancy stole away. Tom sat on the wall beside Susan.

“I don’t care to talk about yourself,” he began awkwardly, “but I reckon you ought to hear my story. I was born in a poorhouse. No one knew my mother, or where she came from. She sought shelter at the poorhouse one stormy night, half frozen and too near death to say anything of the life she was leaving. She lived until the next morning, just long enough to baptize me with her tears.

“When I was ten years old I ran away from the poorhouse, and knocked about for a couple of years, living on kicks and crusts, until I met John McGillicuddy. He was an old bachelor, rich, lonely, and close-fisted; spent his life raising fruit and petting a grouch against mankind, especially women-folk. He hated the sight of a skirt. When I drifted up to his place and asked for a job he greeted me

with roars of laughter, and offered to engage me at once as a scarecrow. I was dirty, ragged, starved, and ill; but I had strength and courage enough to curse him, and I did it thoroughly. Then I dropped at his feet in a dead faint.

“He nursed me through a long illness,—no woman could have been kinder or more gentle. He adopted me, gave me his name, and educated me; didn’t send me to school, but taught me himself. It was a queer life for a kid. He was kind to me, but never intimate. There was some mystery about him, something had happened in the past to turn him sour towards life. His only friends were his books, and he had enough of them to stock a Carnegie library.

“He never spoke of himself, not even when he was drunk; and he had periodic sprees, would drink himself into a stupor and lie for days,—a sodden, human log! The sight of his degradation disgusted me with booze. When he died I inherited his money, his ranch, and his lack of friends. The folks in the nearest town treated me as they had always treated him,—they left me alone. The only people I knew were business acquaintances: the lawyer, the president of the bank, and the man who owned the store where I bought my supplies.

“Then came the War. I have written to you about that. I’m a lonesome chap, as you see. I’ve

never had a chance of being friendly with a girl, so I guess you can understand how I'd appreciate your friendship, if you'll let me have it when we're better acquainted.”

His hand was resting on the coping of the wall between them. Susan reached out and pressed it gently.

“I've been lonely, too, Tom.”

He took her hand in both of his and they sat in silence, listening to the singing in the church. The final verse of the hymn rang out, joyous and clear.

“Angels! sing on, your faithful watches keeping,
Sing us sweet fragments of the songs above;
Till morning's joy shall end the night of weeping
And life's long shadows break in cloudless love.
Angels of Jesus, angels of light,
Singing to welcome the pilgrims of the night.
Amen.”

“I'm going to see Mr. Alden after the service,” said Tom. “I want him to write to my lawyer and also to my commanding officer to get my credentials, so that your folks will know that I'm straight goods. On Wednesday I have to go to New York—er—on some—er—military business. Then I'll get my discharge as soon as I can and come back to Cassburn. By that time Mr. Alden will know all about me and, —well, Susan, I'll hang around for a while so that you can find out if my step suits yours. If it

doesn't,—there's no harm done. I'll go back to my ranch and maybe you'll write to a fellow now and again, as you did when I was in France,—a 'pilgrim of the night.'

“If my step *does* suit yours, well—it's too soon to speak about that; but you can guess what's in my mind. Take your time in getting to know me. I'm not a brainy bird, and I'm rough and unused to girls; so if you can't like me, I'll understand.”

“Perhaps you won't like me,” Susan ventured.

“Per—haps, I don't think!” laughed Tom, as he assisted her from the wall. “I've traveled pretty far in the direction of liking you, and I don't intend to turn back.”

They found Nancy waiting for them at the gate. The congregation had already departed. The church was in darkness, but a soft yellow light streamed from the window of Mr. Alden's study which overlooked the churchyard.

“Susan, you must play truant from Madame Foy's to-morrow. I want you and”—Nancy hesitated and then spoke the next word with friendly emphasis,—“*Tom* to come over for supper. Tom, I saw Mr. Alden and told him that there was a stranger here who wished to speak with him to-night. So he is expecting you. By the way, you don't know my name, do you? I am Nancy Grayson.”

“ I’ve another name for you,” said Tom as he gripped her hand. “ It’s ‘ Miss Fairy Godmother.’ ”

“ I’ll try to live up to it,” replied Nancy. “ Where are you staying? ”

“ I’m boarding with the Grand Blah-Blah of Scripture-quoters, who runs the post-office. While I ate my supper, a little sketch of ham and eggs that looked like a bird’s-eye view of a sunset, she handed me several earfuls of gossip, trimmed with the Holy Writ; and I have a fair idea of what she and God think of the folks in this village. Half an hour’s conversation with her made me long for temporary deafness.”

CHAPTER XX

MORNING'S JOY

FOR several minutes after Nancy and Susan left him, Tom stood at the churchyard gate, wrestling with an overpowering fit of shyness and dread. The coming interview with Mr. Alden required tact and courage, and he felt himself a clumsy, blundering fellow, unequal to the delicate task that lay before him.

True, his story would bring comfort to the lonely, sorrowing father, but Tom was unused to gentle ways of speech and his blunt telling of it would seem a desecration, like the tearing aside of a veil before a shrine. With a hopeless shrug, as though trying to ease the weight of a burden on his shoulders, he turned towards the rectory, wishing it were miles away instead of only a few yards. In sheer desperation he rang the bell. Mr. Alden answered the summons.

“Come in, my boy!” he said with a warm shake of the hand, and a sweet, gentle smile shone over his worn, grief-furrowed face.

He led Tom to his study, a shabby, intimate room with book-shelves climbing up three walls to the ceiling. It was a small room, but the books, with

their polyglot titles, made it a large world; though here and there were gaps in the shelves, dumbly proclaiming the sacrifice of precious volumes that had been sold.

On the wall near the mantelpiece a small flag caught Tom's eye, a Stars and Stripes. Under it were three framed photographs, which he rightly judged were pictures of Mr. Alden's sons who had been killed in action. At one end of a long writing-table was a tray, containing sandwiches and milk for two.

“I always have a little snack after the evening service,” said Mr. Alden as he motioned Tom to a seat. “You will join me, I hope.”

Tom found it difficult to eat, although he was really hungry after the slim supper Miss Louella had served him. He was in a miserable state of fear and agitation, hesitating to disturb the gentle old man's serenity by speaking of Ted. Perhaps the man he had known as Ted Anderson was not Mr. Alden's son! The resemblance he had recognized between his host and the worn, soiled photograph he had momentarily glimpsed in the weird moonlight of that awful night in the trenches might be but a trick of his imagination, a delusion of memory.

Very haltingly, he spoke of Susan and himself, repeating the story he had told her in the church-

yard. Mr. Alden smiled indulgently, his face beaming with genial interest as he wrote down the addresses Tom gave him.

“I will write at once,” he said. “I admire the manly, straightforward way in which you have come to me. Susan, I have known since her babyhood. She is a sweet girl, a noble character. I am deeply interested in you both, and I shall do what I can to give your War romance a happy ending. By the way, your name seems familiar to me. Where have I heard it? Let me think.”

The lighted lamp on the table gave a silvery lustre to his white hair as he sat tapping his fingers together, his brow slightly puckered in a puzzled frown.

“Ah! I have it!” he rose and picked up a folded newspaper which lay among some books at the other end of the table. “Your name is here in the citations for bravery, and you are to be decorated next Friday. My boy, I am proud to know you!” He held out his hand.

Tom stood blushing like a schoolboy detected in wrong-doing. He floundered for speech, his mind submerged in a morass of embarrassment.

“I—er—I—oh!” He ceased shuffling his feet as, looking down, his glance fell upon a framed photograph on the table. It was Ted Alden, a handsome youth, eager, impetuous, defiant, with a dare-

devil tilt of the head which seemed to challenge the world. There was something strangely familiar about the face. Tom's eye grew misty, and the picture changed into the haggard, haunted face of the man he had known in the trenches,—the world-stained, unyouthful Ted who had recklessly courted danger, carrying his life like a banner to the victory of a gallant death.

Tom was sure of his ground now. His chum *was* Ted Alden. He tried to speak, but words refused to come.

“I always read these accounts of our brave lads,” the old man rambled on, “and I rejoice over them heartily, for I seem to share the joy and pride of the parents whose sons' gallantry has been recognized and rewarded by a grateful country. Three sons of mine gave their lives, like thousands of others; but to them did not come the opportunity of heroic deeds that stir mankind. ‘Theirs but to do and die’—they simply fought and fell. So I take a vicarious pleasure in the glory of others.”

“There is something more I want to tell you, sir.” Tom spoke slowly. “Maybe we'd better sit down. It'll take some time.”

“Take all the time you want, my boy,” rejoined Mr. Alden cheerfully. “I never retire early. At my age, there is so little time left for living that I grudge the hours lost in sleep.”

They did not return to the other end of the table. Mr. Alden seated himself in the chair he always occupied when writing, and Tom drew up another.

“There was a chap I knew in the army,” began Tom. “His name was—Ted Anderson.”

“Ted?” the word fell like a sigh from the old man’s lips, and he involuntarily touched the photograph on the table.

“I want to tell you about him, sir. He was a wonderful pal to me.”

The story was told in stumbling phrases, very simply, but with more intimate details than he had given Nancy. Many conversations between his comrade and himself, indelibly stamped on his memory, were related word for word.

“A noble death!” observed Mr. Alden when Tom paused, struggling for composure after describing Ted’s gallant action. “And the letter, the photograph? Of course you sent them to the brave fellow’s father and wrote to him? Ah!” the man’s eyes were filled with longing. “I can understand what that wandering boy’s letter and your story of his death would bring to the heart-broken father! ‘The peace of God which passeth all understanding.’”

“I was unable to send them, sir. The explosion came before I had time to put them in my pocket, and they were torn from my hands. I had only

looked at the photograph, and hadn't seen the name and address on the letter. So I could do nothing.”

“That is unfortunate,” murmured Mr. Alden. “Somewhere a lonely father is grieving and praying for his son, and the prayer must remain unanswered until God's own time.”

“But I remember the old man's face, sir!” Tom's voice rose eagerly. “I was looking at it when that bomb came over and blew our trench to pieces. It seems to be photographed on my mind. The memory of that face has haunted me like a ghost; and to-night,—I saw the face—again!” Tom felt as though he had leapt across a chasm.

“You saw the face to-night? Here,—in Cassburn?”

“I wanted to speak to you about it as soon as I came to you; but somehow the words wouldn't come. I couldn't be sure. I thought that my memory was playing a trick on me. But this picture,” he pointed to the photograph on the table between them, “tells me beyond a doubt that you are my chum's father. This is the man I knew as Ted Anderson!”

The old man sank to his knees beside the table, with Ted's picture in his hands. Tears trickled slowly from his closed eyes, his lips quivered, but he uttered no words. Before Tom's awed gaze the bending, shrunken form seemed to be surrounded

with the white glory of God's throne. He stood in silence and bowed his head.

Presently Mr. Alden rose to his feet. He took the photograph from the table and turned to the flag on the wall. His fingers fumbled and fluttered over the wall until he touched a small nail. There was a metal ring on the frame of Ted's picture, but the old man's trembling fingers were unable to adjust it to the projecting nail.

"Let me help you, sir!" Tom sprang forward.

In a moment the picture was in place beside the three, and a fold of the flag draped its frame.

"'For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" The father turned to Tom with a radiant smile of cloudless love.

CHAPTER XXI

GRANNIE

DICK's car jolted along on a flat tire through a downrush of rain, which descended in perpendicular lines like Japanese bead curtains.

"What a joy-ride!" chortled Nancy, as they turned into Cedar Street where the squelching mud sounded like eggs being crushed under the wheels. "I'll never forget it. Oh! I believe it is going to clear, now that we have acquired a thorough soaking! Get out of your wet clothes at once, Dick, or you'll take cold."

"The same to you, old dear," he laughed. "You're as wet as I am."

When the car halted before the Graysons' gate the sun burst forth through the wind-driven clouds, making the wet world a dazzling glory. Nancy, drenched and dripping, waved a laughing farewell to Dick and ran up the path to the house, jumping lightly aside to avoid puddles and receiving showers of raindrops from the syringas and lilacs as she brushed against them.

When she reached the steps the door opened and Harry appeared. There was an air of subdued excitement about him. His face was glowing beneath its freckles and his eyes blinked rapidly, as though

they were trying to make a startling announcement before his lips could utter it.

“Don’t know enough to come in when it rains, do you?” he remarked, as she began to wring streams of water from her skirt. “My eye! ‘what fools these mortals be’!”

Nancy laughed merrily and shook her dripping hat in his face.

“Things have happened since you left the house,” he continued. “You’ve missed the grand sensational surprise of our lives. And now,—you’ll never guess who’s turned up!”

“Not Father?” her face paled.

“Guess again!” he smiled mysteriously. “Hammer some think-tacks into your brain and guess again!”

“I can’t guess! It couldn’t be any one else but Father! *Has* he come?”

Harry grinned. “Hold on to something, or you’ll drop when I tell you. About an hour ago Jim Deane’s Peace Ship sailed down the lane and deposited a stranger at our gate,—our *stepmaw!*”

“*What?*” gasped Nancy, feeling as though a bomb had exploded and scattered her wits. “Our stepmother? Oh! wh-wh-what is she like?”

“She’s like a frightened mouse; a weepy-looking little lady, dressed in black. Don’t trouble to change your wet clothes before you meet her. She’ll

probably slop over and weep on your neck and give you another soaking.”

“Where is she?”

“In the living-room having a long jawbation with Oonah, who made her a cup of tea and shooed us away after the first greetings were over. Gee! I wish you’d been here. Monica was the only one that had any presence of mind when Stepdaw told us who she was. They cottoned up to each other at once; but the rest of us,—Oh, glory be!”

“What did you do? What did you say?” questioned Nancy.

“Do? Say? Nothing.” The last word thudded from Harry’s lips. “Joan gasped and looked like a sick codfish. Then she let out a wild squawk and scooted. The twins were dumb for the first time in their lives. They stared with eyes and mouths wide open, and looked as if they had swallowed their tongues. I stuttered and curled up into a hoop and rolled around the room. Then Oonah came out of her trance and told us to clear out, which we gladly did.

“So, run along, kid, and behave pretty. It’s up to you to restore the honor of the family and give Stepdaw a proper welcome. That’s why I came out to warn you.”

“I’ll change first,” murmured Nancy, and she whisked up the stairs to her bedroom.

A few minutes later she descended to the living-room. Her hair was still wet and hung loose, the moisture dripping like beads on the towel she had pinned about her shoulders to protect her green gingham dress.

A small pine-log was burning in the grate and diffusing a spicy odor. Oonah had lighted a fire to banish the dampness that lurked like a ghost in the old walls and came forth at the call of rain. Oonah was standing before the fire, gazing down at the stranger who sat almost buried in a large arm-chair which was in sore need of an upholsterer's ministrations.

Mrs. Grayson looked up with a startled air when Nancy entered the room. She was a slender little woman, fragile as a windflower, with an abundance of silvery-white hair and a thin, pathetic face. Her small hands, wrinkled and blue-veined, fluttered helplessly like withered leaves, as she made an effort to rise from the deep hollow seat.

"This is Nancy, the oldest wan av the family," announced Oonah. "An' I'll be lavin' you to get acquainted by y'rsilves, I will. It's news she has fer you, Nancy darlint; news that'll hit you loike a bump on the head an' make you see stars, I'm thinkin'. Shure, my feelin's is all anyhow, an' that's the truth!"

Nancy came forward. The little woman again

tried to lift herself from the chair; but Nancy knelt beside her and took the trembling hands in hers.

“This is a great surprise,” she said gently. “I’m sorry I wasn’t at home when you arrived.”

“I should have written before coming,” replied Mrs. Grayson, “but I wasn’t sure whether you had heard of me, and I hardly knew what to say. And I wanted to see you all,—oh, so badly! I hope you don’t mind my coming like this!” the soft tones ended with a sigh.

“Mind?” echoed Nancy. “Of course not!” Her face blossomed into a smile as she gave her step-mother’s hands a caressing squeeze. “But what is the news? Is—Father coming?”

“No—no,” Mrs. Grayson hesitated. “You must have often wondered why I didn’t come to see you before, why I didn’t write; but, you see, I didn’t know until—the other day that there were any children. Your father had never spoken of you, and ——”

“Father has usually overlooked us,” observed Nancy drily. “But I’m glad you have found out about us at last and that you’ve come. I hope you will stay. We are a rough-and-tumble family, not the sort of children one would expect Father to have. But I hope you will like us. I’m sure we shall like you. You have won my heart already.”

“It is good to hear you say that, my dear.”

“You know,” Nancy tossed back her hair which was gradually drying and fluffing into crinkly curls about her face, “you aren’t in the least like what we imagined our stepmother would be, when Father wrote and told us that he was married again.”

“That’s what dear little Monica told me. She said I was more like a kind little Grannie than a stepmother; and the dear child called me Grannie.”

“But you aren’t old enough to be our grandmother; at least, not mine,” protested Nancy.

“I’m forty-nine, and I feel and look much older. But I hope you will all call me ‘Grannie.’ It is such a loving, little name. I wouldn’t ask or expect you to call me ‘Mother.’ I have no right to that.”

“Then you shall be Grannie, our own little Grannie!” Nancy snuggled against the chair. “And now, Grannie, let me hear your news.”

Raindrops from the wind-stirred vines tapped on the closed windows. The fire crackled cheerily, and the bright copper kettle hanging on the crane purled and bubbled over the flames.

“I’d like to tell you all about myself,” began Mrs. Grayson in her slow, shy way. “I want you to know everything, to understand how I came to marry your father. I have only a vague memory of my parents. They died when I was quite a small

child, and I was brought up by my grandfather and his sister. They were a strange pair, morose, austere, penurious, and unsociable. We had no friends,—we lived quite alone.

“For a few years there was a servant, a grim, silent, elderly woman, but when she died I did the housework. There was a great deal to do, sheer drudgery. My aunt was a cripple. I had to wait on her and I spent hours every day, and often far into the night, reading aloud to my grandfather. That endless reading was my only education. I don’t regret it now, but at the time I felt I was just a reading-machine and I didn’t realize the good it was doing me. But now I know it saved me from becoming a clod.

“Our home was really sordid. My grandfather was so miserly that our scanty meals often closely bordered on starvation. Sometimes I went to bed hungry, and I often prayed that I might die before another day came.”

“Oh! what an awful life!” cried Nancy.

“So I grew old,” the murmuring voice went on, “without knowing what it was like to be young. When the aunt died I was glad,—*glad* to be freed from her exacting ways and the whining voice that had never given me a kind word. It was wicked of me to rejoice over her death; but I couldn’t help it.”



F. LAUX WILSON '28

“THEN YOU SHALL BE GRANNIE, OUR OWN LITTLE GRANNIE!”

Page 245.

“I should think not!” broke in Nancy passionately.

“Two years ago my grandfather died and I was left quite alone in the world. I had no friends. The day after his death, when I was wondering how I could possibly manage to live,—I had no money and there was no food left in the house—a strange man came to the house, my grandfather’s lawyer. He told me that I was very wealthy; that my grandfather had died without a will and, as I was his only remaining relative, his fortune was mine. He was very kind and gentle with me. I was so timid, so shy, he must have thought me half-witted. I couldn’t realize it all.

“For a few months I lived on at the dreary home. I was too dazed and frightened to leave. At last I woke from my stupor and went to New York, to spend my money and, as I thought, to learn to be happy.

“I bought wonderful clothes, went to a beauty parlor regularly and was massaged, manicured, and shampooed. I went to the theatre, but I soon gave that up. The plays were so queer, so—improper. I used to take one of the maids at the hotel where I was staying. I didn’t know any one else. She liked all the plays except one of Shakespeare’s,—*Cymbeline*. I hadn’t read it and I thought that, being Shakespeare, it would be all right. But, my

dear, it had a bedroom in it, just like all the others! So Gladys and I left the theatre.

“By and by, I got to know people who were staying at the hotel. They seemed kind and friendly, but I always felt that they were secretly laughing at me. I was so stupidly shy. Then I drifted into War Charities. I subscribed to everything, for I was glad to be able to spend my money in such a wonderful way.

“Then I—met your father.” A faint flush spread over the pale face. “It was at a charity bazaar in which society people were interested. Your father was one of the organizers. I was serving at one of the booths, selling Flemish lace. We were introduced and I—fell in love with him. It seems foolish for a woman of my years to speak of love; but, Nancy dear, I had never known youth, never known beauty, never known love, and he seemed to personify all three; all the glamor and sparkle of life that I had missed.

“When he asked me to marry him I felt as though the gods were offering me a cup brimming with the wine of youth. Of course, I knew that he didn’t really care for me. He was immensely popular with women, and I was not the sort of woman that could possibly attract him. It was—my money. I knew that. But it made me feel young just to care for him, to hear him talk in his bright,

clever way. His charm and youthful appearance seemed to hypnotize me. To be near him fed an aching, hungry want in my heart.

“So we were married. For some reason, he never mentioned his children. I can’t understand why. It would have made me so happy to have known you all. At his suggestion I bought a country place in Long Island, but he was seldom there and I was very lonely. He practically lived in New York, at his Club.”

“Father was never a home man,” observed Nancy. “I hope he is—kind to you,” she added, remembering Mr. Grayson’s selfishness and irritable temper.

“Oh, yes! He was always extremely courteous and kind in an easy, careless way. But I had no place in his life. We seemed to live in different worlds. Yes, he was always very affable and kind,—and fascinating at times.”

“When he wanted money, I suppose,” thought Nancy, biting her lips to restrain the utterance.

“Two weeks ago he went to the Adirondacks, to visit some wealthy society friends at their summer camp. He was out riding and his horse threw him. I was sent for, and ——”

“Was he hurt?” cried Nancy. “Is he ill? Oh! you are wearing black,—Father is—dead!”

Mrs. Grayson leaned forward and encircled the

girl with her arms, holding her close with a tremulous agitation. For a short time there was silence.

"I suppose I ought to cry," Nancy said presently, "but I can't—I can't cry! I feel as though I were suffocating. Father is dead, and I can't, I don't even *want* to cry."

"I understand, Nancy dear. It was in examining your father's letters and papers that I learned of his children. So I came here at once, to love you and to try to win your affection. I am all alone in the world, and it will make me very happy if you and the others will give me a place in your lives, if you can learn to love me after a time."

"I have learned already!" Nancy started up and sat on the arm of the chair. "Grannie dear, I'm glad you came to us!" She kissed her impulsively, and her golden curls mingled with the silvery waves of the woman's hair.

The younger Graysons received the news of their father's death with a stoical, half-shamed indifference. He had entered their lives so seldom that he seemed remote, unreal, like a character in a book. The heartless, unfatherly treatment he had always accorded them, during his brief visits at home, had stultified their affection and had created a gulf between them which was never bridged by understanding, filial or paternal.

Flip and Flop, lured by the smell of cinnamon

buns Oonah was baking for supper, went to the kitchen and watched her in silence as she scraped the rolling-pin and pastry-board. She did not shake the rolling-pin at them and say,—“Gwan widger!”, the greeting they usually received when they entered her domain uninvited. When she drew the pan from the oven they sniffed blissfully. Then—oh, miracle of miracles!—she detached two sugary, steaming segments from the sheet of buns and pushed them across the table.

“There, put yersilves outside av thim buns.”

“Umm-umm!” they sighed and sniffed, giving the hot buns wary touches.

“Oonah,” began Flip after his second swallow, “are you sorry Father’s dead?”

“Divil a bit, an’ more’s the pity,” was Oonah’s response. “An’ there’s nary a drap me eyes’ll be spillin’ ’nless I peel onions.”

“Is there any of that wrinkly black stuff in the house to make bands for our arms, like the one Mr. Hertz wore on his sleeve when *his* father died?” asked Flop. “I’d like to wear a black band so’s strangers ’d know we had a dead relation in the family.”

“Crape bands, is it? Huh! I’m thinkin’ the only band you’ll iver wear on y’r arrums’ll be handcuffs, there’s divil a doubt av that. Now, gwan an’ wash y’r hands and faces. Wid the Lorrud afther

givin' you mouths to ate wid, for why would you be tryin' to ate wid yer ears? ”

That evening the conversation at the supper-table, usually so mirthful and unruly, limped through a bog of depression. There were broken remarks and brief requests for things to be passed along the table, scattered here and there through the gloomy silence. Towards the end of the meal Joan, who had not opened the book beside her plate, suddenly gave way to a fit of hysterical weeping.

“ I'm not sorry Father's dead! ” she declared with gulping sobs, “ but if I don't cry, I shall laugh. It's awful not to be sorry! It's wicked to feel like laughing, but I can't help it. It wasn't our fault that we didn't love him. He never loved us; and now he is dead, we can't feel sorry. It's awful not to care! ”

CHAPTER XXII

SPREADING THE NEWS

IT was sunrise time the next morning, and Oonah was the only one astir in the Grayson home. The kitchen door was wide open, and the morning-glories that curtained its porch were massed with pink, white, purple, and lavender blossoms; shy nun-flowers that would soon close with shrinking modesty beneath the bold, staring gaze of the sun.

The garden was still impearled with dew, and the new day was sparkling with light and joy. Early birds were twittering over their proverbial breakfast in the rich soil which the worms had riddled with their diminutive excavations.

“My sowl to glory! iv Mither Grayson iver did wan dacint thing in his loife, it was marryin’ that angel woman!” Oonah was truculently triumphant, as though defying contradiction of her statement which was made to her own reflection in the small mirror over the kitchen sink. “An’ that’s the truth!” she continued, jerking the roller-towel as she dried her hands. “An’ the Lorrud put His good grace on the marriage by makin’ her a widdy, He did, an’ sendin’ her here.

“It’s wishin’ I am, wid a heart an’ a half, that

that sainted mother up in hivin knows av the blissin' that's come to her children. Stepmother in-dade? That's no name fer that swate, tendher-hearted little woman! Shure, it's 'Grannie' she is, an' that's a name that grows in the heart like a flower!”

Flip and Flop were eager to apprise Dick of Mrs. Grayson's arrival, and, as soon as they were dressed, they scampered over the dew-drenched lawns of Cedarwold to tell him the wonderful news. They disregarded the formality of ringing the bell, and ran through the house until they found Noki in the breakfast-room.

“Honorab' Bloss making blig splash in the bathtub,” was the Jap's answer to their breathless inquiries as to Dick's whereabouts.

Upstairs they went, and battered with their fists on the locked door of Dick's bathroom. The only response to their onslaught of blows was the sound of running and splashing water, which formed an accompaniment to Dick's quavering rendition of a lovesick ditty about the “days of old when knights were bold.” As he shivered with shuddering gasps and groans under a cold shower, he produced an original version of the warrior's description of his lady love, which robbed the song of its sentimental charm.

“ M-m-my love is y-y-young-ng-ng and fair,
M-my love hath l-l-light bl-bl-blue hair,
And eyes s-s-s-so g-g-gold,
And heart s-s-so c-c-c-cold-d-dd—er—er ——”

The tremolo ceased when the water was suddenly turned off, and a rapid fire of vigorous slapping ensued.

“ Captain Dick—oh, Di-ick!” they called.

“ Y-Y-Yes—who’s there? ”

“ It’s us, and Grannie’s here, and we want to come in. Open the door—Grannie’s here! ”

“ Grannie’s here? ” repeated Dick, and then added quickly in a wild shout of alarm when they rattled the door-knob, “ She can’t come in—*she can’t come in!* Who the dickens is Grannie? I didn’t know you had one.”

“ Father’s dead and she’s our widow, our step-mother,” said Flip.

“ An’ we call her ‘ Grannie,’ ’cause she’s nice,” explained Flop.

“ Stepmother? ” ejaculated Dick. “ My word! Did you say that your father was ——”

“ Yes, he’s dead, an’ we’re orphans,—there’s divil a doubt av that! ” was Flip’s cheerful response.

“ We’re not erzactly orphans,” Flop amended, “ ’cause we’ve got Grannie an’ she’s adopted us. We’re adopticated orphans.”

“Lord love a duck!” was all the astonished Dick could say.

A few minutes later he appeared. “See here, you kids,—are you mad or am I dreaming?” he demanded.

“We’re not mad, we’re glad ’cause Grannie’s here,” answered Flip. “Come over and see Grannie. She’s a good old sport.”

“She’s a peach,” contributed Flop.

“I’ll come over after breakfast and meet the paragon,” laughed Dick. “So fade away. I want to shave and dress and—er—recover my wits. You’ve given me shell-shock. I’m on the verge of gibbering idiocy. Meditation and prayer I must have! Scoot!” he snapped his fingers. “By the way, there’s a circus coming to Bradbury next week, and ——”

“Oh! are you going to take us?” They hurled themselves at him, making him stagger.

“That depends,” he said slowly, as he surveyed their eager faces with a teasing smile. “You’ll have to earn the treat, so toddle along or ——”

They were out of the room before his sentence was finished.

“Whew!” whistled Dick, and presently his bewildered face was covered with a mask of soapy lather.

When he went over to meet Mrs. Grayson his

mind was still groping in a fog of amazement. He had a vague sense of being only half-awake, and the twins' startling announcement of their widowed stepmother's arrival seemed like the hazy recollection of a dream.

The Grayson garden was full of song and sunshine and cool, blossom-scented breezes. He saw the family grouped under a venerable apple-tree that made an island of shade in the centre of the lawn, and they were a charming picture with the sunlight glancing through the leaves and tracing golden arabesques over them all.

Dick hurried forward with outstretched hands.

"Grannie," he began, "I'm going to call you 'Grannie' because I insist on your adopting me with the rest of the family. I've always wanted a Grannie, so"—he leaned over with a gay, boyish laugh, "I'm going to kiss you!"

Grannie's face lighted up with one of her rare, lovely smiles. A faint flush of shy, tremulous happiness flooded her thin cheeks, and her tear-bright, gray eyes gleamed as though they were reflecting the silver sheen of her hair.

"What a dear big boy you are!" she said. "Nancy has told me about you. I'm so glad there is a romance in the family!"

"And I'm glad there's a Grannie like you in the family!" He sat on the rustic bench beside her.

“Now, I want to celebrate. There’s to be a luncheon-party to-day at my house, with Grannie as the guest of honor. You’re all invited, and we’ll have a regular Oh-be-joyful jamboree to welcome this dear little grannie into the family!”

The news of Mr. Grayson’s death and the coming of the unknown Mrs. Grayson occasioned much buzzing excitement in Watch-and-Pry Corner.

“When all’s said an’ done, a father’s a father!” Miss Louella expounded to the women who were in her bay-window. “An’ when a father’s dead, it’s the duty o’ his children to wear sackcloth an’ ashes, an’ not put on soft raiment like the good-for-nothing Graysons is doin’, I say.”

“Just so,” wheezed Mrs. Hertz. “An’ there ain’t a sign o’ black on one o’ them children, not even a crape sleeve-band! An’ Nancy’s wearin’ nothin’ but white, which ain’t fit an’ proper with her father jes’ laid away in his grave.”

“Well, I don’t know as I blame Nancy for not puttin’ on black these hot days,” said Mrs. Talbot. “With Mr. Grayson bein’ what he was, an’ livin’ away from his family like he did, his death won’t seem anythin’ more to his family than a long visit he’s payin’ somewheres without them knowin’ his address. An’ I vow he’s gettin’ all the respect he deserves when his widow sees that he’s buried decent an’ puts on her weeds o’ mournin’. Mrs. Gray-

son is real sweet-lookin', an' the children is as fond o' her like as if they were her own."

"As the Holy Writ says, you may look as harmless as doves an' be as wise as serpents, especially if you're a widow in a crape veil, I say." Miss Louella paused to sniff. "An' las' Sunday in church I took a good look at Mrs. Grayson sittin' in the family pew like patience on a footstool an' lookin' as if butter was meltin' in her mouth; an' I says to myself,—'There's the wisdom of a serpent under that harmless dove's face, that's what!'"

"The Graysons is certainly lookin' up, with a rich stepmother an' Nancy engaged to young Dick Thorold," observed Mrs. Wiggins.

"Seems like folks won't be callin' them 'the good-for-nothing Graysons' now," said Mrs. Talbot with a superior smile.

Miss Louella snorted. "Many a house is built upon sand, an', as fer that family,—well, as the Holy Writ says, you can't gather grapes o' thorns or figs o' thistles any more'n you can make a silk purse out o' a sow's ear."

There was a brief lull in the conversation while Miss Louella handed the mail-bag to Jim Deane, who was on his way to the station to meet the afternoon train. Jim greeted the women with a nod of the head and a "howdy," and hurried out to his Peace Ship, which was laden with its usual cargo

of children, who looked upon the short journey in Jim's coughing, rattling car as a veritable joy-ride.

“A letter came this morning for Susan Avery,” Miss Louella informed her visitors, when she returned to the bay-window. “It was from that soldier fellow. He's in New York again.”

“Susan's another lucky girl,” remarked Mrs. Wiggins, “gettin' ready fer her weddin' like she is; an' they say that young McGillicuddy is quite well off. I never thought that Susan'd be able to catch a husband, her bein' afflicted with a harelip. Of course, his face is awful scarred, but bein' disfigured don't count 'gainst a man like it does with a girl.”

“I think Susan is lookin' real pretty these days. Her cheeks are rosy an' her eyes sparklin',” said Mrs. Talbot. “I vow, happiness has changed her a lot.”

“Well, as the Holy Writ says, you can't put new wine in old bottles any more'n you can put beauty into a girl's face if the Lord, in His wisdom an' mercy, has seen fit to give her a harelip. This marriage o' Susan's looks like a good thing, an' I'm hopin' she won't regret it. But to my mind, it's a risky business marryin' an' goin' 'way out west with a man that's been soldierin' in France; that country that's filled with French girls, whose favor is deceitful an' whose beauty is vain. Susan may find that her weddin' cake's jes' dough, I say.”

“Mr. Alden says that Tom McGillicuddy is a fine young man,” declared Mrs. Talbot. “An’ he’s found out all about his character ’n’ everythin’.”

Miss Louella tossed her head. “The Reverend Niggle always thinks well of everybody. That’s jes’ a way he’s got, an’ it’s mighty foolish, I say. The other day I spoke to him ’bout Jessie Neve. I said that, with her elopement bein’ known ’bout like it was, it seemed he was makin’ a mistake lettin’ her approach the Communion Table; an’ he looked at me with that queer smile he has an’ said: ‘The greatest of these is charity.’ Huh!”

“I vow, I’m sorry fer Jessie,” put in Mrs. Talbot, “an’ I think folks ought to be kind to her. She’s so quiet an’ sad, an’ it’s jes’ fine the way she’s helpin’ her mother now,—doin’ the housework an’ gettin’ the garden in order. Maybe she *was* a bit foolish, but, my sakes! she’s tryin’ to live it down!”

“I hear the measles has broken out real bad over to Bradbury,” began Mrs. Hertz irrelevantly, “an’ I guess I won’t take my Eric to the circus to-morrow. He hasn’t had ’em yet; an’ it’d be temptin’ the Lord to do His worst if I took that child into a crowd that’s full o’ measles an’ pickpockets.”

“My grief an’ patience!” cried Mrs. Wiggins. “An’ I was plannin’ to take Hazel. She’s jes’ crazy to go. All the Graysons is goin’. Dick Thorold’s goin’ to take ’em, the twins told Hazel.”

“Then I’ll call over the back fence when I get home an’ tell Oonah they’d better not go,” announced Mrs. Hertz. “We don’t want any one bringin’ measles to Cassburn.”

“It’d be jes’ like the twins to get measles an’ spread ’em all over the village,” declared Miss Louella. “They’d glory in doin’ a thing like that! fillin’ the place with plagues an’ pestilences, an’ makin’ Cassburn a valley o’ dry bones, that’s what!”

“It’s a measly shame!” sobbed Flop, when she and Flip were told that the eagerly awaited trip to the circus was not to take place.

“We wouldn’t get the measles, we just *wouldn’t!*” Flip assured Dick. “Besides, you promised to take us to the circus, an’ it’s a wicked sin to break your promise!”

“I tell you what we’ll do,” said Dick cheerfully. “We can’t go to the circus, that’s flat; but we’ll have a picnic instead. We’ll all crowd into the car and go up to Windy Hill. What do you say to that?”

“It’ll be better’n doing nothing,” Flop admitted grudgingly, “but it won’t make up for missing the circus!”

CHAPTER XXIII

“BALDUR THE BEAUTIFUL”

THE road to Windy Hill skirted the edge of Bradbury, and as Dick's car, with its occupants “packed like a box of figs,” as Joan observed, glided past the town, they caught a glimpse of the circus tents bedecked with fluttering flags, and heard broken strains of band music which brought forth wails of disappointment from Flip and Flop.

The weather was cool and sparkling, with a high wind making holiday among the clouds, massing them together like gigantic bales of wool, then tearing and pulling them apart and blowing them in thin, white fleeces across the vivid blue sky.

It was a short, steep, tortuous ascent up the sparsely wooded eastern slope of the hill to the bare summit, where great rocks towered like the embattlements of an impregnable fortress, an aery of the wind. Half-way was an old sandstone quarry, and there the scant oaks gave up the weary climb and lagged behind the stunted pines and firs that straggled upward among boulders and cliffs, as though determined to reach the old-time forest that grew on the sunset side of the hill.

They saw Jerry among the bushes and mulleins that grew in the quarry, his great, upright form

drawn to its full height as he stood with arms outstretched, gazing at the sky. His hair was glorified by the sun and his loose, baggy smock repeated the color of the vast blue roof of the world.

“ He looks like a Sun God,” said Nancy. “ Isn’t he a magnificent figure? He makes me think of

“ ‘ Baldur the Beautiful,
God of the summer sun,
Fairest of all the gods! ’ ”

They left the car near the quarry and walked up over the crest of the hill; and then down through the green dimness of the woods, following the windings of a chattering brook until it broadened into the silence of a deep pool, which slipped smoothly over a rock and descended in a curtain of lacy spray. Gnats danced in the air and dipped in the pool, making wrinkles and whorls in its glassy surface which was flecked with amber gleams of sunlight.

There was a small plateau beside the pool overlooking the massed trees below, an open space of ground spongy with brown pine-needles through which tiny insects wandered like walking jewels of bright green and red.

“ This is the spot,” announced Dick, as he and Harry set the lunch baskets on the ground. “ I discovered it the other day and immediately planned for a picnic. A cushy little corner, isn’t it? ”

“Oh, it’s a wonderful place!” cried Nancy. “I’d much rather be here than in that hot, noisy, sawdusty circus tent, with all sorts of people chewing gum and peanuts and crowding against us. It is hard to realize that all that racket and shoddy glitter is only a mile and a half away from this peaceful spot. Here, we are next door to heaven!”

“Grannie, sit here on this log,” said Dick. “Nature has upholstered it with moss, to make a throne for you and Nancy. Monica, my little sweetheart, here is your place.” He spread out a rug near the log. “The rest of you may bestow yourselves as you please. My place is at Nancy’s feet.”

Joan strolled off with a book, and Harry disappeared down-stream with his fishing-rod. Flip and Flop went over to a group of white birches, where they discovered a spring trickling from a rock in silver threads which soaked into the mossy soil. They busied themselves in digging a River Tiber, and within half an hour they had built a city of twigs and pebbles which they named after the ancient city that wasn’t “built in a day.”

Grannie took her work from the cretonne bag which hung on her arm. The fine filet lace seemed to flow from her fingers, as her hook flashed up and down with a fairy magic that transformed the prosaic balls of cotton into a filmy fantasy of rosebuds.

Monica smiled with a wistful sigh of content, as

she curled herself comfortably on the rug. Dick, with his hands clasped behind his head, looked up at Nancy's face aureoled with her breeze-ruffled hair, and saw his heaven in her eyes. Squirrels cheeped and scurried about, making the branches quiver as they leaped lightly from tree to tree. A white moon lingered in the clear blue sky, like a little lost cloud.

“Look at the ghost-moon!” said Monica dreamily. “It has followed the sun, like Mary's little lamb that ‘followed her to school one day’; and the breezes are like children laughing to see a moon in daytime. I love the woods! The trees are so wonderful and wise, especially the pines. This great pine over us must be very old. It looks as though it had been growing here ever since there was any remembering in the world. And through all the years the winds have come to it with stories of what men are doing in the world; and at night God has covered the sky with star-writings of what men are dreaming. So, although it has always lived in this lonely place, it knows all the secrets of life, all the dreams and deeds of men. Listen to its whispering music! We aren't wise enough to understand its language, so it seems to be saying over and over,—‘Mystery, mystery, mystery.’ I hope there will be trees in heaven, trees and flowers.”

With a drowsy sigh she closed her eyes, and presently she slept. Very fair and fragile she looked, on the dark plaid rug. Her long, wavy hair, faintly rising and falling with her regular breathing, concealed her misshapen shoulders like a veil.

“Dear little girl!” whispered Dick, as he gently drew a corner of the rug over her. “What a quaint little dreamer she is!”

Nancy sighed. “I wish she were stronger, that she would play with dolls, and be more like other children of her age. She has never cared for toys and games. Sometimes I fear we let her read too much. She has a wonderful memory. Her mind is filled with the fairy lore of poetry; and lately she has been reading the Bible which, she says, is grand and solemn, like the music of the sea. Beyond teaching her to read and write, I have never taxed her with lessons. Arithmetic and spelling are her bugbears. Like Dickens’s Little Dora, her ‘sums won’t add’; and she thinks that spelling words, letter by letter, is silly, like tearing a flower apart.”

They continued to talk in low tones, their words drifting lazily on the dreamy stillness of the woods, like the fugitive leaves that floated on the pool.

Harry was the first of the wanderers to return. Then came the twins, clamoring for supper. When the meal was ready they had to search for Joan, who was so deeply absorbed in Gertrude Ather-

ton's "The Conqueror" that she was deaf to their calls.

The late afternoon sun filled the air with a hazy light, like a sprinkling of golden powder, which slowly softened into a blur of amethyst and rose.

"There will be a gorgeous sunset," said Dick. "Those clouds in the west are setting the stage for a pageant of color."

"We must stay and watch the show!" cried Joan. "It will be better than the circus. There's one gray cloud 'that's almost in shape of a camel,' and another that's 'very like a whale'; and that dark one streaked with gold is a 'tiger, tiger, burning bright.' Oh! I'm so happy and contented that I wish I were a cat so that I could stretch out my paws and purr!"

A cool breeze swept among the pines, rising from a rustling murmur to a shrill tone which suddenly sank into silence like the abrupt ending of a skirl played on the bagpipes. A crow passed overhead with loud raucous caws, and dropped a feather which fell, like a blot of ink, on Nancy's lap.

"Ugh!" she grimaced, and a little shiver of dread passed through her, as she flicked the glossy feather from her skirt. "I'm afraid of crows. They seem so—so malignant. I feel as though that feather were an evil omen; that something dreadful is going to happen."

The words had scarcely left her lips when they were all startled to their feet by the sound of something crashing through the woods above, as though one of the great boulders at the top of the hill were descending upon them. Then came a weird, inhuman bellowing, as of some crazed creature, mingled shouts of men, and the roar of an infuriated animal.

Suddenly Jerry appeared, waving his arms and clamoring as he ploughed his way through bushes and saplings that sank under his tread and then sprang back, heaving like the waves of a leafy sea. His smock was torn, his arms and face were scratched and bleeding, his hair was tangled with leaves and brambles, and his eyes, wide and staring, were filled with madness and terror.

They stood petrified and helpless with fear. The twins began to scream. Dick seized Monica and placed her as high as he could reach, on the forked branch of a tree.

“For God’s sake, Nancy, climb a tree! The poor fellow has gone mad!” he cried; and, with Harry’s help, he lifted the twins to safety beside Monica.

The shouts of the men drew nearer. Jerry began to whimper and kept waving his arms. Nancy was too weak and powerless to move. She and Grannie clung together. A shrill scream escaped their lips

as another form came hurtling after Jerry,—a huge, tawny lion. Dick encircled them with his arms and pushed them behind a large boulder. Joan threw herself on the ground, face downward, and Harry, seizing her feet, began to drag her to Nancy and Grannie.

For a moment the animal stood on an overhanging rock, heaving with panting breaths, its eyes blazing with rage. Then, with a bellowing roar of fury it leaped down, bringing a shower of leaves and pebbles.

Jerry gave a wild yell and sprang at the creature. The two rolled together on the ground, scattering dust and pine-needles like battle-smoke. The hideous scene blurred before Dick's eyes as he picked up the fainting Joan.

Half a dozen men, wearing vivid blue and yellow circus uniforms, had scrambled down the slope. The foremost took a careful, deliberate aim at the lion's head and fired two shots. With a frenzied roar the animal leaped into the air and fell, a shuddering, gasping mass, near Jerry, who lay still with blood spurting from a ghastly wound on his bared shoulder.

“That's the second man that damned beast has killed to-day,” said one of the men, as Dick came over to Jerry. “He's been actin' queer for over a week, an' this afternoon the crowds an' the noise

seemed to madden him. He growled an' roared all through the show. When it was over, his trainer went into the cage; an' in less'n a minute poor Joe was dead on the floor, an' the damned beast was loose an' outa the tent. By good luck it came this way, 'stead of rushin' through the streets that were filled with crowds goin' home. Crikey! we came after him as fast as we could, but we lost track of him for a while until we heard that poor cuss yell.” He brushed the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Dick knelt beside Jerry. Nancy came forward timidly.

“Is—is Jerry dead?” she whispered.

“I don't know. Keep away, Nancy!” he begged.

“I'm not afraid.” She knelt on the other side of Jerry and gently wiped away the blood that oozed from his lips. “Poor Jerry! He came to warn us of our danger, and we thought he had gone mad. And now, he has given his life to save us!”

Jerry opened his eyes and smiled feebly. With a deep, indrawn sigh he strove to raise himself, and then sank back with a shuddering groan.

Dick lifted him carefully and supported his back with his knee. The men, removing their gold-braided caps, stood near in silence.

Sunset burnished the sky with crimson and gold, that touched the varied greens of the trees with

bronze and copper tints and gave a divine radiance to Jerry's face and hair. The clouds in the west were a shifting mass of splendor, changing, glowing, and melting into a mystic haze that veiled the sinking sun.

The dying man's breaths came in feeble gasps from his smiling lips, and his eyes were filled with a rapt and consecrated vision, so that "his face did shine as the sun," as he reached out with trembling hands. Suddenly a strange, wonderful light shone through a rift in the clouds, flooding the world with purest gold,—a baptism of glory.

As though the healing hand of Christ were laid upon him, the miracle of speech came to Jerry and he uttered, in a cry of rapture, the first word he had ever been able to articulate.

“ God! ”

A slight tremor passed through his great form and he sank back lifeless in Dick's arms.

Harry had lifted Monica down from the tree, and the child now came quickly forward. Her face glowed with awe and ecstasy as she laid one little hand on Jerry's head and raised the other, pointing at the heavenly city pictured in the sky. Very slowly she spoke.

“ ‘ And lo, the heavens were opened unto him. And lo, a voice from heaven saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. ’ ”

CHAPTER XXIV

OPAL MIST

THE day of Jerry's funeral was warm and moist, veiled with mist that caught a translucent shimmer from the hidden sun and mingled sky and sea in continuous transitions of soft luminous colors: silver, mauve, and pearl, through which came fleeting gleams of the sun's golden glow, like the flame that dreams in the heart of an opal.

The churchyard was thronged with people. All the villagers were there, laden with dewy trophies from their gardens. The children had been out since early morning, scouring the woods and meadows for the wildflowers their playmate had loved and made his own,—“Jerry's flowers,” as they called them.

A grim, dusty tramp shambled in, and drifted like a bit of human wreckage through the crowd to peer down into the open grave. It was old Nero, the tinker and knife-grinder. His shaggy, bearded face and bent, twisted body had made him an abiding terror to children whose threatening mothers used his name as a prophecy of inevitable punishment. Tears stole down his grimy face and disappeared in the thicket of his beard.

" Jerry wuz a good frien' to me, he wuz. An' his eyes, they wuz full o' the kind words his lips couldn't speak. He stayed in my hut for three weeks, he did, an' tended me through the roomatics, an' saved me from dyin' alone. He wuz a good frien'."

Nero left the churchyard and plodded his way along the dusty road where he would never again meet the simple, kindly dumb man who had always smiled upon him,—the man who was his only friend.

The murmuring sound of the sea filled the air with a sighing undertone, as Mr. Alden read the burial service. Then the children, who had been allowed to decide what they should sing at the grave of their comrade, sang their favorite hymn. Their treble voices rose sweet and clear, as the shy ones gained confidence and joined in with the others who bravely began the first lines. The hymn of heavenly promise, which they loved and knew so well, was more in keeping with their memory of Jerry than any included in those for the burial of the dead. It pictured to them the land of pure delight where Jerry had gone; the land where

" There's a friend for little children
Above the bright blue sky."

" Somehow, I can't see our Jerry playin' a harp

in the Bible heaven of starry thrones an' golden streets," remarked Jim Deane to a group of men who lingered before his shop after leaving the churchyard. "It seems to me like Jerry's heaven'll be a meadow where he c'n romp with the children jes' like he did down here. I guess he'd rather tell them stories, for he'll be able to speak up there, than sing with the angels; an' he'd rather wear a wreath o' flowers made by the kids than a starry crown."

By noon the mists had rolled away and the sun was diffusing its full glory of light and heat over the village, filling it with the dry, dusty glow of August.

Housewives busied themselves with the tasks they had left undone in the morning, finding relief for their depressed spirits in a noisy clattering of dishes, splashing of mops in soapy water, and unnecessary polishing of stoves.

Men resumed their interrupted work in the fields where the air seemed alive with grasshoppers, as the clicking machines cut and tied the golden wheat in sheaves, or raked the loose, tawny hay into piles that formed an archipelago in acres of stubble sea.

Children hung about the doorsteps of their homes in listless boredom. The day with its holiday freedom seemed endless to them; there was "nothing to do," and it was "too hot to play."

Bees hummed and whirled over the flowers that were heaped on Jerry's grave, the rapid beating of their wings forming a blue haze, like their song made visible. The incoming tide crept in slowly, foaming and murmuring over the hard, wet sand which had been etched with scalloped outlines by the ebbing waves, and the song of the sea saddened the summer air, like the voice that

“ For ever cried
‘ Baldur the Beautiful
Is dead, is dead! ’ ”

CHAPTER XXV.

“MILLIONS OF MISCHIEFS”

THE sun-grilled weather continued, dragging through a week of blistering days. The air was filmy with a quivering heat haze which blurred the landscape, like a picture done in pastels and rubbed into a smudge of colors by a careless hand. The sea was burnished by the sun with a shimmering, oily iridescence which made it seem as though its waves might suddenly burst into flames.

Pumps groaned as they poured forth their feeble streams, and buckets came up only half-filled with warm, brackish water from depleted wells. The brook shrank into a thread of water, trickling between stones that were encrusted with dry clay. Gardens languished, flowers withered in the bud, and the leafy world was songless, as though all the nest-dwellers had joined a silent brotherhood.

“Seems like the world is givin’ a purty good imitation o’ hell,” Jim Deane said to Louella Greer one morning when he delivered the mail-bag. “What’s the latest news o’ the Day o’ Judgment, Louella? It can’t be far off, I reckon. Hev you received any word from headquarters ’bout when the affair’s to take place?”

She regarded him with a disdainful smile. “As

the Holy Writ says, Jim Deane, your tongue is as a reed shaken by the wind o' folly, an' your mind is a rollin' stone that gathers no moss o' wisdom, I say. When the Day o' Judgment *does* come, you'll find that the idle folly o' your much speakin' 'll be laid up against you, that's what!"

A day came when the unnatural spell of drought and heat was broken. Dawn blushed rosily in the east, but, before the sky was "fretted with golden fire" by the sun, a cloud-laden land breeze cooled and stirred the air with a promise of rain.

The crisp, thirsty leaves on the trees fluttered and showed their under sides, the flowers nodded languidly, and the birds flung a few trilling notes into the air, like loose, raveled threads of fairy music.

Then came the rain, falling throughout the day with a gentle monotony; reviving the trees and flowers, and filling the air with a glorious thrill of renewed life and hope.

"It's the divil's own weather we've been havin'," Oonah observed to the family, as she brought a plateful of hot muffins to the breakfast table. "A taste av hell, it was, an' that's the truth. An' it's God's mercy, it is, that the rain has come at last to save Cassburn from blazin' up an' dishappearin' in a puff av smoke. Shure the blissed rain is fallin' down from the sky loike howly wather, it is that!"

In the afternoon Miss Louella was sitting alone in her bay-window. The rainy weather had kept her gossiping companions at home. In her bony, red-knuckled hands she held a newspaper which was soiled, frayed, and beginning to yellow with age. From time to time she glanced and gloated over an item that was distinguished by a crude circle drawn around it with a blunt blue pencil.

“ I wonder who could’ve sent me this! ” she said in puzzled tones, and she picked up a torn envelope from the table.

It was addressed to her, and the writing had evidently been done by the same pencil that was used in marking the newspaper.

“ It looks mighty like Sid Hale’s writin’, an’ it come from New York where he’s livin’ now. Wouldn’t wonder if he *did* send it. Well, it’ll make the village sit up and take notice, I say! As the Holy Writ says, tell it not in Gath; publish it not in the streets o’ Askelon, but Cassburn ain’t mentioned: so I guess I’ll use my tongue, an’ Dick Thorold an’ Nancy Grayson’ll be a proverb an’ a byword among all people, I say! ”

The paper was a humorous sheet, written in a breezy, slangy style, and interspersed with items that a conservative editor would have rejected as unfit for publication; but it was a cheerful “ rag,” the sort of thing that war-weary men might read

with pleasure and profit to their jaded spirits. It had a “kick” like the hind-leg of a mule; and, in many of its paragraphs, there was the spirit of optimistic courage that had enabled many a man to “carry on” and do his bit during the War.

“It’s a soldiers’ newspaper,” soliloquized Miss Louella, “made over in France, but it’s done in English printin’. I guess some returned soldier must’ve brought it back an’ give it to Sid Hale. I wonder why he thought o’ sendin’ it to me! My! I wish the rain’d let up, so some one’d drop in. There’s only been three people in fer their mail to-day, an’ they come before I’d opened this. Sakes alive! I wonder why Sid Hale sent it to me, ’stead o’ his own folks!”

She turned to the paragraph and read it over, slowly nodding with an exultant smile. At the sound of some one entering the post-office, she started and looked up.

“Why, Aggie Vance!” her voice was shrill with excitement, “I was jes’ wishin’ that some one’d come in. I’ve somethin’ here that’ll make the mornin’ stars sing together, that’s what! Jes’ look here,—read this!”

She spread the newspaper on the table and indicated the marked paragraph with a pointing finger. Mrs. Vance, in slow, stumbling tones, read aloud.

“After a terrific bombardment of three days, the enemy put Busy Bertha and Coughing Clara to sleep and withdrew from action. The lull was like a dose of soothing syrup to our frazzled nerves. Meanwhile, in this little town, *Somewhere in France*, Cupid gave the merry ha-ha to the guns of Mars and got busy with his bow and arrow. Greta Henshaw is a cute little trick, we’ll tell the cock-eyed world; and when she hands round her smiles every feller in sight is a fall guy and falls hard for Greta. She’s the prettiest skirt in the Red Cross outfit quartered in this section, and on Wednesday night last she was wedlocked to Richard Thorold, the shrinking violet of Ward No. 4,—lucky dog!

“When Richard recovers from shell shock and his lamps are illuminating his head-piece again, he’ll find that he’s won a prize; though when the lovely Greta led him to the matrimonial halter, he visibly reluctated. But the band played ‘Hearts and Flowers,’ and the Rev. Sandy Macpherson, our benign and beloved Padre, Harrylauderized the solemn rites with the famous sob in his voice that is said to turn dust into dew. The Groom’s seal ring was torn from his resisting hand and placed on the left hook of the blushing Bride; and the Rev. Sandy intoned the closing lines of the ceremony with a fervor that brought a tear to every manly eye.

“The evening finished with gin and jazz, and a good time was had by all.”

“Well, whatta y’ know ’bout that!” exclaimed Mrs. Vance. “Dick Thorold married already, an’

him gettin' engaged to Nancy Grayson! Jes' wait till I tell Mis' Wiggins an' Mis' Hertz!”

“I always knew that Dick Thorold'd shame this village, which the Lord hath blessed as a habitation o' the just!” Miss Louella's bugle eyeballs flashed, “but I never thought he'd try to start a harem in our midst an' make the state o' holy matrimony a joke on the Lord, Who never intended marriage to be the more the merrier. When the Day o' Judgment comes, he'll hev to go through the eye of a needle on a camel's back before he'll get so much as a look-in at heaven, I say! I'd jes' like to give him this newspaper an' watch him read it! It'd make me feel like Delilah cuttin' off Samson's hair!”

“Why don't you take it over now?” suggested Mrs. Vance. “I'll mind the office while you're gone.”

“I don't know as I ought to do that,” Miss Louella hesitated. “As the Holy Writ says, man goeth forth unto his work an' to his labor until evenin', which might be said o' the way I run this post-office; an' if the Government found out that I went off duty ahead o' time, there'd be trouble in Washin'ton, an'——”

“Well, President Wilson quit his job an' went to Europe, didn't he?”

“That's right, he did! An' if he c'n play hookey,

I guess *I* can. I'll show you how to open the stamp-drawer; an' if any one asks fer me, you c'n let on that I'm sick or somethin'."

After the midday dinner the Graysons had gathered in the living-room, to spend the afternoon in a lazy, rainy-day fashion. Grannie was reading aloud to Monica, Harry was drawing, Joan was grubbing among the old magazines, and Flip and Flop were building pagodas and towers on the large table with a pack of cards.

The drip, drip, drip of the rain outside, the low, even tones of Grannie's voice, the rustling of Joan's magazines, and an occasional outcry from the twins when a wobbly tower collapsed, all seemed a part of the monotony of the long, gray day that irked Nancy into a fit of restlessness. She stole from the room, donned her raincoat, rubbers, and slouch hat, and left the house.

After pacing the shore aimlessly, she turned on her homeward way through the Cedarwold gardens, where the trees were musical with pattering rain-drops and twittering bird songs. Through the open windows of the library came the lilting strains of Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." Dick was playing. The joyous melody, with its swaying rhythm and liquid, rippling tones, seemed like a plagiarism of the bird-and-raindrop music in the trees.

She mounted the verandah, tossed her hat and

coat on a seat, kicked off her rubbers, and stood in the open French window. A moment later the “ Spring Song ” ended abruptly, when Dick caught sight of her. He laid his violin and bow on a table and strode forward.

“ Nancy! you ‘ phantom of delight ’ ! ” he took her in his arms and drew her into the room.

“ Oh, Dick! ” she nestled against his heart, and her lips puckered into an adorable pout which he accepted as a challenge for a kiss, “ I’m cross and restless. I don’t know what’s the matter with me. My nerves are jumpy. All the heat of the past week seems to have entered my system, and this placid, monotonous rain makes me sizzle with bad temper. A wild thunderstorm would be more in keeping with my mood. I am possessed of devils to-day. Play to me and drive them away! ”

She curled herself in a deep, springy armchair with her feet tucked under her, and met the questioning scrutiny of his eyes with a wistful smile.

Dick cuddled the violin under his chin. “ What shall I play? ” he asked, his bow poised in his up-lifted hand.

“ Oh! anything. ” Nancy closed her eyes with a sigh of content.

Dick began Kreisler’s arrangement of Dvorák’s “ Indian Lament. ” The beautiful melody breathed its rich harmonies upon the room like the fragrance

of flowers, a benediction of peace and ineffable sweetness. He gazed at her with a tender, amused smile as the little troubled frown which creased her brow was gradually smoothed away.

Miss Louella appeared in the open doorway. She was ushered in by Noki, who closed the door as he withdrew. Dick stepped forward.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Louella,” he pronounced the lie with a welcoming smile. “Won’t you sit down?”

Miss Louella was visibly nervous. As she said to Mrs. Vance when she returned to the post-office,—
“I walked up to the cannon’s mouth, but I hadn’t the nerve to screw my courage to the shooting place.”

“I guess not,” she shook her head as Dick indicated a chair. “I can’t stay more’n a minute. I thought I’d bring this over to you, and, as Nancy’s here, she might’s well see it, too. As the Holy Writ says, he that hath knowledge spareth his words, an’ a still tongue makes a wise head. So I ain’t sayin’ nothin’; but when you read this you c’n guess what’s in my mind, that’s what. It come to me in the mail to-day, an’ I guess Sid Hale sent it.”

She gave him the folded newspaper, but her intention to remain and watch him read it was overcome by an attack of cowardice, and she hurried from the room.

Dick seated himself in the armchair Nancy had vacated on Miss Louella's entrance and unfolded the newspaper, glancing up at Nancy with puzzled amusement as she perched on the arm of the chair and leaned over his shoulder. For a few minutes they read in silence.

“Isn't it funny?” chuckled Nancy.

He turned to the inner page. “Why the dickens did Miss Louella bring this trashy sheet to me? And why did young Hale send it to her?”

“Oh! there's a marked column!” exclaimed Nancy. “Let's read that.” She touched the blue circle with the tip of a forefinger.

Dick's jaw dropped in amazement as he read, and the circle seemed to spin round with his tumultuous thoughts. Nancy rose slowly and clung to the back of the chair in limp dismay. Her face had a deathlike pallor, and its delicate, flowerlike beauty was hardened into a blank, frozen mask.

The paper dropped to the floor from Dick's hands. His mind was a seething chaos of baffled bewilderment in which lurked a suspicion, amounting to dread, that this nonsensical description of the war wedding was a plausible, and perhaps truthful explanation of the haunting “ghost voice” that had so often intruded upon his thoughts, to tantalize him with its mysterious recurrence and the futility of his efforts to identify its ownership.

It also accounted for the loss of his seal ring, and the peculiar physical sensation he had frequently experienced, the sensation of a hand pressing on his left arm. Black doubt battered his reason into a state of numbness.

The smell of moist earth and the fragrance of rain-washed flowers which came through the open windows seemed to be subtly blended with the portentous silence of the room. Suddenly a string of the violin, left exposed to the damp air, snapped with the sound of a pistol-shot. The startling report roused Dick. He stood up and faced Nancy, and the tragedy in his face made her shiver with dread.

“Dick, it—*isn't* true,—is it?”

“Nancy, I—*don't know*,” he replied with a hopeless gesture. “I have no recollection of marrying any one; but for months I have been tormented by the sound of a woman's voice; no actual words that would give me any clue to her identity,—just smooth, drawling tones.

“On looking back, I can recall the mad excitement of leading my men into action the last time I went over the top. After that my mind is blank, except for periods of awful suffering, the conscious intervals in a hospital when I seemed to be dragging my pain-racked body through a hell of torture. When I returned to the actual world I learned that

the War was over, and it was then that I missed my ring. Throughout the War it had never left my hand. I don't know what to believe!”

“Then it must be true,” she shook her head despairingly, and the pain in her eyes, the pitiful quivering of her lips smote him with remorse. “We can't be married, you belong to some one else. We haven't even the right to love each other, now.”

“No!” he protested vehemently, seizing her hands. “I belong to you. That marriage, if it *did* take place, can,—*will* be annulled. I'll go to New York to-night and see my lawyers. They will start inquiries at once, and find the Red Cross nurse. Nancy dear, don't let this destroy your faith in me and rob me of your love,—of you!”

The despair in his voice, the helpless dejection of his attitude, stirred her heart with a shuddering pain, and a warm rush of pity surged through her being. She felt a strange sensation within her, as though her heart were breaking through a chrysalis, emerging with the untried wings of womanhood and leaving her girlhood behind, an empty, discarded shell.

“I'm going to hope, Dick, and so must you. If the marriage did take place, you were not in a condition to realize what was happening or to remember it afterwards. So, don't look so sad, so ashamed, as though you had done something wrong;

as though you had cheated and wronged me! You haven't! You are still my dear old Dick,—the man I love!”

When she released herself from his embrace, she smiled bravely and spoke in cheery, matter-of-fact tones.

“ Dick, if you really married that Red Cross nurse, why hasn't she turned up to claim her position as your wife? There's hope for us there! If all the silly newspapers in the world said that you were Solomon with his hundreds of wives, I'd still love you and believe in you!”

“ Nancy, you're a—you're a brick!”

“ Now, I must go home.” She shivered slightly. “ I shall have to tell the family. How I dread it! But Miss Louella will be in her glory over this, pouring it into the ears of every one. Oh, Dick! come back from New York as soon as you can! Without you, I shall be an awful coward about facing the village. How their tongues will wag about 'the good-for-nothing Graysons' now!”

CHAPTER XXVI

“VOX-POPPING”

NANCY'S courage deserted her when she left Dick and hurried home through the garden. On entering the house, she sought Grannie and found her alone in the living-room.

The little woman was smiling over the lace she was making for Nancy's trousseau, weaving her dreams and prayers into the dainty rosebuds she crocheted. At the sound of the closing door she looked up, and saw a strange, new Nancy standing before her. The girl was like a wraith. Her face was drained of color, her eyes wide with a frightened, unseeing stare. With trembling hands outstretched, she seemed to be groping her way from the door.

“Nancy dear, what is it? What has happened?”

“Oh, Grannie, Grannie!” Nancy knelt beside the chair, and Grannie's arms enfolded her in a loving embrace.

“It is incredible!” she exclaimed when Nancy had told her story, and she vainly sought for words to comfort the weeping girl.

“I'm ashamed of myself! I mustn't give way like this,” Nancy gulped down a strangling sob, “but I'm such a coward!”

“You’re a dear, brave girl!” contradicted Grannie. “This crying is what you needed. There is no reason to be ashamed of it.”

A faint smile glimmered through Nancy’s tears. “Harry would call it a wash-out, and it *has* done me good. I feel better already. Oh, Grannie! how good it was to come to your arms and pour my sorrow into your heart!”

Grannie’s eyes gleamed with tender happiness. “Nancy dear, this is a wonderful chance for you and Dick to learn what love is, and that it is worth fighting for. Hold on to your love with both your hearts, face the ordeal with faith, and your courage will mount with the occasion.”

With a pitiful attempt at bravado, Nancy enlightened her family at the supper-table, and she chose a moment when Oonah came in with a pitcher of milk for the children.

“I thought it better to tell you myself,” she finished.

Joan giggled nervously, and her fork fell with a clatter to the floor. She leaned over to pick it up, almost lost her balance, and then bumped her head against the edge of the table. She was a picture of comic bewilderment, as she rubbed the stars out of her eyes and gazed ruefully at the others.

“Save us an’ bliss us!” exclaimed Oonah, and she immediately took her stand beside Nancy’s

chair, laying her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Nancy, me darlint, don't you be afther belavin' the newspapers! Shure, they're jes' rags the divil uses to wipe his hands on, an' the lies they print are the dirt that comes off av his fingers; an' thin he uses thim fer kapin' his big bonfire burnin'. Shure, iv there was no newspapers in the worruld, there'd be no fires in hell!"

There was a general laugh at Oonah's vehemence.

"It's wishin' I am that I could git the divil by the scruff av his neck an' make him ate the newspapers. It'd give him a stomachache that no medicine could cure; an' he'd howl wid cramps fer miny a long day, he would that! Whin I die, I hope to go to hivin so's I c'n be wid the wee Monica,—the saints fergive me fer spillin' me wild talk in her swate ears now! But I'd loike to pay a short visit to the other place an' hev the chanct to tell the divil what I think av him."

"Oonah *dear!*" remonstrated Nancy feebly.

"Let me spake, Nancy! An' Monica, put yer fingers in yer blissed ears. It's spake I must, fer I'm desprit. Me mind is such a flood av worruds that, iv I stood nixt to the Niagara Falls an' spilled me worruds, the Falls'd look loike a drippin' fasset in the kitchen sink."

"I don't mind your funny talk, Oonah," began Monica with her sweet, placid smile, "but I *do* feel

sorry for the poor devil! He is always blamed when things go wrong in the world. Perhaps he is sorry he is the devil, and wants to be good instead.”

“Bliss the child! Sorry fer the divil, is it y’are?” Oonah’s voice was gentle.

Monica nodded. “I’m sure no one wants to be as bad as people say he is. Sometimes I think of him sitting by himself, very lonely and sad because every one is against him.”

“I’m going to pray for the poor devil,” announced Flop.

“So’m I,” added Flip. “Every night I’ll say, ‘God bless me an’ the devil an’ make us good boys. Amen.’”

“It’ll be a long toime that yet,” said Oonah. “But it’s a frindly thing to do, an’ the divil’ll take it kindly, I’m shure av that. Nancy darlint, don’t be down-hearted! Things hev to go wrong wance in a while, loike this trouble fer you an’ Dick, or the worruld’d grow top-heavy wid joy an’ fall over into nowheres. Ivery rose has its thorn, an’ ivery bush has its bug. Don’t fret an’ lose yer appetite. Face the worruld wid a glad heart an’ a full stomach, an’ you’ll win through anythin’.

“Shure, I’m fergittin’ the batch o’ bread I left in the oven, ivery loaf smellin’ wid a swate, crusty smell, loike incinse ticklin’ the nose av a saint!

Bad cess to me mimory! They'll be burned to cinders, they will, an' there'll be nothin' to ate in the house but a tin box av thim educated crackers that's only fit fer the divil to crack his teeth on." She hurried from the room.

"Isn't Oonah priceless?" chuckled Joan.

Harry grinned. "She's our wild Irish rose, I'll say."

"Dear, faithful old soul!" said Grannie fervently. "How loyal and devoted she is! Her outburst was a good tonic for you, Nancy."

"It was, and I wish Dick had been here to listen to it. Oonah has given me a glad heart! I will now proceed to acquire a full stomach, as she advised." Nancy helped herself to cold chicken.

"I bet there'll be some lively 'vox-popping' in Watch-and-Pry Corner," remarked Harry. "When Miss Louella and her cohorts get their teeth into this story, the whole village will ring with their chin music. Oh, Day of Judgment! this will be pie for Miss Louella!"

"Huhuh!" assented Joan. "She'll talk until the cows come home. I shouldn't wonder if she jaws about it in her sleep, and I wish it would give her lockjaw."

Harry turned to Nancy. "What are you going to do about it, Nance? Face the music, or go into retreat until the storm blows over?"

“I’m going to face the music,—to brazen it out,” she answered. “Dick will hurry back from New York, and the village can ‘vox-pop’ all it wants to when they see us together.”

“Good for you, old girl!” he gave her an admiring look.

The village was in a whirl of excitement over the newspaper story of which Miss Louella made bundles of gossip, tied with strings of Holy Writ, and handed out with the mail to all who entered the post-office; like prize packages given to customers with their purchases.

One day, when buying a bag of tobacco in Brackett’s store, Jim Deane gave utterance to his views in soft, drawling tones that tinged his voice with sadness, although furtive twinkles lurked in his eyes.

“Well, I guess it was ’bout time somethin’ happened to save this village from dry-rot; an’ I intend to use all my influence, such as it is, with the authorities in Washington, so’s Dick Thorold’ll be awarded a Congressional Medal. He sure deserves it.”

Jim loosened the drawing-string in the tobacco bag and then proceeded to fill his well-seasoned pipe, slowly and carefully.

“There hasn’t been anythin’ fer Louella to gab ’bout fer weeks past,” he continued, “an’ I was

beginnin' to feel that I owed it to the community to stir things up an' do somethin' rash an' reckless, like committin' suicide or,—proposin' to Louella, maybe. But now, the village is like a pot o' scandal-stew boilin' over, an' Louella's givin' it a lively stirabout with her tongue. I wish I could quote Louella's Holy Writ to pass my opinion on her; but that ain't my line, so I'll jes' say that she's enough to make a cat laugh.

“Dick ain't a fool or a criminal, an' if he *did* marry that Red Cross dame, like the newspaper said, he c'n give the village a taste o' high society life by gettin' a divorce. When he does that this place'll be listed in the *Smart Set*.”

The customers who had lingered in the store to hear Jim's discourse laughed their agreement.

“Divorces is gettin' to be real common,” observed Mrs. Talbot.

Sam Brackett paused in slicing bacon. “My wife passed the same remark yesterday. The papers is full o' divorces.”

“You've said a mouthful, Sam,” drawled Jim. “Why, I hear that, in New York, divorces are so fashionable now that all the marriage certif'cates hev divorce coupons attached; an' when married folks get tired o' bein' together, all they hev to do to get free, is to clip a coupon off. An' they hev to publish a society book there called ‘Who's Who,’

so's folks c'n keep wise to the rise an' fall o' stocks in the marriage exchange.” He drew on his pipe with evident enjoyment of its tobacco and the interest of his auditors.

“Durin' the War queer things happened ‘over there’ ; an', as they sing in the revival tent meetin's over to Bradbury,—‘not half has ever been told.’ But this weddin' o' Dick's, that Louella's tootin' the trombone 'bout, sounds sorta fishy to me. It wouldn't jolt my mind to hear that it was jest a fairy tale, maybe.”

He paused at the door, before making his exit. “I'm real glad to see that little Nancy Grayson has spunk enough to get round the same's usual, an' that she an' Dick ain't slow 'bout bein' seen together, now that he's come back from New York. They're a fine young pair, an' no one'll be gladder'n me when this mess is straightened out an' Louella's tongue has to take a rest-cure. She may be a worthy woman in the sight o' the Lord; but there's times, an' this is one, when Louella gives me a *big, fat pain!*”

Jim uttered the last words with a display of feeling that startled his audience.

“I never heard Jim speak so *warm!*” exclaimed Mrs. Talbot, as the blacksmith departed.

Watch-and-Pry Corner was rife with surmises and comments.

“ One’d think that Nancy’d bow her head in shame, an’ not be seen out o’ the house these days,” said Mrs. Wiggins.

“ Just so,” snuffled Mrs. Hertz. “ But the Graysons is a brassy lot an’ know no shame.”

“ Brassy is jes’ the word that’s in my mind when I think o’ Nancy,” declared Mrs. Vance, “ an’ I’ll say that her brass ain’t all in her hair.”

“ You’re right there, Polly Vance!” Miss Louella nodded with approval. “ Out o’ your mouth cometh wisdom. Every day I see Nancy ridin’ with Dick in his car, as bold as you please. She sits there beside him, holdin’ her head with pride an’ a haughty spirit, like as if she was a picture o’ that French queen in Solomon Simpson’s hist’ry book, ridin’ in a tumble-cart to the gelatine. On the Day o’ Judgment the Lord’ll see that Nancy stubs her toe at the pearly gates, an’ great’ll be the fall thereof, I say!”

“ Louella, you give me a big, fat pain!” Mrs. Talbot had picked up pearls of speech from Jim Deane’s harangue. “ You’re enough to make a cat laugh when you talk o’ the Day o’ Judgment, as if the Lord needed *your* help in runnin’ it. I jes’ wish you had the habit o’ takin’ out your tongue at nights along with your false teeth; then, maybe, it’d shrink so’s it wouldn’t fit your mouth any more an’ you couldn’t use it. I miss my guess if that

tongue o’ yours wasn’t pickled in salt an’ vinegar before it grew in your head!”

“Why, Melissa Talbot!” gasped Miss Louella. “You, a Christian woman! talkin’ slang an’ throwin’ my teeth in my face! I never heard the like in all my born days!”

“Maybe not, so it’s time you did,—*that’s what!*” Mrs. Talbot voiced her last words so violently that they seemed like stones she was hurling at the astonished postmistress.

“I’ve one thing more to say ’bout your tongue, Louella, an’ then I’m goin’; an’ it ain’t my intention to speak pious like a Christian, but like a human bein’. I’d like to take hold o’ the end o’ your tongue an’ pull at it like a piece o’ ’lastic so’s it’d snap back at your face an’ give you a sting, like the tongue-lashin’s you’re so liberal with ’bout the Graysons. Good-bye, all!”

Mrs. Talbot departed with a smile that was like a banner of triumph, leaving the women stunned into silence until Mrs. Hertz managed to wheeze “Just so,” as though corroborating the attack on Miss Louella.

CHAPTER XXVII

IF

SUSAN AVERY and Tom McGillicuddy were on their way to have supper at the Graysons'. Tom had just returned from Washington, and he and Susan had met, according to arrangement, in the churchyard where they now sat together on the stone wall. This was their favorite meeting-place because it was the scene of their first encounter, on the Sunday night when Nancy had brought them together.

There was time to spare, and they lingered in the quiet, secluded place, discussing Tom's trip to Washington and their wedding which was only two days away.

"I ran into an old buddy in Washington. Had dinner with him and his wife one night. They're a jolly pair, very much in love, and always teasing each other like a couple of kids. She was a Red Cross nurse during the War, and the three of us sat up until dawn swapping experiences. It was a great night!"

The ocean boomed a sullen undertone to the symphony of village sounds that drifted to their ears, and the grinding shriek of a scythe being sharpened rose above the distant clamor of barn-

yard cacklings, barking dogs, mooing cows, and laughing children at play in the gardens.

“Two more days, Susan,” he pressed her hand affectionately, “and we’ll be starting off together! Girl, that word ‘together’ makes my heart do a song and dance.”

Susan’s reply was an uplifted glance of her brown eyes, brimming with love and gratitude.

“We’ll spend a week or two in New York,” he continued. “It’ll be a novelty to you,—the crowds, the noise, the high buildings, and the splendor. You’ll get some eyeful, believe me! Then for home! There’ll be no dressmaking for you there, old girl! I want you to forget how to thread a needle. It’s a long gaze you need to drive that tired, strained look from your eyes, and you’ll get it out there. I’m going to teach you to ride. Then we’ll go on camping-trips up the mountains, and I’ll show you what the world looks like—fresh from the hand of God.”

“It seems too good to be true,” said Susan with a low, gurgling laugh. “You’ve made the world over for me.”

“Nothing’s too good to be true,” he replied. “I want you to myself for a while. Then I’ll have your family come out. They need transplanting. There’s an empty house on my place, over a mile from our home, that they can have. Your father

has got on the wrong side of life here. The air out there will stiffen his backbone and make him realize that life isn't a rest-cure.”

“ You're wonderfully good, Tom. I never dreamed that the world could hold so much happiness as you've given me. If only Nancy and Dick could be as happy as we are! ”

“ What's the matter with them? Have they quarreled and broken their engagement? ”

“ Oh, no! ” cried Susan, “ nothing like that! It's worse, much worse. I didn't write to tell you about it, but, while you were away, some one sent Miss Louella a newspaper in which there was an account of a war wedding between Dick Thorold and a Red Cross nurse. Dick hasn't the faintest recollection of it; but you know he was terribly wounded and shell-shocked. As Nancy says, the marriage may have taken place, while he was not in a condition to know what was happening to him or to recall it afterwards. Why, he can't even remember where the hospital was! ”

“ Dick's lawyers have started an investigation, but, until the nurse is found and her story known, Dick and Nancy feel that the awful newspaper may be telling the truth; especially, as it mentions his seal ring being used in the ceremony. Dick has never been able to account for its loss. It's an awful mix-up, and —— ”

“Hold your horses, Susan,” broke in Tom. “What was the nurse’s name?”

“I don’t quite remember,—er—something like—er—Grimshaw, I think.”

“*Sacre bleu* and *Donner und Blitzen!*” ejaculated Tom, as he slid off the wall. “That’s two ways of saying ‘Gee whiz!’” He glanced at his watch and held out a helping hand. “Let’s toddle along or we’ll be late. Your story has made my naturally slow intelligence leap to the conclusion that this world isn’t such a large place after all; but it’s a rum queer world, I’ll say. And now, I have a little spiel to make that will be news to Nancy and Dick. Let’s make it snappy.”

“News? What is it? Oh, Tom, tell me!” urged Susan with panting breaths, as they hastened out of the churchyard.

“Keep your hair on!” admonished Tom with his one-sided smile. “I’m going to show you all how the wheels go round in the long arm of coincidence.”

Tom’s long strides which Susan accompanied with little running steps soon brought them to Cedar Street. Dick’s car was stationed at the Graysons’ gate, where Noki was adjusting a tire.

“Blig man with blig name coming along, I see,” he announced to Dick, who was standing with Nancy just inside.

Grannie was seated in the garden near the out-

door supper-table, which was being set by Oonah and the younger members of the family.

"Cheerio!" was Tom's greeting, and they all crossed over to Grannie.

At the sight of Tom, the twins rushed forward and threw themselves upon him.

"Did you see the President in Washington?" demanded Flip.

"Sure, I did. He was asking about the two of you; hopes you will both join his cabinet soon. Och! Oonah mavourneen, the pride av me hearut!" Tom always addressed Oonah in an exaggerated brogue. "It's glad I am to see yez. Shure, it's been a long toime since me eye hez been dazzled by the sight av yer swate face. The top av the mornin' to yez, Oonah!"

Oonah set a chocolate cake on the table and faced Tom with a shrewd, friendly smile. "Iv you think your blarneyin', broguein' tongue'll get you into hivin, you've got dishappointmint ahead av you, there's divil a doubt av that. The howly St. Pay-ter'll take your soft spache wid a slice o' lemon, he will that. An' thin he'll be sendin' you down to where, it stands to raison, there's niver a worrud av Irish spoken or heard, you may rest your sowl on that. Iv you always wore your head undher your hat, you'd be knowin' it widout me tellin'. Now, iv you'll all take your places, I'll be servin' the supper

at wance, so's you c'n ate while the heel av the day lasts."

The meal under the old apple-trees progressed with fun and laughter, in which Oonah often joined when she passed the plates around. Tom complimented her on her hot biscuits.

"It's wishin' I am, Alanna, that these biscuits av yours'd grow on bushes, loike the crabapples on the tree over yer head; an' it'll be a great day whin that happens, I'm thinkin'."

"It will that," agreed Oonah, "fer pigs'll hev wings an' Ireland'll hev Home Rule, wid sinse an' wisdom to rule the home."

When the meal was finished Flip and Flop ran off, in pursuit of a luna moth that fluttered over their heads. The others lingered at the table while the west-dipping sun painted the garden with a crimson haze, as the day softly melted into evening. Purple shadows began to creep from under the trees, and the flowers' benediction of dewy sweetness was breathed upon the air.

There was a brief silence, broken by the striking of matches when Tom and Dick lighted their cigarettes, from which the smoke curled, floated, and faded; like little ghosts of the thoughts that lurked in the minds of all.

"Tom, what about the long arm of coincidence?" asked Susan.

“I’m going to stretch it now.” Tom lighted a second cigarette and turned to Dick, who was beside Nancy at one end of the table. “Susan has told me about the snag you are up against,—that war wedding.”

Dick nodded, and his hand reached out to Nancy’s which rested on the table.

“While I was in Washington,” continued Tom, “I met an old buddy,—Bill Henshaw.”

“*Henshaw?*” exclaimed Dick. “Why, that’s —”

Tom’s voice flowed on, sweeping aside the interruption.

“I had dinner with him and his wife and, as I told Susan, we sat up all night, swapping yarns. Mrs. Henshaw had an interesting story to tell. She and Bill, by the way, were married just before he went overseas, and they kept the marriage quiet because she was going over with the Red Cross. You know, there was some regulation against officers’ wives going over in any official capacity.”

Dick moved uneasily in his chair and his grasp on Nancy’s hand tightened, as he repressed an impulse to murmur impatiently, “Come to Hecuba.”

“Well, Mrs. Henshaw’s story had to do with an entertainment which the boys and nurses arranged as a sort of antidote to the merry hell the Germans had been serving up with their usual efficiency. It was a vaudeville show, and one of

the acts was a mock marriage, with Nurse Henshaw as the bride and one of the wounded soldiers as the groom. The officiating 'meenister' was Alexander MacPherson, who is now leading comedian in a Broadway musical show."

Nancy looked at Dick with a puzzled query in her eyes. His face was rigid and white with restrained impatience and agitation while Tom paused to relight his cigarette, vainly scratching the damp matches and tossing them aside.

Oonah came out with a sweater for Monica and an old wrought-iron lantern which Harry hung on a bough of the apple-tree over the table. Through the interlaced scrolls of its design the light of the lantern glowed with a mellow radiance, making it seem like a magic fruit growing among the dusky leaves. Oonah sat on a rustic bench and the twins, exhausted with their futile chase of the moth, snuggled beside her. The air was vocal with the harsh, grating noise of katydids, and from one of the trees came the plaintive call of a whippoorwill.

Tom, sheltering a lighted match in his cupped hands, succeeded in putting a glow on the end of his cigarette as an exasperated "Chut!" escaped from Dick's lips.

Tom's voice drawled on. "The act went over big, but the funny part of it is that Mrs. Henshaw doesn't remember the name of the chap who played

the unwilling bridegroom. The rôle fell to him by the drawing of numbers, she said; and if she knew his name at the time, it didn't stick in her memory. She told the story with funny imitations of the 'meenister' and the reluctant groom, and it gave us a big laugh. Bill teased her a lot about it and said that whenever Greta was hard to manage he could make her eat out of his hand by threatening to have her arrested for bigamy."

"Dick was the man,—the bridegroom!" cried Joan, "and he isn't married after all! It was just a lark, a bit of spoofing!"

Tom nodded and blew out rings of smoke.

"Thank God!" murmured Dick, as he raised Nancy's hand to his lips.

"Glory be!" exclaimed Oonah. "Praises an' blissin's!"

"The only thing that worries Greta," Tom went on, "is the seal ring, a valuable antique. She still has it and would like to return it to its owner. I'll telegraph Bill to-morrow."

"Oh!" breathed Nancy. "Everything is—is —"

"Hunky-dory," finished Harry.

Her face was radiant. "Susan, when you knitted that pair of socks for the Red Cross, you little thought that the happiness of so many lives was twisted in the skein of yarn you used, did you?"

If you hadn't knitted those socks, and if you hadn't put your name and address inside them, Tom wouldn't have written to you and he wouldn't have come here to see you! And where should we be, without Tom?"

"He is our *deus ex machina*," laughed Dick.

"Oh, spare my blushes!" said Tom with visible embarrassment. "Can the compliments! I may be a deuce of a machine, as you say; but I've done nothing to make a song and dance about."

"You *have!*" insisted Nancy. "Your coming to Cassburn has filled our lives with enchantment. Without you, Mr. Alden would still be breaking his heart over his son, not knowing that Ted had risen to the triumph of a hero's death; and Dick and I——" her voice faltered. "Oh, it might have taken an endless time to untangle the snarl of that newspaper story! And you, Susan, how your life has changed! Think of an insignificant pair of socks being a web of destiny! All our lives seem to hinge on the 'if' of your making them. *If* you hadn't ——"

"But I did," laughed Susan. "I knitted scores of pairs, though I put my name and address in only one pair, the pair that happened to reach Tom. If they had gone to some one else,—well, there's another 'if.'"

"There's much virtue in *if*," quoted Grannie.

“ My sowl to glory ! ” Oonah rose from the bench and stood under the glow of the lantern. “ You c’n talk av all the virtuous ‘ iv’s ’ settin’ the worruld right, an’ you c’n kape it up till mornin’ iv you want to ; but at prisent spakin’ there’s only wan thing that’s worth me breath to say ; an’ it’s wishin’ I am that I could *sing* it, fer it’s ringin’ in my heart loike a bell.”

“ What is it, Oonah ? ” asked Dick.

“ *God bliss Tom McGillicuddy*, though it cracks me jaw to say his name ! ”

THE END

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00024933143

