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AT

HOME



By AMY BROOKS





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The little procession was crossing the lawn. — Page 14.

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BY

AMY BROOKS

AUTHOR OF "DOROTHY DAINTY SERIES," "THE RANDY BOOKS,"
AND "A JOLLY CAT TALE"

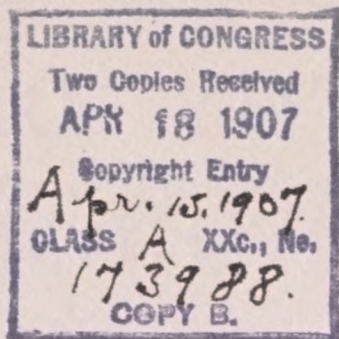
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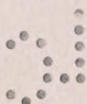


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DOROTHY DAINTY AT HOME.



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DOROTHY DAINTY AT HOME

CHAPTER I

THROUGH THE FOREST

THE gardens at the great stone house were ablaze with color. The clambering rose-vines wreathed porch and balcony, and the tall, flowering shrubs were pink and white with blossoms. Down by the pond the fleur-de-lis poured forth its fragrance, and the fountain sent upward sprays of soft mists which caught the sunbeam's kiss, then from sheer joy fell back into the pool, a shower of sparkling drops.

The tall trees cast cool, swaying shad-

ows, and from the sheltering branches came sweetest music in liquid notes which were echoed by other tiny songsters.

All through the early morning the gay laughter and merry chatter of children's voices had made yet sweeter music, but now the little playmates sat upon the lawn or stood in little groups trying to decide what the next game should be.

“What shall we play, what *could* we play that we haven't played before?” said Molly Merton.

“Yes, that's it; let's think of some game that we haven't ever played, because that will please Molly,” urged Flossie Barnet, who was Molly's staunch admirer.

Flossie had a sweet disposition, and whatever would give pleasure to playmate or friend was sure to make her happy.

There were other girls and two boys in the group, but they offered no suggestion; they could not think of any game which they had not played many times.

There were Nina and Jeanette Earl, Molly Merton and Flossie Barnet, Russell and Aline Dalton, who were spending the day at the stone house with their cousin Dorothy Dainty, whose home it was; Katy Dean, another little neighbor, and her cousin Lester, while upon a garden-seat sat Dorothy Dainty with Nancy Ferris, her dearest friend.

“I do wish I could think of some fine game which would be new; can't you think, Nancy?” Dorothy asked.

“I *have* thought this very minute!” Nancy said, springing to her feet in the greatest excitement. “I wonder why I didn't think of it before.”

“What is it?” “Tell us about it!”
“How do you play it?” questioned the
eager children.

“Mrs. Dainty told us a lovely story last evening,” Nancy said, “and we who heard it couldn’t help remembering it. Now you tell the others, Dorothy, as your mamma told it to us, so we’ll all know it, and then *I’ll* tell you how we’ll play it.”

“It wasn’t exactly a story,” Dorothy said, “but mamma was telling us about the figures on the frieze in our dining-room, and we asked her about their costumes, and why all the figures, both men and women, were carrying something in their hands.”

“And Mrs. Dainty said it represented a Greek festival, and some are carrying fruit and others have flowers,” said Nancy.

“And the men and a few of the women

wear skins for clothes, and others have very long draperies," Dorothy continued.

"And others are playing on pipes, and one girl has a tambourine," said Aline. "I remember her, she's such a pretty figure."

Nancy's dark eyes were bright with excitement.

"We'll play we're Greeks," she said, "and we'll dress up and have a festival of our own. We'll have a procession! Come, come!"

Nancy's excitement made the others wild to follow where she led, but, as they hastened after her, they plied her with questions.

"Where'll we get the furs to wear?"

"And the pipes to play on?"

"And the fine draperies?"

"Somebody must carry a tambourine!"

“ One fellow in that dining-room frieze has a long stick with a lot of fruit tied to it; ” this last remark from Dorothy’s cousin Russell.

Nancy ran until she had reached a little grove near the fountain, where in the cool shade she sat down to tell her plans. Eagerly they listened, as in little groups they gathered around her.

“ Now, first of all, there’s the fur rugs out on the lawn, where the maid left them to air, if Mrs. Dainty will let us — ”

“ Oh, she will, I know she will let us borrow them, ” said Dorothy, “ and the boys will look fine with them flung over their shoulders. ”

“ And there’s a tambourine in the music-room, ” continued Nancy.

“ I’ll carry that, ” cried Aline.

“ And I’ll be the chap with the stick

over his shoulder, and the fruit hanging from it. I'll get the gardener to help me fix it," said Russell.

"I can be the fellow with the pipes. Two small sticks would look like those reeds he's playing on," Lester said.

"And the rest of us will dance along just to look jolly, and help to make a fine procession," Molly Merton declared, to which, as usual, Flossie Barnet agreed.

As eagerly as they had hurried toward the grove, they now rushed to the house, and Mrs. Dainty laughed merrily as she stood upon the piazza trying to understand what the little group before her was saying.

"One at a time, please," she said, smiling at their eager faces, "for I hear cries of 'festival,' 'fruit,' 'furs,' 'tambourine,'

‘ pipes,’ and ‘ drapery,’ but I cannot imagine what it all means.”

So Dorothy, with Nancy’s assistance, told how the story of the frieze had suggested a fine game, and they now wished to borrow articles with which to array themselves like the Greek youths and maidens.

“ You shall have the fur rugs and, indeed, any other things which will help you to look like the nymphs and swains. The maid will carry the rugs to the grove, and I will see that John helps you. He can cut a stick or staff for Russell, and hang some grape-leaves and clusters of green fruit upon it. I’ll get the tambourine now for you, Aline, and I think that there is an old flageolet in the music-room which some one can call an ancient pipe.”

“ Oh, mamma, I knew you’d help us to

play it, it's such a lovely game," Dorothy said.

Aunt Charlotte Grayson, who had been an interested listener, now came forward and joined Mrs. Dainty.

"I think I have something to offer the little Greek nymphs," she said. "In the storeroom at the stone cottage there is some old mosquito-netting, a number of yards of pink and white. If you will run down to the cottage to get it, Nancy, it will, I think, make some floating draperies."

"The very thing to make us look fine," said Nancy, and she ran at once to the cottage, returning soon after with the bundle of bright-hued netting.

"I think it will make the pageant more beautiful if you carry flowers as well as fruit," said Mrs. Dainty. "The girls can

wear wreaths of blossoms, and a staff may be hung with flowers as well as fruit. Now when you are arrayed in your furs, your gauze, and your flowers, march down across the lawn and let us see you. We shall be in the sitting-room, but at the sound of your pipes and tambourine, Aunt Charlotte and I will surely come out here to see the brave Greek youths and lovely maidens as they pass."

"We'll come, we'll come where you shall see us!" they cried as they hurried away.

It was a task to get the little company properly costumed. Katy Dean preferred pink netting, as did Molly Merton and Flossie Barnet, but when Nancy had draped herself in pink, there was quite enough left for two girls, but not enough for three. It might have been unpleasant,

but Flossie Barnet, always sweet-tempered, always willing to yield, decided to wear white netting, that Molly and Katy might have the pink which they preferred.

Russell and Lester were delighted that the fur rugs were for their own adornment. They thought the furs more manly than the gauzy draperies. There were four rugs, however, and but two boys to wear them.

“What’ll we do with these two rugs?” Russell asked.

“We’ll wear them,” said Nina. “There are two girls in the frieze that have fur mantles, so Jeanette and I will wear them.”

John proved a valuable helper. He knew the best way to securely fasten the fur rugs so as to resemble the soft skins which draped the charming Greek youths;

he fashioned a pipe from a bit of cane; he made a slender staff to which he tied a cluster of bright blossoms. But even with his generous aid, the boys were a long time preparing for the procession; indeed the girls teased them because they were so fussy. Russell was eager to tie the clusters of green grapes and their leaves so that they should hang gracefully, while Lester was sure that his furs were not arranged becomingly.

The girls were quite as particular, and the maid was kept busy arranging drapery, weaving wreaths, and tying ribbons. How they laughed and chattered, and how the moments flew!

At last they were ready, and with pride the maid stood beside the gardener watching them, as they made their way through the shady grove toward the lawn.

“ Oh, the dears! It’s a pleasure ter do anything at all for them! ” said the maid.

“ That it is! ” John replied. “ Their chattering makes the place cheerful, but I tell ye, Miss Dorothy’s the sunshine o’ the house.”

“ An’ who loves her truer than Miss Nancy? ” said the maid.

“ ’Twas a fine thing when the mistress took her in, the little waif, ” the gardener replied.

The maid looked up into the man’s honest face to learn if he were joking. “ Truth that I am saying, ” he said. “ Bein’ a newcomer here, ye’re not knowin’ that Nancy Ferris was left ter shift fer herself; yes, fer herself, because her stepmother, the good-fer-nothin’ woman, hadn’t no int’reast in her. Then, just when we’d all learnt ter love her here, a ole uncle o’ hern

stole her an' made her earn his livin' fer him a-dancin' on the stage."

"What kind o' folks were they ter treat a child like that?" said the maid.

"'Bout as mean folks as there is," the gardener said. "Oh, it's er long story an' full er int'rest. The cook'll tell yer all 'bout it some day ef ye ask her."

He went back to the garden-bed which he had been weeding, and the maid returned to the house, resolved to question the cook regarding Nancy Ferris, in whom she already felt a friendly interest.

While the young maid stood beside John, talking of Dorothy and Nancy, the little procession was crossing the lawn, with soft draperies fluttering in the breeze, and the merry voices of the mimic nymphs and swains mingling with the tinkle of tambourine, the trilling of the pipes.

Oh, the beauty of the scene!

The sunlight, the shadows, the bright draperies, the laughing faces, the dancing feet!

They were singing a song which they had learned at Aunt Charlotte's private school, a song which Dorothy always loved to sing:

“Youths and maidens to the fields are hieing,
And in wreaths the fragrant flowers tying.”

The tambourine marked the time with the clashing of its brazen bells, while the boys merrily whistled the pretty air. The winding path led them through another little grove, which they always called the “*forest*,” because that sounded grander, then across a wide terrace and down some stone steps, then farther on across a babbling brook and up over rising land to the

broad lawn. Their music had heralded their coming, and as they passed the house, Mrs. Dainty and Aunt Charlotte stood upon the piazza waving their handkerchiefs and smiling with pleasure at the pretty sight.

The gardener had planned a surprise for them. He had been busily weeding the garden when a bright idea made him drop his tools and hurry around to the servants' quarters. He told them of the little procession, and urged them to drop their work for a few moments and await its coming.

“It'll please Miss Dorothy an' all of 'em ter see ye lookin' at 'em, an' they do look fine, I tell ye, so do ye all stand out where ye kin git a good look at 'em, an' do ye give three rousin' cheers as they pass.”

“That we will!” they cried as with one voice.

The cook removed her big apron, the pompous butler peeped into a tiny mirror to see if his collar were straight, the maid dropped her duster, while Mrs. Dainty's own maid walked shyly beside the young groom, leaving the coachman and footman to escort the others. Out on the lawn they filed, and, as the children marched before the piazza and turned to pass around the house, three lusty cheers rang out.

“Oh, the darlings! I'd not miss that beautiful sight for forty pies like I was makin' when ye called me ter drop my work an' come out,” said the cook.

“I never see anything finer'n that on the stage, an' me a maid in the city an' always a-seein' *vaudy-veel* whenever I had a afternoon off.”

“ Well, we all lived in the city last winter, lass,” the butler replied, “ but I’ll tell ye one thing: summer er winter, city er country, this family is the best in the world ter serve.”

The servants returned to their tasks, while the children, following the path which led around the house, came out into the sunlight, which made the fountain sparkle and caused every bright flower to blaze with warmth and color. Around the pond they marched, again through the “ forest,” where the cool shade was delightful, in and out between the clumps of flowering shrubbery, until they were glad to sit down to rest and regain their breath. They took turns telling stories, the boys trying to outdo each other in relating thrilling tales of adventure which they had read. Harold owned many fine books

which told of life on the plains, while Lester loved the stories of hunting and fishing which he had eagerly read.

The girls listened with delight to the wild tales of adventure. It felt so nice and safe to be sitting in the beautiful garden, around which stood the great stone wall, while the gardener, the coachman, and the groom were so near that they could hear the least outcry.

“Tell us another story,” urged Dorothy.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” Nancy said. “Just make up a hunting story, and see how well you can tell it. You begin it, Harold, and then Lester can go on with it, and see if you two boys can tell a story big enough to scare us.”

“Jolly fun!” exclaimed Harold. “So here goes. The name of the story will be

— le' me see. Oh, now I've got it. The name of the story is —

“ ‘The Great Hunter of the Green Forest.’

“ Once there was a hunter so tall you had to look straight up in the air to see his face, and he was as big around as the biggest tree that ever grew. He always wore a green suit, so that when he was in the woods the bears that he was after couldn't tell him at a distance from a tree.

“ Well, one day this hunter started out for a day's sport, and when he reached the forest the first thing he saw was bear-tracks all along the path!

“ Now you go on, Lester,” Harold said, as he threw himself back upon the grass.

“ All right,” agreed Lester, “ here's the next thing: The moment the hunter saw

the bear-tracks, he strode into the forest, for he meant to show the bear that there was *one* hunter who wasn't easily scared. He went striding along, tramping down the bushes and weeds that were in his way, when all at once he came to an open place and — there was the bear *a-waiting for him!* ”

Of course the girls screamed when Lester shouted these words, and just at this exciting point the maid appeared to summon them to lunch. Russell and Aline were to leave just after lunch for the train which would take them to their home. Russell promised to finish the tale when he should again visit Dorothy.

“ I wish you could tell us how it came out, ” said Dorothy.

Russell laughed.

“ I don’t know how to tell it now,” he said, “ but I’ll have time to think about it, and I’ll tell you all about it the next time I’m at the stone house.”

CHAPTER II

ROMEO

THEY were sitting upon an old stone garden-seat, and they had been talking very gaily until Dorothy spoke of her absent pets.

“To think,” she said, “that Bijou should have run away so far that no one could find him. He was such a dear little dog that I can’t bear to think what may have happened to him. The gardener said that he disappeared about a week after we left here to spend the winter in the city. Oh, do you suppose that he tried to follow us, and could not find his way?”

There were tears in her sweet eyes, and

Nancy longed to comfort her. She drew Dorothy closer and looked into her lovely face.

“Try to think that perhaps some one found him who loves him, and that he may be living in a good home,” she said, and, although it was only a hope which Nancy expressed, it cheered Dorothy, and she smiled through her tears.

“You see it was different when my goat went away. I loved Corny, and it seemed hard to part with him.”

“But you didn’t lose him,” said Nancy; “you sent him away.”

“Yes, that made the difference,” Dorothy replied. “I had grown so large that I could not enjoy riding in the little carriage, and papa said that I might give it to some one who would find pleasure in owning the little goat-team. I cried when

Corny went, but I sent it to my little cousin, the one who was named for mamma.”

“She wrote you a lovely letter, telling you how pleased and happy she was,” Nancy said. “I remember the letter, because you read it to me.”

“I have you always to play with,” said Dorothy, as she leaned lovingly toward Nancy, “but I do miss my pets.”

The sound of merry voices made Dorothy's eyes brighten as she turned to greet Molly and Flossie, who were running up the walk. She forgot to grieve for her pets, for the morning was spent in playing games, and Nancy was delighted to see that Dorothy was again her bright, happy self.

A week had passed when again they sat upon the stone seat, and it happened that

Dorothy was thinking of the goat-team which she had once enjoyed.

“ Do you remember, Nancy, how quickly Corny would come when I called him? ” she said.

Nancy was about to reply, when a slight sound made her turn toward the gateway.

“ Oh, look, *look!* ” she cried, and for an instant Dorothy *did* look, then she ran forward to greet the newcomer, who, with grace and dignity, was walking up the driveway as confidently as if he knew of the sweet welcome which awaited him.

“ A pony! A pony! Oh, I know it is for me, ” cried Dorothy, and she ran to the pretty creature, who paused as if waiting for a caress.

“ Oh, Nancy, see what a beautiful face he has! Wouldn't any one know that he was gentle to look at him? ” said Dorothy.

“ And the carriage! ” cried Nancy, “ it’s exactly like your mamma’s phaeton, only smaller, to match the pony.”

“ How *did* papa send him, for of course it *is* papa’s gift, and who guided him to our garden and started him up the walk? ”

In answer a merry chuckle came from behind the shrubbery, and Jimmy emerged, lifting his cap to the girls in his best manner.

“ Why, Jimmy Harkins! ” Nancy exclaimed, “ do *you* know where this lovely pony came from? ”

“ I sh’d say I did! ” Jimmy replied, “ fer Mr. Dainty sent him out by *me*. Wa’n’t I proud ter be chose from all the men in his office? I promised ter bring him out from the city safely ter Miss Dorothy, and ter start him up the driveway

as if he'd come 'thout anybody with him. I hid behind the bushes jest ter see her look s'prised."

"And what a fine surprise it was," Dorothy said, "and I know why papa sent him by you, Jimmy. He told mamma this morning that of all the people in his office, there was not one whom he could more surely trust than Jimmy Harkins."

"Did he say that?" the boy eagerly asked.

"Indeed he did," Dorothy replied.

"I heard him say it," agreed Nancy.

"Well, he may trust me, fer I'll always be faithful. Didn't he give me the chance ter work fer him, an' him er gentleman, 'stead er that ol' place I had at the theatre, where I had ter work hard fer er little money an' heaps er scoldin'?"

It was evident that Jimmy worshipped

his employer, and that he was working diligently to win his regard.

“ I’ll have ter hurry back ter the office,” Jimmy said, “ an’ I’ve some other errands ter do. Here’s er note fer Mrs. Dainty.”

“ There’s the maid; you could give it to her,” Nancy said.

“ That wouldn’t do,” said Jimmy, stoutly, “ fer he said, ‘ Give this ter Mrs. Dainty,’ an’ I won’t leave till I see it in her hands.”

Jimmy felt that Mr. Dainty was honoring him by entrusting important errands to his care, and he was determined to merit his employer’s regard. He believed that in all the world there was no one so generous, so handsome, so brave, so courteous as Mr. Dainty, and he had resolved to become just such a brave and gallant gentleman.

Of course the pony was duly admired by Mrs. Dainty and Aunt Charlotte, who were in the secret and had been eagerly awaiting his arrival that they might see Dorothy's surprise.

Oh, the delightful drives which Dorothy and Nancy enjoyed, going far out into the country over roads which lay between sunny fields and meadows, or through little lanes which were bordered with wild flowers! Sometimes a cow looked over a rail fence to stare with mild wonder at the pony and his lovely little mistress, or a flock of sheep came down to the bars to learn if the charming occupants of the carriage were bringing a treat for them.

Whenever they sallied forth for a long drive, or when Dorothy sprang into the saddle for a brisk canter, a groom rode at a respectful distance behind them to

protect them if the road chanced to be lonely.

Nancy was always eager to ride in the luxurious carriage, but she was delighted with anything which gave pleasure to Dorothy, and whenever the pony was brought around to the door with his handsome saddle in place, she seemed as gay as if she were about to spring into it and gallop away.

She would wait while the groom assisted Dorothy to mount, and then she would watch the graceful figure as long as it was in sight, waving her hand to Dorothy, who always turned in the saddle to return the salute.

What a difficult task it was to find a suitable name for the pony! "It would be hard to choose a name for an ordinary pet," Nancy said, "but this pony is such

a beauty that we cannot think of any name that seems fine enough for him.”

Aunt Charlotte smiled as she looked at the eager face. The eyes were as serious as if an affair of state were under consideration, and indeed it did seem as if proper deference were not given the pony that he should be “a member of the family,” as Dorothy said, “and yet have no name.”

Countless names had been suggested, but to each Dorothy shook her head. “They are not fine enough,” she said.

Mrs. Dainty’s beautiful span boasted fine names. One was called “Comet” and the other “Star,” so some one suggested “Meteor,” but Dorothy did not like that.

“Dash,” “Lightfoot,” “Whisk” were alike refused. Jimmy had thought “Lime-light” would be a showy name. He had

seen the picture of a circus horse who bore that name, but neither of these pleased Dorothy.

“How would you like to call him ‘Pygmalion?’” Mr. Dainty had asked.

Dorothy hesitated.

“That sounds rather grand,” she said, “but I don’t quite like it.”

Mrs. Barnet was a member of a club which had been organized for social enjoyment, and one evening a dramatic entertainment was arranged in which Mrs. Barnet appeared as “Juliet” and her brother as “Romeo.” Flossie was sure that they were the handsomest couple who had ever appeared upon any stage, and her glowing account of the costumes worn by them delighted her playmates.

“Mamma was a lovely ‘Juliet,’ and

Uncle Harry was a handsome 'Romeo,' " she said.

"That is the very name for my pony!" Dorothy declared. "*Romeo!* Why didn't I think of that name when I've been trying so hard to find one which would sound fine enough for him? He roams everywhere with me, and the name just suits him."

Mr. Dainty was amused. He explained that the name was not spelled like the word "roam," but Dorothy cared nothing for that. The name had caught her fancy, and "Romeo" he should be.

One sunny morning Dorothy sprang into the saddle and started the pony at a brisk pace. It was very early, yet Romeo was already saddled.

She had intended to ride soon after breakfast, and, knowing this, the groom

had made the pony ready that he might promptly lead him up to the house. Then he had sauntered to the other end of the garden to talk with John, and Romeo, thinking that his little mistress might already be waiting with his usual treat of sugar, walked up to the stepping-stone where he looked for her to appear.

She saw him, and forgetting that she was never to ride without the groom, ran out to the block and attempted to mount. Finding that impossible, she led the pony up to the piazza railing, and from there managed to place herself in the saddle. No one had seen her. What a joke it would be to take her ride before breakfast! How surprised they would be to find that she could mount without the aid of the groom! It did not for a moment occur to Dorothy that they would be anx-

ious, and as she rode out from under the leafy branches of the trees, the sunlight and the fresh breeze filled her with delight, and she sang as she rode along.

The distant hills were blue in the warm sunlight, and the sound of the pony's hoofs rang out and was repeated by the echo. Somewhere a childish voice was singing a familiar air, and Dorothy softly hummed the cheery song. She saw beyond a field of wild flowers. She would ride nearer that she might see their beauty, then she would turn about and let Romeo canter home. The breeze played with her bright hair and kissed her cheek until she smiled with pleasure, and the field beyond gleamed in the sunlight.

And while the pony was carrying his lovely rider farther and farther from home, Nancy, half-wild with fear, ran from one

end of the garden to the other calling for Dorothy. Servants were hurrying from room to room in search of her, while Mrs. Dainty and Aunt Charlotte, having been to every room without finding trace of her, sat waiting for the servants to report to them. At last the young groom, hat in hand, came to announce that the pony was also missing.

“But that doesn’t account for Miss Dorothy’s being away, for she couldn’t mount without me to help her, so who has the pony, an’ who has her? It’s not off the place I’ve been since I saddled him.”

It was the first time that there had been anxiety regarding Dorothy. Nancy had twice been lost. Could it be that in a like manner Dorothy had disappeared?

Oh, fearful thought! Mrs. Dainty shuddered and wished that her husband were

at home, and just as excitement was at its highest pitch, the clatter of hoofs sounded in the driveway, and, as they hurried out on to the piazza, Dorothy, bright, laughing Dorothy greeted them.

“Just think, mamma, I walked Romeo up to the piazza myself, and slid into the saddle and was off before you dreamed it. Wasn't it fine to have such a ride before breakfast, and to see how beautiful everything looks in the early morning? Why, how queer you all look!” she said, as, for the first time, she noticed their anxious faces.

For a moment no one spoke, and, completely puzzled, she looked from one to another.

“Where is my Nancy?” she asked, in sudden fear. “Oh, she *isn't* lost again, is she? You look so frightened. Why,

every one looks frightened except you, mamma. You look delighted.”

“ Oh, Dorothy, it was your early ride that alarmed us, and Nancy is half-wild with fear. She is looking everywhere for you, and indeed the groom is out searching for you, while every servant on the place is anxious for your safety. Ride around to the side door and let them see that you are safe, then return to me.”

Dorothy was amazed. It had seemed to her that Nancy was the one who might be lost or stolen, as she had been before, but that the household might be anxious because of her own absence had never occurred to her. She felt secure. It was Nancy's Uncle Steve who had stolen her. She had no wicked uncle to take her from her home. How very odd it was that the entire household should have been fright-

ened. The servants were rejoiced when they saw that Dorothy had returned, while Nancy's delight knew no bounds.

“I can't see why you were so worried,” Dorothy said, to which Nancy replied:

“I was stolen twice, Dorothy, and I couldn't help thinking that some one had stolen you.”

Mrs. Dainty explained to Dorothy her reason for wishing the groom always to attend her.

“It is not safe for you and Nancy to drive over lonely roads unattended. That is why the groom must always ride at a little distance behind you. Truly, Dorothy, you must not again go out alone.”

Dorothy willingly promised. Not for the world would she give a moment's unhappiness to her family or friends.

The sunlight had been so charming, the

ride so delightful, that she had been out far longer than she had dreamed. She had thought that a canter over the road would occupy only a short time, but she had urged Romeo a bit farther, until nearly an hour had slipped by as if on golden wings, and she had yet to return. She determined never to do anything which could make the household so uneasy, so frightened. The groom should *always* attend her.

CHAPTER III

A NEW NEIGHBOR

THE little stone cottage in which Aunt Charlotte Grayson lived was owned by Mr. Dainty, and it stood upon the grounds which surrounded the stone house. Opposite was Flossie Barnet's home, and next beyond was a new house which had just been completed. Its front windows looked toward the stone cottage, its side windows toward the home of the Barnets.

There had been much guessing as to the new neighbors and what they would look like. Flossie had believed that there would be three children in the family, and she

thought that they would be girls. Mollie agreed that there might be children, but she thought they would be boys, while Dorothy and Nancy refused to guess, preferring to wait and see.

One evening the family arrived, and it was Flossie Barnet who first met the little girl, who proved to be a strange character.

It happened that on the next day after her arrival she went out upon the lawn to look about, and when she saw Flossie she at once decided to become acquainted. Flossie was eagerly looking to see if there were any fresh blossoms opening upon the blush-rose bushes. She did not know that any one was near her until the stranger spoke.

“ Ahem! Good morning! ”

Flossie turned.

“ Oh, good morning, ” she said. “ I

didn't know any one was out here but me."

"I've come to live in the new house," was the next remark, "and I thought you'd like to know me. I'm Arabella Corryville."

She was not pleasing to look upon, and Flossie was not at all sure that she wished to know her, but if she was to be her next neighbor she must surely become acquainted with her, so without replying to Arabella's remark, she offered her hand to her, saying:

"And I am Flossie Barnet."

Arabella took the proffered hand, but continued to talk of herself. She seemed to think that Flossie should at once know many facts regarding herself and her family.

"I have to wear these glasses because

I am near-sighted, and papa is away 'most all the time. Mamma don't like house-keeping, so Aunt Matilda keeps house for us. She says kind of queer things sometimes, and she says she has her 'views,' but she says she's a Presbyterian, so I guess she's all right."

Flossie was wondering what Arabella expected her to say, when a shrill voice called:

"Arabella! Arabella! You'd better come in. The lawn must be damp."

"That's Aunt Matilda! She's seen my rubbers in the closet and knows I forgot to put them on. O dear! She'll have to tell me her views again."

Arabella ran across the lawn, and then remembering that she had left Flossie rather abruptly, paused to say:

“ I’ll come out again when the lawn is dry. Good-by.”

“ Good-by,” Flossie called to her, and then, as Arabella vanished around the corner of the house, she wondered if she ought to be eager to see her again.

Uncle Harry sat on the piazza, and Flossie knew that he had seen Arabella, and he looked so amused that she thought that he must have heard what Arabella had said.

“ What are you laughing at, Uncle Harry? ” she asked.

“ I’m not laughing, I assure you,” he replied. “ I’m only amused. That was the queerest child that I ever saw. I couldn’t decide whether she was very young and looked a hundred years old, or whether she was a hundred years old and looked very young.”

“Harry, Harry! Really you must not poke fun at people. We all know what a tease you are, but truly you should be careful.”

It was his lovely young wife who had spoken, but, although she gently rebuked him, her eyes were merrily twinkling.

“I’m not ‘poking fun,’ as you seem to think, but really, between you and me, hasn’t that queer child an acrobatic name? I’m not sure if I shall be able to remember whether her name is Arabella Corryville or Carabella Orryville; it goes either way, you see. I wonder if she will be particular which I say.”

“I *think* she’d be *very* particular, and if she isn’t, her aunt might be. Arabella says her aunt has ‘views.’ I think I should be afraid of her aunt,” Flossie concluded, to which Uncle Harry replied:

“ I should really enjoy talking with Arabella’s Aunt Matilda; there might be fun exchanging ‘ views.’ ”

When all the girls had met Arabella, and felt well acquainted with her, they puzzled over her odd ways, and each had a different idea of her. Mr. Dainty thought that she must be very lonely.

“ Her father, Robert Corryville, was a classmate of mine at college, and I wish you to be kind to his little daughter,” he said, and Dorothy at once invited Arabella to meet her playmates. Dorothy did not like her, but would not say so, even to Nancy, and she tried to help her to become acquainted with the other girls.

If Arabella was grateful, she did not show it, and when, at twilight, Dorothy sat beside Mrs. Dainty upon the piazza,

she spoke of some things which had puzzled her.

“ I didn’t wish her to thank me,” she said, “ but I *did* think she would be pleased to know the girls. I don’t believe she was, though, for she acted as if she didn’t enjoy being with us.”

Mrs. Dainty was not surprised. Mr. Dainty had said that, at college, Robert Corryville had been a strange, unfriendly young man whom his classmates had cared little for. They had admired him because he was an earnest student who stood high in his classes, but he was not agreeable, and so, of course, was not a favorite.

“ It is to be hoped that his little daughter is not like him,” Mr. Dainty had said. “ I have not seen him since our college days. In that time he may have grown more companionable, so we will call upon

them, and Dorothy must try to be kind to Arabella."

And Dorothy had tried, but she had found her very hard to please.

"Oh, I couldn't play *that*," Arabella would say, "because Aunt Matilda would call it rude."

Then some one would suggest another game.

"I can't play *that*," she would say, "because you have to be out in the sun to play it."

"Well, suppose we *are* in the sun, what then?" questioned Molly Merton.

"I'll get freckles," Arabella replied, "and Aunt Matilda says it's inelegant to have a freckly nose."

Molly's quick temper was aroused.

"Oh, *is* it?" she snapped. "Well, I have some freckles on *my* nose, but I'm

not going to be poking round in the shadow for fear I'll get a few more."

"P'r'aps we can play something in the grove; it's shady there," Flossie said, as usual wishing to be peacemaker, but Arabella did not wish to be pleased.

"I guess it's damp there. I think Aunt Matilda'd say so," she said.

"Oh, bother Aunt Matilda," whispered Nina Earl, to which Molly replied:

"That's what *I* say."

They knew that it was not nice to say it, but truly Arabella was provoking.

They played a few games that afternoon, but Arabella did not appear as if she enjoyed them. She was such an old-fashioned-looking child that one could seem to see her sitting down to talk with Aunt Matilda and looking much more at ease

than when trying to play the merry games which the other girls enjoyed.

It was now three weeks since she had come to live in the new house, and thus far no one had seen Aunt Matilda.

“What *do* you suppose she’s like?” Nancy asked one morning as they were speeding over the road in the pony carriage. Dorothy guided the pony to the shady side of the road, then, turning toward Nancy she said:

“I believe she’s tall and very stout, do you?”

“I think she’s big, and that’s why Arabella does just as she says; she’s afraid of her! She *must* be awfully big,” Nancy continued, “for Arabella told me that her papa is afraid of Aunt Matilda.”

“Why, how funny!” Dorothy said. “Well, then, she *must* be large, for Mr.

Corryville is very tall and stout, and he used to be centre rush on the college football team, papa said, and he's 'most a giant."

They met Molly and Flossie, and drew rein for a moment. Molly had a bit of news to tell.

"Arabella Corryville is spending the afternoon with Katy Dean. I wonder that her Aunt Matilda let her."

Dorothy and Nancy wondered, too, but they did not say so. Not that Katy was not charming, indeed she was one of the sweetest girls in the neighborhood, but it was a long walk to Katy's house, and Arabella's aunt usually insisted that she must stay very near home.

A few days after, Arabella gave the pleasure of her company to Nina and Jeanette. They had asked her to come

“sometime,” and Arabella had thought that there was no time like the present. She did not seem to be at all interested in the girls whom she had met, but she was curious to know if either of them had as beautiful a home as the great stone house. She had seen Katy Dean’s fine home, but it was not a stone house, so, of course, was not as fine as Dorothy’s.

Arabella had not *said* so, but she had talked and talked of the great splendor of Dorothy’s home, until Katy had completely lost patience.

“Dorothy’s home is fine; we all know that, but really, Arabella, you needn’t speak as if we other girls lived in *shanties*,” Katy had said.

Then Arabella looked quite grieved; she could always do that if she chose, and Katy wondered if she had been too hasty,

if Arabella had not intended to be unkind. It was strange what disagreeable things Arabella could say without seeming to intend to say them.

Katy was glad when Arabella said that she must go home, and Arabella was sorry. To Katy, the afternoon had been anything but pleasant, but Arabella had enjoyed it, and she told Katy that she would come very soon again.

“I’ll come to-morrow if Aunt Matilda’ll let me,” she called, as she ran down the walk.

“O dear, I wish she wouldn’t,” Katy said, while she wondered if it were very wicked to be truly glad to hear a friend say good-by. It would be impossible to say whether Arabella changed her mind, or whether she did not think Katy sufficiently eager to have her hasten to visit her, but

certain it was that her next visit was to the Earl homestead.

Nina and Jeanette were pleasant girls, but they were not as gentle as Katy, and Arabella knew that she must be a bit careful as to what she said.

She did not care to play, so the three sat down in the shade of a large tree, and Nina proposed that they take turns telling stories. Jeanette told the first. If she liked it, the visitor had an odd way of showing her pleasure.

“Aunt Matilda says that fairy stories aren’t edg’cational,” she said.

“Why does she say that?” Jeanette asked, sharply.

“I don’t know,” Arabella said, “only she always says that when she doesn’t approve of things.”

“Well, I didn’t tell the story to your

Aunt Matilda," snapped Jeanette, to which Arabella responded, coolly:

"I know that."

She did not say that the story had pleased her.

Nina told the next one, and when she had said, "and they lived happy ever after," she turned toward Arabella, but Arabella was looking down the avenue.

"How far is your school from here?" she asked.

"Why, Arabella Corryville! I've been telling a story to amuse you. Did you hear it?"

"Why, yes, I heard it," Arabella replied, "but I was just wondering about your school."

It was not strange that the girls were vexed. Truly, Arabella was provoking, for when Nina told her about how far the

schoolhouse was from their home, and Jeanette had commenced to tell of the fine times they had enjoyed at Aunt Charlotte's private school, Arabella spoke of something which she thought far more interesting.

“What a beautiful garden Dorothy Dainty has,” she said.

“We were just telling you about our private school,” Nina said.

“Yes, I know, but *I'm* talking of Dorothy Dainty now,” was the cool reply. Then, after praising everything which belonged to Dorothy, including her friend Nancy, she began to tell of the charms of Katy Dean, and of the beauty of her home.

Nina and Jeanette were fond of Dorothy, of Nancy, and of Katy, and they were always glad to hear pleasant things said of them, but Arabella had a peculiar way

of saying pleasant things of one friend in a way that made the one who listened feel as if she were of no importance whatever. While with Katy, Arabella wished to have her think that she preferred any other friend. Now, with Nina and Jeanette, she was trying to have them think that she liked any of the other girls better.

With such an unlovely disposition, Arabella could not have been happy, and indeed her face was anything but sunny. Her sharp eyes seemed to be looking about for something in which to find a fault. Her thin little lips seemed ready for almost any remark which could be so carefully worded as to appear to be kind, although it was intended to make discomfort, and her smile—she did sometimes smile—was so slight that it could hardly

be seen. And when she left them, Nina said to Jeanette:

“ I said good-by to her right here, but you ran down the walk with her. Did you ask her to come again? ”

“ I didn't have a chance to, ” Jeanette replied. “ She said she thought she might come again next week, if her everlasting Aunt Matilda would let her. ”

“ I don't believe Arabella called her that, ” laughed Nina.

“ No, but *I* do, for I'm just sick of hearing about her, ” said Jeanette.

On the way home, Arabella met Nancy, who had been out to do an errand for Aunt Charlotte. She seemed intent upon mischief that afternoon, for she at once commenced to tell what a great personage her Aunt Matilda was, and how much more delightful it was to live with her than it

could possibly be to live with Aunt Charlotte.

Now Nancy loved Aunt Charlotte, and the moment that Arabella began to speak of her as being not nearly as nice as any other aunt in the world, Nancy forgot all the wise, kind things which Aunt Charlotte had taught her as to thinking *twice* before speaking when she was angry.

Think *twice!* Why, how could she think *once* where her dear Aunt Charlotte was concerned?

“ I never have seen your Aunt Matilda, but you’ve seen my Aunt Charlotte, and you know she’s sweet and gentle, and you just needn’t say she’s anything but lovely! You just needn’t *say* it! Do you hear? ”

To say that Arabella was surprised would express it but mildly. She was astonished.

“ I’m sure I think I might say that I like my aunt best,” she whined, but Nancy, like a small whirlwind, had turned and was running up the driveway.

CHAPTER IV

A DAY OF SURPRISES

THE Corryvilles had occupied their new home but four weeks when it was learned that they were going to the mountains for the summer. Arabella told the news, and then looked eagerly to see if the girls were impressed. She had just told it to Dorothy when Nancy joined them, and before she had finished speaking, Molly with Flossie ran to meet them.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Dorothy, feeling that it would be rude and unkind if no one noticed what Arabella had said, asked where she was going.

“I don't know yet,” she replied.

“ Papa and mamma would like to go to the mountains, and so would I.”

“ Then that’s where you’ll go, isn’t it? ” queried Molly.

“ I guess so,” said Arabella, “ but it’ll make some difference what Aunt Matilda says.”

It was with a sigh of relief that the little group of friends saw the Corryvilles departing for their summer outing. Arabella leaned far out of the carriage for a last word.

“ Good-by,” she called; “ we’re off to the mountains. Aunt Matilda thought we’d better go there.”

They saw Mr. Corryville lay a restraining hand upon Arabella, and they caught a glimpse of a little old woman whose head was closely veiled.

Could that have been Aunt Matilda?



Dorothy drew Nancy into the cushioned window. — Page 65.



She did not look like a personage who could intimidate any one, certainly not a man of Mr. Corryville's proportions, yet as Molly wisely said, "You couldn't tell."

Arabella had not been a pleasant addition to the group of girls who had so long been happy playmates, and it seemed as if with her departure the sunshine had returned. The bright June days sped as if on gilded wings, for there seemed always to be something delightful to do, or some pleasure to be enjoyed.

One morning Dorothy drew Nancy into the cushioned window to listen to something which she had to tell. It was evidently very important, because it had to be whispered, lest some one might hear. Dorothy's blue eyes were bright with excitement; Nancy's dark eyes answered with a merry twinkle.

Every one knew that a week from that day would be Mrs. Dainty's birthday, but every one did not know just how it was to be celebrated. Indeed, Mr. Dainty declared that he had a secret regarding it. Mrs. Dainty said that she had several, while Aunt Charlotte smiled and kept her own counsel.

“Well, we have a beautiful secret,” said Dorothy, “and you'll say so when you know what it is. We'll have to *tell* you a part of it the night before, and we'll *show* you the rest of it in the morning.”

“And why am I to have it in two parts instead of waiting until my birthday to hear and see it?” Mrs. Dainty asked.

“Oh, that is part of the secret,” Dorothy declared, “and isn't a whole week a long time to wait?”

At last the day before the birthday ar-

rived, and a bright, beautiful day it was. There was a delightful drive in the morning, and as they sped over the road it seemed as if the pony had caught the excitement, for his hoofs barely tapped the road, and he tossed his silken mane as if to show that he, too, enjoyed the drive.

After lunch the gardener brought a huge mass of laurel with which to decorate the rooms, saying that the laurel would hold its freshness, and the bright-colored blossoms could be fastened among the glossy leaves early in the morning.

Dorothy and Nancy watched the men at work, after pausing to whisper over their fine plan for the next day. Truly it was very exciting. Guests were to arrive on the afternoon of the following day, not for a birthday party, but just a few intimate friends who would be delighted to be with

Mrs. Dainty and to wish her many happy returns. Aunt Charlotte had left her cottage early that morning, and had spent the day in assisting Mrs. Dainty. It had been a busy day, and she now stood waiting for Nancy, that they might together return to the cottage for the night.

Nancy ran toward her, saying:

“I had to do just one thing more. I have something to say to Mrs. Dainty.”

Aunt Charlotte nodded permission, and Mrs. Dainty turned a smiling face toward Nancy.

“You have something to say to me?” she asked.

Nancy made a graceful curtsey.

“We have heard Mr. Dainty call you the queen of this household. To-morrow morning at nine a princess will arrive, and

she begs that you will be upon the balcony to greet her," Nancy said.

"She shall receive a royal welcome," Mrs. Dainty replied.

The gardens were bathed in sunlight, the flowers nodded in the soft breeze, the butterflies chased each other from the roses to the mignonette, then high above the fountain they flew over the garden wall and back again, because the gardens, after all, were fairer than the highway.

At eight o'clock Dorothy opened the great door and ran across the lawn to join Nancy, who she knew would be waiting for her.

Nancy was there, and so was the gardener, and in a few moments the groom appeared, leading Romeo and followed by the maid, who had promised to assist.

Three tinkling bells hung from his collar, for which Dorothy thanked the groom, who had given them to help in decorating the pony.

The maid wove a wreath for Dorothy's sunny hair, and Romeo was given his share of bright blossoms. The groom declared that the pony knew that he was being decorated.

“Look, Miss Dorothy! See how proud he holds his head! I tell you he knows he's a fine little beast, and he thinks he's bein' dressed up smart. See him paw the ground an' toss his head! There's pride for you.”

Dorothy clasped her arms about his neck.

“Oh, my own Romeo, I love you so,” she cried, and even as she caressed him

he arched his neck, and then touched her arm with his soft lips.

“He tries to say ‘I love you,’” said Dorothy.

“An’ no wondher,” whispered the gardener.

Nancy added a few blossoms, tucking them in every conceivable place, and at last they were ready.

“You look just like a princess,” said Nancy. “Now I’ll run over to the hedge where Aunt Charlotte is waiting for me. We’d like to see how delighted your mamma will be when she comes out on to the balcony. We’ll be just behind the hedge, where we’ll see and not be seen. We want no one in sight but you, Dorothy.”

Then the gardener picked up the old flageolet and played a most amazing fan-

fare. He felt that the coming of the princess should have been heralded with a blare of trumpets. He had once read an exciting story of olden times, wherein the royal personages, wherever they went, stirred never a foot until the flourish of trumpeters had told of their approach.

Accordingly he trilled upon the flageolet, and was delighted to see the French window open, and Mrs. Dainty appear upon the balcony. Then out into the sunlight rode the Princess Dorothy, the pony approaching the house with mincing steps, as if he thought the lawn but half good enough to walk upon.

How beautiful! How like a princess Dorothy held herself! With Nancy she had read countless fairy-tales, and together they had dreamed of the grace and

dignity which those fairy princesses had possessed.

Hidden by the hedge, Aunt Charlotte and Nancy lovingly watched Dorothy, as, with Romeo, she passed the fountain and on toward the house. Then, looking up to the balcony, she waved her bouquet in salute.

“Your Highness, I come to greet you,” said Dorothy.

“Fair princess, I bid you welcome,” Mrs. Dainty responded, smiling with pleasure as she looked with pride at her dear Dorothy.

It was then that Dorothy’s clear soprano voice rang out in a song which Aunt Charlotte had taught her.

“Lady fair, oh, lady dear,
List, I sing a song of cheer,

Flowers bright I bring to you
Jewelled o'er with drops of dew,
I've another gift, I trow,
Shall I enter and bestow?"

Dorothy paused, and in her outstretched hand Mrs. Dainty saw a package.

"Enter at once, my princess," she said; " 'tis easy to reach me, for this is a modern house, and there is no drawbridge to be lowered."

Then Dorothy sprang from the saddle, and with her bouquet and gift ran lightly up the steps and in at the open door, followed by Nancy, who had hastened from her hiding-place that she might witness Mrs. Dainty's pleasure at the sight of her gift.

"Oh, mamma, *were* you pleased? You knew who the princess would be, didn't

you? And were you very much surprised?"

"I believed that you would be the princess, dear, but, of course, I never dreamed of your lovely costume, or of the beautiful scene when, with Romeo decked with flowers, you rode down the lawn in the sunlight. It was very charming and picturesque."

"Aunt Charlotte made my costume, and Nancy helped the maid to dress me," Dorothy said, eager that those who had aided her should share in her honors. "And Aunt Charlotte taught me the song, but Nancy and I planned this part of your birthday surprise," she continued, "and, oh, mamma, here are the flowers which *truly* are 'jewelled o'er with drops of dew,' and this is your princess's gift. Oh, we *do* hope you'll like it."

Mrs. Dainty kissed the eager upturned face.

“The bouquet is beautiful, and before I see the gift, I know that I shall like it. Whatever you might choose, dear, would please me.”

Yet, even with this assurance, Dorothy looked with great eagerness while the ribbons were being untied, and almost held her breath when the tissue-paper was unfolded and her mamma's beautiful eyes rested upon the gift.

“Oh, Dorothy, my dear, it is perfect, this picture of yourself, and how very still Romeo must have stood! Why, when was the picture taken upon this very lawn that I should never have caught a glimpse of the artist?”

“Oh, I'm so glad you like it, for we planned it together, Nancy and I. Flos-

sie's Uncle Harry took the picture the day that you went for a shopping trip."

"You could not have pleased me more," Mrs. Dainty said. "The little picture is perfect, and its gilt frame is exquisite."

"Nancy ran to tell him we were ready as soon as you were on your way to the depot. We had to try ever so many times before we could get a picture in which Romeo was still at the same time that I was."

"This one is a fine portrait of you both," Mrs. Dainty said, "and now you must know that I have already received a beautiful present. Open the case which stands upon my dressing-case. It holds a priceless gift."

Together they crossed the room, opened the blue velvet case, then clasped their hands in silent delight. Nancy gave a

little cry of surprise and admiration. Then Dorothy spoke:

“ Oh, the beautiful necklace, how it blazes! ” she said.

“ The red stone on the clasp seems on fire, ” cried Nancy.

“ And the diamonds all around it twinkle and flash like stars. It is papa’s gift, ” Dorothy said.

Yes, there was the tiny card beside it, upon which was written “ From Rudolph. ”

To please them and that they might see its beauty, Mrs. Dainty clasped it about her throat, where its great brilliancy showed even more than when it lay upon the satin lining of its velvet case. Then, still wearing her jewels, she led Dorothy and Nancy to a table, upon which two little packages lay.

“These are for you,” she said. “I could not think of receiving *all* the charming surprises.”

When they opened them, words could not express their delight. A tiny locket and chain for each they found, almost alike, but with just enough difference so that, at a glance, they could tell them apart.

“What a lovely locket,” Dorothy said. “I’d rather have it than anything I could think of, mamma.”

“Such a dear present. Oh, how kind you are to me,” Nancy said, and her dark eyes were tender with the love and gratefulness which she felt.

Mrs. Dainty was about to speak when Aunt Charlotte came hurrying in. Over her arm hung a soft gray silk gown, to the

neck of which was attached a collar of rich lace.

“ My dear, my dear, who ever dreamed of such a gift for me? Truly you wish us to be happy on your birthday.”

Aunt Charlotte’s gentle voice trembled, but her eyes, her bright smile showed her delight.

“ Indeed I do wish all the household to share in my pleasure, and of all your gowns I think this one will be the most becoming. I am so glad that you like it.”

“ I shall wear it to-day in your honor,” Aunt Charlotte said, “ and I earnestly wish you many, many happy returns of the day.”

“ I wish you the same, dear friend,” Mrs. Dainty replied. “ It is a blessing to have you with us.”

The servants were remembered with

gifts which gladdened their hearts, and a cheery host they were as they made preparations for the expected guests.

“It is a day of surprises, just a day of *great* surprises,” said Nancy, spinning about because her excitement would not let her be still.

“That’s just what it is,” agreed Dorothy. “Papa found a lovely charm for his watch-chain this morning. It was mamma’s gift to him. I do wonder what the next fine surprise will be.”

So many delightful things had already occurred that it was not strange that both Dorothy and Nancy believed that at any moment some other amazing thing might happen.

Soon the guests began to arrive, and with them came beautiful gifts for Mrs. Dainty. Out in the sunlight the gardens

were a mass of gorgeous color, the fountain played its soft, tinkling, plashing music, while indoors soft music of violins swept through the corridors. All was sunshine and merriment, the happy meeting of charming friends.

Mr. Dainty returned from the city for the afternoon that he, too, might enjoy the pleasure of his guests.

Dorothy and Nancy thought that there never had been so perfect a day. When evening came the house and grounds were brilliantly lighted, and the gaiety was at its height when in the doorway appeared the young groom, his frightened face telling that something unusual had caused his sudden appearance.

“If you please, sir, I must speak to you a moment,” he said to Mr. Dainty, who happened to be standing near the doorway.

Mr. Dainty hastily followed the man, who had retired to the hall.

“ Please, sir, I know my place, but I couldn’t wait for the maid to take my message to you, sir, but the pony’s disappeared and no trace of him can we find.”

“ How can that be, Creston? ”

“ That’s what I don’t know, sir, is how it happened. The little beast was in the stable when I went to supper. No, sir, we didn’t go to supper at the same time. Mrs. Dainty said we was not to do that, so I had tea with the maids, and when I went back to the stables the coachman went up to the house to have tea with the butler. The coachman’s as scared as I be. Whatever are we to do? ”

“ You’re sure you’ve not been off the place, Creston? ”

“Neither man nor maid servant have been off the place to-day, sir,” was the prompt reply, so earnestly given that Mr. Dainty could not doubt him.

CHAPTER V

MANDY AND CHUB

A DAY of surprises it had been, as Nancy had said, but this was not the sort of surprise for which the happy throng was looking. At first Mr. Dainty thought only of keeping the unhappy news from Dorothy, that the bright day might not be marred by the loss of her dear Romeo.

Then it flashed through his mind that his guests even now were wondering at the sudden appearance of the frightened groom; indeed he remembered that a nervous woman had whispered something about fire. Did she imagine that the groom had come to warn the host of danger?

He felt that he had no choice but to allay their fears, but he determined to speak as lightly as possible for Dorothy's sake. With an effort he forced a smile and reëntered the drawing-room. He saw at once that while they listened to the music, or stood in little groups conversing, they were very evidently ill at ease.

“Friends,” he said, “the groom who so hastily summoned me was quite unnecessarily nervous. One of our horses is not in the stable, and the groom has jumped at the conclusion that he is not on the place. The men servants are searching for him now, and with extra assistance which I have secured, the animal will doubtless soon be found.”

A sigh of relief swept through the room; it was, then, nothing worth being frightened about, they thought. Again they

were laughing and talking as gaily as before. They had all heard Mr. Dainty's reassuring speech, and all derived comfort from it, save the two who stood in a recess with clasped hands and parted lips. Each had the same thought, that the missing horse was Romeo. A moment they stood thus, then Dorothy ran across the room to ask the question to which she believed she knew the answer.

She laid her hand upon her father's arm and looked up into his face, her fine blue eyes meeting his, which they so closely resembled.

“Papa, is it Romeo that they said was not in the stable? *Was it?*” she asked.

“Yes, Dorothy, it is Romeo, but you must not be so frightened. You know that he is never tied, and it would not be singular if he had walked out to have a

little trot around the place. The great gates were closed, so you see it is not likely that he is far from here.”

“Oh, if the gates were closed he may soon be found,” she said, and thus comforted, she ran back to Nancy. Mr. Dainty did not tell her that the extra aid which he had summoned was from police headquarters. It was neither wise nor kind to frighten her when by the morrow her pet might be returned.

With good wishes, and many thanks for having been so charmingly entertained, the guests took leave of their host and hostess, and then it was that Rudolph Dainty told his wife of the groom's message, and that the men had not yet found the pony.

“If he is not found to-morrow I shall offer a generous reward for his return. You know how truly Dorothy cares for her

pets; another handsome pony would not be Romeo.”

When morning came, Dorothy had to learn that the pony had not returned. Nancy overheard the maids, as they gossiped over the affair, telling that the great gates had been locked upon the outside, so that whoever had stolen the pony, and of course he *was* stolen, they argued, had locked the gates upon the outside, so that he thus might hinder whoever should attempt to follow.

The servants were greatly excited and talked of little else, and the fact that the pony had not been found furnished a mystery about which to gossip.

They loved Dorothy, and were sorry that she should be grieving for her lost pet, but they could not help feeling a bit important. It was a fine thing to belong

to the Dainty household, and Nancy heard a maid telling the coachman that she liked to be in a place where there was always something happening.

“An’ ye won’t say ye’re pleased ter have the pony stole, are ye? If ye are, ye’re a queer girl,” said the coachman.

“Indeed I’m not,” was the indignant reply, “but as long as he *is* stole, there’s no harm in us girls talking about it.”

If the servants gossiped, they were careful not to do so when Dorothy was near, but not every one was so thoughtful.

Dorothy herself was trying to be brave, and to believe that Romeo would be found.

“He may be found. Just think how *I* was stolen from you *twice*, and now I’m with you,” Nancy said, trying thus to cheer Dorothy.

Dorothy turned and clasped Nancy in her arms.

“That’s the only way that I can comfort myself,” she said, gently. “It’s so hard to be wondering where my Romeo is that it seems as if I couldn’t bear it, but it isn’t half so bad as it would be if it was you, Nancy dear, that we couldn’t find.”

Mr. Dainty had told the servants to say nothing to Dorothy about the lost pony, nor were they to repeat to her any gossip regarding his disappearance. Her friends were too kind to say a word which might add to her regret, but one never can tell what mischievous person will hear a rumor and run to tell it.

Dorothy and Nancy were walking up and down the avenue one day, their arms about each other. Nancy was talking of

Vera Vane, whom they had first met at the shore, and next in the city where they had spent the previous winter. They had reached a place where the wall was so low that they could sit upon it.

Side by side they sat, talking of Vera, Dorothy for the moment forgetting to grieve, when around a curve of the road came a girl and boy, who paused when they saw the girls upon the wall, and turned as if about to retrace their steps. They were not at all attractive. The boy was short and chubby, with a mass of thick, sandy hair; the girl was tall and slender, and her gingham dress hung about her as a bedraggled flag will cling to its staff. The girl stooped to whisper to the boy, who nodded, as if satisfied with what he had heard, and they walked slowly along until they stood near Dorothy.

“*You* know who we are, but *she* don’t,” said the girl, looking sharply at Nancy. “I’m Jimmy Harkins’s sister Mandy, an’ he’s Chub,” she continued, addressing Dorothy, while she pointed a very grimy finger toward the boy. “He’s got ’nother name, but nobody never calls him by it, so *you* needn’t.”

Dorothy thought that she was not longing to call him anything, but she could not say that. She could not tell Mandy that she was glad to know her. What *could* she say that would be polite, and yet would not encourage the odd pair to stay? She would speak kindly of Jimmy; she could do that truthfully.

“My papa says that your brother Jimmy is the best boy he ever had in his office,” she said.

“Wal, I do’no’,” Mandy said, doubt-

fully. "Ma had ter lick him pretty often, an' that's why he ran away. He sends some of his money ter ma, an' he likes his place, but ma thinks your pa's 'most too kind ter him."

"Why, I should think you'd be glad to know that Dorothy's papa is good to him," said Nancy.

"I guess ma'd just as soon he'd be kind ter him, only Jimmy is gittin' ter feel pretty big," Mandy replied. "He's goin' ter evenin' school now. He says he's goin' ter be just as near like Mr. Dainty as he can, an' he even thinks p'r'aps he'll *look* like him when he's grown up. He said so in a letter he writ ter ma. When ma read that she said:

"'I guess *not*, with that snub nose er his'n!'"

While Mandy had been speaking, Chub,

with round eyes, had been staring at Dorothy. Now he spoke:

“ Jimmyth nothe goeth right up, tho,” he remarked, with his stubby finger pushing his own nose upward to make clear his meaning.

Dorothy wished that they would continue their walk, but she could not rudely tell them to go. Nancy wished it, too, and thinking to help Dorothy, she said:

“ I think we’ll go back to the garden, Dorothy.”

“ I wonder you don’t say *our* garden,” said Mandy, unpleasantly. “ Ye needn’t be in a hurry, fer we ain’t goin’ ter stay much longer. We’re goin’ ter the bakery, him an’ me, but I’ll just ask you if ye’ve found yer pony? ”

“ Oh, Mandy, why *did* you ask her? ” said Nancy.

“What’s the harm er askin’?” the girl replied. “I was only goin’ ter say that some er the folks over our way says that the circus folks took him when they left town, an’ some says the ‘Cowboys’ Caravan’ took him, so I do’no’ which. If it’s the circus, he’ll be learnt ter have riders a-hoppin’ round on top er his back, an’ if it’s the ‘Cowboys’ Caravan’ that’s got him, they’ll throw lassos round his neck, an’ mebbe they’ll punch him with er hot cow-puncher.”

Dorothy cried out with the pain which Mandy’s story caused her, and, with her hands over her ears, slipped from the wall and ran toward the garden, up the walk, and into the house, while Nancy, angry that any one should so cruelly grieve Dorothy, turned toward Mandy with flashing eyes.

“Don’t you ever do such a thing as that again, Mandy Harkins,” she said.

“I ain’t ’fraid er you, Nancy Ferris. I remember when you lived over near me an’ wa’n’t nobody ’tall. I guess I ain’t likely ter be ’fraid er you *now*.”

Chub, to show that he sided with his sister, frowned darkly, and kicked a lot of loose gravel toward Nancy. Then he picked up a stone, but before he could hurl it, a strong hand reached over the wall and shook the stone from his dirty little fist.

“Dhrop it, ye little rascal! An’ d’ye git out’n this neighborhood ter onct, both av ye! I’ve heard enough, an’ losht me patience entoirely. Git now, or I’ll git out me schoop-net an’ gather the two av ye in it, an’ off ter the p’lice station ye’ll go, d’ye moind that?”

Mind! The dust flew as they ran down the avenue, never once turning to look back at the angry gardener. How did they know but that his scoop-net was just over the wall, where in an instant he could grasp it?

Nancy ran to the house to follow and comfort Dorothy, while the wrathful gardener watched to see if by any chance the unlovely pair might come back, but they had no thought of returning.

Chub's eyes were full of tears, so that he could not see where he was going, and he found it a task to make his dumpy legs keep pace with Mandy's long strides. She held his hand, and pulled him over the road with a laudable intention of dragging him out of danger, and never a whit cared he where he was going, so long as Mandy was tugging him out of the reach of the



Chub found it a task to make his dumpy legs keep pace with Mandy's long strides. — *Page 98.*

man and his net. Chub never doubted that even at that moment the net was ready to ensnare him.

How they ran! Mandy's eyes were wide open, staring with fright; Chub's were shut tight, lest he should catch sight of that net!

When they had turned the bend of the road, Mandy slackened her speed, but she did not stop until she had reached that part of the village where the roads were narrow and shabby houses the rule and not the exception. Then she sat down upon a stone, and offended Chub by asking him why he was crying.

“Come here and tell me this minute,” she demanded, at the same time pulling him roughly toward her. Chub shut his eyes tighter, and, opening his mouth wide, let out a scream like an engine whistle.

“What yer screechin’ fer?” asked Mandy, at the same time shaking him, as if to shake an answer from the wide-open mouth.

“Oh, ow, the thcoop-net!” he roared.

“Wal, if I *ever!*” ejaculated Mandy, as grandly and with as much surprise as if she had not for a moment thought of being frightened.

“Why, there’s no scoop-net here, nor no man neither,” she said, “an’ if ye don’t b’lieve it, jest open yer eyes.”

Chub opened one eye a trifle, then the other, and, seeing no one but Mandy near him, suddenly acquired courage.

“Huh! Who’th ’fraid!” he said.

And while Mandy and Chub were resting to regain their breath, Nancy was bending over Dorothy.

Mandy’s hints as to the possible where-

abouts of her dear Romeo had made her wretched.

Mrs. Dainty and Aunt Charlotte had gone to the city for a shopping trip, and Mr. Dainty was, of course, at his office, so there was no wise, older friend to comfort her. She had thrown herself down upon the cushioned hall seat, and Nancy's best efforts failed to cheer her.

The maid came out to dust the hall, and was at once eager to learn if Dorothy were ill.

"Indeed, Miss Dorothy, if you'll tell me what ails you, I'll do anything for you," she said.

"She isn't ill," Nancy explained, and told the maid how the silly stories had frightened her. Then it was that quite innocently the girl blundered:

"Circus is it, or the Cowboys' Cara-

van? Indeed, it's not so at all, for some boy told the coachman that 'twas the gipsies that had him, so you needn't b'lieve what that Harkins girl said."

She did not dream that she had blundered, and wondered why Dorothy's tears flowed afresh. She had intended to comfort her, and she left the hall wondering why she had not succeeded. Surely, if Dorothy had not liked what Mandy Harkins had told her, here was yet another tale.

Dorothy had thought that Romeo was lost or stolen by some one who wanted him for a pet. She had not dreamed that he might be ill-treated, and the thought that the handsome, gentle pony might be abused, that a hot branding-iron might sear his sleek body, filled her with horror. Oh, could it be that that Harkins girl

knew, and that gentle, graceful Romeo was writhing with pain? Dorothy cried until Nancy was in despair. Nothing that she could say or do would comfort her, because nothing could make her forget what Mandy had said.

CHAPTER VI

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD

EVERY one missed Romeo, from his loving little mistress to the children of the village streets. He had prized Dorothy's caresses, after following her to coax for more love-pats from her soft hands. Nancy loved him, and indeed he had been a favorite with all of Dorothy's friends. Whenever she left the carriage to enter the post-office, the village children would gather about the pony, and it sometimes seemed as if he knew that his good points were being discussed. He had accepted a share of their candy, taking it from their hands in the gentlest manner, and now

they were sorry not to see him, and very eager to know if he had been found.

The next day after Mandy had told the tale which had so frightened Dorothy, a bit of news was circulated which found ready listeners at every street corner. It being Saturday, there was no school to keep the children captive, and they formed a part of every group, listening to their elders, or talking among themselves about the one subject which interested all.

“ A hundred dollars reward, an’ no questions axed! That orter fetch ’em, whoever they be,” said a burly policeman, “ an’ that’s what he offers ter any one what’ll bring the pony back ter him safe an’ sound.”

“ If I was the feller what stole that little hoss, I wouldn’t be likin’ ter go up ter the fine house with him, fer seems’s if Mr.

Dainty couldn't help axin' suthin'," said another.

"He won't, though," rejoined the policeman, "fer he ain't that kind of er man. He *said* 'a hundred dollars reward an' no questions axed,' an' he'll stick to 't. He's the soul of honor, an' ye kin count on his doin' what he *says* he'll do every time."

"That's just so," agreed a rough-looking man, who had sauntered along to join the group.

"He promised ter do something fer me one time, an' when the time came fer him ter do it he could er got out'n it just as well as not, but when I told him so, he looked at me with them clear blue eyes er his'n, an' says he, 'I *promised*.' He said it so solemn-like that I almost held my breath. He done what he promised ter, an' considerable more."

“ Will somebody bring the pony back to Dorothy Dainty? ” asked the little girl who clung to the speaker’s hand. “ *Will* they, papa? ” she repeated.

“ I do’no’,” he said; “ I know I *hope* they will.”

“ So do I,” said the little girl.

“ Do you know her? ” questioned a child who stood beside her.

“ I don’t know her, but I know who she is, and she’s sweet to look at, so I wish she’d get her pony back.”

Many of the townspeople knew Nancy Ferris, and they could not forget how kind Mrs. Dainty had been to her. They saw how lovingly Nancy was cared for, and they admired the generous spirit which led Mr. Dainty and his lovely wife to be kind and to give aid to all who needed it. No

deserving person had ever asked aid of Rudolph Dainty who had been refused.

There was much excitement at the great stone house. Vera Vane had promised to visit Dorothy sometime during the summer, and now she was coming to spend a week, and would arrive on Monday. There was much to anticipate, for Vera was full of fun, a bright, merry friend.

“We must do everything we can to make her visit pleasant, and we’ll have to do something different every day, because you know she gets tired of things in just no time,” said Dorothy.

“How I wish we had — ” Nancy said, then stopped and looked at Dorothy.

But Dorothy knew what Nancy had intended to say.

“Yes, oh, yes, *I* wish we had the pony.

Vera would have enjoyed some rides with him. We can drive with mamma, but he was my own little horse, my Romeo."

An hour later Dorothy learned of the reward which had been offered, and, with Nancy for companion, she seated herself in the window which looked out upon the driveway, to watch for Romeo's return. For who could resist the offer of a hundred dollars? They believed that at any moment a man would appear leading the pony up the walk to claim his reward.

The day passed, however, and not a word was heard of the missing pet. Sunday came, and no pony appeared; Monday morning and afternoon, and still Dorothy waited.

"Oh, Nancy, do you suppose that whoever stole him doesn't know of the reward

papa offered, or that he'd rather keep the pony? ”

The day had been sultry, but at twilight a cool breeze which felt as if it had blown in from the sea caused them to leave the piazzas and seek the warmth and cosy cheer of the open fire.

Mr. Dainty remained outside, saying that he would finish his cigar and then join them in the cheerful sitting-room.

Aunt Charlotte told some amusing stories of places which she had visited and people whom she had met, to which Dorothy and Nancy eagerly listened, Mrs. Dainty seeming as much interested as they.

Mr. Dainty, pacing up and down the broad piazza, noticed that his cigar was nearly finished, and turned to throw it aside, when in the dusky shadows near the

gateway he saw, or thought he saw some one approaching the house. He waited. Whoever it was, whether friend or stranger, was making slow headway, and his footsteps could hardly be heard. And was he a person of huge proportions? Was it more than one person who approached?

Although the gardens were brightly lighted, there were great shadows cast by the trees and shrubbery, and when the approaching figure reached one of those dark places, it paused a moment, then again came toward the house. Mr. Dainty could now see that it was a man of ordinary size, and he wondered what could have made him appear to be a giant before he stepped out into the light.

He was a coarse-looking man, and, as he neared the piazza, Mr. Dainty saw that

it was a sullen face which looked out from under the slouching hat-brim.

He took another step forward, and touched his hat awkwardly.

“ Mr. Dainty? ” he asked.

“ I am Mr. Dainty. What do you wish? ”

“ There’s a clean hundred dollars yer offer ter the feller what’ll bring yer little girl’s pony back, an’ ye say ‘ no questions axed.’ *Will* yer pay the money? ”

“ Certainly, when the pony is brought here, safe and sound,” Mr. Dainty said, firmly.

“ An’ ax no questions? ” the man asked, cautiously.

“ And ask no questions,” Mr. Dainty repeated, his voice betraying his impatience. He believed that the man was an idler who had heard of the reward, and,

with no idea as to the pony's whereabouts, was eager to win the prize and anxious in regard to the terms. The next remark was most unexpected:

“ The pony's here, sir, an' as ye promise ter pay prompt — ”

He paused — “ ter pay *prompt*,” he repeated.

“ At once,” was the quick reply.

“ Then I'll bring him up,” said the man, “ an' d'ye wait where ye are.”

He hurried down the driveway to a clump of bushes, returning almost immediately with the pony, whose hoofs made only a dull sound, as if he were shod with overshoes, as indeed he was, but of what a strange design!

“ Led him up here, an' muffled his feet fust. Ef ye was goin' ter do the straight thing I'd lead him ter yer an' c'lect the

money; ef ye *wasn't* straight, I'd lead him back, an', with them things onto his hoofs, ye'd never know he'd been here."

Mr. Dainty made sure that the pony was unharmed, then, tying the halter to a slender birch-tree, he turned to the man, who stood sullenly waiting.

The man looked like a sneak, and, as Mr. Dainty stepped toward him, he cowered and drew back. He had intended to snatch the pocketbook and run, but he knew that he would be no match for the splendid, athletic figure before him.

Mr. Dainty produced two fifty-dollar bills, which he had placed in an envelope for this purpose, and laid them in the grimy outstretched hand.

"I promised to ask no questions, and I'll stick to it," he said, "but I'll do one

thing which I didn't promise to do: I'll escort you to the gate."

Silently the two walked down the driveway. Mr. Dainty opened the gate and the man slouched out. Not another word was spoken, but the groom, who, unseen, had been a silent witness, heard the man mutter as he turned from the gate:

"Good job that! Got a chance ter see the house close to, an' a hundred dollars to boot!"

It had been done so quickly that it seemed like a dream.

The man had appeared, had spoken in an undertone. Then he had led the pony with its padded hoofs up the driveway to where the master of the house stood, had pocketed the money, and slouched down the walk to the gate and out upon the avenue, where in the shadows of the trees he was

soon out of sight. Even the pony looked ghostly in the electric light.

Mr. Dainty untied the halter and led Romeo toward the stable, but before he had reached the corner of the house, the groom overtook him.

“I’ll take him to the stable, sir, while you tell the good news to Miss Dorothy. I’ll have these things off his feet in a minute, sir, an’ it may be that she’ll be out here to see him.”

“There’s not much doubt of that, Creston,” Mr. Dainty said, with a laugh, as he turned toward the house. He ran lightly up the steps, and, hurrying through the hall, joined the group in the sitting-room.

Aunt Charlotte looked up with a smile as she completed the fairy story which she had been telling in the usual way, “and they lived happy ever after.”

“ You may all make believe that I have been telling a fine fairy-tale, and that I have just reached the place where I grant a wish.

“ Dorothy, what is your dearest wish to-night? ”

“ I wish, oh, *how* I wish I could see my Romeo,” she said.

“ Then come with me,” he said, gently.

“ Do you mean it? Where shall I come? ” Dorothy said.

“ With me, just follow me. Come, we will all go out to see Dorothy’s wish granted.”

Hastily throwing light wraps about them, Mrs. Dainty and Aunt Charlotte followed, Mr. Dainty leading the way with Dorothy and Nancy on either side. How they wondered what it all meant!

But when he turned into the path which

led to the driveway, and then toward the stable, they knew that the pony must be waiting here for a greeting from Dorothy. She could no longer walk quietly along. With a little cry of delight she ran ahead, Nancy following, and there in the centre of the brightly lighted stable stood Romeo.

The groom touched his hat, but Dorothy's eyes were blinded with happy tears. She ran to the pony, and clasped her arms about his neck, saying as she had so often said before:

“Romeo, my Romeo, how I love you!”

When they had returned to the house, Mr. Dainty told them that a rough-looking man had returned the pony while he had been upon the piazza smoking, and that he had received the promised reward. He did not tell them of the man's sullen man-

ner, nor of the strange fact that the pony's hoofs had been padded. Mrs. Dainty was easily frightened, and Aunt Charlotte was hardly less nervous, and, if they were told of the man's unpleasant manner, they would think that he might loiter about the place, while Dorothy and Nancy would at once fear that the man had heard of their home from Nancy's Uncle Steve, and that the two men were in league; that Uncle Steve might any day again attempt to steal Nancy.

They questioned him as to the man's appearance, Nancy especially being very eager to know exactly how he looked. Steve Ferris had been dark and swarthy, so when Mr. Dainty described the short, muscular, sandy-haired man, Nancy sighed with relief.

That night, however, when she lay in

her cosy chamber at the stone cottage, she thought again of the man who had returned the pony. Doubtless he had stolen it because he had believed that a reward would be offered. What a mean thing to do, and how like Uncle Steve. Then a thought came into her mind which made her shiver with fear. She felt that she could not stay alone; she must ask Aunt Charlotte about it.

She crept across the hall and waited a moment before speaking, to learn if Aunt Charlotte were awake. If she was asleep, she would be brave and wait until morning to talk with her, although she knew that she should not sleep until she had told her fear.

Some one was moving about in the room. Nancy paused, then knocked upon the door.

“ May I come in just a moment? ” she asked.

The door was quickly opened.

“ Why, Nancy, are you ill? ” Aunt Charlotte asked.

“ Oh, no, not ill, but I thought of something that frightened me so that I couldn't stay alone. ” Aunt Charlotte sat down in a low chair and drew Nancy toward her.

“ What is it that frightened you? I thought that you were asleep, and was moving about my room quietly so as not to waken you, ” she said, kindly. Her voice was gentle, and she tried in every way to comfort Nancy. Indeed she succeeded in cheering her, telling her that she was safe among those who loved her so dearly.

But Nancy, although a little happier, still thought of Uncle Steve, and wondered

if the man who had stolen the pony might be one of his friends. Aunt Charlotte saw that Nancy was timid.

“You need not go back to your own room,” she said. “You may stay with me, if you wish,” and Nancy gladly remained.

When morning dawned she forgot her fear. The sunlight made the gardens so fair and bright that everything looked different. Even the man whom Mr. Dainty had described seemed less to be feared. He had received the promised reward and had gone away. Why should she think of him again?

Indeed, she had little time to think of anything except the fact that Vera Vane was to arrive that morning.

Dorothy ran down to the cottage to call for Nancy.

“Come up and help me,” she said, “for I’ve such a lot of things to do before Vera comes.”

“I’ll help you,” Nancy said. “What shall we do first?”

“Her favorite color is pink, so mamma has given the pink chamber to her while she’s here,” said Dorothy, “and I’m going to fill some jars with pink roses. Come! We’ll gather them now.”


Nancy needed no urging, and together they ran to the rose-bushes, gathering the freshest and fairest in bloom.

When Vera arrived, warm and tired from her long ride in the cars, she was delighted with the lovely room. She said that it rested her to look at the pink roses with which the mantel and dressing-case were heaped, and was grateful to Dorothy and Nancy for placing them there.

She was the same merry, fickle Vera whom they had first known during their summer at the shore. Later, in the city, she had been a true and loving friend to Dorothy.

“ We’ll try not to mind if she soon gets tired of things, because she really can’t help it,” Dorothy had said.

“ Yes, we’ll try,” Nancy replied, “ for when she is tired of *one* thing she’s sure to think of another.”



CHAPTER VII

VERA'S PRANK

VERA proved to be a delightful guest. She was as changeable as ever, and really merited the name "Weather-vane," which her brother had given her.

But, as Nancy had said, when she tired of one thing, she usually thought of another. The first days of her visit had passed gaily. She met Molly Merton and Flossie Barnet, whom she remembered, having met them at Dorothy's home in the city, and she was glad to see them again.

Vera was a pretty girl, tastefully dressed, and Nina and Jeanette Earl de-

cided at once that they liked her. They usually chose those friends who were the most finely dressed.

They had had the gayest times together, and each day had seemed jollier than the one before, but one morning Vera declared it to be too warm for any sort of game. Indeed, the breeze was sultry, and Dorothy was wondering how Vera could be entertained on so hot a day when Vera answered the question for herself.

“ We might go out for a drive, and go ’way off where it’s just countrified, where there are farms and cattle and barns and things,” she said, and she looked so eager that Dorothy thought it might be the best thing to do. If Vera so wished to go, she would surely enjoy it.

Mrs. Dainty was driving with Aunt Charlotte, and what could be more enjoy-

able on a hot morning than to ride over country roads and through sunny lanes, laughing and talking all the way?

They did not hesitate a moment, but found the groom, and in ten minutes the pony and tiny carriage were at the door, the groom mounted and ready to follow at a reasonable distance.

Vera thought that it would seem more of an adventure if he were not with them.

“Does he *always* ride behind you?” she asked, impatiently.

“Always,” Dorothy said. “Papa will not let me ride without him. Why, Vera, he doesn't bother us. He's with us so that nobody *else* shall be.”

And when they were seated, and Dorothy gathered up the reins, they felt that they were off for an adventure, for Vera had said:

“Let’s go out on some country road that you haven’t seen before,” and Dorothy laughed and turned the pony toward a new road which was being made.

“I don’t know where this leads to,” she said, “but with Creston with us we can’t get lost.”

They soon found that the new road was too hot and dusty for pleasure, and when they came to a beautiful shady road where branches met overhead, they turned Romeo, and the cool shade was delightful. Vera was charmed.

“Oh, I could ride here forever!” she said.

“Forever!” laughed Nancy. “Oh, Vera, the idea of *your* doing one thing as long as that.”

“Laugh if you like,” Vera said, “but just now I’m perfectly happy riding. It

may happen that I'll change my mind soon, but not just now."

"You must not change your mind very soon," said Dorothy, "because we're a long way from home. You'd *have* to ride ever so much more before we could get back. We could turn around any time, if you'd like to, and go straight back to the house."

"Indeed, I wouldn't like to do that," Vera replied. "Instead, I say let's go ever so much farther, it is so lovely out here in the country."

And now the houses were farther apart, and they passed broad acres bathed in sunlight, over which the blue sky seemed keeping watch, and many a little pool reflected the floating clouds, making them look even whiter because of the darker shadows in the water.

Dorothy and Nancy thought that they had never seen so lovely a spot, while Vera seemed even more charmed than they.

“ Oh, let’s stop here awhile,” she cried. “ We could let Creston take care of the pony, and we might sit down over there where those tall bushes make it shady. Come! ”

Of course they did as Vera said. Vera’s friends usually obeyed her every whim. She had a way of talking about anything which she wished to do that made those who listened eager to do the same thing.

The groom led his own horse and the pony toward a large tree which gave fine shade, and sat down upon the grass to wait until the party should be ready to turn homeward.

At first Vera thought it very restful to

pause in their ride, and to sit there in the cool shade and tell stories, listen to the birds, and watch the butterflies, but after a time she thought it rather quiet amusement. She looked across the fields and saw some roofs of houses and a spire.

“Where’s that?” she asked. “Is that a part of Merrivale?”

“Why, that can’t be Merrivale, away over there,” said Nancy, as she looked at the roofs and chimneys toward which Vera pointed.

“Do you know, Creston?” Dorothy asked.

The groom walked over to where the girls were sitting

“That’s a little place called Stanton,” he said, “but right there where those houses show through those trees is a part of Merrivale. Why, Miss Dorothy, you

must remember the little store and restaurant where Mrs. Grayson sometimes stops for little errands when she's out driving with Mrs. Dainty."

"Oh, I know," Dorothy said; "we stopped there for a lunch one day. It was a funny little restaurant, but they served a nice lunch."

"But we must have driven right round in a circle to reach that part of Merri-vale," Nancy said, "and that is the place, for I remember that tall, red building. The candy store is next to that."

"Oh, now I know what I want," said Vera. "I want some bonbons, and I have my purse with me. Can't Creston go over there and get some for me? It would be a regular picnic to sit here and eat them."

Dorothy hesitated. Vera would be pro-

voked if she was unwilling to send the groom, but they were in a lonely place, and Mr. Dainty had said that he wished the groom to be near at hand whenever they were out driving. But, as usual, Vera was unreasonable.

“Well, we’re not driving, we’re just sitting,” she said, “and your papa said he must be with us whenever we were *driving*, so I don’t see why he can’t go.”

“We could go around that way home,” said Nancy, “and stop there at the store for the bonbons.”

“But perhaps by that time I sha’n’t wish for them, and I *know* that I want them *now*. We could have such a fine time out here if we just had a box of bonbons.”

“Well — I don’t know if papa would like to have me send Creston over there,

while we remain here," Dorothy said, "but if you so wish it —"

"Oh, I do, I do," Vera interrupted, and Dorothy told the groom to do Vera's errand for her.

"I'll go as quick as I can, Miss Dorothy," he said, for he knew that she had not wished to send him.

Vera knew that she should not have teased Dorothy, but she would not say so. She had wanted the groom to go, and he had gone. She watched him as he crossed the field, and wished that he might go faster. As if in answer to her thought, Nancy said:

"I hope Creston will be back soon; I think it's lonely here. There's nobody living near here, and nobody has passed since we came here."

"Look! There's some people now.

Why, what gaudy colors!" Dorothy said, as she pointed toward where, between the trees, gaily dressed figures could be seen approaching.

"Oh, keep still, do! Don't let them see us," cried Nancy, in sudden fear. "They're gipsies, don't you see they are, Dorothy? Oh, I wish Creston was here!"

She shrank back toward some tall bushes, drawing Dorothy with her.

"Vera, Vera!" she cried, "do come back here with us; they'll surely see you!"

"I *wish* them to," Vera coolly replied.

"But Nancy is afraid of them, and so am I," Dorothy said, "so *do* come over here with us. The pony is out of sight, and if you'll just stay here with us, they'll pass without seeing us."

"Fraidie cats! Fraidie cats!" cried

Vera, and she laughed in a provoking way. "You can keep out of sight if you choose," she said, "but I wish them to see me, for I mean to have my fortune told."

It was too late to again call to Vera to come back, for, as she ran out into the sunlight, she beckoned to a young gipsy, who left her companions to learn why Vera had wished to speak to her.

From behind the bushes Dorothy and Nancy saw Vera offer her hand to the girl. They saw the other members of the wandering band pause to watch the fortune-teller, then turn toward the highway.

"They're going, and they've not seen us," Dorothy whispered.

"All but that one," was Nancy's whispered reply, pointing to the one who still held Vera's hand.

"Where *is* Creston all this time?" said



From behind the bushes Dorothy and Nancy saw Vera offer her hand to the girl.—Page 136.

Dorothy. "I wish I hadn't sent him, and I wish he'd come back."

"So do I," Nancy said, "and there he is, just jumping over the wall."

"And the gipsy is saying something to Vera. Now she's going," whispered Dorothy, "and with Creston with us, we'll not be afraid."

And when the young gipsy had told Vera's fortune, she hurried away to join her party, while Vera, with sparkling eyes, ran to her friends to tell what she had heard.

"Isn't it great?" she said. "Isn't it fine? She says I'm to be a great singer, and you *know* I can hardly sing a note, and she says I'll travel some day, and that right away I'll disappear, and for awhile my friends won't know where I am. What fun that would be if it came true!"

“ Oh, no, Vera, it wouldn't be fun at all,” said Nancy. “ It's horrid to disappear, and those who care for you just wild because they can't find you. I *know*, and I wish you hadn't asked her to tell your fortune.”

“ You think it's horrid because, when you disappeared, your wicked uncle stole you, and made you dance to earn his living. Now I know I wouldn't like to live in his house, but I'm *sure* I'd have liked the dancing. I've always thought it was queer *you* didn't. It must have been exciting, and I like to be in a whirl.”

“ I wish she hadn't told you you'd disappear soon,” Dorothy said. “ It frightens me to think of it.”

“ Why, Dorothy Dainty! That's the only amusing thing she said. I tell you

it would be just fun to have everybody wondering and wondering where I was."

Creston came hurrying toward them with the box of bonbons.

"I got back as soon as I could," he said, "but it was farther than I thought, an' when I went into the store it was full of customers an' I had to wait."

"I won't let you leave me again when we're out, for this time some gipsies came by, and we were frightened," Dorothy said.

"You and Nancy were; I wasn't," said Vera, "and, anyway, here's the bonbons and they're fine."

She gave some to the groom, because he had done the errand for her, and they then sat down to enjoy their treat. But when the bonbons had been eaten, Vera tossed the empty box aside and looked about her restlessly.

“What can we do now?” she asked. “I’m not ready to drive home yet, because it is so lovely here, but I don’t think I want to sit here and just talk. Let’s play Hide-and-Seek.”

Dorothy thought it too warm for a romp, but Vera was her guest, so she agreed, and soon the three were hunting hiding-places and enjoying the fun in spite of the heat.

Across the sunny fields came the tones of the town clock striking the noon hour.

“Twelve o’clock! We ought to be driving home now,” said Dorothy, “so as to be ready for lunch at one.”

“But Mrs. Dainty and Aunt Charlotte aren’t to be home at the lunch hour, so I should think we might have our lunch whenever we choose,” Vera said.

“Mamma always says, ‘Have your

lunch at lunch-time whether I am at home or not.' It makes it hard for the servants if we're not there for lunch when they have it ready," Dorothy said.

"I shouldn't think of that. So let me hide once more, and then we'll go. I'll hide, and you and Nancy can hunt for me. Say, I'm going to disappear!" said Vera.

"Oh, Vera, don't say that," said Dorothy, in sudden fear.

"But I *am*, and you must hunt for me, you two, but you won't find me. Now, blind your eyes; no peeking!" she said, and ran swiftly to a place which she had thought of when she had been listening to what the gipsy had to say.

As she hurried past the groom, the mare, always timid, was startled, and it was a task for the man to calm her, and

when she once more stood quietly beside the pony, Vera was out of sight.

Creston wondered where she had gone, and why she had been in such haste.

“I’ve not heard Vera call, have you?” Dorothy asked.

“Once I thought I heard her,” Nancy said, “but she must be ready now. Let’s commence to hunt for her.”

And how they did search for her! Behind the tree-trunks and tall clumps of bushes, over beyond a huge rock, and back again to look in every place where they had looked before, yet no Vera could they find. Creston could not say that he had seen her.

“She ran past me,” he said, “and scared the mare, an’ when the mare was quiet, *she* was out of sight.”

“You’ll have to come and help us to

find her," Dorothy said, "for we must be getting home by one."

"Indeed, we can't do that, Miss Dorothy," Creston replied, "for it's quarter to one now, and I'll see what we can do."

He was always willing to please Dorothy, and then there was the fine lunch to be served in the servants' hall! He did not care to be late to that. So he started with a will to search for her, while Dorothy and Nancy looked in possible and impossible places for the missing Vera, but no Vera could be found.

If they had been at the stone house, where every hiding-place was known, it would have been a different matter, for, sooner or later, Vera would be found, or would herself appear to laugh at them. But in the lovely but lonely spot it was different, so different.

Again and again they called to her to return, but received no reply. The groom was now as frightened as were the girls. Lustily he shouted:

“Miss Vera! Miss Vera! We’ll be goin’ without you if you don’t hurry back!” Only the echoes answered, and the man’s face turned pale.

“It’s no use stayin’ here an’ hollerin’,” he said, “for if she was near us we’d have found her, and if somethin’s happened to her there’d ought ter be somebody more than us here.”

“What *shall* we do?” wailed Dorothy, clinging to Nancy, who could think of no comforting word to say.

“I’ll shout again, an’ if that don’t fetch her, we’ll have to drive home for help the quickest way we know how.”

CHAPTER VIII

WHERE THEY FOUND HER

AND where was Vera? When they had first entered the field, she had seen a ditch or trench which she thought would make a fine hiding-place. She had not spoken of it, because she thought if they chose to play "Hide-and-Seek," she would hide there, and she believed that they would not think to look there for her. So when the gipsy had said that she would disappear, she thought of the ditch, and decided to hide in it.

As soon as Dorothy and Nancy had blinded their eyes, she ran across the field, and as the groom was busy calming the

frightened horse, he did not see in which direction she ran. She hurried to the ditch, saw that it was dry, and, pushing aside the tall weeds, jumped in, then crouched there, laughing to think how completely she was hidden.

It was indeed a fine hiding-place, and, between the tall weeds which bordered the ditch, she could see Dorothy running one way and Nancy another. It was rare fun for a time to hide where no one could find one, but soon she became restless. The sun was hot, and her cramped position tiresome. She could run out and laugh at them, but she did not wish to do that. Had she not said that she would disappear, and that they would not be able to find her?

She turned around as well as she could, and looked toward the road. It was shady

out there. In a moment she had climbed out of the ditch, and, hidden by a clump of bushes, made her way over the low wall and out upon the road.

“My! This is better,” she said, and she drew a long breath as the fresh breeze rustled the leaves. She was wondering what she would do next, when a familiar sound made her turn quickly. Yes, there was an electric car, and its sign said “Merrivale.”

To be sure it was going the wrong way, but would there not be one soon which would be going toward the town? It was across another field, and on a road which ran parallel with the one on which she was standing, but it was not far to go, and what a joke!

On the swift-running car she would

reach the avenue, would get off, and run to the stone house.

“I should get there long before they do,” she said. “I do believe I should reach the house while they are still hunting for me.”

The smart ringing of the bell caused her to look up. Yes, there was the red car coming along. She had been crossing the field while she had been deciding what to do, and was just in time for the car for Merrivale.

It was an open car, and she climbed up on the step, and along to the front seat. Oh, how cool it was after being so long in a hot, sunny ditch! The breeze blew her hair back from her flushed face. She took off her hat and laid it in her lap.

“This is fine!” she said to herself, never giving a thought to the hot, tired

friends who were still searching for her. Vera was not unkind, or rather, she did not intend to be. She was thoughtless, and when she saw an opportunity for a joke, she never gave a moment's thought to the discomfort which it gave to others. She was as happy and contented, as the car sped along, as if no one were inconvenienced. Once she laughed, as she wondered if they were still hunting.

When the car stopped at the avenue, Vera jumped off, ran up to the house, and in at the gate.

The gardener looked up in surprise to see Vera returning alone.

“Is Dorothy home yet?” she asked.

“No, not yet,” John replied, “an’ why d’ye be comin’ alone?”

“That is my joke,” Vera answered, pertly.

“An’ O’ll bet if Oi knew, Oi’d not think much of the joke,” he muttered, as he picked up his tools and walked away to another part of the garden.

Vera was a bright, merry girl, but the servants did not take kindly to her pert ways.

She lingered near the driveway that she might hear the carriage when it neared the gate.

It was not a joke to Dorothy that Vera could not be found, and Nancy was not less anxious, while the groom’s face plainly showed the concern which he felt. And when at last it seemed useless to search longer, Creston hurried them into the carriage and mounted his own horse, saying:

“Drive pretty lively, Miss Dorothy, an’

when I've seen ye safely home, I'll come back with a number of men an' we'll scour wood an' field. Ye'll be sick if ye stay huntin' in this hot sun."

At first Dorothy stoutly refused to leave for home without Vera, but Creston explained that a number of men could do more than they could possibly do toward finding Vera. At last she became so frightened that she yielded, and never before had Romeo gone over the road at such a lively pace!

He was willing to run, for he knew that he was going toward home, and he knew also that he wanted his dinner. Dorothy had forgotten that she had had no lunch, for in her fear for Vera she could think of nothing else.

As they neared the house, the pony

rushed at top speed, and in at the gateway.

“Home first! Home first!” came the greeting in Vera’s well-known voice, followed by a rippling peal of laughter.

“Oh, Vera, Vera!” Dorothy cried, and leaned back in the carriage so white that even Vera was frightened.

“Why, Dorothy, dear! Did I scare you so when I jumped out at you? I only meant to surprise you.”

“I’d advise ye, Miss Vera, if I may be so bold, not ter scare yer friends twicet in a day. They can’t stand it,” said Creston.

He was a servant who knew his place, but, like all the servants on the place, he worshipped Dorothy, and he was angry to see her made ill by a careless, thoughtless friend.

At any other time Vera would have resented his speech, but for once she saw that she had carried a joke too far, and she was sorry, truly, deeply sorry that she had caused Dorothy such alarm.

She turned to Nancy, but found no comfort there, for Nancy's face was almost as pale as Dorothy's.

It was a very quiet Vera who entered the house with Dorothy, telling her all the way how sorry she was for her foolish prank.

“For I do love you, Dorothy,” she said, “and I only meant to tease, not to frighten you. I thought it a joke to hide and reach home first. It was a joke, but it was a stupid one, and I'll never play one like it again.”

“We'll have some lunch, and perhaps

I shall feel all right after that," Dorothy said, gently.

Although Vera was at fault, Dorothy pitied her distress, and even Nancy, who was so angry that Dorothy should have been so badly frightened, looked into Vera's eyes and kept back the sharp words which she had intended to say.

It was a quiet little lunch party which gathered around the table and afterward found its way out on the piazza. The air was cooler now, and Dorothy, with the lunch and rest, looked like herself. Nancy kept close beside her, and Vera sat with her arm about her. It was strange what opposite traits Vera possessed. She was naturally loving, yet she could tease until she saw that she had hurt a friend, when she would at once become all penitence and pity.

It always seemed easy to forgive Vera, she was so truly sorry for her fault that one might think that she never intended to tease again. She was such a charming playmate, too, always thinking of something which was new and amusing, so that her friends were never dull when she was with them.

She was sitting upon the long piazza seat, swinging her feet and furtively watching Dorothy.

At last she spoke:

“ We’re too warm and tired to play anything just now,” she said, “ but I’ll tell you something fine that I’ve thought of. It truly *is* fine,” she continued, “ and the best of it is that we can have all the girls in it. Want me to tell about it now, Dorothy, or wait till to-morrow? ”

“ Oh, tell it now,” said Dorothy.

“It won’t tire Dorothy to hear something now,” Nancy added.

Vera looked at the two eager faces and laughed with delight. She knew her power, and she enjoyed it. It was such fun to be able to interest her friends in whatever she wished to do.

“Something that I saw this morning made me think of the fine thing I’ll tell you about,” Vera said, nodding her head and looking as if about to reveal a genuine mystery.

“What, out there in that field where we ate the bonbons?” said Nancy.

“No, *indeed!*” said Vera, “not out in that hot little sunny field. No, it was here in this garden, and I saw it while I was waiting for you to come home.”

“Oh, Vera, hurry and tell us what it is,” said Nancy.

“ Well, it’s a private letter-box! ”

“ A *what?* ” questioned Dorothy.

“ A private letter-box, I said, and if you’ll come down to the gateway I’ll show it to you,” Vera said.

She was laughing, and they wondered if she had invented a new plan for teasing them.

She ran on ahead, and turned to see if they were coming with her.

They were following, and Vera seemed to be so excited that they knew that she certainly was in earnest. She hurried down the driveway, nearly to the gate, then turned to the right, and, with her back to the stone wall, stood waiting for Dorothy and Nancy.

“ Now first I’ll *tell* you something, and then I’ll *show* you something,” she said.

“ In a story I read once, a girl lived in

a stone castle. She was a princess, I think, and she had a secret letter-box in the wall that was built around her garden, and all the princes that loved her put their letters to her in the box. Nobody else knew anything about it. Now we aren't princesses, and we don't know any princes, but we girls could have lots of fun with just such a secret box, couldn't we?"

"A secret letter-box! My, but how could we?" said Nancy.

"Yes, that's just it, how *could* we?" questioned Dorothy.

Without answering their questions, Vera continued:

"And I saw the very place for one right here in this wall just behind where I'm standing. Look!"

She stepped aside, and Dorothy and Nancy leaned forward, pushing aside a

tiny bush which hid the spot to which Vera was pointing. There it was! Just as she had said, an opening in the wall where a stone had become loosened and had rolled to the ground, where behind the little bush it lay.

“Put your hand in and feel what a fine place it is for a letter-box,” said Vera.

Nancy thrust her arm into the opening, reaching down until her hand touched a flat stone.

“Fine!” she cried; “it’s a perfect letter-box.”

Next came the question as to how many girls should be invited to use the little secret mail-box.

“We’ll tell Molly and Flossie the first thing,” Dorothy said, “and I suppose Nina and Jeanette, too.”

“If we tell Nina and Jeanette, we’ll

have to tell Katy Dean," said Nancy, "she lives so near them, and if she knows we had a secret and didn't let her into it, of course she'd feel hurt."

"If you tell *everybody* about it, it won't be much of a secret," said Vera. "I heard mamma say that a secret was a secret so long as two knew and kept it, but that a third person in it made it just no secret at all. Now there's three of us, and with Molly and Flossie and Nina and Jeanette and Katy, there'll be *eight* in the secret, and I wonder what mamma would say to that. I guess she'd laugh at us, and ask us how long it would be a secret when we're letting the whole town into it."

"Why, Vera, we aren't telling every one in town. We haven't told *any one* yet, but when we do, we can't let a few

friends in and keep the others out. Just think how they'd feel."

"Well, it's your letter-box and your garden, so you can tell as many as you want to, but if 'twas mine, I think four would be a crowd," Vera said.

"And there's Arabella," said Nancy.

"Well, — she isn't at home now," Dorothy said, and Nancy knew that Dorothy was glad that, for a time at least, the secret could be enjoyed without sharing it with the unpleasant little opposite neighbor.

In the days which followed there were scores of letters written. To be sure, the playmates were such near neighbors that they could at any time meet and say whatever they wished, instead of writing, but think what fun it was to be able to send a letter to a friend, not through a common

post-office, but in a letter-box so secret that only the writers of the letters knew about it.

There was never any time set for mailing or receiving letters. One could, at any hour, watch for a time when no one was passing or loitering near the gateway, and then run down to the wall, push the branches of the tiny bush aside, and reach for the letters which were sure to be there.

Early each morning Dorothy and Nancy would run down to the box, take out the letters, keep those which were written to them, and replace those which were intended for the other girls.

Molly and Flossie thought it a wonderful secret. Nina and Jeanette were quite as delighted, while Katy Dean said that she knew that no one ever had such a fine

secret, or one which was so hard to keep from telling.

Sometimes a wee box of candy or a tiny parcel of nuts was sent in place of a letter, and always it was exciting to see how large the mail would be.

One morning Dorothy ran down to the letter-box, expecting to find it about half-full. She pushed the bush aside, and peeped in. There were no letters in sight. A moment she paused, and then thrust her hand into the hole. When she drew it out it was empty! In haste she ran to tell Nancy.

“ Oh, Nancy, what do you think? There’s not a single letter in our box! You heard Molly tell me last night that she had just dropped one in, and she said that Jeanette had put one in just before.”

Nancy’s eyes were round with surprise,

“ Why, how could they get out? ” she said, “ for besides those letters Katy Dean told Molly that she was going to put a box of candy in it for us. She said she wrote ‘ For Dorothy and Nancy ’ on it.”

“ Well, there’s nothing in there now,” said Dorothy.

Nancy ran to peep in. It was true; there was nothing in the letter-box.

CHAPTER IX

A TRIP TO THE SHORE

VERA came running across the lawn.

“What is it?” she called; “can’t you get the letters out?”

“There aren’t any to get out,” Dorothy said.

“Isn’t it queer?” said Nancy.

“Queer!” Vera cried, “queer! Well, I guess not. If there are no letters in there, somebody got here first and took them out!”

“Why, Vera Vane! Who’d be so mean as that?” said Dorothy.

“The one who took the letters,” Vera answered, coolly. “Why, Dorothy,” she

continued, "it isn't any use to look like that. If the girls put the letters *in*, and there aren't any there *now*, of course *somebody* took them out."

Vera spoke sharply, and convinced her listeners.

"But nobody we know would do such a thing," Nancy said.

"P'r'aps it's somebody you *don't* know," was the quick reply.

It was useless to sit looking at the empty letter-box, so the three playmates turned toward the grove, and there on the rustic seat they sat down to talk the matter over. They all agreed that something should be done, but no one could think what to do.

"We don't even know who took them," Nancy said.

"And we ought to tell the other girls,

or they'll be putting more letters there for somebody to take," Dorothy said.

"Let's run over to Molly's and tell her now. See who'll get there first," cried Nancy, and she flew down the walk, followed by Dorothy and Vera. She was a swift runner, and she reached the gate much ahead of the other girls. She ran to the wall, and she could not have told why she peeped over, but what she saw made her turn and hold up her finger to tell the girls to come silently to where she was standing. Softly they tiptoed to the wall and looked over.

What a sight!

There was no longer any mystery about the stolen letters.

Upon the ground sat Chub, his face smeared with the chocolates which he had been ravenously eating. The half-empty

box was clutched firmly in his left hand, while with his right he was trying to force a huge bonbon into his already well-filled mouth.

“The the ain’t no uthe,” he muttered, as he flung a handful of letters from him.

“I can’t read their letterth, but I can eat their candy.”

“You horrid little boy!” exclaimed Nancy, no longer able to keep silent.

“You *perfectly horrid* boy!” cried Vera, her voice shrill with anger.

And Chub?

Not an instant did he waste in thinking what to do. Grasping the candy-box tightly, and holding one arm above his head, as if to ward off a blow, he bolted down the avenue, roaring with the full strength of his lungs:

“The thcoop-net! The thcoop-net!”

Never once did he turn to see if any one was chasing him, so sure was he that he was being followed, for he never doubted that the gardener with his net was ready at any moment to snatch him.

The three girls stood watching the flying figure, whose pudgy legs and clumsy feet kicked up a cloud of dust so thick that it nearly hid him from sight. If the dust obscured the figure, it could not stifle the lusty voice, and even when he had reached the bend of the avenue, they heard his frightened scream:

“ Oh, ow! The thcoop-net! ”

The girls turned, each looking to see what the others had to say. For a moment neither spoke, then how they laughed! The little rascal had been such a coward, screaming and running away when no one was chasing him, and his clumsy figure had

scampered down the avenue at such a ridiculous gait that they could not forget how comical a spectacle they had seen. It was Vera who first spoke:

“I don’t care,” she said. “I was getting tired of it, anyway; we’ve had it quite a while.”

“Oh, Vera, how queer to be so soon tired of your letter-box. Why, it’s just no time since we first had it,” Dorothy said, laughing as she spoke.

“Queer!” said Vera, “queer did you say? Why we’ve had it as much as a week, and even a week is long enough for me to tire of a thing.”

But flighty and changeful as she was regarding her pleasures, she was constant and true to her friends.

She loved Dorothy and Nancy, and she wished that she might always be near

them, so when Mrs. Vane wrote, inviting them to return with Vera and for a time be her guests at the "Weathervane," Vera's delight was boundless.

If Vera was eager for their visit, Dorothy and Nancy were no less excited, and when the day for their departure arrived, the three friends were ready and waiting for the carriage a full half-hour before it was time for them to go.

Mrs. Dainty's maid accompanied them, and when the car-ride was ended and the long trip in the steamer had been enjoyed, she looked at the lively trio and breathed a sigh of relief that they were safely landed upon the pier.

Dorothy was gentle, and Nancy always tractable, but Vera rarely yielded to guidance, and the maid had been half-wild with anxiety during the trip.

“ Miss Vera, ye’ll not be leanin’ out the winder,” she had said, or, “ Indeed, Miss Vera, if ye lean way over the railin’, ye’ll be in the water, head first, an’ me responsible fer yer,” she added.

Ah, there was the light phaeton awaiting them, Mrs. Vane’s coachman standing beside the handsome horse immovable as a liveried statue.

As they bowled along the broad beach, Vera whispered to Dorothy:

“ We *had* to have your maid with us all the way, and Thomas is with us now, because mamma won’t let me drive Flashlight, but to-morrow we’ll be free, and just see what we’ll do! ”

Never was there a more genial host than Robert Vane, nor a more delightful hostess than his charming wife. They were eager to give pleasure to their guests, and were

as happy in entertaining Vera's friends as their own. Every day a new pleasure awaited them, and Dorothy and Nancy awoke each morning wondering what delightful plan had been made for the day.

One morning Vera, on her way to the dining-room, paused on the stairway to tell of a charming engagement for the forenoon.

“I couldn't wait to tell you,” she said, “for I'm just wild about it myself, and I knew you'd be. We're to drive over to that point of land that we've seen when we've been sitting on the cliff. We're to have dinner at the hotel, everybody we know will be there, and after dinner we'll see the races. Do hurry and come down.”

She had told all the news in a shrill, excited voice, and, without waiting for a reply, had hurried down the stairs to the

dining-room. Dorothy and Nancy soon followed her, and the trio sat by the window, talking of the delightful trip and looking far out to where the tiny point of land gleamed in the sunlight. They had wondered how it would look if one were out there to see it; soon they were to stand upon the little sun-kissed point of land which they had dreamed of.

“Breakfast is late,” said Vera, her red lips pouting in displeasure. “Mamma is not down yet, and papa has not come in from his early walk, but that isn’t why we’re waiting. It’s because Rob went out sailing before daylight. I do believe they hold their breath when Rob doesn’t return at the very hour he says he will.”

“Why, Vera,” said Dorothy, her blue eyes showing her surprise, “aren’t *you* anxious that Rob hasn’t yet come in?”

“No, indeed, of course not,” Vera answered. “It’s likely he’s safe. He’s late because he’s late, that’s all. Come! There’s no such thing as guessing when breakfast will be served, so let’s go out for a run on the beach.”

Half an hour later Mrs. Vane entered the dining-room, and was surprised to find no one there. She had heard the merry chatter, but did not realize that for thirty minutes the room had been silent. She believed that they were in some other part of the house and would soon reappear.

She sat down by the window and gazed out at the sea, her anxiety for Rob making her for the moment forget that Vera was not with her. The clock chimed the hour, and she started as if awaking from a dream.

Where was Rob, and, oh, where was Vera? Where were her friends?

A search of the house revealed nothing, nor were there slightest sounds of laughter in the garden. The butler had looked in every possible place, and returning to Mrs. Vane, reported that they were not to be seen, and that repeated shouting brought no reply.

It was Vera's restlessness which had led her to coax her friends out for a romp on the beach. She well knew that at the "Weathervane" breakfast was the first thing to be thought of, and that Mrs. Vane expected all members of the family to be in the dining-room when the clock-hands marked the hour of eight, but she settled the matter for herself with this strange reasoning:

“ Rob knows as well as I do that we’re to have breakfast before going out, and he went off, so why shouldn’t I? ”

They walked along the beach, sometimes stopping to pick up a shell, or a bit of seaweed; Dorothy and Nancy listening while Vera described the pleasure trip which had been arranged for the day.

“ And we’ll go, rain or shine,” she said. “ No, that isn’t so, for now I remember mamma said, ‘ if it is fair,’ but of course it will be.”

“ P’r’aps it’ll be sunny later, but the sky looks queer now,” said Nancy. “ Just look out there! ”

“ Pooh! Those are just wind clouds,” Vera replied. “ By the time we are home and eating breakfast, the sun’ll be out. See if it isn’t. I’m hungry now,” she added, “ so let’s have a race down the

beach, and then we'll go back to the 'Weathervane.'

"Ready?" she questioned, then slowly she counted:

"One, two, three!"

They were off like the wind. Dorothy and Nancy were hatless, but Vera had felt it impossible to go out without wearing the showy hat which the milliner had sent to the house the night before. It was not suitable for a morning romp, and its huge brim caught the wind and tossed the blue ostrich plumes about as if trying to snatch them from the hat.

Impatiently Vera twitched it from her head, intending to run with it in her hand, but the rough wind tore it from her grasp, and on the dancing waves it floated like a little boat with blue sails catching the wind.



“One, two, three!” They were off like the wind. — Page 178.

A bit of rocky beach, like a tiny promontory, made out into the water, and, seeing that the hat was floating toward its point, Vera ran out over the rough crags, calling to Dorothy and Nancy to follow.

A moment they hesitated. The rocks looked wet and slippery, but Vera called to them so shrilly that, although half-afraid, they followed her.

“Why didn’t you come the minute I called to you?” she cried. “Didn’t you see that my lovely new hat was floating this way? You *must* help me get it now.”

Vera was angry, and plainly showed her displeasure, so, although the wet rocks slanting toward the water looked like a perilous foothold, Nancy crouched upon them, ready to reach out for the floating hat. Dorothy knelt beside her, and as they watched the blue plumes and the fluttering

lace and ribbons, it seemed as if the pretty hat was playing with them.

Upon the crest of one tiny wave it would dance swiftly toward them, when, as they reached for it, another wave would carry it out of reach.

“Reach out now, Nancy!” Vera cried. “It’s coming this way, and I *must* have it!”

With her left hand holding firmly to a large rock, Nancy extended her right toward the hat, which dipped and danced as if an imp were under it.

“Just reach out this time, Nancy, and you’ll surely get it. Quick now, while I hold you by your skirts. Quick!” cried Vera, and Nancy did her best, but, although the hat floated quite near, not even the tips of her fingers would touch it.

“We *must* get it,” Vera insisted.

“Mamma isn’t often angry, but she will be this time if I lose the hat that only came home last night. Just think, I haven’t worn it anywhere yet. Oh, oh, just see! It’s floating away now! What shall I do?”

She clasped her hands, and turned her head so as not to see the blue plumes fluttering in the breeze which was driving it out of reach. Then, like a flash, she turned and commenced to make her way over the rocks toward the shore.

“Come!” she cried, “come and I’ll tell you what we’ll do.”

Quickly they followed her, glad to be turning toward the shore, but Vera had no idea of returning to the “Weathervane.” She had a better plan, she thought.

On the opposite side of the ledge a huge stake had been driven far down into the sand. A short rope was tied to it, and at

the end of that rope rocked and swayed a tiny boat. Two small, light oars lay in it, and Vera ran toward it, calling to Dorothy and Nancy to follow.

“What *are* you going to do?” shouted Nancy, but Vera ran on ahead and seemed not to hear her, for she made no reply.

They soon saw what she intended to do. The waves had beached the little boat, and Vera clambered into it, calling impatiently to them to follow.

“Oh, Vera, I can’t, mamma wouldn’t like it!” Dorothy cried.

“Well, you’re my company, and you *ought* to be nice. I’ve just *got* to get my hat, and I can’t reach it from the rocks. I’m going after it in this boat, and you and Nancy must help me.”

“But you got into a horrid scrape once when you went off in a boat,” said Nancy.

“ Oh, *that* time was different,” Vera hastened to say; “ there were no oars in the boat, and what could I do? This boat has two nice little oars, and, anyway, I’m going. I’ll row, and you two can reach out for my hat. Come! I can’t wait. See how fast the hat is floating! You’ll not be very nice if you won’t help me.”

Dorothy looked into Nancy’s dark eyes.

“ Ought we to go? ” she asked.

“ Are we rude not to? ” questioned Nancy.

“ Hurry! I can’t hold on to the oars and pick up my hat, so you’ll *have* to come with me,” snapped Vera.

“ I don’t believe we ought, but we seem to have to,” whispered Dorothy, as she turned toward the boat, and without a word Nancy followed.

CHAPTER X

WITH THE TIDE

“**A**ND now we are in, who’s going to push us off?” Vera asked, then, without waiting to be answered, she grasped one of the light oars, intending to thrust it into the sand and thus push off from the shore.

The boat was but barely on the sand, and the little waves which lapped one side of the keel were doing their best to float her, so it needed but one thrust of the oar to send it out into the water.

Boldly she struck out toward the sand, but the light oar wedged fast between two rugged rocks and snapped; only two-

thirds of the oar remained in her hand when the boat sped out on the waves. The breaking of the oar threw Vera back into the boat.

Dorothy, now thoroughly frightened, sat trembling and very pale, and Nancy, seeing her blue eyes wide with terror, spoke the first thought which came into her mind.

“Just look at Dorothy!” she said.
“Oh, I wish we hadn’t come a step.”

“Pooh! There’s nothing to be frightened at,” Vera said, scrambling to her seat and taking a firm hold on the oars.

“Rob has taught me to row, and in two minutes we’ll catch up with my hat, pick it up, and before you know it we’ll be back on shore and running up the beach to the Weathervane.”

“It will be more than two minutes,

Vera Vane," Nancy said, "for we are nowhere near your hat yet, and you've only one oar and half of another to row with."

"That's all right," replied Vera; "the oars *were* pretty heavy, and the piece that broke off makes one of them ever so much lighter."

Dorothy said never a word. She was always timid when on the water, and it seemed to her that with only Vera at the oars, there was but little hope of safely reaching land. Nancy shared the fear, but she strove bravely, for Dorothy's sake, to hide her terror, trying not to catch her breath when they rose on the crest of one wave, and stifling a scream when the boat floated down into the cradle of another.

Vera seemed to be doing great work with her oars, and she talked excitedly

of the strength of her arms, but the truth was that the tide was coming in, so that, while one stroke would take the little boat from the shore, the next incoming wave would toss it back toward the sand. She had not sufficient strength to row against the tide.

For a time the three were silent. Vera knew that they were making but little headway, but she was not willing to admit it, so she set her lips firmly and continued to pull at the oars. Dorothy watched Vera, while Nancy watched the clouds which were piling higher and higher in gray, smoky masses. It was Dorothy who first spoke.

“ Oh, let’s go back,” she said; “ *do* let’s go back, Vera. Your hat isn’t anywhere to be seen, and just look at the sky!”

“ It *does* look as if there was going to

be a storm right away," Nancy said, "and truly you *must* take us back, Vera."

"As if I hadn't been trying to!" snapped Vera, her patience quite worn out with the effort which she had been making.

"Why, we thought you were trying to row out to sea!" replied Dorothy.

"And so I *was*, but when I saw that my hat was out of sight, I began to try to row back; first this horrid boat wouldn't leave the shore, and now it won't return."

As she spoke, Vera tugged even harder at the oars, but her effort only caused the boat to rock, and not an inch nearer to the shore would it go. Every incoming wave drew the little boat toward the shore, while an eddy caused by rocks below the surface pushed it away from the sandy beach.

The clouds grew heavier, and Nancy, looking up at the dark, baggy masses, held

out her hand just in time to catch a big rain-drop.

“It’s *raining!*” she cried, and even as she spoke the big drops came pattering down upon them. Vera’s arms were aching with her useless work at the oars. Nancy was desperate. Dorothy’s pale cheeks and quivering lips made her wild to say some brave, comforting word, but what could she say? She was stronger than Dorothy, but she was quite as frightened, while Vera showed plainly that the courage which she had boasted was fast disappearing. She had urged them to get into the boat, and had rowed them from the shore, and she was determined to get them safely back, but could she do it?

“Let me have one oar,” Nancy said, and Vera was glad of her help. For a moment Dorothy’s sweet face brightened.

She believed that Nancy could do almost anything, and that with one oar in her hands the little boat would soon be on the beach, but Nancy had never used oar or paddle, and, try as she would, she could not get the boat out of the eddy which held it a dancing, bobbing prisoner.

And now the drops which had been pattering softly came driving down upon them, drenching them completely, and lashing the surface of the water as if angry with the waves.

“ Oh, what *shall* we do? How shall we ever reach home? ”

It was Dorothy who cried out, and then hid her face in her hands. She could not bear to look at the water, which was now leaden gray, and the heavy rain made the beach almost invisible. The sky was dark and angry, and the sullen waves lapped the

sides of the boat with a soft, lispingsound, and Dorothy thought that they were whispering together.

Tightly she held her hands over her ears that she might not hear their murmuring, but even thus protected the waves made themselves heard. Always imaginative, Dorothy seemed to hear them whisper:

“Lose — them, lose — them; lose, lose, lose them.”

“Oh, if we’re — ” she could not say it. “If we’re lost,” was what she had meant to say, but even in her terror she could not bear to speak the word. There was not a tear in Nancy’s brave eyes, but they plainly showed the fear which made her tremble.

Vera, who at first had talked so boldly, now lost her courage completely, and, crying out with the pain in her blistered

hands, dropped the one oar which she held.

“ Oh, Vera, quick! Don't let your oar go! ” screamed Nancy, “ don't you see it's slipping from the rowlock? ”

“ Well, s'pose it is? Haven't I made my hands so sore that I can't row any more, and if I can't row what's the use of the oars? ”

Without answering, Nancy turned her face toward the beach, and, placing her hands to her mouth, shouted with all her strength.

“ Help! Help! Help! ” she screamed; then turning sharply to Vera, she said:

“ Scream with me, can't you? If you can't row, you can shout. *Shout* now, both of you! ”

That gave them courage, and with a will they joined Nancy, calling lustily for aid.

They did not think that there was a living being within hearing distance, yet with a will they shouted:

“ Help! Help! Help! ”

“ Ay! ay! Where be ye, youngsters? ”

“ Here! Here! ” they cried, even louder than before, for the sound of the bluff human voice had lent them strength and cheer. Then through the driving rain they saw the huge figure of a burly fisherman making his way out on the ledge.

“ Lan’, young uns! In a *boat!* Why, by yer screechin’ I thought ye was in the water, an’ up ter yer eyes at that! Here! Ketch er holt er this here rope, will ye? ” And as he spoke, he took a heavy coil from his shoulder and threw an end toward the boat.

It missed, and again and yet again he threw it out. It was Nancy who caught

it, and in a few moments the frightened, bedraggled, yet happy little party were standing upon the beach. Happy because they had believed that they would surely be drowned, while yet so near the land.

Vera had been as frightened as the others, but now that she stood firmly upon the beach, she wrung the water from her skirt as coolly as if the adventure were a thing which happened every day.

Suddenly something in the man's voice sounded familiar, and she looked up.

“Why, you're Captain Trelton!” she said.

“So I be,” he replied, “an' you're Miss Vera Vane. The time before when ye took a trip in a little boat, an' I took ye home, ye said ye'd never git inter a boat agin!”

“Oh, well, this was another time, and

besides, I'd forgotten I ever said that," Vera replied.

It was only sprinkling now, and their hearts were very light as they turned toward the "Weathervane." They paid little heed to the rain.

"We're too tired to hurry," Nancy said, "but we don't need to. We're as wet as we *can* be now, and we're so happy because we've been almost lost."

"And now we're safe," said Dorothy.

"We weren't *anywhere near* 'almost lost,'" Vera said, stoutly. "We were in the boat every minute, and if we didn't get spilled out, and the boat wasn't upset, and we were near enough to the beach for Captain Trelton to hear us, we weren't *very* near being lost, were we?"

"N-no, *perhaps* not," Dorothy said. She had been so frightened that she felt

that they had been in great danger, but what Vera said sounded reasonable.

“You *looked* just *scared*,” said Nancy.

“Well, if I *did*, I’m not scared *now*, and I wouldn’t let Captain Trelton walk over to the house with us, because mamma would surely think we’d been nearly drowned,” Vera declared.

“She’ll think that as soon as she sees us,” said Nancy.

So along the beach they trudged, talking little, but thinking a great deal. Dorothy and Nancy were wondering what Mrs. Vane would say, but that was not what Vera was thinking. She was wondering what she could say which would make her fault seem less annoying. She knew that her mother had told her never to enter a boat without an older person with her, and she also knew that it must be

long after the hour set for the ride to the races.

The rain had nearly ceased, the clouds were lifting, the sun was almost out. Truly, had they waited for breakfast, they would now most surely have been bowling along swiftly over the road toward the race-course!

“ I wish we'd stayed in this morning,” she said, “ for we had our run down the beach, but what fun was that when the very next thing we did was to get a drenching? ”

There seemed to be no answer to Vera's question, so she continued:

“ How'd I know my hat was going to blow off and go sailing out on the waves? And when it *had* blown off, what was there to do but to go and get it? To be

sure, I *didn't* get it, but I *tried* to; mamma ought to like that!"

She thought it very hard that she should lose the day's outing, but the thought that she was also depriving others of promised pleasure did not occur to her. As they ran up the driveway, a man servant came hurrying toward them.

"Why, it's you, Miss Vera, and your friends, sure enough," he said, "and every one about the place a-hunting for you. Wherever have you been? Master Rob has been home an hour and more, and joining in the hunt. You're drenched! You look like three drowned rats, if I may be so bold as to say it!"

"Well, you *needn't*," said Vera, running on to the house, Dorothy and Nancy following.

Of course there was a glad welcome

awaiting them, and in the excitement Vera escaped the reproof which she richly deserved. They were so happy because of her safe return that they could not scold her, and she began to think herself a heroine.

The three girls ran up to their rooms, where, with maids to assist them, their wet garments were replaced by dry ones, and they soon ran down the stairway, looking as fresh and fine as if no rain-drops had ever touched them.

“ Oh, I say, Vera! We didn't lose the races! ” announced Rob.

“ Why, Rob Vane! It's ten o'clock, and we were to start at nine! ” said Vera.

“ I know that, Miss Weathervane, ” Rob replied, “ but the bulletin at the hotel says that there's no kind of a wind, and the

aces are postponed till — I've forgotten when; sometime next week, I think."

"Then nobody missed to-day's sport because of what *I* did; it's the man that planned the races who's at fault," Vera said.

Her heart was very light; it was such a pleasure to have the blame shifted to another's shoulders.

There were but a few days longer before Dorothy and Nancy must return to the stone house, and Mrs. Vane endeavored to fill those days with pleasure. A number of Vera's friends were invited for a little lunch-party, there was a fine concert at the great hotel, a coaching party was planned for another day, and when on a sunny afternoon they said "Good-by," they felt that their visit had been a dream of delight.

Mrs. Vane's maid accompanied them on the steamer, and when they reached the wharf, Mr. Dainty met them, and glad indeed were they to see him.

How much they had to tell! The ride in the cars was not nearly long enough to tell of all the delightful happenings, and at dinner and in the pleasant evening which followed, they recounted all the pleasures which they had enjoyed at the "Weathervane."

CHAPTER XI

ARABELLA

THE sunlight kissed the flowers in the tiny garden, touched the swaying vines which overhung the window, and danced upon the floor of the cheery sitting-room of the stone cottage.

“Look, Aunt Charlotte!” Nancy said; “when the sunlight plays upon the carpet like that, I always feel like dancing.”

She tripped through a pretty figure which the old dancing teacher, Bonfanti, had once taught her, and the kitten, awaking from its nap in the sun, caught the spirit of the moment and scurried after Nancy's flying feet, as if trying to take part in the dance.

Aunt Charlotte watched the dainty steps of the child, the nimble grace of the kitten, and she thought of the hundreds who, a few months ago, had watched Nancy's swaying figure, as, night after night, she had sped over the stage at the theatre.

Nancy danced until a bit tired, when she paused, picked up the kitten, and, sitting down upon a low stool beside Aunt Charlotte, leaned lovingly against her.

“There are times when I love to dance, when I *must* dance,” she said.

A sudden fear made Aunt Charlotte tremble, and for a moment she could not speak. She laid her hand gently upon Nancy's dark hair and looked down into the truthful brown eyes.

“Nancy, dear, you never wish that you were on the stage again, do you?” she asked, anxiously.

“ Oh, no, no, Aunt Charlotte, I *never* wish that! ” Nancy cried. “ How *could* I long to go back? It would mean to dance night after night for the crowds of strangers, and to live with people who only cared for the money my dancing would bring.”

“ I know how wretchedly homesick you were,” Mrs. Grayson said. “ It did not seem possible that you could wish to return, only that you said that there were times when you felt as if you *must* dance.”

“ So I do,” Nancy said, “ but to enjoy it I’d have to be where you and Dorothy are. It is when I think how I love you both, and how you love me, that I hum a little song and dance to it.”

“ Then I hope that I shall often see you tripping merrily about the house and gardens, for then I shall know that you are

truly happy," Aunt Charlotte said, as she took up her sewing, a smile upon her gentle face. Later, when Nancy ran along the garden path on the way to the stone house, Aunt Charlotte watched the graceful figure and whispered these tender words:

"My faithful Nancy."

Nancy ran on through the flickering sunbeams, the leafy shadows, past the tall rose-bushes which swayed in the breeze, sending out their perfume to her as she passed. Then on to the red mint over which the dragon-flies hovered, pausing to watch the bees in the honeysuckle, then on again toward the pond and the fountain.

She paused to watch the tinkling drops as they flew high in air, then fell back into the basin. She was always charmed

with the rhythmic play of the fountain, and as she watched the spray and saw the sunlight flash upon it she felt a quick delight. She extended her hands as if inviting the merry fountain to join her in a dance, and then, with fairy-like motion, she skipped forward and back, and from side to side, flitting in and out of the warm sunlight with a grace which was all her own.

From behind a huge tree-trunk Dorothy watched her. She had intended to run down the path to meet her, but she would not interrupt the dance; she would wait, quietly enjoying the lovely scene.

Ah, now Nancy was singing!

Dorothy leaned forward to hear the words as well as the merry music. How sweet the tender verse!



She extended her hands as if inviting the merry fountain to join her in a dance. — *Page 206.*

“Oh, my Dorothy!
Dear, dearest Dorothy!
I would do anything
For my precious Dorothy!”

She stooped to snatch a flowering vine which ran along the path, and, tossing it above her head, danced with it as if it were a scarf. Around her shoulders she wreathed it, back and forth she swung it, singing gaily, sweetly singing of her love for Dorothy:

“My dearest, *dearest* Dorothy,”

she sang, until Dorothy could wait no longer, and running from her hiding-place, she threw her arms about Nancy.

“Oh, Nancy, Nancy! You love me truly, but not any more than I love you,” she said; then, clasping hands they ran together down the sunny path, and now both were humming the merry tune. As they

passed the stable, they saw that the pony was stamping restlessly.

“ I believe that Romeo is just longing to be out. Let’s go for a drive! ” Dorothy said.

Nancy needed no urging. It was always a delight to ride over the shady roads behind the handsome pony. They were laughing, chattering, singing little snatches of song, when, as they passed the corner of a side street, they saw an odd little figure coming toward them.

“ Why, that looks like Arabella, but I thought she was away at the mountains, ” said Dorothy.

“ That *is* Arabella, ” Nancy replied, “ and she wants us to stop. ”

Indeed, Arabella was waving her hand to them. She did not hurry when she saw that they were waiting for her, but walked

along as leisurely as if her time were all her own. It was always Arabella's habit to invite herself to do whatever pleased her, so they were not surprised when she said:

“ I've been out for a walk, but I'm tired of walking now, so I guess I'll ride with you.”

Of course Dorothy agreed, but even before she had spoken a word Arabella was climbing into the carriage.

Dorothy could not say that she was glad to see her, and while she was trying to think of something kind to say, Nancy spoke:

“ We thought you were at the mountains,” she said.

“ And so we were, and we all wanted to stay longer, that is, papa and mamma and I wanted to, but we couldn't,” Ara-

bella said, and she looked sharply at them and waited as if she wished them to question her.

“ You *couldn't* stay? ” Nancy asked.

“ We just couldn't, ” Arabella replied, “ because Aunt Matilda wouldn't let us. Papa said he thought he'd like to stay three weeks longer, but Aunt Matilda said that a man *never* knew what was best for him, so here we are at home. ”

Dorothy tried to tell Arabella of their visit to Vera, but, as usual, Arabella preferred to talk of herself.

“ I'm glad I met you, because even if we take quite a long ride, I'll get home quicker than I could walk there, and I have to take some cordial before dinner, ” she said.

“ What's cordial? ” questioned Nancy.

“ I don't know, ” Arabella replied, “ but

I take it before breakfast to brace me, and before lunch I take herb-tea that Aunt Matilda makes to calm me, and just before dinner I have to take another kind of medicine to keep me from dreaming horrid dreams."

"What a lot of doses to take," said Dorothy.

"That's what Flossie Barnet said, and her Uncle Harry asked me if I ever took any kind of medicine to keep me from talking too much. What *do* you suppose he meant? He wasn't laughing; he looked as wise as an owl. I told Aunt Matilda what he said, and she said if he'd give her the recipe she'd make some and give him half of it. Aunt Matilda is real queer sometimes. I couldn't tell whether she was pleased or angry."

Arabella saw no joke in the matter, but

Nancy did, and she found it a task to keep from laughing.

“ I had one fine day while we were at the mountains,” said Arabella. “ We had had pleasant weather and all sorts of good times, but one day it just poured, and I wanted to find something to read. I went down to the library and hunted and hunted till I found just the book that I could enjoy. It was full of the oddest stories, but the best one of all was called ‘ The Haunted Manse.’ ”

“ Oh, I don’t like that kind of story,” Dorothy said, shivering as she spoke.

“ P’r’aps not,” said Arabella, “ but you never heard this one,” and then she commenced to tell the story, at the same time keeping her sharp eyes fixed upon Dorothy and Nancy, to see if they were very much frightened.

“ Oh, Arabella, don't tell me any more of that story! ” pleaded Dorothy. “ I don't mean to be rude, but I can't listen to it, indeed I can't. ”

“ Pooh! I read it through and through, ” Arabella replied, “ and that's why I remember it so well. You ought to hear how it came out. It ends like this:

“ ‘ Just as the wild wind blew round the corner, a night-owl commenced to screech, and— ’ ”

“ Oh, Jimmy! ” cried Dorothy, delighted that he should have appeared just in time to interrupt Arabella's unpleasant story.

Jimmy touched his cap in his best manner.

“ I'm to put this parcel into Mrs. Dainty's own hands, an' to give her a special message, ” he said, his manner

plainly showing how proud he was that Mr. Dainty trusted him.

They had reached the gateway, and Jimmy ran up the driveway toward the house. Arabella had said that she must reach home promptly, but she now remained in the carriage and said not a word about hastening homeward until a shrill voice was heard calling:

“ Arabella! Arabella! ”

Dorothy drew rein, and Arabella sprang out.

“ That’s Aunt Matilda! I’ll have to run, for I’m ’bout sure she’s standing with that spoonful of cordial in her hand. ”

She ran down the walk, forgetting to thank Dorothy for the delightful drive, and hurrying toward the house as if taking cordial were a genuine pleasure.

The groom took Romeo around to the

stable, and, as Dorothy and Nancy ran up the steps, they met Jimmy, who had just delivered the parcel and message.

“ You always are rushing,” Dorothy said. “ Do you hurry all day long? ”

“ I hurry whenever there’s something Mr. Dainty wants done. I was glad ’nough when he gave me a place in his office, an’ I said ter myself, ‘ Jimmy Harkins, ye’d better try ter make him glad he took yer,’ an’ I’ve been doin’ my best ter please him ever since. An’ say! I’m ter be *permoted* next year, an’ then I’ll be *James*, ’stead er Jimmy.”

Mr. Dainty’s message told of important business which would detain him until late in the evening, possibly too late to permit him to get a train out to his home, so that it might be that he would not return until the morrow.

Mrs. Dainty urged Aunt Charlotte and Nancy to remain with them for company, and as the evening breeze was chilly, she closed the windows and drew the crimson curtains over the lace draperies. The wind was rising, and, although it was a summer evening, they enjoyed the blazing fire in the grate, which Mrs. Dainty had directed the servant to build.

It was odd that, while Aunt Charlotte was telling interesting stories of her school-days, Dorothy was thinking of the tale which Arabella had told.

“I wish Arabella would tell pleasant stories, or not tell any at all,” she said.

“I was just thinking of the one she told this afternoon,” said Nancy, “and I truly wish we hadn’t met her.

“Every time the wind whistles around the corner it makes me start and look

around. I do b'lieve it's the way she tells it as much as the story itself that scares us so. She just peers through her glasses, and then over them, and once in awhile, when she's telling something that is just a little more disagreeable than the rest of the tale, she points her skinny finger at you, and she looks just delighted when you hop."

"I wish the wind wouldn't blow so, because it doesn't sound like wind," Dorothy said. "It sounds like a giant whistling."

Nancy tried bravely to cheer her. "Perhaps if we make believe it's a giant, we'll feel less afraid, because we know there are no giants," she said.

Dorothy laughed.

"We're too big to believe in any fairy folks," she said, "but it is fun to talk

about them, and truly the wind sounds less shrill since you said 'let's make believe.' "

It was a delightful evening, and they all enjoyed it, for when Aunt Charlotte had finished her story she asked Mrs. Dainty for some music, and with rare skill she sang many of her choicest songs. When, later, the hour came for retiring, Dorothy begged that Nancy might share her room with her. "I'd so like to have her with me," she said.

So together the two ran up to Dorothy's lovely chamber, and once there the rosy glow of the pink-shaded lamps and the soft rose tint of the draperies dispelled their fears.

"Let the wind whistle," said Dorothy, "while we are cosy here."

CHAPTER XII

NANCY'S BRAVERY

THE breeze from the open window fanned the lace draperies, and blew one curtain so near to the lamp that Dorothy feared that it might catch fire, and partly closed the window, then standing before the mirror she commenced to remove the ribbons from her hair.

Nancy, struggling to untie her shoe, paused to watch and admire Dorothy.

“Those are beautiful ribbons,” she said, “but I love to see you as you are now, with your hair hanging over your shoulders. I would do anything for you, Dorothy.”

“And so would I for you,” Dorothy replied, and then, before they knew it, they were talking of Arabella.

“She told about all those doses which her Aunt Matilda made her take as if she felt proud to say that she was always taking some kind of — what is it?”

“*Cordial*, did she say?” Nancy asked, at the same time tugging at the ribbons which tied her shoes.

“She said cordial and herb-tea and something else, I’ve forgotten what,” said Dorothy, “and she might have said anything she chose, if only she’d not told that story. It makes me shiver now.”

She crossed the room and looked out at the gardens upon which the moonlight lay like a silver mantle. Nancy followed her and stood with her arms clasped about her.

“I like to see the moonlight on the

lawn," Dorothy said, "but when I look at the shadows of the trees, I wonder if they are really standing still. It almost seems as if the shadows move."

"Then let's look only at the moonlight," said Nancy.

"But you can't help seeing the shadows, Nancy."

"We *can* help seeing them, for we can leave the window and not look out until to-morrow morning, when the sunshine will make everything bright," and, as she spoke, Nancy gently led Dorothy from the window.

A long time they talked of their visit to Vera, and of the good times which they would enjoy now that they were once more at home with Molly and Flossie.

"I'm not the least bit sleepy," Dorothy said when at last they lay talking of their

pleasures and their friends. The lamp was no longer burning, and the moonlight streamed quite across the room. The wind was still blowing, and Nancy tried to talk so rapidly that Dorothy might not hear it, and she thought that she would keep awake until she was sure that Dorothy was asleep.

At last, after what seemed a very long time, she listened, and knew that Dorothy must be asleep and dreaming. Then she nestled in her pillow and soon was soundly sleeping.

The wind had calmed, and only a gentle breeze swayed the long vines which clambered over the balcony railing. The moon had sailed across the sky to where some silvery clouds offered it a fine hiding-place; a hush seemed to rest upon the garden.

The leafy branches of the trees rustled as if whispering together; a graceful vine swung back and forth as if trying to tap at the window. Toward the window, away from it, again and yet again it swung, until a stronger effort of the breeze drove its blossoming tendrils against the glass.

Nancy's eyes opened wide. She was usually drowsy when first awakened, but this time she was instantly wide awake. She saw the clinging vine and noticed that the lace draperies were but gently blowing. She saw, too, that the room was not nearly as light as when they had retired. The moon must be shining, because she could see objects which were near the window, but one side of the room was all in shadow. How still it was! She could plainly hear Dorothy's even breathing; she would lie very still so as not to awaken her. It

seemed to Nancy that she had lain a long time awake, and she wondered what had aroused her from slumber. A slight sound caused her to turn so that she might look toward the end of the room nearest the door.

Again she heard the sound as if some one were turning over the contents of a drawer. What was that by the dressing-case? Who would be in their room at night, and who would think of hunting in a drawer without a light?

Oh, *was* it the figure of a man? A stray moonbeam came in at the window just long enough to fall upon the figure, and to show it to be a stranger of broad and clumsy build. For a moment Nancy's mind was filled with the surprise of it all, then, like a flash, wild terror seized her!

Was he a burglar? Would he be content with stealing, or would he harm them?

Then, worst fear of all, *was* he *Uncle Steve* pausing to steal a few valuables before snatching her? What should she do? If she screamed, he would rush at them; if she lay still, he would surely capture her, and then if Dorothy cried out, he would certainly do something to silence her. The fear that he might harm Dorothy told her of the one thing to do. He was still busy at the upper drawer. An instant she watched him.

There was no time to lose, and when in a second she saw him crouch to hunt in the lower drawers, she slipped noiselessly from the bed to the floor and, trembling from head to foot, crept swiftly along the shadowed side of the room to the low window. Out upon the stone balcony she flew,

making never a sound, and at top speed ran along to Mrs. Dainty's window.

It was rare luck that Mrs. Dainty had been wakeful, and in a light wrapper was sitting at the window.

Like a little sprite Nancy flew across the room before Mrs. Dainty could question her, and reached for the electric button on the wall behind the bed. Instantly the whole house was ablaze with light, while in answer to the second button the butler, the coachman, the footman, and the groom rushed in and up the main stairway, followed by — Robert Corryville.

They met the stranger as he was wildly attempting to escape.

He was a rough specimen, and made a desperate fight for his liberty, and it is possible that he might have succeeded in getting away but for the timely aid of the

neighbor. None of the servants were heavy men, and the thief was plying his fists with good effect when Mr. Corryville grasped both his wrists with an iron grip and pinioned them behind him, then forcing him to the floor, he deliberately sat down upon him, at the same time ordering the groom to ring for the police. The groom, a slender young fellow, ran to do his bidding, and in less time than can be imagined, the burglar was safe in the grasp of the law.

They found Nancy lying upon the floor, with Aunt Charlotte bending over her, bathing her temples. She had done her utmost to summon aid and then had fainted. Now she was opening her eyes and asking eagerly:

“Is my Dorothy safe?”

“Safe because of you, Nancy,” Doro-

thy answered, kissing Nancy's face and caressing her hands.

"Was it Uncle Steve?" was her next question, to which Aunt Charlotte was delighted to reply:

"No, indeed, he was not your Uncle Steve, and from what Mr. Corryville says did not look at all like him."

"Was I quick enough? Was I in time? Why was Mr. Corryville here?" were her next questions.

"You were indeed in time, dear," Mrs. Dainty said, "and we are all safe because of your bravery. Mr. Corryville was returning to his home at this late hour, and when he saw the lights flash suddenly in all the windows, and then saw the servants rushing from the lodge, he thought that something must be wrong, and hurried in to aid if he were needed. He is

a very brave man, although he will not let me say so. He only laughed when I called him brave, and said that his courage was largely due to his having been centre rush on the football team at college.

“ ‘ You must not thank me too generously, Mrs. Dainty,’ he said. ‘ Rudolph Dainty would have done as much for me. My effort called for physical strength, but that child, Nancy, showed amazing bravery; ’ and, oh, my little girl,” she concluded, “ how I bless the day that gave you to me,” and she took Nancy in her arms as tenderly as if she had been her own little daughter.

Nancy, a bit weak, but very happy, lay with her head upon Mrs. Dainty’s shoulder, but as she looked up into the lovely

face, she felt that she must make a confession.

“ You mustn’t say I was *very* brave because, you see, I didn’t know he was a burglar. I thought he was Uncle Steve, and I ran out on the balcony to save myself and to ring for help before he could harm Dorothy.”

“ Nancy, Nancy, that does not make your act less brave,” Mrs. Dainty said, “ for, truly, I believe you would have been more afraid of your Uncle Steve than of any burglar, however brutal he might have been.”

“ Oh, I would! ” Nancy said, drawing yet nearer to the loving woman who so closely held her.

“ Brave you surely were, and when morning comes I shall telephone to Rudolph and tell him what a fright we had,

what a kind friend Mr. Corryville proved to be, and what a brave defender we had in our Nancy."

"Do tell papa just how Nancy hurried right across our room with that horrid burglar there, and how the moment she'd turned on the lights the man ran out and down the stairway, so that I didn't even see him," Dorothy said, eager that Nancy's courage should be fully appreciated.

"Indeed I shall," Mrs. Dainty said, "and now I think we'd better try to get a little sleep, since we're safe for the remainder of the night. Hereafter, the butler and the footman will have rooms in the house, while the other male servants will, as usual, stay at the lodge."

Tired and excited though they were, they soon were dreaming, and when the

daylight came it found a happy household, with Nancy as the centre of interest.

“You must sit in this easiest chair, Nancy,” Dorothy said, “and here on the piazza you shall do just what you like, and when you get over last night’s scare, you’ll be ready for play again.”

The news of the night’s happening at the great stone house at once became known to every one who lived within hearing distance. The police were not silent, and the local paper, proud to have an article of genuine news, made as much of it as possible, telling all the particulars and giving Nancy all the honor which she deserved. At every house where a grocer’s boy called for orders, the servants received from him a thrilling account of the event, while Arabella, proud of her father’s bravery, ha-

stened to Flossie Barnet to tell the great news.

“Only think,” she said, “my papa just caught hold of that burglar till the p’lice came. Isn’t it funny that he wasn’t afraid of that rough man, when he’s *so* afraid of little old Aunt Matilda? The grocer’s boy told our cook that the difference was that Aunt Matilda holds the purse-strings. What do you suppose he meant? Aunt Matilda’s purse hasn’t any strings, and neither has papa’s.”

Flossie could not make it clear, but her Uncle Harry in his chair behind the shrubbery laughed softly. Was it Arabella’s words which amused him?

In answer to Mrs. Dainty’s message over the telephone came a reply so tender, so solicitous that Mrs. Dainty blushed happily, and to Nancy she eagerly said:

“ Mr. Dainty bids me thank you for him for all which you did, and to tell you to look for a parcel directed to you this forenoon.”

“ Oh, how good he has always been to me,” Nancy said. “ I would be glad just to know that he is pleased with me.”

An hour later Jimmy, feeling very important, trudged up the driveway and, touching his cap, placed a very large parcel in Nancy’s hands as he said:

“ With the *compliments* of Mr. Dainty.”

Nancy’s fingers trembled as she untied the strings, removed the wrappings, and held up for all to admire a large bouquet of exquisite flowers, to which was fastened a card.

“ How beautiful! How *very* beautiful! ” Nancy said, bending to catch their fragrance.

“Just see what the card says,” said Dorothy.

Nancy looked, then flushed with pleasure.

“Oh, Aunt Charlotte, everybody, see what he says!” said Nancy.

“I have a loving family, and a host of friends, among the bravest I am proud to name, — Nancy Ferris.”

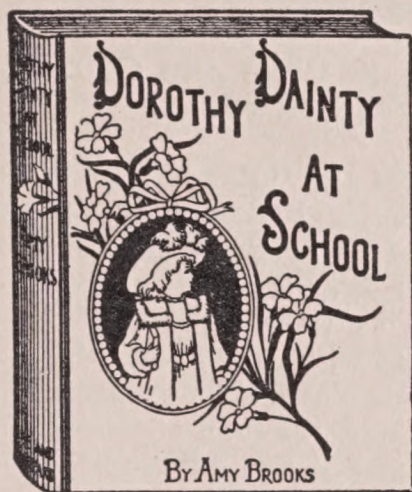
And when early in the afternoon Mr. Dainty left his business to hasten home, he found a happy and excited household awaiting him. How glad they were to see him, and how much they had to tell! It was a merry party at dinner, each member doing his best to be entertaining. In the evening there were delightful plans for the coming season, which Mrs. Dainty unfolded and which Dorothy and Nancy hailed with delight. Of the merry school-

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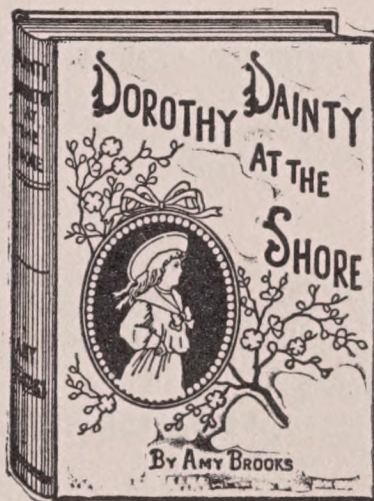
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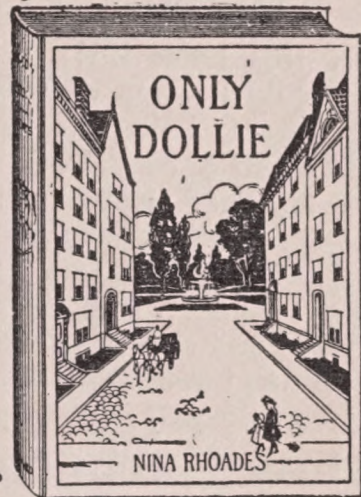
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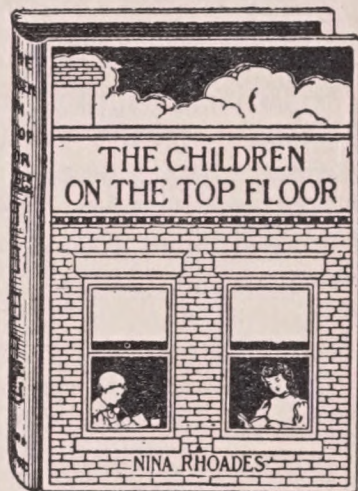
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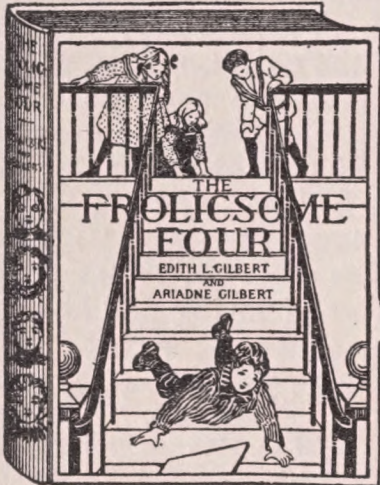
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