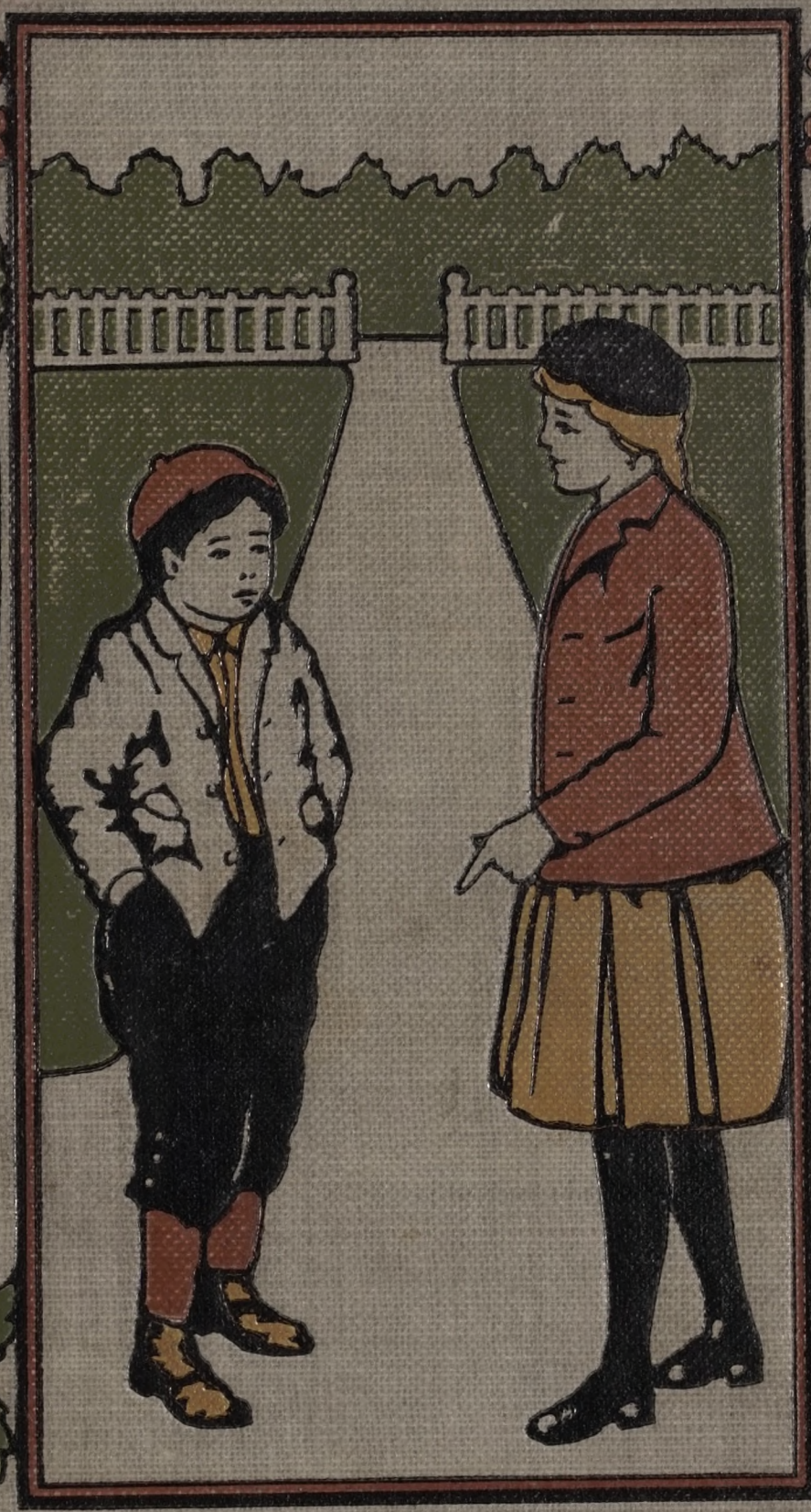
THE DOINGS of NANCY



BY

EVELYN RAYMOND

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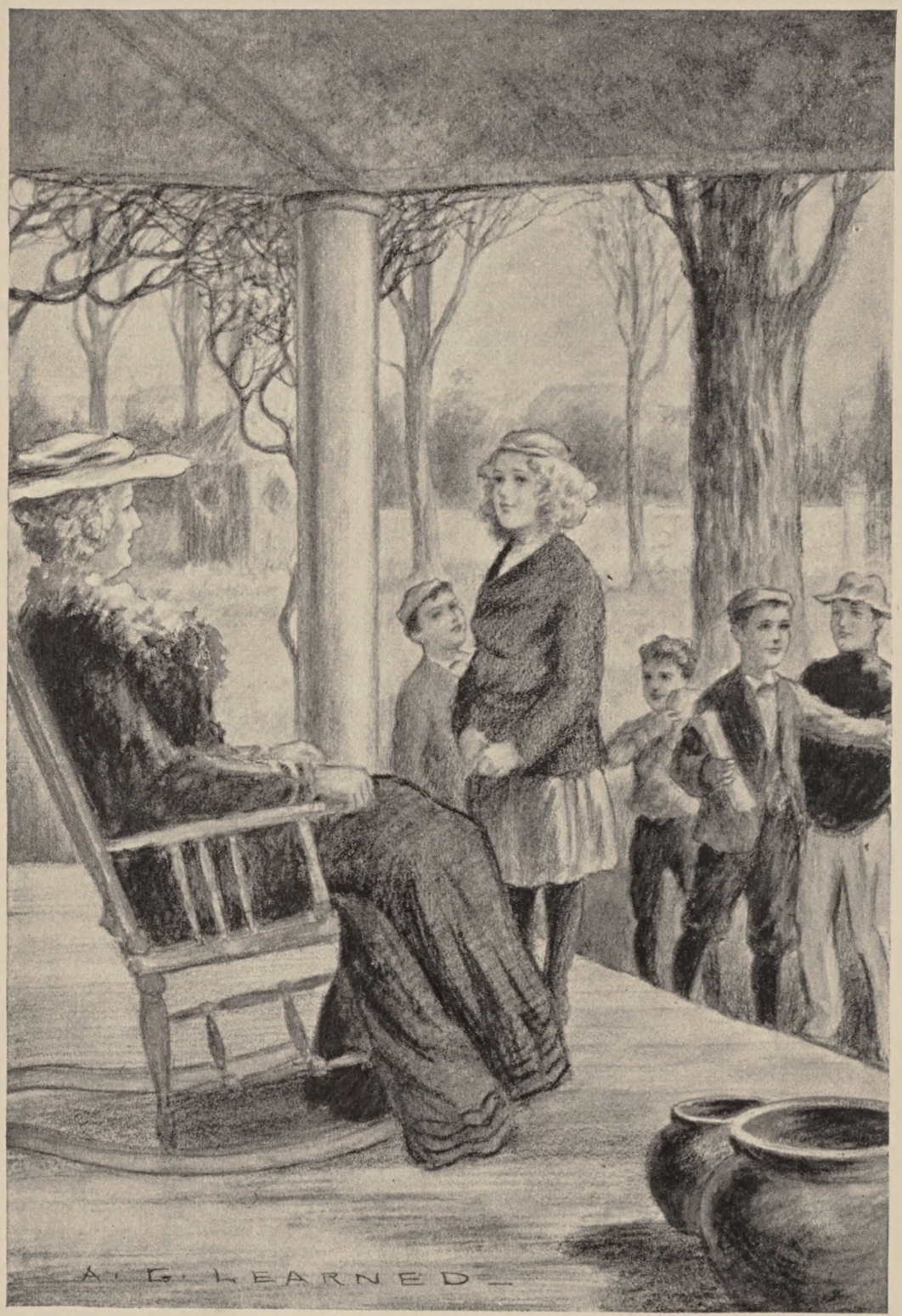

"I CAME TO ANSWER YOUR ADVERTISEMENT, IF YOU PLEASE.'"

The Doings of Nancy

By EVELYN RAYMOND

Author of "Boys and Girls of Brantham," "Mixed Pickles," "My Lady Barefoot," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY A. G. LEARNED

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THE DOINGS OF NANCY

CHAPTER I.

BROTHER AND SISTER

SINGING as lustily as the birds in the shrubbery, Nancy came skipping out of the kitchen, with the tray, to the porch where Frank lay on his cot awaiting breakfast. The glory of the spring morning was in her heart, making it merrier than ever, but just then the sight of her happiness was an aggravation to the crippled brother, who exclaimed:

"I do wish you'd keep still!"

"Couldn't! Nothing keeps still on a day like this. I can almost see the things grow."

"Humph!"

"Come, Boy! You're hungry. See how nicely I've fixed your oatmeal," and she

placed the saucer on the little table, convenient to his hand.

He sniffed suspiciously, took one morsel, and pushed the dish aside.

"Oh! laddie, take care! That's the very last piece of step-aunt-mother's china left. If you broke it—"

"Well, I can't eat that stuff. It's scorched."

"Is it! Oh, dear!

"There was a small maiden of Norwich
Who made the best sort of porridge,
Till one day it burned,
And then it was spurned
By a fussy young man who was—horrid!"

"Trash! That's no rhyme."

"Maybe it's the truth, though! How's this? Any better?

"There was a dear sister named Nancy,
Who for cooking had quite a fancy,
But when breakfast she burned
She found it returned
By an ungrateful brother called Frank-sy!"

"Don't try any more. Isn't there anything else I can have?"

"Truly, Frank, I don't know. The four little Bateses ate the very last slice of bread there was, and every scrap of potato. Even father'll have to put up with a baker's loaf for his dinner, and will stop for it on his way to work. But wait! I'll tell you! Old Mrs. Wakeman's white hen strayed into our woodshed yesterday, and maybe she laid an egg there. If she did — her mistress says 'findings are keepings.' I'll see."

Away she ran, singing, of course, her disappointment at spoiling her invalid's breakfast already forgotten in the hope of providing a better one, and Frank watched her, amused yet envious, thinking:

"That certainly is the best-natured, homeliest girl in Norwich! But I wish I had her legs. The idea of my lying here helpless and she free to run where she likes, yet no account to anybody. While I — Somebody else'll get that clerkship — and all for a

stupid ball game. It seems as if I couldn't bear it!"

Something very like tears came into the boy's fine eyes, and at sound of children's voices squabbling in the passage the scowl deepened on his brow. He resolutely looked away from them as the four small boys, his stepbrothers, came out on the porch to bid him good-by before going to school; and when each had hurled at him the prescribed formula: "Good-by, brother Frank; hope you'll soon get well again," and vanished through the gateway, he was greatly relieved. Sometimes they jostled his poor leg in its plaster cast, and sometimes they knocked his book or glass of water beyond his reach and left him longing for both till somebody chanced to come and restore them. This morning they had done nothing worse than leave their youngest brother, baby Solomon, sprawling on the porch floor, having shaken off his hold upon them as they dashed away.

But nothing dismayed Solomon; not even

the fact that he was flat upon his back, and that the more violently he struggled to make his fat legs of use in turning his body over, the straighter they pointed toward the porch roof.

However, the infant's wrigglings finally carried him against the railing and, by its aid, he managed to roll upon his face, and thence to rise upon his pudgy feet. Not a whimper had escaped the little fellow, and though he now stood uncertainly, trembling and panting, he merely regarded his big brother with that intense gravity which had earned for him the nickname of "Solemnity."

"Well, small sir, you did it! You're a plucky little chap, aren't you?" cried Frank, forgetting his own troubles for the moment.

There was no answer, save a gurgle of delight, as Solomon discovered the saucer of oatmeal and toddled toward it. But his fat hands had no sooner closed upon it than he lost his balance and fell backward, the cher-

ished dish breaking upon the boards and his own courage forsaking him. His shrieks brought Mrs. Bates from her housework and Nancy from her egg-hunting, and caused Frank to cover his ears against the din.

But midway to the house, the sister was stopped by Mrs. Wakeman, leaning over the fence and extending something carefully covered with a napkin, as she called:

"Here, girlie, is a bit of steak left from our own breakfast, and maybe the poor boy, yon, can relish it. I said to Mr. Wakeman, I said, 'Hiram, that's too nice a piece of meat to go into a cold ice-box.' 'Then put it into somebody's stummick,' he said. So here 'tis; and a hot roll and roast potato to keep it company. No, no. No thanks. It's a pretty how-de-do if a neighbor can't lend a hand to another, now and then. By the way, how many eggs did old Whitey lay in your wood-shed?"

"Not one! Though, if she had, I should certainly have begged it of you for Frank.

You see, I burned the porridge, and — there wasn't anything else. It's the queerest thing how hungry this Bates family is, all the time. I try to eat as little as I can, myself, but the boys — well, it would make you stare to see how fast a plate of bread gets emptied."

"Never mind, Nancy. Be thankful they're so hearty, and hurry to Frank with that steak. Here's the morning paper, too, if he'd like it. As for me, I'm too busy to bother with newspapers, and Mr. Wakeman has finished it. My! how that little Solomon does screech!"

"Yes, but it isn't often he cries, poor darling. Thank you, thank you, so much; and I'll bring the dishes back in a few minutes."

Radiant with pleasure at the feast he was to enjoy, Nancy hurried to her brother's side and carefully placed the dainty breakfast before him. The mother had carried Solomon away, and there seemed nothing left to mar the peace of the morning; but, to Nancy's

surprise, the cripple pushed the dishes angrily aside, remarking:

"I wish that old woman would keep her 'cold victuals' at home. I'm not a beggar, if I did break my leg. Take the stuff back with my compliments, please. I — I hate her! I hate — everything!"

Down upon the floor dropped Nancy, laughing, yet clasping her hands with a tragic gesture, as she burst forth with another "Limerick:"

"There is a young crosspatch named Bates,
Who his kindly old neighbor just hates,
For 'twas her mistake
To send him hot steak,
Which as horrid 'cold victuals' he rates."

In spite of himself, Frank laughed, and as his lips parted to do so, plump went a morsel of buttered potato into the open cavity between them. He had to swallow it, but cried: "Quit —"

"'That!'" finished the girl, for him, as a piece of meat followed the potato.

"Nan —"

This time it was a bit of roll, and, finding himself vanquished, as well as the food refreshing, Frank made a virtue of necessity and submitted to be fed with the entire contents of the big plate. After which his crossness had entirely disappeared, though there was left in its stead a look of such unhappiness that Nancy's heart sank. With a sympathetic impulse she threw her arms about him and begged:

"Don't look so wretched, laddie! I can't have it! I know it's hard, dreadfully hard, and I wish I could take your place on the cot here and give you my own uncracked legs!"

"That's just it, Nan. They're cracked bones, not honest broken ones, and they're bound not to heal. The doctors talked about 'two months,' there at the hospital where I was taken from the field, but yesterday, when I went across in the ambulance to have the cast changed, they said there was only one chance to save me from being *always* lame."

"Franksy! What — do you mean?"

"Just exactly what I say. It was their talk made father so blue last night, and mother so quiet this morning. I know she's trying to think out a way to help me, but she can't. How can she, when father's in debt for his own doctor's stuff, and able to work but half the time? What a fool, what a fool I was to go into a football game — a beggar like me!"

"Now see here, Frank Bates. Don't you dare to call my brother names. If you do I'll dose you with more 'Limericks' — or worse. But you tell me in plain words, 'suitable to my simple comprehension,' what those learned old bone-setters said and meant."

"I must keep on these casts for three months; then, if I am not to be left lame, a limper, a hoppety-pat for life, I must have a very expensive brace made to fit me, and must wear that for a long time afterward. Now, do you wonder I'm cross and — horrid?"

"No, I don't. I'm glad you are. When

sick folks are — umm! — it's a good sign. They're on the mend, so Mrs. Wakeman says. But, tell me. How much would this brace really cost?"

"Fifty dollars, at least. Possibly seventy-five."

"Frank Bates! Oh, oh! For a little bit of a thing no bigger than your leg?"

"So they say. Surgical things cost fearfully. It's no use. I must face what can't be helped. Yet it makes me mad to think it's only fifty dollars, that lots of rich people waste in foolishness, which would save me from lifelong disgrace!"

"There's no disgrace in being lame, Boy, any more than —"

"Don't preach! That's easy enough, though, so long as it's I not you who has to suffer. That makes the difference. I wish you'd go away. I didn't sleep much last night, and maybe I can now."

Nancy showed no resentment at her brother's unjust words, and scarcely heard

them. Already she had determined that this seemingly impossible fifty dollars must be secured, though with no idea how. She arose and gathered up the dishes and newspaper, then swiftly retreated to a dusky corner of the rickety woodshed, and the spot she always sought upon the rare occasions when she wished to be alone.

Putting her neighbor's china in a safe place, she sat down upon the chips, leaned her head against the cobwebby wall, and spread the paper in her lap.

"Now, I've got to think my hardest! Frank Bates shall not — shall not be a cripple — never! If we could only swap legs! Of course, we can't do that, though it would seem the easiest way out. Father hasn't the money, and poor step-aunt-mother never has a cent. Once I had a nickel. Alas! it's gone. Fifty dollars is five thousand cents, and a nickel is five. Five into five thousand — give it up!"

With a comical gesture she dropped her hands upon the paper in her lap, then bending forward, raised them and laid her face between them. For a time she gazed upon the printed columns without gaining any meaning from them, so absorbed was she; then one short paragraph seemed suddenly to leap into view and impress itself upon her mind. The next instant she was upon her feet, ecstatically waving the newspaper and emitting a series of delighted shrieks that unflattering Frank would have termed "squeals."

"I've found it! I've found it! I'll do it — yes, I will! Oh, let me be quick — quick — quick!"

A few moments later the excited girl bounced into Mrs. Wakeman's kitchen, deposited that lady's dishes on the table, hugged her till she choked, and bounced out again, leaving the astonished matron wondering:

"What's that madcap after now! Seems

if her folks had hard times enough, seems if, but nothing ever worries *her*. Time and again I've said to Hiram, I said: 'Trouble slips off Nancy Bates as if she'd been greased;' and he said, 'Better to slip it than to lug it,' he said. Likely he was right. Quite likely."

CHAPTER II.

SEEKING A SITUATION

Miss Lucretia Halpine was a gentlewoman with very strict ideas of propriety to which she felt she had been unfaithful, as she read and re-read her own advertisement in that morning's *Local*, still damp from the press. When Jane came in to clear away the breakfast things her mistress looked up and exclaimed, half reproachfully:

"Jane, they've put it in!"

"Well, ma'am, that's what you expected when you sent it, wasn't it? Else why?" returned the servant, in her common-sensible way.

The flush deepened on the lady's fair, elderly cheek as she assented:

"Yes, of course. But it's the first, the very first time in all my life that I ever

rushed into print in this bold manner. It's quite disgraceful to need help, anyway, but to advertise — My! I didn't realize how it would seem; so like airing one's domestic affairs in public. And I do not see what possessed Solomon to get rheumatic now, in the spring of the year, with gardening coming on so fast and all. If he'd chosen the winter — "

"Laws, Miss 'Cretia. We're all old folks together, you and him and me. He's the oldest, course, and so the likeliest to fail first. But don't you fret, honey. He's a good deal worrieder over the work than you be, and will get into that garden soon's he can hold a spade. I wish you'd read it out, ma'am, if you please. Then I can tell it to him. He thought it was dreadful clever of you to write things good enough to print, though I told him there wasn't much in the head-work line you couldn't do if you tried."

So Miss Lucretia read as follows:

"Wanted: A boy to work in a flower

garden. Must be neat and trustworthy. References required. Apply to Miss Halpine, Cedarcroft."

Jane complimented the author of this effusion:

"There! Don't that sound slick? I feel proud of it, indeed, and the first time, too. I'll hurry to tell husband before I forget a single word," and she at once departed; to return promptly and in great excitement, crying out:

"Miss 'Cretia, look out the window — town way — quick! The road's as full of boys as 'tis of angleworms after a shower! And you a-wonderin' if you'd get one answer!"

Miss Halpine crossed the room, glanced, and gasped:

"Oh! Jane!"

Then she sank into a chair, and presently said, quite calmly:

"I'm as foolish as you. Of course, all those lads are not coming here. Maybe

there's a school holiday and they're off for a picnic or fishing trip. It's absurd to imagine that one small advertisement —"

The old servant interrupted:

"It's as true as preaching. Every mother's son of them *is* making for our gate! Solomon, he's always talking about the 'power of the press,' 'specially along 'lection time, but yonder beats any 'lection I ever saw. What shall I do with 'em? Whatever shall I do with 'em?"

"Lock the gate. They mustn't come in; at least, not so many. The paths are fresh from the rain and they'll track them dreadfully. Oh, why did I do that senseless thing!"

"What's a gate to a boy, ma'am? Only something to climb over. Better let 'em track the gravel than the grass. It's your own doings, and we've got to see the thing out, somehow; if we live to do it!"

"Oh, oh! I didn't know there were so many lads in the whole of Norwich!" cried

the mistress, taking another look out of the window, and now able to hear the shouts and laughter of the approaching applicants, whose number seemed countless. "Call Solomon. He must get up long enough to protect us. He must."

Jane closed her lips grimly; then opened them to say:

"Not an up will he get, ma'am. No, indeedy. Proud as he is of your writin' smartness, he was mad about its being put in the paper. He said if you'd give him time he'd find somebody worth having around, but them yonder! Humph!"

Miss Halpine rose. It was not the first time that this old couple, who had served her from their youth, had presumed upon her patience. Devoted as they were to her interests, their occasional fits of obstinacy could only be met by indifference; and now, as if she were not at all disturbed by what was happening, she replied:

"Very well. Just as he pleases. I will

go out on the south porch and receive the lads."

"But, Miss' Cretia, you might catch cold, or they might be sassy."

"The air is mild, I will take my hat, and —I can find all the 'sass' I wish within doors;" and, by this time seeing rather the ludicrous than the annoying side of the affair, the mistress of Cedarcroft stepped out upon the piazza with a smile upon her face.

The foremost of her small fellow citizens had already reached the spotless steps and was about to put his muddy foot upon them, when a strange figure flew around the house corner and pushed him back, while a gay voice reproved him thus:

"Aren't you ashamed, Jimmy Lincoln? How dare you mess things that way? Wipe your shoes; and, anyway, I'm first. *I'm first.* Oh, please, please, Miss Halpine, take me! *Please take me!*"

At this a wild shout went up from every one of the throng, and the deafening uproar

caused Miss Lucretia to look hastily about for some retreat. Instantly, a stoop chair was pushed toward her and she was assisted to it by the same person — was it girl or boy? — who had taken Jimmy to task.

The lady cleared her eyes and looked fixedly at this plain-faced small creature, whose gingham frock was topped by a boy's jacket and hat, whose hair was so red it fairly glowed, whose freckled nose stood out in an inquisitive way from a pair of very rosy cheeks, and whose eyes and smile were the brightest she had ever seen.

"Well, child, what are you?"

"I'm Nancy Bates, Miss Halpine."

"May I ask, Nancy, your errand here?"

"I came to answer your advertisement, if you please."

"But that called for a boy."

"It's only the difference in clothes, isn't it? Anyway, I wore my brother's things — to make it more real like. Please try me, Miss Halpine. Even if I didn't need the

work terribly, — or the pay for it, I mean, — I'd love to dig around in such a lovely place."

The boys on the path began to grow noisy again, after listening thus far, and Nancy turned upon them fiercely:

"Now, you quit that and behave yourselves. If you don't I'll tell the whole business. There's only — "

"Girl-boy! Tattletale!" called somebody in the crowd, and Nancy's face grew red as her hair. But she still held herself in hand, and merely returned, in a very quiet tone:

"It's fair play for those who really started to get the job to have a chance. If the rest of you don't go back, you'll be mighty late for school, and some of your folks won't like that."

There was an uneasy movement amid the group, and some even faced about to follow her advice. Jimmy Lincoln, however, was not to be coerced by any girl, even one who

was supported by her brother's jacket, and retorted:

"Fair for one is fair for two. Tell us what you're up to, and then, maybe, we'll see."

"I'm up to this much. I'm square. I want this place if Miss Halpine will hire me. If she does, I'll tell you why. If she doesn't, why, then, it's nobody's business but mine, and — may the best man win! Now, are you satisfied?"

"All right. Come on, fellows!" answered Jimmy; and at their ringleader's order all but two of the mischievous lads vanished from the premises. Those who remained were really anxious for the situation, yet, as inquiry disclosed, wholly unfitted for it. So Miss Lucretia dismissed them and then turned to Nancy for an explanation of this wholesale trespass on her privacy.

"Do you know why all those boys came here, when only two really wanted work?"

Too tired to stand any longer, the girl

dropped down on the topmost step, took off Frank's jacket, and fanned herself with his hat, as she replied:

"You mustn't be angry with, them, please, Miss Halpine. You won't, will you?"

Nancy was so unconscious of any rudeness in seating herself, uninvited, that the punctilious gentlewoman could feel no resentment, but began to find a sort of fascination in the child's very homeliness. She had never seen a face whose plainness was so brightened by gay good humor and simplicity, and smiled as she asked:

"What has that to do with it?"

"Only this, Miss Halpine. They're all my schoolfellows, and jolly ones. This morning the last two, those you just sent away, saw your advertisement and started to answer it. The others knew they weren't fit, being so little and untidy, and needing to be in school, anyhow; so the rest just came along, pretending they'd all try. Every fellow they met they coaxed with them — I got wind of

it and came across lots, ahead — and so it was just silly boys' nonsense, a lark, you see. They didn't mean any harm, and they didn't think about having no business here till they were fairly on the grounds. Then they wouldn't back out, no matter what. That's 'cause they're boys. Girls, now — "

Just then Nancy saw a twinkle in her listener's eyes and blushed even more deeply. Though she had often see Miss Halpine at church or driving about the town, she had never before spoken with the lady, and now realized that there was something different about this stately mistress of Cedarcroft from those with whom she was more familiar. She fancied that no young girl could be lovelier or more interesting than this delicate old gentlewoman with her snowy curls and pink cheeks, and with the cluster of violets tucked in the lace garniture of her gray morning gown. A yearning to know her better, to be worthy of her friendship, seized the strong-willed, unpolished applicant for labor; yet

she felt that her mad prank of wearing Frank's clothes had ruined her prospects, and, with a humility strange to herself, she rose to go away.

"Miss Halpine, I beg your pardon It's queer that I didn't think — though I never do think at the right time — how silly I was acting. I hope you'll get a good boy right soon, and he ought to be as proud as Punch, if yonder's the garden he's to work in. That's the loveliest bed of hyacinths I ever saw. Far prettier than the one in the park. Good morning."

"Wait, child. Let us talk a few moments. I'd like to know more about you, if, as you said, you really need to earn money. Sit down again, please."

To sanguine Nancy this slight encouragement seemed full assurance of success, and the face she now raised toward her hostess was almost dazzling in its radiance.

"Yes, indeed, and thank you. What would you like to know?"

"Hum. I think anything and everything you care to tell."

"Shall I begin at the beginning?"

"I fancy that's the best way to tell a story."

"So do I. Well, then, I suppose father's the beginning. He's Wilson Bates, a 'boss' carpenter. He had the pneumonia last year and hasn't been real well since. Mother, my own mother, would be next to him. She died when Frank was seven and I four years old. Aunt Mercy was mother's sister and lived with us, and after awhile she and father married each other. That makes her my step-aunt-mother, and she's as good as gold. Then come my A-B-C-D stepbrothers, Adrian, Bertram, Claude, and Donald. Step-aunt-mother named them out of books, but father named the baby — Solomon. Frank is the smartest boy in Norwich, and had just had a place offered him in the big drug store when he got his knee cracked every which way, playing football. Now he has to lie on a cot

with his leg in a plaster cast, and it will be months, maybe, before he can have the last one taken off. When he does, if he isn't to be lame always, he must wear a steel brace to keep his bones right. The brace will have to be made just to fit him, and will cost fifty or more dollars; and we haven't them, and that's why."

"Do you mean that you want to work in my garden in order to earn this money for your brother? Do you love him so much?"

"Oh! I do, I do!"

"Since you are the only daughter, if even a little one, how can you be spared from home? Isn't your duty there?"

"I can be spared, easy enough. Step-aunt-mother is willing. You see it's such a tiny home, and she's such a good housekeeper."

"But what about the sewing for such a large family? Though I've heard that the modern girls do very little of that."

"Why, it isn't large. There are only five

small boys, and we buy them ready-made. It's cheaper."

"Wh—at?" gasped the astonished Miss Lucretia.

"The clothes, of course, not the boys!" laughed Nancy, showing her well-kept teeth. Indeed, had she know it, her perfect cleanliness and wholesomeness were already more persuasive to her possible employer than the best written reference could have been. Miss Halpine had an extreme love for neatness, and this was equalled save by her other passion for floriculture, and only for the latter would she ever sacrifice the former. She saw that Nancy was deft and sure in her movements, and that her clean gingham frock needed no buttons. Had one been missing or a gather ripped, the girl's prospects would have been less hopeful than they were; but, even so, there remained the question of wages and ability, and these matters must now be settled.

"Fifty dollars is a good deal of money. What do you expect to earn?"

"I don't know. Whatever any other boy would, I suppose."

Miss Halpine frowned, and said in reproof:

"Drop pretending boyhood. It isn't nice, in a girl. A boy, a strong boy, would earn fifty cents a day — working days — and find himself. That, my man Solomon tells me, is the regular price."

"Fifty cents a day! Ooh-ee!" cried Nancy, to whom the sum seemed great. "But how could I find myself if I'm already found?"

Miss Lucretia laughed. "That's a provincialism, and means you will have to furnish your own food. Jane is too old to have anything added to her labors, and maybe would not cook for you, even if I asked her to do so. She and Solomon, her husband, have served me for forty years; and they both resent the intrusion of any stranger, even a boy, into our quiet life. I live in my garden and my library, and must have no disturbances of any sort. Solomon has become rheumatic, and that is why I am seeking other help. My

poor flowers must not suffer, even if he does. Come with me. I'll test your strength. There's a border to be spaded, an empty one that you can't hurt, and the soil is in just fit condition. Did you ever handle a spade?"

"No, Miss Halpine. I never had a chance."

"You shall have it now. This way, please."

From his armchair beside the kitchen window the old gardener and man-of-all-work, Solomon Smith, watched his mistress and the small, red-headed girl cross the lawn to the tool-house. The lady stepped daintily, holding her skirts aloft as if she feared to hurt the tender grass, but the girl plunged ahead, digging her heels into the soft sod and thus angering her unseen observer, till he cried:

"Jane! Jane Smith, come here! Miss 'Cretia's boy is a girl, and she's cutting that new-seeded plot all to flinders, tramping over it like a horse. Oh! oh!"

"More like an ox, I should say. No horse ever trod that heavy. But don't you worry.

Mistress won't hire no girl to switch her petticoats 'mongst her posies."

"She wouldn't, hey? Ain't she a woman, and changeable? Look there. Look there, will you? The young one's got hold of a spade she can hardly lug, and sakes! she's tackling that bed 'at I wouldn't have touched for any money. Open this window, woman! Open it quick!"

Jane threw up the sash, and Solomon sent forth a yell so startling that Nancy dropped her spade and screeched a response, while Miss Halpine clapped her hands over her ears and waited, tremblingly, what next. It came in another outcry from the enraged gardener:

"Get out of there! Get out of there, or I'll fire my crutch at you!"

CHAPTER III.

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKES

"WHAT have I done? For it must be I he means?" asked Nancy, laughing, yet frightened.

"I don't understand. I thought there was nothing in this flower-bed. Please step to the window and ask him," said Miss Halpine.

The girl skipped house-ward, humming under her breath:

"There was an Old Man with the gout,
Who sent forth a blood-curdling shout,
Just because a young maid
Had borrowed his spade
To dig in a garden about."

"Singing, are you, Sassy?" demanded Solomon, as Nancy paused just beyond arm's reach from the window.

"I didn't mean to sing 'Sassy,' and some

mightn't call it 'singing,'" retorted she, having taken an instant and intense dislike to the irate Solomon.

"Well, you're as peart as them there yellow crocuses yonder, and not nigh so pretty. You go back to Miss 'Cretia and tell her that border's full of dormant verbenys. Self-seeded, and not to be touched by nobody, no matter who. You tell her I say so, or I'll tell her myself if she'll come nigh enough to give me a chance."

"You'll tell her? You'd dare? Speak like that to that splendid lady?" cried the small stranger, amazed.

"Well, I'd like to know why not?" was the return question, as the old man looked over his spectacles, the better to observe his reprover. "Haven't I raised her, so to speak? Was she anything more'n a chit of a girl when her folks died and left me and Jane in control? Forty odd year I've took charge of Cedarcroft, and not to be set down at the end of 'em by a young one like you. You'd best be off to

school, learnin' sense, 'stead of pesterin' Miss 'Cretia."

Just then a spasm of pain seized the old man, and he shrieked aloud, causing Nancy to spring backward, afraid. Then she understood why, and ran to him, crying:

"Oh! do you suffer like that? Can't I do something? Call somebody? Help in some way?"

"Yes, you can. You can quit asking questions, shut that window, and get out!" he snapped, as, the twinge passing, he was able to speak.

"Thank you!" said the girl, promptly obeying, yet already sorry for her pertness toward one in such evident distress.

Miss Halpine had waited for her by the forbidden square of bare earth, and received the message very quietly, though Nancy had put it into a more courteous form than Solomon had given it. Indeed, despite his boast to the contrary, the faithful old fellow would never have personally ad-

dressed his mistress save with utmost respect.

"Verbenas again! I thought we were to have poppies here, this year. Well, no matter. The self-sown ones are sometimes very beautiful, and have the merit of fragrance, which plants from cuttings mostly lack. Here is a lighter tool, and we'll go to the vegetable patch, where, surely, you can do no harm thus early in the season."

Nancy took the implement, which, while not so heavy as the first one, had a handle reaching high above her own head, and followed valiantly; yet wondering if "gardening" was nothing but "spading," and trying to recall just how Mr. Wakeman did, when he sometimes turned a sod or two in his back yard for the benefit of his hens.

"I know. He puts the edge down straight, spits on his hands, — ugh! I can't do that! — grunts and draws his breath, — swwiisshhd! — jams his foot against the spade as if he hated it, and — up she comes!"

Up it came, indeed! With such suddenness that the small gardener lost her balance and tumbled backward. But she was erect again almost as quick as down, and laughing merrily at her own expense.

"You put too much force in it," explained Miss Halpine, who knew the use and abuse of every tool in her stock. "The earth here is very soft, has been worked over for years and years, and is so rich that anything put in it grows luxuriantly. Try again, firmly, not jerkily. That's the right way."

"Funny. There's a right and a wrong way to everything, isn't there? and funnier still that I always hit the wrong one first. There. Is that more like?"

"Yes. That is very well, indeed. Oh! how good it seems to get into the garden again after the long winter."

Nancy's intrusive nose had been sniffing and wrinkling itself in a peculiar fashion, and presently she inquired:

"Do you know what it is that smells so

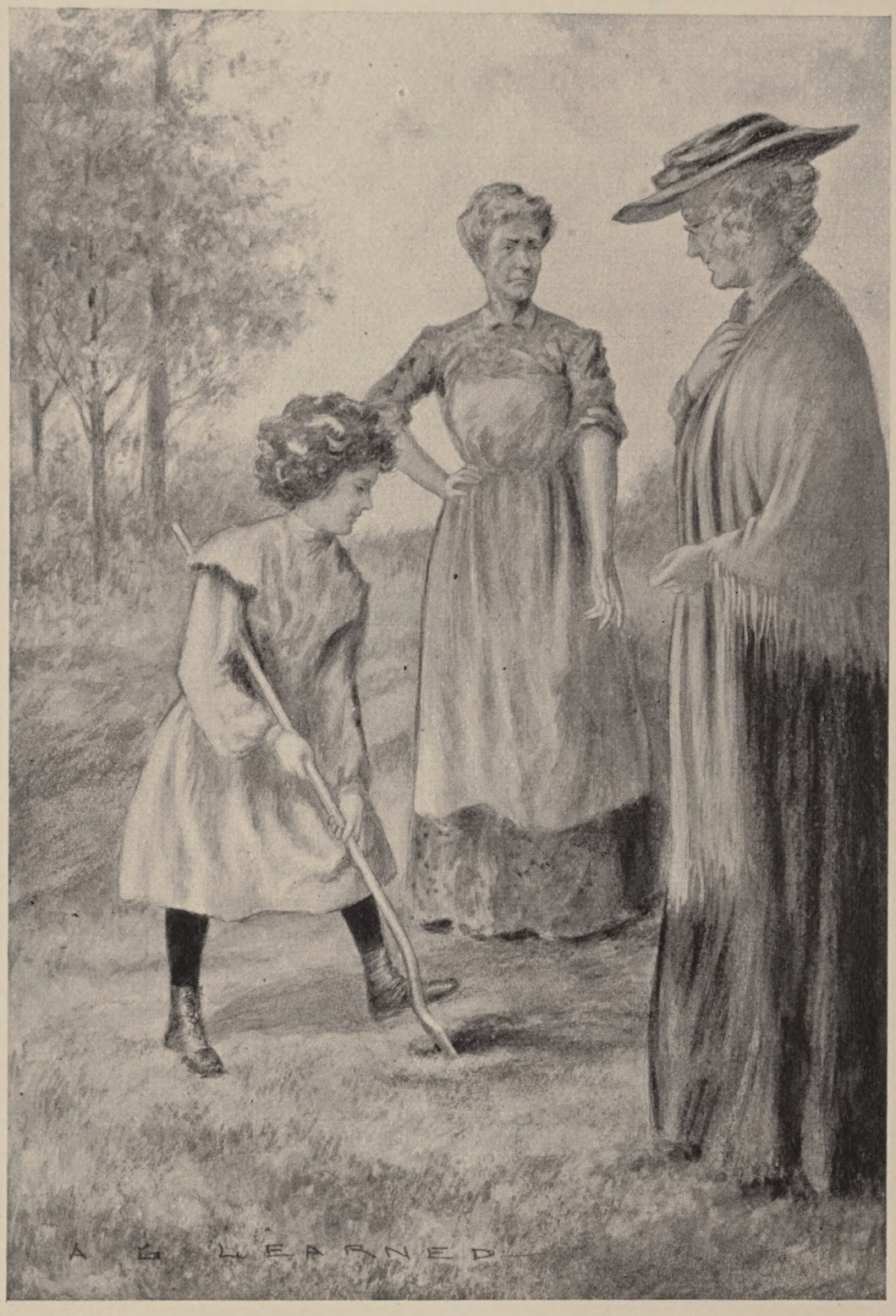
sweet? Seems as if I could just take up great handfuls of it — this way," and she clasped her fingers about her nostrils with an ecstatic little gesture which left a muddy trace behind it.

Miss Halpine smiled, well pleased, and cried, almost as joyously:

"It's the odor of the earth, my dear. To every real gardener there is a delightful fragrance in the freshly turned mold, and if you've discovered it already, you are certain to love your work."

"Oh! then you think I will do?" cried the girl, with another clasping of her hands and another of her dazzling smiles.

Miss Halpine did not immediately reply. Though she felt almost as anxious to keep this eager small person in her service as the child was to remain there, the sight of Jane bearing down upon them from the direction of the house, armed with an umbrella, shawl, and overshoes, had suddenly recalled her to the practical side of the affair. Though she



"'DO YOU CALL THAT THERE TOP-SCRATCHING DIGGING?'"

wouldn't have admitted it even to herself, in reality, she was much more afraid of Jane than the servant was of her. Jane disapproved of sentiment in any form, and Miss Lucretia knew that there was more sentiment than fact about Nancy's spading.

Indeed, the old housekeeper promptly called attention to this matter, pointing contemptuously downward and demanding:

"Do you call that there top-scratching digging? Eh? Why, a yearling baby could stir the sile deeper'n she does. I do hope, Miss 'Cretia, if you will insist upon havin' intruders 'round, you'll pick out such as are worth while. A chit of a child like that, and a girl into the bargain! Sissy, how old be you?"

"Twelve," answered Nancy, stoutly, and making herself as tall as she could.

"Twelve? Humph! You don't look it. You're nearer ten, I should say, if I was to judge."

"Jane, you shouldn't —" began Miss Halpine, but Nancy interrupted, hotly:

"Then you aren't a judge, that's all. I was twelve years old last month, and if I'm small, I can't help it. Size wasn't mentioned in the advertisement, that I noticed."

"Well, you've got one thing big enough, anyway: that's your tongue. Here, I'll show you how to spade. I can do it almost as well as Solomon does, only I can't cook and garden, too. Watch me. This is the how of it;" and seizing the spade in her strong old hands, Jane thrust it deeply into the soft soil, brought it up heaping, and with a deep, moist hole left behind.

"Hmm. I see. Only, it's so anglewormy. I hate crawly things. Don't you?"

"Not such harmless crawlers as those. Their movements keep the ground aërated and free from mould — mould with a 'u' in it," answered Miss Halpine, with a smile which now showed some disappointment.

Jane noticed the disappointment, and, having freed her mind to the mistress whom she

tyrannized yet dearly loved, now graciously observed:

"Well, have your own way, honey, as you always do. You've more notions than sense about some things, and if this young one pleases you — yet how in reason can she? — it's your business, not mine. Life ain't all catnip for any of us. But you put on your gum shoes and things, else you'll get sick, just as spring is coming on, like you 'cused husband of doing. *His* trouble come by dispensation, but *your'n* 'll be by foolhardiness. Folks getting on in years can't resk being careless."

Though this last reminder was not intended for impertinence, it brought a deeper color to Miss Halpine's cheek, and made Nancy furious. She had already, with girlish enthusiasm, idealized her new acquaintance into a sort of saint, and now gazed after the retreating housekeeper with flashing eyes and clenched fists; then suddenly burst forth:

"There was an old woman named Jane,
Who loved to give every one pain,
So her mistress she hurt
With a spadeful of dirt,
That horrid old creature named Jane!"

Then Miss Halpine laughed and demanded:

"Why, child, are you given to that sort of thing?"

"I — I'm afraid I am. It's silly, I know; but you see the time has seemed so long to poor Frank, and it helped. But I'll try not to do it here — if *she'll* let me stay."

Miss Halpine winced. Childhood goes unerringly to the truth, and it had been left for this outspoken girl to put the case as it really was, but, as the lady instantly resolved, it should be no longer. To Nancy she said, with kind decision:

"Anything which helps another to bear pain isn't silly. You may have the situation, if your father, as well as stepmother, consents to it. I don't know how much help you'll be

in the gardening line, but I am won by your sisterly love to give you a trial. When can you begin?"

"Right now, if you'll let me?"

"Very well."

The promptness pleased Miss Lucretia, but she was rather dismayed by finding herself seized about the waist and enthusiastically hugged. Yet she was as suddenly released, and Nancy stood before her with down-dropped head and arms, looking penitent enough to please one even so fastidious as the mistress of Cedarcroft.

"Oh! I do beg pardon, Miss Halpine. It has happened again, the doing first and thinking afterward! I just fancied how Frank would look when I told him he could have the brace, that I could earn it for him without bothering father. As he says, if he'd broken his leg in doing anything useful, it wouldn't have seemed so mean. As it is, he's not only lost the wages he was going to earn, but he's been expense already. He'll pay everything

back, though, when he gets well. Now he's so big he'd rather work for father than have father work for him. Oh! Frank is just splendid. He's the very best boy in Norwich."

Miss Lucretia sighed, for Nancy's words brought back a memory of her own youth. Then she directed her new assistant to carry the spade to a distant part of the garden where some dead stalks annoyed her by their unsightliness.

"There, Nancy, pull all these up and pile them in a heap yonder. When you've cleaned out this corner thoroughly — thoroughly — come to me on the south porch and I'll give you some matches to light the brush-heap. Keeping the ground free from rubbish is the first principle of gardening. But I'm tired of standing and will rest by looking over my seed catalogues. Maybe I'll let you help choose what to order from them. Should you like that?"

"Oh, I'd love it! I — I —"

"You what?"

"Please don't be angry, but I just love — you!"

"Ah! child, none could be angry at that, though I fear it's the glamour of spring upon you as upon the birds. Listen to them singing."

Left alone, Nancy assailed her task vigorously, and, since the dead plants yielded easily, it was soon accomplished. When the last little stalk had been placed on the brush-pile, she rested and surveyed the ground, reflecting:

"It certainly does look a deal tidier now, and hurrah! what a chance to learn how to dig! Nobody can see me from the house, because the porch and kitchen are on the other side of it. I'll surprise that sweet Miss 'Cretia, and show her I can be a real help, even if she doesn't think I will be. Now, old spade, do your duty. Here you go. Why — why, what's the matter?"

This proved a very different bit of ground from that on which she had first experimented.

Though the surface looked equally soft, there lay beneath it a tangle of roots which stubbornly resisted her utmost strength and upon which her sharp-edged tool made no impression. But this resistance was fuel to the flame of her ambition, and she cried, defiantly:

"I 'never say die!' If you old roots won't come out one way, you must another. She said 'thoroughly,' and you shall not master me."

A sharpened stake lay conveniently near, and with this, the spade-handle, and her own fingers, the novice at gardening unearthed her foe. Each root that was loosened made the next yield more easily, and when the last knotted enemy was out and upon the heap, she paused, a very proud but weary girl.

"How I wish I had the matches she promised, then the surprise would be perfect. Anyway, I must go for them, surprise or not."

But fortune favored her ambition. Miss Halpine was asleep in her chair and the box of matches stood on a table beside her.

Nancy swiftly secured them and vanished, and soon there stole upon the air the odor of burning brush.

Miss Lucretia dozed comfortably in her great rocker, and, wearied by a night of pain, Solomon slumbered more heavily in the kitchen beyond. Jane was quite too busy to drowse or to observe anything save the task in hand, till her husband suddenly awoke, sniffed, and exclaimed: "Something's burning!"

"Course there is. I just put wood in the stove. Even I haven't learnt yet to bake bread without fuel," snapped the overtaxed woman, who really loved her husband, yet resented his illness as if it were a crime.

"Fudge! It's outside. It's bresh. Where's Miss 'Cretia?"

"Sleepin' the sleep of the rich, on the porch yonder."

"Where's that red-headed saucebox?"

"Gone about her business, I suppose. I haven't seen her this dog's age."

Solomon tried to compose himself, but the smoke could now be seen as well as smelled, and he grew seriously alarmed, and cried out:

"I tell you that's a fire, and it's right here on our own property. That ain't no neighbor's work. Help me to get up."

"Get up! Why, Solomon Smith, you haven't scurce touched foot to floor this fortnight."

"Well, I'll touch it to ground now, then. I won't sit here and not know what's doin'. Help me up, I say."

Secretly pleased, Jane promptly obeyed, and by her aid, though in great pain, the old gardener made his way around the house, whence the smoke issued, and paused — dismayed. There, in the middle of his own vegetable patch, was a blazing bonfire, and the red-headed girl merrily skipping about it and prodding it, while she sang, at the top of her voice:

"There was a young gardener flouted
By some hateful old roots hadn't sprouted,

But she dug all about
And made 'em come out,
Till the toughest old rooter was routed."

Miss Halpine had also now appeared on the scene, which she regarded with astonishment, and, as her too ambitious assistant suddenly wheeled about and faced the trio of observers, there followed an ominous silence. During this silence Solomon's glance had flown from the bonfire to the newly cleared corner, and in a tone so terrible it made the innocent words seem profane, he yelled:

"Je-ru-sa-lem ar-ti-chokes!"

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER'S BAD NEWS

"Oh! oh! I'm the happiest girl in Norwich! Franksy, Franksy, Frank! I'm going to do it all myself!" cried Nancy, rushing breathlessly through the cottage and dropping down on the floor beside her brother's cot.

"What's up now, you dear little red-headed whirlwind?"

"Thank you. Is that the color of a whirlwind's hair? I guess you'd rush, too, if you had such glorious news. Tell me, brother mine, have you missed me?"

"Umm. Well, yes, a little," admitted the lad, reluctantly. "The newspaper you left blew away, and mother went to market, and a cat climbed in the kitchen window. If she left anything to eat there, it probably stole it. It isn't fair for everybody to go off and leave

me alone, helpless, like this. If ever I get up again —"

"We'll hurrah ourselves hoarse. I'm sorry; but we must think a way to have you help your own self. You see, I can't be in two places at once."

"Then, Nancy Bates, the right place for any sister to be is taking care of her brother, if she really loves him as she says."

"Love you, Franksy? You splendid boy, just listen. You are going to have your fifty-dollar brace, and it isn't to cost father one cent! Ooh-ee!"

The cripple raised himself on his elbow and clutched her skirt, as, having heard her mother's voice, she sprang up to tell her the good news.

"What do you mean?"

Before she could reply, Mrs. Bates came out on the porch, and the girl gave her an affectionate caress, exclaiming: "I've got it, step-aunt-mother! Where's Solemnity? Asleep? I'm so glad. Sit right down here

close to Frank, and I'll tell you both together. But treat me with respect, if you please, the darling pair of you. I'm a money-earner; I'm Miss Halpine's new boy; and she's the loveliest thing! Oh! do you suppose I could ever, ever grow to be like her?"

Mrs. Bates's thin face had brightened already, seeing the girl so happy, and even Frank's irritability had vanished, though he said, teasingly:

"You'll have to look after your nose first. I never saw that aristocratic lady with smut on hers."

"Have I? Well, there's one good thing about noses, they'll wash. I got that in burning 'Je-ru-sa-lem Ar-ti-chokes!' Oh, Frank! I wish you could have seen Solomon! Not our little mite, but a big, grizzly, grumpy old man who's lived with Miss Lucretia for forty years! Think of that! Forty years seems forever, doesn't it?"

"Nancy, child, do tell us all about it.

Baby will wake soon, and I'm so anxious to hear everything," urged the mother.

"Well, then, here it is in just the regular fashion we always tell things. I went from here — No, this way: Once upon a time there was a girl who borrowed her brother's things and went to answer an advertisement of 'Boy Wanted;' and every other real boy in the town of Norwich, it seemed, went too;" and here Nancy gave a brief description of all that had occurred at Cedarcroft up till the time of her leaving it, finishing with an explanation of Solomon's behavior at the bonfire.

"When he said that, 'Jerusalem Artichokes,' it sounded — awful. But right away I saw that Miss Halpine wasn't a bit shocked, and that, though she said she wouldn't have had it done if she'd known it, she wasn't really displeased that it had been done without. You see — ahem! listen to a gardener explaining — Jerusalem artichokes are something like potatoes, only, as Jane said,

'not nigh so hulsome,' and once they 'get started in a patch of ground, they stick to it like original sin to human natur.' Jane's the funniest old body, but I know I shall like her. I shall like Solomon, too, after a little while. I don't believe he's half as cross as he's achey. Well, Solomon likes artichokes pickled, and they don't like him. They give him 'dyspepsy,' and Jane was so glad I'd dug them up that it vexed him worse than ever. 'But they'll spring up again, husband,' she consoled him, and my Miss Lucretia said: 'Yes, that's the worst of it. They're like Jane's idea of sin; both are deep-rooted and perennial.' Say, Frank Bates, do you know what perennial means?"

"Do you?"

"There! I knew you didn't, else you'd never have hidden your wisdom under another question. I do, though. Miss 'Cretia told me. It's a 'never say die' kind of plant, and that's the kind of a gardener I'm going to be. If father is willing! Miss Halpine

says she must see him or hear from him before she considers the engagement final. Doesn't that sound big and grown-up?"

"Come down to facts, Nancy. How much cash will this 'engagement' be worth? I'm selfish enough to be anxious over that part."

"Fifty cents a day, from 'sun-up till sun-down,' as Jane told me was 'reg'lar.' Think of that, for just Nancy Bates, who never had fifty cents of her own in all her life! Ooh-ee! And only my 'victuals and drink' to 'find' for myself. Why — why — aren't you pleased?"

The baby had wakened and his mother disappeared before Frank put the question about wages, and, somehow, he felt more free to express his disappointment when her gentle eyes could no longer reprove him for it.

"Nancy, how far have you got in arithmetic?"

"Far enough to know that fifty cents is half a dollar, and that it takes a good many half-dollars to make fifty whole ones. But —

it's generous, Jane says, for a little greenhorn like me. She did really say 'at hadn't no strength, scurcely,' but changed her mind, remembering the artichoke roots."

"It won't pay for your shoes and clothes."

"I could go without shoes, if Miss Halpine would let me, and anyway, I'm going to borrow Adrian's rubber boots to-morrow — if there is a to-morrow for me at Cedarcroft. I do hope father'll come home early, and not too tired to go out there. It all depends on him now."

Mrs. Bates appeared at the door, asking:

"My child, have you had anything to eat since breakfast?"

"Yes, indeed! Thank you. Jane surprised her mistress by giving me two big sandwiches. Miss 'Cretia wouldn't have dared ask for them, I believe; for, though she doesn't seem to know it herself, she acts as afraid of them as if she was working for them, not they for her. It's the sharp way they speak, I guess, and she's so gentle. I'll show them what's

what, though, if I go back there. Oh! I hope I can! I want to so much."

"For fifty cents a day? You'd work like a day-laborer for that? Oh, if I could only get up and show you!"

"Yes, Franksy, brotherkin —"

"Quit coddling."

"Mr. Bates! You so remind me of somebody I've met. I think, I really do think, it's Solomon Smith, the Grumpy."

"Thank you," answered the boy, but he laughed.

"Let's do another sum in 'rithmetic. Nothing times nothing is nothing. Six times fifty is three hundred. Eight times three — is twenty-four dollars. You've got to keep still for eight weeks, anyway, before you could put on the brace, even if you had it. Well, then, you'll be twenty-four dollars better off if I work than you will if I don't. Twenty-four dollars isn't a whole brace, but it's a good piece of one. It's several straps, at least."

"But to lie here like a log, knowing that my sister, my poor little sister, is digging and weeding, and getting looked down on just for me, — I can't bear it!" cried the brother, hiding his face with his hands, ashamed of the emotion he could not control. In fact, the enforced quiet and confinement had unnerved the hitherto active boy, and the sister had been warned to ignore any such breakings down. So she waited a little, and then said:

"Please don't go to 'pooring' me. I like it. I'd be glad to work in that beautiful garden under such a beautiful mistress for nothing, if she'd have me. And as for the looking-down part, — that's all right. If other folks look down, I can look up. I shall always have to, I guess, for I'm what Mrs. Wakeman said to Hiram. She said: 'That girl of Bateses 'll be no great shakes of a woman, even if she gets to be one at all.'"

Her imitation of their neighbor's mannerism was so apt that the sick lad laughed, and Nancy added:

"As for pride, that's the funniest thing. Father is only a carpenter, but he's just the finest kind of one there can be. He never leaves a thing till it's as perfect as he can make it, and I'm prouder of that than I would be if we lived in a big house and had lots of money. If we had a big house we'd have more to do in it, and if we had money, we wouldn't know the fun of earning it. So there! Trot out your next argument against my 'job,' and I'll knock it down like a nine-pin."

"The fun of earning it! I reckon you'll find out what that is the very first day."

"Right you are, sir prophet. Here are the proofs," and Nancy displayed her plump palms, already blistered and bruised by the unaccustomed labor she had done.

"Nancy Bates!"

"Yes, I see. They're pretty muddy and grimy. I'll go wash them and brush my radiant tresses before father finds me untidy. Ah! there he comes down the road this min-

ute; and he walks as if he were dreadfully tired. Cheer him up, laddie, cheer him up till I get back. I'll be quick as a wink."

Yet, swift as she was, Mr. Bates had already drawn his chair to the table, on which his wife was placing the supper, and seemed so preoccupied that nobody disturbed him with any talk till he had finished his meal and pushed back. Even the alphabetical little boys were more quiet than usual, and Adrian's face was flushed, while he left his bread and milk untasted. The mother grew anxious, and led him away to bed, the younger ones following of their own accord, since there was no fun in staying up after their leader was asleep. Little Solomon played solemnly with his blocks, patiently rebuilding the tiny houses, which always fell down as often as he got them fairly started.

"My carpenter boy," the father called him, but to-night had no attention even for this household pet. Instead of that, he walked to the window and looked thoughtfully out upon

the darkening world. It seemed to Nancy, watching and eager, that his tall figure had never looked so thin and stooping, and it was with sympathy for his unknown trouble, as well as eagerness to tell her own story, that she crossed to where he stood, and slipped her hand in his.

"Father, I want to talk to you a minute."

"Do you, my daughter?" And, sitting down, he took her on his knee.

"If it won't bother you, I'd like to tell you I've got a 'job,' too, same as you have."

"Same as I haven't, you mean, dear," he answered, soberly.

"Haven't you? Why — what — "

"The mill has shut down. Nobody knows if it will ever be reopened."

"Oh, father! How terrible!"

Young as she was, Nancy fully understood that the closing of the mill meant no employment for hundreds of men, and no employment meant no money. For a moment she was dismayed, remembering some former bit-

ter days of pinching poverty, then instantly rallied, exclaiming:

"Well, never mind, father dear, *I* can help you. Indeed and indeed I can. I've got a place in an outdoor sort of mill, if you'll let me keep it, and *my* mill won't close till it freezes up. Listen, you darling father, till I tell you."

She told her story rapidly, interspersed by many warning nods and winks at her brother, through the window, thus forbidding him to mention her original reason for seeking a situation. Of course, the brace would have to wait, indefinitely, and she mustn't think about that disappointment.

"Say I may, father, please. Three dollars a week will buy lots of bread and butter, and we Bateses are always so terribly hungry."

"Bless you, Sunshine! You're worth a gold mine to me! You shame me for my downheartedness, and, of course, I do say — What do I say, Miss Nancy?"

"Yes? No? Oh! which is it? Quick, Quick!"

"I'll surprise you: yes!"

It did surprise her. She hadn't hoped for such an easy victory over the many objections she had fancied he would raise, even though her mother had approved.

"Oh! thank you, thank you!"

"Why, child, one would think I had promised you a holiday instead of a summer of hard work. Putting the money quite out of the question, the association with Miss Halpine and the life in the open air will be fine for you. I have heard that your school will not be reopened for the present, for measles has become epidemic, and your teacher still remains very ill. Since I must be idle, anyway, or most of the time, I can look after Frank and help mother with the children. There is no reason against your plan except that of overtaxing your strength. But as for the money, you may keep that for yourself. Not all our savings went for my

illness, and though I hate to use the last of them, when needs must, there's no help."

"Oh, you darling father! It's so good to have you smiling again."

"Was I so glum, then? Well, I'm not now. Bitter with the sweet — that's the way of the world."

"Jane says, 'Life isn't all catnip,' and that's what you mean, too, I suppose."

"Yes. One word more, daughter, and then I'll leave your future experience to do the 'lecturing.' If you take this situation, you must keep your contract. Even though you're but a child, nothing save illness, or her own dissatisfaction, can excuse you from being at Miss Halpine's on every working-day. This isn't a 'lark,' and it won't be all fun nor pay-day. So think twice before you begin. Now we must get poor Frank moved in from the porch and to bed. That's the place for small gardeners also; and by the time I've settled him for the night you must have made up your mind whether you really wish

me to walk out and arrange things with the lady at Cedarcroft or not. If so, I will go."

"I sha'n't change my mind, father; but what is there to arrange? All you need do is say 'yes,' or write a note."

"She is entitled to the courtesy of a personal visit. I consider that she is dealing very generously with a little, ignorant girl like you."

"Now, father! When I was feeling so big and wise!" laughed Nancy, kissing his hand. And though he smiled back upon her very tenderly, he had made her feel very serious. As for Frank — one glance at his gloomy face lightened her own, and called forth an appropriate "Limerick:"

"Though you'd better have two legs than one,
You'd far better have one leg than none;
And your wearing of plaster
Is no great disaster,
Since you needn't get up with the sun.

There, big brother. That's the silver lining to your cloud; but the cloud to my silver

lining is that I must. From 'sun-up,' Jane said, so good night to you."

Frank's morning laziness was an old grievance in the household, and Nancy slipped away while he was still laughing at her hint of his one compensation for his lameness.

CHAPTER V.

A MEMORABLE MORNING

THE sound of a childish voice singing "Yankee Doodle" sent Miss Halpine to her window early the next morning, and there was Nancy, clad in rubber boots which were too big for her and a faded mackintosh that was too short, her red hair curling ever tighter and more tight as she sat, bareheaded, on the oak-tree bench in a drizzling rain.

"Well, of all things! She is promptness itself. But she'll be drenched." Then the lady threw up the sash, and called: "Nancy!"

"Yes, Miss Halpine. Good morning."

"It's raining."

"I guess I know that. It's a lovely rain, though, as sweet as sweet."

"That's true. The air is delightful. But why don't you go in the house?"

"I thought I was only for the garden, and — and I haven't been invited."

It was not probable that she would be, either, since Jane had just come to the kitchen door and looked out upon the child without saying anything, even a return "good morning" to that which Nancy had spoken to her. Indeed, the housekeeper had had another troublesome night with her rheumatic husband, and was already weary before beginning her day's work. So she assured Solomon that:

"I'll let that young one set there till she sprouts before I'll touch tongue to bringin' her into my clean kitchen. If she was a boy, that she ought to have been, I could set her splittin' kindling. But a girl is no account nohow."

"Well, it's good weather for sproutin'. Every plaguey thing in that garden 'll grow to-day like it was possessed."

"Nothin' much in it to grow, savin' weeds, and I, for one, 'd rather wrestle with big ones

than little ones. Something to get hold of, seems if."

Solomon fell to thinking. He suddenly remembered that "even a girl might have her uses if she could be dealt with proper," and inquired of his wife if she "s'posed Miss 'Cretia was hirin' Sissy for flowers or vegetables, or mixed?"

"I don't know and I don't care. I hear her a-comin' down-stairs this instant, and that's ten full minutes before time. She needn't think I'm going to put breakfast forward just for hired girls, and that's what it means."

Miss Halpine's bell rang, and the pair in the kitchen heard the dining-room window opened, while the lady's voice again called: "Nancy!"

The little girl ran swiftly to the porch, wiped her feet on the mat at the foot of the steps, and hurried to the window.

"Child, have you had breakfast already?"

"Yes, thank you. And I've brought my lunch, too."

"You must be early risers at your house."

"We are, though I didn't wait for the rest this morning. I took father's alarm-clock to bed with me, and it — I put it under my pillow, and it scared me almost into a fit! Then I got my bread and milk, and boiled an egg hard to eat with my bread this noon. Now, what am I to do first? If you'll tell me, I'll begin right away."

"On a rainy day — I hardly know. If it isn't too wet, by and by, I'd like to have you weed the lily-of-the-valley bed. The pips have hardly started and wouldn't be disturbed. Then, if we cover it with a layer of light soil, they should be fine this year. See! That is it all across the east side of the house."

"All that? My!"

"Yes. The bed is older than I am. I can't remember a single May that I haven't sat in the library to smell my lilies. Ah, my dear! You have come to work in a really wonderful old garden, and I hope you will love it a little. Now —"

Jane interrupted by appearing at the inner door, bidding her mistress good morning, and asking:

"Will you please step into the kitchen a minute, Miss 'Cretia? Solomon, he's got some idee in his head 'at he wants to get rid of. Somethin' about his 'early roses' potatoes, you know."

Miss Halpine went to Solomon, crouching over the stove, though to her the room seemed insufferably warm, and inquired:

"How are you this morning, Solomon? Better, I hope."

"Hmm. Then you needn't hope. This is as good weather for rheumatiz as 'tis for growin'. Umm — hey — ahem. Say, Miss 'Cretia, was the boy to be just for posies or for general gardening?"

"Mostly for posies, though she might do a little general gardening upon occasion. Why? Did you find her so thorough with your artichokes that you're willing to trust her elsewhere?"

"Laugh away, Miss 'Cretia. It does me good to hear you. I can laugh, too, for them artichokes are only top-dressed, so to speak. I 'low I'll have a finer crop than ever, soon as the new roots get started again. What I was thinking was — 'early roses.' There's one sack of them down suller that's particular fine. I planned to plant 'em on that south slope, the patch nigh the crick. They'll grow everlastingly there, and come to eatin' long before any others is ready. If I could get 'em sprouted and cut for seed, it would be a help. Seems if."

"Very well. Nancy may do that for you, if she will. I'll ask her, and you can show her exactly how. She could fix them in the wood-house, and the litter could be swept out. I'll call her."

Really very glad of a task so simple as this on which to employ Nancy under the shelter of a roof, Miss Halpine summoned the girl, while Solomon grimly reflected:

"Puts it like a favor, don't she? Wants

me to understand, first off, that this young one is her helper, not mine. Well, any port in a storm, and don't see how she could do any damage with them seed potatoes. I don't see."

Nancy was as ready to tackle the potato cutting as she had been the brush burning of the previous day; so Jane soon brought a few of the "roses" in a tin dish, and with a small knife Solomon showed how they were to be prepared.

"Where the sprouts are long, like this one, you rub 'em off with your fingers. Then you cut the potato into about three four pieces, leavin' two three eyes to a piece. You drop 'em in a basket, and if you've got any wit at all, you'll be some real help. Now go. Your clothes are all wet and give me the shivers. If I should catch more cold, I don't know what."

Nancy took the basin and started; but alas! she was a hungry little human creature. The cold bread and milk she had eaten for

breakfast had already lost its sustaining power during her long walk, or run, from home; and Jane's delicately browned fried potatoes, her scrambled eggs, the fragrant coffee, and best of all, the appetizing flannel cakes which she tossed upon her griddle, were simply fascinating.

Miss Halpine had returned to her dining-room, feeling as if she must invite the stranger to share her own meal, yet thinking it wiser to begin as she could hold out. There would be other rainy days, and she had distinctly stipulated that her assistant should "board herself."

Jane — well, there was no telling what Jane might or might not do. She was an old lady of many impulses, contradictory ones, and for the present things must "shape themselves."

The food served to her mistress, the housekeeper returned to her kitchen, and with a deal of groaning and grumbling wiped imaginary moisture from the spot on the floor

where Nancy had stood to receive Solomon's instructions. Then she gave her husband his share of the breakfast and sat down to enjoy her own. Yet, somehow, "enjoy" was not just expressive of the household appetites that morning. Into each mind would obtrude the vision of a small girl with hungry eyes, sitting alone in a damp outhouse, monotonously cutting into bits a heap of colder, damper potatoes.

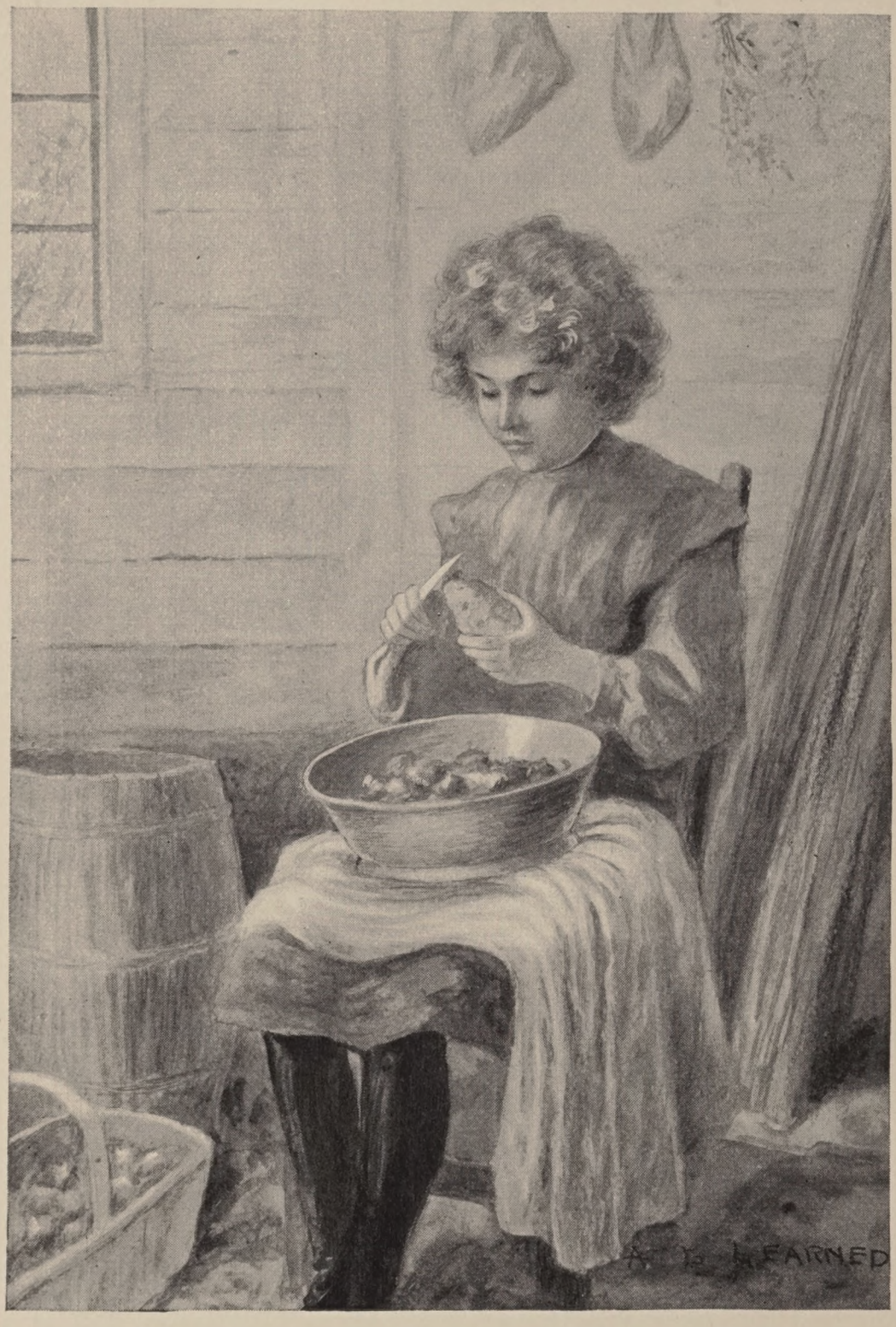
But, breakfast past, the vision ceased to trouble them, and for two hours thereafter Nancy was almost forgotten. Outside the wood-house the rain streamed as if it had never rained before and must do the thing up thoroughly now it was about it. The grass and the springing plants were happy, though, except the opening hyacinths; who dropped their heavy heads as if they felt this too much of a good thing, till the girl, watching them, began to pity and talk to them as if they were little sisters of the soil to be comforted.

All this did not tend to her remembrance of Solomon's explanations, and most of the precious "roses" she cut into bits by the sense of feeling rather than sight. To her, however, the result seemed the same, and when she had completed her task she lifted the heavy basket and carried, or dragged, it to the house.

"Done already? You don't tell me that, child!" cried the old gardener, as she entered, and doubtful whether to be pleased or otherwise. "Why, 'twould ha' took me all mornin' to cut them potatoes as they should be cut. Set the basket down on that rug, yonder, and fetch me a handful."

Nancy scooped her two small hands full and deposited their contents within Solomon's larger palms. She was delighted that by her quickness, at least, she could please this difficult old man.

But, alas! No sooner had his keen glance rested on the cuttings than his eager face underwent a terrible transformation, and



"AND MOST OF THE PRECIOUS 'ROSES,' SHE CUT INTO BITS."

Nancy retreated in fright, expecting he would fling them into her own. Which was just what he would have liked to do, save that Miss Halpine was then entering the kitchen, and he dared not. He contented himself with leaning back in his chair, closing his angry eyes, and groaning as if in utter despair.

"Why — why — my good Solomon! What is wrong with you? Are you suffering so greatly?" cried the mistress, going swiftly to him and laying her hand upon his quivering shoulder.

Then he looked up and groaned again. "Oh! Miss 'Cretia, Miss 'Cretia, you poor, misguided creatur'!"

"Yes, I suppose I am. None of us do right all the time, but what is it now?" answered the lady, annoyed by his ridiculous behavior, for she soon understood that it was not physical pain which evoked these moans.

"That — that — Nancy."

"I see her; and very diligently she must have worked to finish the cutting so soon."

"Finished! Yes, she has. She's finished 'em to the end. See them pieces? Take 'em and look at 'em!"

"I can see them in your hand just as well. What's wrong with them? They seem very cleverly done;" yet even as she said this, Miss Halpine perceived what he meant and her own face grew grave.

"The very last sack of 'em we had. The prime ones, picked out for seed. Sp'iled even for chicken-feed," lamented the gardener.

"Well, since we don't keep chickens, on account of the gardens, I don't see that it matters much. Maybe the rest are cut right even if these aren't. Anyway —"

He interrupted her without ceremony. "This ain't no triflin' mishap, Miss Halpine, this here is a calamity. I 'lowed I'd raise the best crop was ever raised on this property. I was goin' to take a premium with it to the county fair, come autumn. I can't replace 'em, and you can't. I don't believe there's a farmer around would sell seed of

'early roses,' even if we had money to fool away. My advice to you is: Get shut of that blunderin' young one before you can say Jack Robinson. Only come yesterday, and done mischief enough now, more'n she's worth."

Poor Nancy had waited, a silent listener to this discussion, her heart growing more heavy with each sentence, and tears coming dangerously near her big brown eyes. But she winked so fast they couldn't fall, and, keeping a safe distance from Solomon's reach, she went to Miss Lucretia and asked:

"Will you please tell me what I've done?"

The lady was herself too thorough a gardener not to be annoyed by what had happened, but she liked Nancy and was sorry for her evident distress; so she explained, as gently as possible:

"The potato cuttings are useless now for planting. I'm afraid you didn't listen as carefully to Solomon's instructions as you should. He must have told you—"

"I did! I told her forty times over —" interjected he.

"Hardly so many, I fancy," she corrected. "He must have told you once, at least, that each piece should have two or more 'eyes' left on it. These 'eyes' are the growing points, and without them the plants will not germinate, but the bits will simply decay in the ground. All these cuttings which he's holding have been slashed either through their growing points, or have none at all left on them. If the rest are like them, they are fit only for the compost heap. But don't look so unhappy, for I fancy you'll not be inattentive again."

"'Again?' Then will you, can you, keep me after what I've done? Two days and in disgrace twice already. I — do you suppose I can ever learn? Will you give me another trial? I want to stay, and if the money — of course, I shouldn't take any till the loss was made good. I —

Miss Halpine smiled very kindly, as she answered :

" Most certainly I shall keep you till you have had a fairer chance to show what is in you. One has to learn every new business, and a girl who is willing to do what you've undertaken, just from love for a brother — I have deep interest in her. Now come with me ; and Jane, please bring a plate of puppy-noses into the little sewing-room. I'm going to sort and sift my home-grown seeds, and they'll taste nice."

Nancy followed eagerly, yet wondering not a little at the peculiar appetite of a lady who would eat " puppy-noses," and where a supply of such could be procured. However, when brought, these proved to be nothing but dark-skinned apples, whose shape gave them their name, and which were as sound and delicious now, after a winter's storage, as when first gathered.

" Put the plate right beside yourself, Nancy, and eat as many as you like. One is

all I enjoy now, but when I was your age, I thought nothing of a half-dozen. Now, observe. All these seeds were gathered with their husks on, and have dried through the winter. These phloxes are especially fine, and I don't want to lose one. Here is a little sieve that just suits them. Break, very carefully, any husks which have not opened of themselves, and sift the whole over this box. I will write the names on these tiny envelopes, and as soon as the ground is fit, we'll sow them. I love phloxes; they're so bright and clean. They last, too, till after heavy frosts. These sweet peas are coarser, and can be sorted without a sieve. But handle all gently. The little, dead-looking things are full of life."

"It doesn't seem so, does it? What a lot you know about plants, don't you?"

"Well, I should know something. They've been my closest companions for almost all my life. My friends, indeed, that I love as if they were human. I couldn't do without them."

Nancy looked in surprise at this gray-haired lady whose life seemed so lonely yet whose face was so serene, and resolved that no carelessness on her own part should ever bring a cloud to it again. This seed sorting was a part of gardening which was wholly delightful, and when all was done her employer directed:

"Now take this blank book and write the names of the packets in it with the numbers after them, just as I've marked them."

Nancy took the pen, but paused at the first word, exclaiming:

"Why, it's Latin, I guess, or something foreign. I never studied Latin, and maybe I'll not write it right."

"Surely, you can copy. Latin is the universal language of the plant world. I might ask a German florist for a 'swamp-pink' and he wouldn't know what I meant; but if I told him I wanted a Rhododendron Nudiflorum, he would instantly supply me if he could."

"Whew! Beg pardon, but gardening is

going to a higher sort of school than I have been to, after all, though I thought I'd stopped studying. Well, I'll try;" and Nancy began very carefully to make her entries in the little book. Upon its pages the common phlox became Phlox Drummondii; the sweet pea, a Lathyrus Odoratus; and another homely, familiar seed aspired to the polysyllabic title of Convolvulus Purpureus, though she knew all the time it was nothing in the world but a morning-glory! But it was fun after all; and her handwriting was so legible and neat that Miss Lucretia forgot the potato mishap, in her present pleasure.

Nancy's face had regained its ordinary brightness, and her talk of her home and its affairs interested her employer, so that to both the time passed swiftly; and before they had noticed it, the clouds had dispersed and the sunshine come out.

"Now, I hear Jane putting the dinner on the table, and you must have your hour of 'nooning.' After that I think you'll be

able to weed the bed of Convallaria Majalis, as I mentioned," said Miss Lucretia, with a teasing smile, feeling herself younger than she had for a long time.

Nancy hazarded a guess: "The lily-of-the-valley bed! Isn't it?"

"Yes. That's its full-dress name. But in ordinary we'll keep to the dear old common one. And now — Why, Jane! What's happened? You look troubled," cried the lady, as the housekeeper entered, not to announce dinner but what appeared to be some great calamity, and which, from the way Jane looked at her and her alone, Nancy felt concerned herself.

"What — what have I done now, Mrs. Smith?" faltered the girl, while the disturbed woman wrung her hands and deplored:

"It never rains but it pours, and, as if we hadn't enough to bear as 'twas, we've gone and hopped out of the frying-pan into the fire! Oh! my sake!"

"Then I should think the rain that 'pours'

might put out the 'fire' that burns," returned Nancy, who could not help laughing.

"Laugh, can you? Well, you may, but 'twill be out the other side your mouth when you hear all."

CHAPTER VI.

HOW IT WAS DECIDED

NANCY forbore to laugh from either side her mouth at this, for Jane's anxiety was very real, but she could not quite repress a smile as the frightened woman extended toward herself a pair of tongs with a folded sheet of paper between their ends.

"There! Take that and read it. I've smoked it with matches, and I hope it hasn't fetched nothin' catchin' with it, but like as not. Fourteen days before a body could tell a thing, whether no, and all that time a-worryin'. Read it out, child, and don't scare Miss 'Cretia into an ampersand."

Not knowing what an "ampersand" was, and doubting if Jane did, the girl rather gingerly took the proffered note, after which the housekeeper immediately walked to the win-

dow, and dropped the tongs to the ground beneath, remarking:

"I've always heard that mud was purifyin', and there's mud enough to-day, in all conscience." Nor was her perturbation so great that she did not glance reprovingly at Nancy's rubber boots, which she still wore because she had nothing lighter to supply their place.

But the reproof fell pointless, for the child was gazing at the paper in her hand, unable to believe what was written there. Then she looked at Jane and demanded, rather than asked:

"Who brought this?"

"A boy. 'Bout as big as you be, or a little bigger."

"Where is he, please? Quick, quick!"

"He's outside, by the wood-house. Didn't s'pose I'd let him come trackin' in, did you?"

"Jane, I'm afraid your neatness is greater than your hospitality. Tell me, do you know what's in that note to startle Nancy so?"

said Miss Halpine, as the little girl rushed from the room.

"Should think I did know. The boy handed it in to me, and I read it. Course. 'Twasn't in no envelope, and I thought likely 'twas some monkey-shine or other. I knew we couldn't have a passel of boys hangin' round here, even if you did force us to put up with one girl. But it was a dark hour for us, Lucretia Halpine, when you was deluded into writin' for the paper. Don't you never do it again, honey, don't you. Even if we go without a garden the whole summer."

"Jane, stop wandering from the subject, and tell me, at once, what has happened."

"Could easier tell what hasn't. Don't seem possible, but the boy declares up and down it's true."

"What is true, Jane Smith?" cried her mistress, quite losing her patience.

"That a whole family should come down with the measles to once. That a boy with a broken leg should be took off to the hospi-

tal, not knowin' whether he'd live or die if he took 'em. And the baby swallowin' a nickel or a big marble right in the midst; and the woman next door to 'em havin' her own grandchild comin' to visit this very day, so she can't take her in; and we left with her on our hands, and every soul of us exposed to it, and — Dear me, suz!"

Exhausted by her own excitement, Jane sat down and fanned herself with her apron, while her mistress hastily left the room to learn, if possible, the simple facts of the case. They proved to be these: Two of the Bates children had been ill all night, and a doctor had been called to them just after Nancy had so quietly left home, fondly believing that she was the only one of the household then awake. The disease had instantly been pronounced measles, and of a malignant form then prevalent in the town. To prevent his "taking" this sickness, Frank had already been sent to the hospital. The house was quarantined, and though Mrs. Wakeman had

consented that some of Nancy's clothing should be sent to her home, if such were properly fumigated, she could not receive the girl herself, as her own house was to be filled with guests that very day. At Mr. Bates's dictation, across the fence, she had written this news; and he also wished "if Miss Halpine knew of any house near her own where Nancy could be boarded, for the time being, she would kindly suggest it. It would be wiser for the lady to send his daughter away at once, so as not to worry more than needful over the danger of contagion, and he was, respectfully, etc., Wilson Bates."

It was Jimmy Lincoln who had brought the message, and, when Miss Lucretia appeared on the scene, he was harrowing Nancy's sad heart with all the details he could recall of the few deaths which had occurred during the epidemic, and lustily encouraging her to believe that she would herself be stricken at the earliest possible moment.

Wild-eyed and pallid, Nancy listened to him

for awhile, but when he ended by declaring, "You'll come down with it yourself by bed-time, see if you don't," she lost her temper, and sprang from the wood-house floor, where she had thrown herself prone, exclaiming:

"I'll do no such thing! I never was a catcher, and I never will be, so there. As for my darling little brothers, they will all get well, every single one of them. The more you say they won't, the more I don't believe you. It was good of you to come 'way out here with the note, but that's the only good thing there is about it. And now — you'd better go home."

"And where will *you* go, Miss Hoity-Toity? When you begin to get all shivery and scorchin' hot, and sore-throaty, and sick-stummicky, what then? Maybe then — maybe — Hmm, I know somethin'."

"Humph! I should never have dreamed it!" snapped poor Nancy, her heart aching with anxiety, determined with all her might that she would not be ill herself, yet

wondering what was to become of her, well or ill.

But by this time Jimmy's real manliness and affection got the better of his pleasure in teasing, and he ignored her sarcasm, reiterating that:

"I do know somethin', Nancy Bates, and you'd better listen to it. You may come to our house and stay till they get well or die, either one."

Nancy faced around upon him, touched and surprised.

"Who says I may, Jimmy Lincoln?"

No answer forthcoming, she repeated her question, and now twisting one foot nervously around the other, he replied, shamefacedly:

"I do."

"You do? Without your father or mother saying so? You dare?"

At this he tossed his head and answered, valiantly:

"Yes, I do dare. Ain't I the only one to

our house? Haven't I had 'em and got well? Isn't my mother the nicest, biggest-hearted mother in Norwich? And my father — whatever my mother says goes with him. They'd be only too glad to do your folks a good turn, and I know it. How many flower-frames has your father made for Ma? How many nights did he sit up with Pa when he had the fever? Haven't I heard Ma say, more'n once, that if ever there was a Christian woman it was your step-mother, and how lots of real mothers could take a lesson by the way she's brought Frank and you up? Oh! I ain't talkin' in the dark, I ain't."

To the impulsive Nancy her relief could only be expressed by hugging Jimmy's neck: but his own sentiment having now become exhausted, he resented this exhibition of hers, and roughly tossed her arms aside, crying:

"There, you needn't do that. I hate to be sissied over. You can take it or leave it. There it is, and I've no more to say;" and the little fellow pushed his hat backward,

thrust his hands into his pockets, and began to pace the narrow place, whistling indifferently. One reason of this assumed nonchalance was his discovery of Miss Halpine, who had been an amused, but unobserved, witness of the scene between the children. Nancy, also, now saw the lady, and, running to her, clasped her hands, entreating:

"Won't you please tell me what to do? and I'll do it."

"Child, I wish I knew!"

Already, in great perplexity, Miss Lucretia was pondering over what was the wisest course to follow. Her impulse was to keep Nancy safe at Cedarcroft and risk the consequences of her being "took down," as Jimmy prophesied; on the other hand was her own inexperience as a nurse and Jane's vehement opposition to this plan. The old servant's fear of contagion was great, and she asserted, positively, that "if any of us old ones took it, we'd die sure, for it's only the young gets over things easy." Then, too, should it be

needed, the difficulty of getting other help in house seemed to a person of Miss Halpine's fixed and quiet habits almost insurmountable. Yet, how could she turn the helpless child adrift?

Suddenly and eagerly Nancy asked, as if she had found a solution of their trouble:

"Oh! Miss Halpine, what is that teeny tiny stone house down where the garden ends by the creek? Where the pretty stone bridge is."

The lady started slightly, yet answered readily enough:

"That was the negroes' quarters when, many, many years ago, there were slaves even up here in our northern New York State. The building has been long unused, but my— We never tore it down, for it's interesting as an historical landmark. It is said that a British officer once hid there, to escape our soldiers, but that he was discovered and—I haven't been inside the place since, I mean for a great while."

Jimmy's hand now flew up, snapping its fingers, as he thus claimed attention:

"Teacher, — that is, Miss Halpine, — *I* know! I know 'bout that! My father told me. Th' officer was caught and killed right there, in that very house. They say he's a ghost now, and he comes there and yells of nights, sometimes, when the wind is right. I've heard lots of folks say so, true's I live. That's the 'Haunted Cabin,' Nancy Bates, and you'd ought to be ashamed to lived right here in this town and never known it."

"Well, I didn't, then, and I'm not ashamed. Though *you* ought to be for believing such stories. *My* father says it's only ignorant people who do. And, anyway, how could a ghost 'yell,' when his throat and mouth and the whole yelling part of him would be dust of the ground? Pooh!"

"But I tell you *my* father —"

A controversy as to the veracity of their respective parents seemed imminent; and for some reason, known only to herself, the mis-

tress of Cedarcroft always disliked any talk about the ancient stone "cabin," so she changed the subject, and in a spirit of mischief she had developed since her little "assistant" came into her life, she suggested:

"Gardener, suppose you go to your weeding of the Convallaria Majalis, as we planned, if your friend can wait for his answer till I can consider this matter more fully."

Jimmy's astonishment at these formidable terms delighted his playmate, and with a flash of her own brown eyes, she responded:

"Yes, indeed, I will; and, as you told me, I'll look in that far corner to see if the Fritillaria Imperialis has started to grow."

Her employer was also delighted that Nancy was so apt and quick, and returned to the house feeling that affairs would arrange themselves in some satisfactory way if she only gave her mind to the matter. Indeed, despite its seeming impossibility, that question about the empty cabin would return to her again and again; and when Jane entered

the sitting-room, inquiring: "Well, Miss 'Cretia, what you going to do with her?" she almost amazed herself by answering:

"Maybe I'll put her in the 'Haunted Cabin.'"

"Lucretia Halpine! Be you crazy?"

"I hope not. But I feel as if I should be if I were hard-hearted enough to turn that little girl away from Cedarcroft, now that misfortune has come to her."

"For goodness sake! And you haven't known her only two days!"

"But I love her as if I had known her all her short life. She's so bright and affectionate, I don't see how even you could dislike her, if —"

"Land, honey, I haven't said I do. I wasn't taken with the notion of her hangin' round, doin' more destruction than good, a-clutterin' up everything, when we'd ought to have a strong, able-bodied man, if we have anybody, to work the place. But —"

"But, you good Jane! Ah! I see in your

eye that you pity her now as much as I do. It needed but to touch your heart, and your wise old head throws caution to the winds. Sit down, please, and let your work wait, while we settle this thing one way or other. The child is here — thrown upon our hands; what shall we do with her?"

Despite all her sharpness of tongue, Jane's nature was kindly and faithful. She understood, without being told, that her mistress hated to part with the little girl, to whom she had taken such a fancy, and really wished to gratify her; still, she would never consent to risk the child's staying under the same roof, eating in the same room with themselves, until all danger of infection was over. Dropping her chin in her hand, she reflected in silence, then remarked:

"Nobody ever *saw* the ghost. Of course, it's there. Everybody knows that, though it don't come round much, 'cept in the winter, and most of all in March. 'Twas of a wild March night it happened, so I've heard;

and 'twas of another wild March night Master — "

"Jane! Jane!" almost shrieked Miss Lucretia.

"There, there, honey. I forgot. Forgive the old woman that loves you, and wouldn't hurt you for all the money in the world. But if the child don't know about it, and 'know nothing fear nothing' is the saying — It's a snug, good little house. As well built as this, and *this* old stone mansion will outlast all the new gimcracky ones them new folks is building on the 'Heights.' Time was when Cedarcroft was such a show place that people came from far and near to see it. Ours was the first windmill in Norwich, save that terrible old one they used for flourin'; and we was the first had water piped in our buildings. Your father was the first man in these parts ever owned a horse mowin'-machine, and as for reapin', the farmers round said he'd meet a judgment doin' things by horses that had always been done by men.

And I 'low it did use to be a pretty sight, a line of haymakers mowing side by side. The sweep of their scythes, so even, just like the music your mother played on the harp, and them singin' in tune — many's the time I've stood at the buttery window and watched 'em, Solomon leading the whole lot, and him and me keepin' company, reg'lar — "

"Jane, Jane! come back out of that happy past into the present. When you and I begin our reminiscences, we forget to stop. All our lives we've lived together, old friend, and I know you'll help me to decide now what's best, just as you always have. We were talking about the 'cabin.'"

"If she wasn't afraid to stay there, not knowin' — "

"It's just the thing! She does know, that Jimmy boy told her, and she isn't afraid. These little people of to-day are much better taught than we were when we were small."

"Maybe. Hmm. She's made friends with

Rover, already, and she could have him. He wouldn't let nobody come anigh."

"The very thing!" again cried Miss Halpine.

Rover was the misfit name of a venerable St. Bernard dog, so old and fat that he never roved anywhere save between his kennel and the kitchen stoop, and so cross that it was surprising he had permitted Nancy to touch him.

"Well, if you will have it so, I'll fix the things. I'll get them children to help me. I'll put her victuals in the wood-house, and she can get 'em there. When I have a job to get through with, I want to get through with it, but, remember, Miss 'Cretia, that whatever comes of it, you're to blame. And now I must go stand over burnin' sulphur smoke and get my clothes full of it, so's I sha'n't catch the measles."

Thus speedily it was settled that Nancy should set up an independent housekeeping within a "haunted cabin;" and nightfall

found her standing on its threshold, watching Jimmy's departure townward, assuring herself that:

"I'm not one bit afraid. Not a single bit. Stay close to me, good Rover, nice Rover! Yes, you can go to sleep, if you want to, for I'm not a bit afraid. It's only so — so — sort of spooky, it makes me all goose-fleshy. There, Nancy Bates! You go to bed and stop thinkin' of ghosts. It's nobody but Jimmy Lincoln's old ghost, anyway; so there."

And with that she crept between the covers of the cot Jane had prepared, and fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, to wake, a few hours later, in the midst of a horrible racket that made her heart almost stop beating from fear.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE HAUNTED CABIN

COMPOSING this fearful din there seemed to be the angry growling of the dog, the shrieks of some human creature in pain or terror, the rumbling of heavy thunder, and worst of all, the wild, weird moanings that came from the roof — could it be from the ghost?

For the first few seconds, this thought was uppermost in Nancy's mind; then a flash of lightning showed her whence issued those human shrieks, and sent her to the rescue, regardless of all else. A boy was hanging on the sill of the small rear window, whose sash opened sidewise and inwardly, one leg outside in the rain, the other firmly clutched by the few remaining teeth of the vigilant Rover.

"Who are you? What you doing here? There, Rover, good Rover, let go. He's

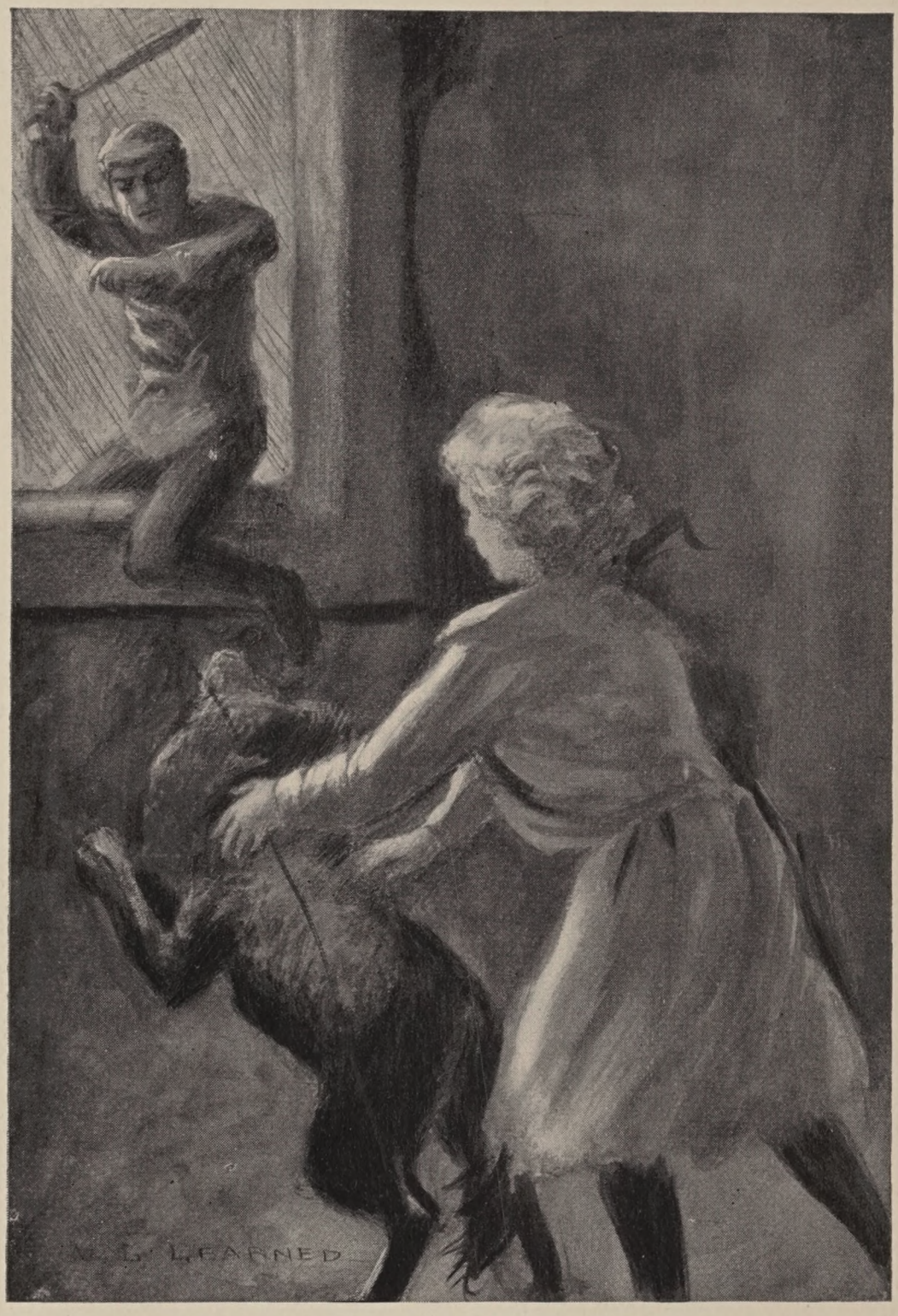
all right, Rover, Rover, Rover! Down, sir, down."

But the St. Bernard was faithful to his trust. He had been bidden by Jane to "watch well," and he was wholly obedient. No intruder should enter the premises he was set to guard, not while his strength held out; but when a second flash showed this intruder to be none other than Jimmy Lincoln, Nancy matched her own strength against his, and by gripping Rover's throat choked him from his hold.

There was more of Jimmy within than without the wall, and, as soon as he felt his leg free, he lost his balance and fell to the floor. Here, again, Rover was with difficulty prevented from seizing the lad, but hearing Nancy speak in a natural tone to the visitor, the animal barked once or twice, and returned to his own disturbed slumber.

"Well, Jimmy Lincoln, what you doing here, this time of night?"

"Say, he bit me. He's bit me all to pieces.



"'HE'S ALL RIGHT, ROVER, ROVER, ROVER! DOWN, SIR, DOWN!'"

Oh! Ouch! True's you live, he's tore my leg all to scraps. Oh! oh! oh!"

"Hush. You mustn't scream so. You'll wake my dear Miss 'Cretia up, and she'll think it's I, and that I'm scared and—"

"Well, you are, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not. Not now. I was, course, when you screeched."

"Sho! I guess you'd screech, too, if a great hundred-and-sixty-pounder had hold of your leg with all his teeth. Jane says he weighs that, and he measures 'most seven feet from tip to tip, 'cause Solomon measured with her tape measure and—"

"All his teeth aren't enough to pick a bone with. He hasn't but four left."

"Well, he's got jaws, then, and I tell you I'm bit."

"Oh! I hope not. Wait. I'll light the lantern Jane gave me, 'case of accident,' she said. If this isn't an accident I don't know what it is. Why did you come here, eh? I

wish you'd stayed at home, waking me up this way."

As soon as the light was produced Jimmy uttered another shriek, but this time a jubilant one, as he pointed to Nancy's clothes and derided her thus:

"Thought you wasn't afraid! Thought you didn't believe in 'any old ghost'! Hi! And you did, after all!"

"I didn't either: what makes you say that?" contradicted Nancy, stoutly.

"'Cause if you hadn't been, a fussy-clean girl like you'd never gone to bed without undressing. You've got on every one your clothes, shoes and apron and all."

"Well—well—supposing I have. They're mine, aren't they? I was—I was dreadful—tired—last night, and—I wish you'd go home, Jimmy Lincoln. I've got to get up and go to work in the morning, and I'm the boy Miss Halpine hired, not you. Why did you come, anyhow?"

"To — to take care of you," faltered the lad.

"Fudge!"

"Well, to — to see 'it,' then, if you want to know."

"Have you seen 'it,' Captain Courageous?"

"Not yet. Say — have you?" demanded the young "protector," sinking his voice to an awesome whisper, and fairly jumping as, at the word "it," Rover turned uneasily and growled again.

"You can't see what there *isn't*. I'm going to put the light out, and you'd better go. Through the door this time, and not by the window. My! How it does rain and thunder! And it was only just a teeny bit cloudy when I went to bed."

At this Jimmy groaned dismally and begged:

"Don't! Not till we look and see how he's hurt me. I don't know as I *can* go home. I don't see how I could walk a step."

"Running's faster than walking," replied

Nancy, unmoved. "There, look quick, before I waste any more of this candle. Isn't it a funny, old-fashioned lantern? Ours at home has a kerosene-lamp in it."

"Bother your old lantern! Just look a-there, will you?"

With real anxiety Nancy bent above the terrible wounds she now expected to see, but a moment's scrutiny satisfied her that none such existed, and she exclaimed, contemptuously:

"Well, of all boys, to make a fuss over nothing! He hasn't bitten you at all. How could he? with only four poor old teeth, and them so loose that Jane expects he'll 'shed' 'em any day."

"Sho! It's worse 'an that. It's a good deal worse 'an that. Legs'll get well themselves, but clothes won't. Look at my stockings. Look at my knickers. What'll Ma say?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't like to be in your shoes when she finds out. You may

be the 'only,' and she may be the 'biggest-hearted,' but I reckon she'll inquire how that happened."

"You needn't pile it on that way. Say, Nancy."

"Well, 'say' what? Quick, for you've got to go home."

"What time do you s'pose it is?"

"Long past time for you to clear out."

"Say. I always liked you first-rate, didn't I? 'Most as much as if you'd been a boy. 'Most as much as I do Frank?" cajoled Jimmy.

"I never heard of it if you did," returned the girl.

"I always have. True's you live. Say."

"Oh! you silly thing! You deserve a 'Limerick,' and here it is:

"There once was a boy who said 'Say!'
So much that his tongue ran away;
And even at night,
So sad was his plight,
Kept clacking as if it were day.

But say your 'say,' quick, and have done with it."

"Well, then, you haven't — I don't suppose — hmm. Say, Nancy, have you got a needle and thread here?"

"No. How could I have? Why?"

"Maybe we — you — could sew stitches in 'em, and then Ma wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't she, my 'truthful James'? You may cheat yourself, but you can't cheat mothers. They know everything. Aren't you ever going home?"

As she asked this question, the wind, which had lulled for a time, sprang up again and the storm burst forth afresh. With this return of the gale returned, also, those mysterious moans and wailings overhead, which startled even the really courageous Nancy into a shivering fit, and sent her would-be-gallant "knight of chivalry" prone on the floor, where he lay breathless with terror, till the gust passed and the moanings ceased.

With the silence, Nancy's spirit rallied, and

shaking Jimmy vigorously by the shoulder, she ordered him:

"Now, Jimmy Lincoln, you go straight home as you can go. A pretty 'protector' you are, leaving me to face the spook all alone while you hide your eyes like that. It's nothing but something can be explained. My father says all such things can be, and — Oh! I've got a notion! Wouldn't I be proud if it happened that I, just Nancy Bates, hunted this spook to its lair? Wouldn't those folks you say believe in it feel ashamed? You too? Well, then, I will. I certainly will. Now, before it wails again, you march." Then, as he remained motionless, that is, made no effort to start, she was inspired to ask:

"Why don't you go, boy?"

"Say, Nancy. I'll tell you something. Won't you never tell, long's you live?"

"I may and I mayn't. Depends. I hate to promise anything, for the minute I do I begin to want to break it. Father says that's human nature, and I don't believe there ever

was a girl so chock full of human nature as I am."

"I've a good mind to anyway. You're square, gen'ally."

Nancy's curiosity was getting the better of her discretion, and now that there was comfortable silence around them, she grew eager to hear any bit of news was going. So she added, encouragingly:

"I won't if I can help it. I'll try not. And if I feel as if I must, I'll try not to try— Oh, dear! I'm so sleepy, and I wish you would go home!"

"I don't think you're very polite. If I had a little house all to myself, and you came a-visiting me, I wouldn't send you home, I wouldn't. Not if it was raining blazes and you was afraid every step of the way, and things seemed jumping out of every bush you went by, and there wasn't a house betwixt here and a quarter of a mile, and that one old Joe Foster's, who gets drunk and comes home any time a-hollerin' and goin' on —"

"Oho, Jimmy! You needn't say any more. That lets your secret out, plain enough. You needn't think I'll tell it. I'd be ashamed to say one of my friends was brave enough to run away in the night, after his folks were asleep, and too big a coward to go home again. A fellow that felt it safe to go to see a ghost in a house where there was a girl to take care of him! And 'say,' Jimmy; I always liked you first-rate, didn't I? Well, I did. So much that I hope you'll sometime be braver than you are now. So much that I hope your mother hasn't waked up and found her son lost and been broken-hearted about it. So much I hope you'll save your credit by starting this minute while it's stopped raining 'blazes,' or drops either; and if you will I'll go half-way back with you, even far beyond old Joe's. Come along."

"Say, Nancy, what's the harm of my staying here till mornin'?"

"All the harm in the world. Miss Halpine

wouldn't like it. We'd be sure to oversleep and — Come on."

But James had now plucked up the remnant of his courage, and dragged himself to the door, where he paused for a final "say," and this relating to the spook he had hoped, yet feared, to meet.

"Say, Nancy. If 'it' should come, after I've gone — "

"I'll send 'it' in pursuit! Only I thought I'd got to see you home."

"Well, you haven't. Who's afraid, anyway?" returned the boy, whose pride was roused.

"Well, James Lincoln, I guess — both of us! But that doesn't matter. Step lively, now, and I must go to sleep, or I shall never, never wake up again. Good night."

With that Nancy gently but firmly assisted her ill-timed visitor over the threshold, and before the echoes of his running footsteps had died she was fast asleep.

Fortunately, old Rover answered the pur-

pose of an alarm-clock, and it was his restless moving about the little room which awoke her betimes; but her head ached, and she felt so stiff, from sleeping in her clothes and from her weeding in the rain of the day before, that, at first, her thought was: "Oh! I'm sick! I've 'taken' the measles, spite of all!" Her second: "My throat isn't sore, and I'm as hungry as Rover seems to be. Yes, you dear old fellow! You shall go out-of-doors. It's a beautiful morning, and I ought to do a lot of gardening to-day. If only Miss Halpine could get that man she's needing to do her ploughing and spading. She asked Jimmy to ask his father to send somebody, if he knew anybody. Mr. Lincoln is quite a gardener himself, even if he does live in the town, and I hope he can."

Then she went down the bank of the creek which ran beside the cabin and filled the ewer that Jane had provided; and decided that, since she had no fresh clothing to put

on, she would take off what she wore, shake it out well, and dress again.

"That will make it feel fresher, anyway, and I suppose somebody will bring me other things to-day. Oh! how dreadful it is! To be right here in the same town where my brothers are so sick, yet not let to go home. Seems as if I couldn't bear it. I wish, I wish I had never read that old advertisement, nor come here! No, not quite that, because then I shouldn't have known Miss Halpine. But of what use is it? When I think of all the new expense poor father's got to meet, sickness and doctor visits, and Frank back at the hospital, and big board to pay — what will become of us? Old Mrs. Wakeman talks poorhousey herself, though she's not poor, really, and I've laughed at her. But — I don't feel like laughing now. Yet, there, Nancy Bates! Stop thinking of things you can't help. Father says 'do the duty that comes first,' and now I'm dressed, that is to read what Jane wrote down for me to

do and not to do. She takes care of Miss 'Cretia same as if she were a little girl, and orders her as much. Hmm. I mustn't set foot inside the house, 'less I'm asked, till a fortnight's passed. I will find my victuals — sounds as if I was a beggar! — in the wood-house. I may eat them there if it is cold or stormy, but if it isn't, I better do it outdoors, and must 'rench' my dishes in the creek before I set 'em back where I found them. I will have my breakfast at seven o'clock sharp, my dinner at twelve, and my supper at six. When I'm obliged to ask Miss 'Cretia for orders I must yell at her from a distance, and not go anigh. I must keep the things I use tidy and — Dear, dear, dear! This world's just made of musts and mustn'ts! But it's a cute little house to keep, all the same, and I do wonder if Jimmy got home all right. He was the 'fraidest boy — and I was. But I sha'n't be again. I slept here, alone, and nothing happened. Nothing but Jimmy, of course, and no real ghost, if there

was one, could scare me much worse than he did when I saw him hanging in that window with Rover grabbing him. There, I begin to feel better already. I shut up my cabin too tight, and it smells dreadful doggy. To-night Rover must sleep in that other room, and I'll leave the top half of that queer old-fashioned door open."

Jane had brushed and cleaned the empty cabin very throughly, and had brought to it the few articles actually needed: a cot, a wash-stand with its furnishings, and one chair. She had, also, at her mistress's desire, spread a rug on the cement floor before the cot, and had showed Nancy where were hooks to hang her clothing upon if any came to her. The cabin stood at the foot of the six-acre lawn, which the little girl called "garden," and the brook babbled by it like a real playmate. On its banks there were dog-tooth violets — which Nancy was to be informed were really named Erythronium Americanum; masses of bloodroot blooms, which seemed

more like snow-banks than Sanguinaria Canadensis; and the dear little pinkish-lavender liverwort flowers, which tried to hold up their heads under the weight of Hepatica Triloba.

Though she had lived so little among them, Nancy loved flowers, and now began to feel about them as Miss Lucretia did, saying:

"They seem almost like real folks. I do believe the beautiful things are asking me to take them to that other beautiful creature, my Lady of the Garden. Oh, you dears! I must kiss you! You are so crisp and sweet and clean. You have had your rain-bath and put on fresh-starched dresses, all ready to go up to the big house and say 'Good morning.' I wish I could send some of you to my own little home and my darling brothers, but —"

Winking fast, lest she might do something worse, the little girl gathered a big bunch of the wild flowers, and sped swiftly over the lawn, determined to see only the brightness

and beauty of her surroundings and to forget, if she could, the troubles she could not prevent.

Jane was just coming out of the kitchen with a tray of breakfast, and Nancy ran to her, clasped her close, and gave the astonished matron a hug and kiss before she could object. Then the nosegay was held under the woman's nostrils and she was asked :

"Did you ever see anything so pretty as that? I'm going to take it to Miss Halpine, to put on her own breakfast-table."

Then the tray was set upon the path with a force that jingled the dishes, and holding her head held far back, to avoid contact with the flowers, Jane grasped them with her apron and flung them away, indignantly demanding :

"Would you kill her?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HAPPENINGS OF A MORNING

Poor Nancy recoiled as from a blow. She was often thoughtless and needing reproof, but it had never been given her in a tone like that, which conveyed an unbearable sense of degradation. Her temper flamed, and with equal indignation, she demanded:

"Am I a leper? You act as if I were. You — I hate you! I'm going home this minute. I wish — I wish — Oh, you poor little innocent flowers! Since I've 'poisoned' you already you may as well go with me and make somebody glad; and why, why did I ever come here?"

Jane was as much surprised by this outburst as Nancy had been by the treatment accorded her lovely nosegay; but a fresh surprise was in store for both. Unseen by

either, Miss Halpine had been behind the arbor vitæ hedge, stooping to see if the forget-me-nots planted in its shadow had started growth, and her head now appeared above the cedar as she inquired:

"Jane, Nancy, are you quarrelling? and on such a morning as this? Jane, your caution is absurd. Nancy, you've forgotten the respect due an older person. Bring me the flowers, my dear, for they shouldn't lie in disgrace, the innocent victims of human tempers."

"Miss 'Cretia!" remonstrated the old servant, moving forward as if she would interfere.

But Nancy had already picked up her nosegay, and with a defiant glance toward the housekeeper, now handed it to her employer.

"I gathered them for you, because they made me think of you. They are so pure and dainty, but — but — do you suppose — if it's true, and there is any danger, please throw them away and wash your hands quick. I'm sorry I spoke saucily to Jane — I mean,

I begin to be sorry and I shall be quite, when I get cooled down. But it's horrid to feel as if you were a walking pest-house, like the smallpox hospital — "

"What's that? Smallpox?" exclaimed the old servant, who had bent to lift her tray and had caught but thus much of what the girl had said. "Who's got the smallpox?"

"Nobody. Nor even the measles. Do recall your wandering common sense, good Jane, and take that tray to the porch. Put it on my little table there, and fetch Nancy a chair to sit in," said Miss Halpine.

"There mustn't nobody else sit in it, then."

"Nonsense. There, child, have patience. Why, I hardly know my bright-faced gardener this morning. You look as if — did you sleep well, last night?" now asked the mistress, with remorseful thoughts of how easily she had yielded to Nancy's assurance that she "wasn't at all afraid to stay alone in such a cosy house."

"Not very," answered the child, after a slight hesitation.

"What disturbed you, my dear?"

"I'd rather not tell, if you don't mind," was the second reluctant reply, for Nancy would not betray Jimmy's escapade.

This grew so interesting that Jane paused midway to the porch and listened intently, regardless of the heavy tray with its cooling food. But the little girl was not so regardless. That was a very different sort of breakfast from her accustomed ones, and hunger banished the last of her anger, so she inquired, with a return of her usual smile:

"Is that for me? 'Cause it looks so delicious I can hardly wait to eat it. My headache's all gone and I want to go to work. What am I to do to-day, Miss Halpine?"

"I haven't quite decided. There's so much I hardly know what's best. Though you're right: breakfast, for all of us, is first. I hope you'll enjoy it. I'm going in to mine now."

Jane's curiosity got the better of her caution,

and as her mistress disappeared within the house, she lingered by the little stoop-table and asked, beneath her breath:

"Child, did anything come to the cabin last night?"

"Please don't ask me. You ought not."

"Then there did! I knew it. I knew where there was so much smoke there'd be some fire! Let Miss 'Cretia pooh-pooh it much as she will."

"W-h-a-t?" gasped Nancy. "There wasn't a bit of fire, or smoke either, that I saw."

Jane continued, more as if talking to herself than to the little girl:

"It was just the sort of night it always comes. The wilder, the surer. Well, I'm glad you're safe, and — I don't know what's to be done now. I'm none too pleased to have you here, I must admit, but I'm no heathen to make you stay in the 'Haunted Cabin' again. I don't know how you lived through it, you poor little creatur'."

"Jane, you get over your tempers 'most

as quick as I do, don't you ? There. I s'pose that's saucy again ; and you'd better go give our — our mistress — her breakfast."

Nancy had promptly discovered that Jane's spirit resented that name of "mistress," on anybody's lips save her own, and enjoyed this slight retaliation for offences received. Yet the old servant took no notice of the term, and hastily departed, intending to cross-question Nancy at the earliest opportunity. And with much satisfaction she announced to Solomon, as she joined him at the kitchen table :

"I always knew it ! Time and again I've heard it with my own ears ! "

"Well, most folks do hear things with their own and not other folkses'," he assented. "Give me some more coffee. I feel a sight better this morning. I believe I could plough if I tried."

"You're not goin' to try, then. The milk-man's goin' to send a man. You'd plough an hour and grunt all the time, then lie abed a

week. If you're better, you'd best keep so, to look after things. Hmm. *I don't believe there's another property in the county got one but ours!*"

"Quit starin' at nothin', woman, and give me my coffee. Seen that young one this morning?"

"Should think I have. And she's eatin' on the porch, all measly as she is. But she's seen 'it!' And she's as holler-eyed as a phantom, and what's to be done, I don't know."

Solomon was more interested than he would admit, but considered it wiser to frown upon the superstition of his wife, and returned:

"Fudge. I do. Them dandelions want pullin' all out the lawn. It's yaller with 'em, and rootin' out the grass like lightning."

"Yes, there was lightning, and terrible thunder," mused Jane.

"Cleared the air and makes me feel good. She could do that and not hurt nothin', seems if."

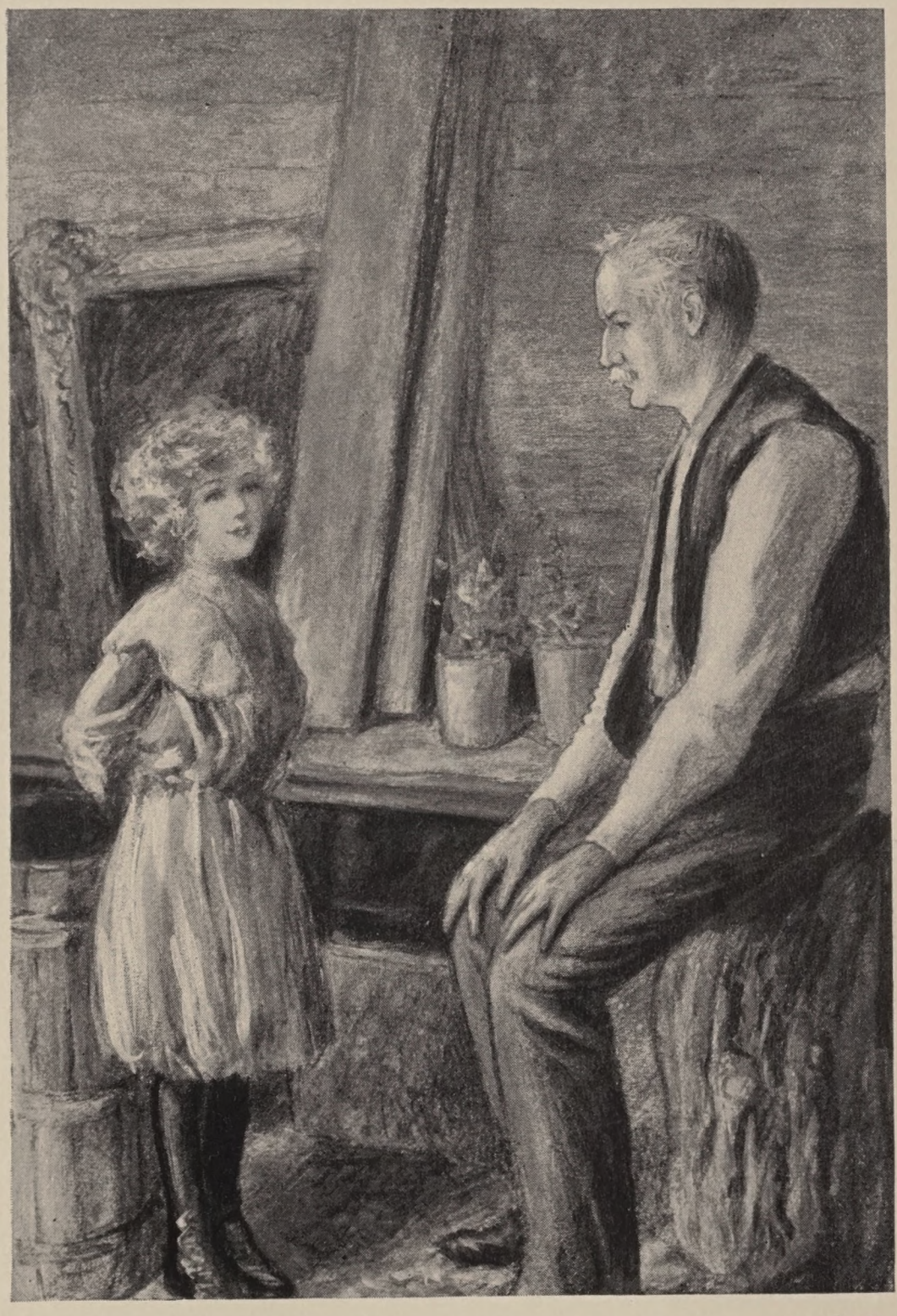
"But that poor little creatur', all alone."

"Look a-here, Jane Smith. If you don't watch out, you'll get to likin' that young one 'fore you know it. I'm tempted that way, even myself. Two three times she picked up some the things I dropped, yesterday, and I never in all my life seen such a white set of teeth in anybody's head, and her eyes — they kind of snap like all the time, like they was about ready to say somethin' worth while."

Jane rose to clear the table and remarked:

"I never heard eyes talk, not I myself. And how 'bout 'early roses'? All the red-heads in creation can't make them good again."

"No, Jane, that's so. 'Twouldn't do. She's a blunderin' young one, and once we get her started here, she'll grow right along. I mean — Fudge. I can't think of nothin' but that neglected garden. But, Jane, you tell Miss 'Cretia 'at I've got a job for Nancy, and I'll instruct her how to do it myself. I'd like to see her right now, and I'll hobble out to the wood-house, where I can in peace and quiet.



"'SAY, SISSY, WHAT WAS IT YOU SAW LAST NIGHT?'"

A man can't talk sensible where a woman is clatterin' her dishes all the time."

"Well, I'm thankful you can go. I always did despise to have men-folks clutterin' up the house," returned his helpmate, with a laugh at her own smartness of repartee. A laugh in which he joined, despite his will, for they were a devoted old pair, whose affection for one another was as sincere as oddly expressed.

Nancy followed the gardener to the wood-house, wishing him a gay good morning, and noticing that he seemed far less afraid of her infecting him with the measles than his wife did. Indeed, as he sat on the great chopping-block, he looked cautiously around, fearing interruption, and, instead of telling Nancy what to do, dropped his voice to a whisper, as he asked:

"Say, Sissy, what was it you saw last night?"

Nancy started guiltily, wondering if by any possibility he could have been out-of-

doors and a witness of Jimmy's coming or going. It was not likely, however, for he would have been afraid of the storm's making him more lame; and nobody could see well so far from the big house, unless by aid of the lightning's flash. But she asked, quietly:

"What makes you think I saw anything?"

"Jane. She says so. You must ha' told her."

"I told nothing. And she'd no business listening to the talk between Miss Halpine and me."

Solomon ignored this, and persisted:

"Needn't be afraid to trust me, Sissy. I can keep a secret well's the next one, and havin' lived my life here, if there is a — a ghost, I sh'd deem I was entitled to know all the facts of the case if anybody was."

Nancy's eyes twinkled and her smile was certainly bright as he continued, after a brief pause:

"If you'll tell me the whole business, true

and exact, not addin' ner subtractin' a ioty, I'll give you — I'll give you a nickel."

"Mr. Solomon, I couldn't!"

"A dime, then. Though 'tain't worth it."

"Pooh! I fancy it, the it I saw, would claim he was worth a deal more than that!" and she laughed so merrily that the old man grew offended and exclaimed, testily:

"Well, keep your old ghost, then, if you want to; for if you cal'late on squeezin' a quarter out of me, you'll be disappointed."

The spirit of mischief made her deepen the "mystery." "Mr. Solomon, I'm above bribery! *He* might exhibit himself for cash, one never can tell what a spook will do, but I can't betray him. Besides, it's getting late and I must go to work. What is it, please, and how am I to do it?"

At that moment Jane's sunbonneted head appeared above the quince bush beside the door, and Solomon answered, in a very loud tone:

"You take this garden-line and stake off a

strip of the grass, so; then you begin to one end of the strip, and with this little peelin' knife you dig out every old dandelion root you see. Them that are in blossom you can fling into one basket, for the compost-heap. Them that ain't, put into another one, and Jane'll cook 'em for greens. The bitter of dandelion is hulsome, in the spring of the year."

"The *old* roots, you said. How can I tell the difference?"

"Do you mean to be sassy, Sissy, or do you not? It sounds mighty like — there, there. Don't say nothin' more. Female tongues from their youth up are troublesome things. Jane, you've come just in time to take down them two baskets hangin' yonder. Now, girl, be off about your work, and don't you make no blunders this time."

"Two negatives make an affirmative," murmured Nancy, recalling her grammar lessons, and smiling, as she ran away, to think how disgusted Solomon would be, could he know

who her "ghostly" visitant had been. Jane had put a small piece of carpet in one of the baskets for her to kneel upon as she dug her roots, that her frock might not be greened, and for the first hour of her labor Nancy was very happy. The morning was still cool, she was able to forget home troubles in the novelty about her, and she sang as she worked. The second hour was not so pleasant. The air grew very warm, and the sun beat down on the wide unshaded lawn as if trying to scorch her. The dandelions seemed innumerable and her task monotonous. Thoughts of her sick brothers obtruded themselves, and a terrible homesickness assailed her.

Miss Halpine had not been visible since breakfast, and by the end of the third hour it seemed to the banished daughter that she would lose her courage, entirely, if she couldn't have a glimpse of her father's face; and when she reached the stake she had planted by the stone bank-wall, bordering the road, and which finished an

imaginary "row," she could not restrain her grief.

Throwing herself down in the shade of a spruce-tree, whose great branches swept the ground, she cried as if her heart were broken; but while she lay thus, sobbing bitterly, there came to her a sound which some people would have pronounced "ear-splitting." This was the shrill signal common to lads upon the street, made with fingers and lips, and Nancy instantly recognized it as Jimmy Lincoln's whistle.

The next instant her red head was lifted from the grass and she was eagerly waving her hand to the boy who came staggering up the road, under a bundle he was carrying pick-a-pack; and which he tossed upon the wall, with a sigh of relief.

"Hello, Nan! What's up?"

"Oh! I'm so glad you've come, you darling boy!"

"Shucks! I wasn't so 'darling' last night, was I?"

"Tell me, Jimmy, quick, quick! How are my brothers?"

"I didn't see 'em."

"Of course you didn't, I didn't expect they'd let you. But you must have heard. Are those my clothes? Didn't Mrs. Wakeman send me any message?" demanded the anxious girl, catching Jimmy's sleeve. "What makes you so slow?"

"Didn't, didn't, didn't — if you want answers you better give me time to breathe, betwixt. It's no fun being an old go-between. My father says I'm an 'immune' — a fellow 'at's had 'em and can't catch 'em again — and that's why he makes me come with your duds. He said 'duty,' and that's the meanest word in the whole dictionary. I hate duty. Don't you?"

"I don't hate you, Jimmy, if you're a 'duty,' 'cause I see you have brought me no bad news, even if you haven't good. Please tell me how everybody is. Quick."

"What were you a-cryin' for?" now inquired the exasperating boy.

"Just for that. Because I could get no word from home and was so homesick. Please tell."

"W-h-e-w! Just for that? Well, here goes: They stummick-pumped the baby and got the nickel out of him, so he's all right, only fretty as blazes. The B-C-twins are: 'I said to Hiram I said, them twins, Bertram and Claudy, have got 'em the worst they can be got, but they're so tough they'll get well. Adrian's the sickest one, I said, but Donny'll have 'em light. Now, Jimmy, you tell it as I say, and don't mix 'em. I told Hiram, I said, I'll vouch that Lincoln boy'll say 'twas the worstest one was the wellest and vicy-versey. And he said: Let him. He never was right bright, and he's a spoiled only child.' So, there's your message, word for word, exactly as I got it from her own lips, and unmixed. Then she gave me the bundle and said she'd find some way of sending you

word every day. And you're to be a real good girl and not cut no capers, and — a lot more such rubbish. Of course, I'm to be the 'way' she'll find of sending 'word,' but it's no fun, I tell you."

"You have already told me, disagreeable boy. But I don't care, now. I don't care for anything; and, oh! Jimmy!"

"Oh! what? I thought I was a 'darling,' a minute ago."

"Listen! It's the funniest thing. I looked as if I hadn't slept well last night, and each one of our family has asked me about it, privately. Each one — I know it — believes I saw a 'ghost,' a real one. Neither one would admit to the other that this was true, but it is. Even Miss Halpine asked me, with a queer look on her face, as if she dreaded my answer, and dared not urge me when I told her I was disturbed — "

"Nancy Bates! If you told on me, I'll throw your old clothes in that ditch yonder!"

"Look here, Jimmy Lincoln. Am I that

kind of a girl? Would you have liked me 'first-rate,' ''most as much as if I were a boy,' if I had been? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Of course I didn't tell. Then Jane cross-questioned me, and got no satisfaction, but believes in the spook more than ever. But the funniest was Solomon. He's better, so took me out into the wood-house to tell me what to do, but really to ask me what I saw last night. He went so far as to offer cash payment. But I was above bribery: though I tell you, and if you want to make a few cents out of the scrape — tackle Solomon, and maybe you can."

"Hurray! I'll make him blood-curdle worse 'an any the stories my father won't let me read make me. How much do you think I could get out of him? A quarter? fifty cents? a dollar?"

Before Nancy could reply there was a sound of a warning cough on the farther side the spruce-tree, and with another of her Jack-in the-box-like appearances, the mistress of Cedar-

croft stood before them. Her expression was full of quiet amusement, yet she made no comment on what she must have overheard, and bade Jimmy a kindly good morning. Then she asked:

"Can you drive a horse, James? A very gentle, safe old horse?"

"Huh! Should think I could. I can drive the fastest racer goin', I can. I've been raised on horses, every kind. My father, he keeps the liberty stable — I mean livery — used to say that when I was a kid — I — Why, Miss Halpine?"

"Because I may hire you to do some errands for me. Solomon isn't able, though he'll superintend the harnessing. And Nancy, I think there can be no harm in your going to see the brother who's in hospital. Should you like that? Though you would have to ask the superintendent before you did see him, of course, and might be refused permission. You may take him a bunch of the wild flowers, and I'll cut a basket of hyacinths

and tulips for the other patients. It is my habit to send flowers there twice a week, and while you're here you may be my 'agent' in the business. Indeed, I think you would like to help cut and pack them, as well as your own bouquet. Let us attend to it at once, while James is helping Solomon."

Saying this, the lady turned to cross the lawn, over that part of it which Nancy had weeded; but she had not gone a dozen feet before she stopped short, threw up her hands in dismay, and cried out:

"Oh! oh! oh! Nancy, how could you! And you a country-bred — or, at least — oh! dear!"

CHAPTER IX.

A WOODLAND VISIT

THE glow died from Nancy's face and in answering dismay she cried :

"What harm have I done now?"

"My violets!"

The girl caught her breath, as she glanced toward the basket of weeds destined for the compost-heap, then she explained :

"Solomon told me to dig up everything, everything except the grass. He was very particular. He asked me over twice if I knew just what grass was, as if he thought I was an utter stupid. I knew those were violet leaves, like we find in the woods and sometimes along the roadsides. But they're not the sweet ones, such as are in that bed you showed me. But, Miss Halpine, I'd better go away. I'm always doing wrong without meaning it, and

if I stay on I'll likely ruin everything you have."

For a few moments the disappointed lady felt like taking the girl at her word. It did seem that all she touched was doomed to death, and she had undone in a few hours the labor of years. Then justice prevailed, and a glance at the small face that had been so gay and was now so sad touched her own warm heart. Also, she reflected that there might have been, probably had been, a purpose in Solomon's instructions, which his pupil had too literally obeyed.

"No, Nancy. Not yet. Try and try again, you know."

"Were you so fond of them, Miss Halpine?"

"Yes. I've been transplanting them from the woods or roadsides, from wherever I could get them, because I love the blue carpet of them. It looks like that, or has looked so from my windows, at their time of blooming, a little later than now. But Solomon has

not liked them. He says they root out the grass, which he has been even more years in trying to grow to such perfection. There isn't a lawn anywhere about with such fine, moss-like grass as ours; and I suspect that he's more to blame than you. He has evened off that artichoke affair, and will, doubtless, be as pleased as I am sorry. There, child, think no more about it. It can't be helped."

"Why can't it, Miss Halpine? These are not much withered, and if I carefully set them back again, why shouldn't they grow?"

"You are already tired, I see, and it would be a long, warm task."

"Please let me try. Please, please. Indeed, I can't bear to be such a destroyer of everything you prize. Let Jimmy go to the town without me. He'll be a safe messenger, for he is used to horses, as he says. He's a good boy — 'most always."

"Very well," assented Miss Lucretia, thinking it well that Nancy should have some lesson to teach her carefulness, and meaning

to give her a greater pleasure later in the day. So Jimmy drove alone through the great stone gateway, and was back so soon that Solomon accused him of having left some of his errands undone. The boy convinced him to the contrary, and rejoined Nancy on the lawn, to explain that he hadn't "waited to bother with seein' Frank, though he'd left them flowers all right. But, say, Nancy."

"Well, say what?"

"If I was to stay and help you, so you'd get done twice as soon, you'd get double money, don't you see?"

"No, I don't."

"Course you would. If you had a whole day's dandelionin' to do, and you got through in half a day, you'd get two days' pay, wouldn't you? And could give me part?"

"I don't see how. Something's wrong with your arithmetic. I'm no good at figures, myself, or not much, but that sounds queer, some way. Why, of course not. I'm not doing this job by the dandelion — or violet,

ah, me! — but by the day. And I guess you'd better go now. Did Miss Halpine pay you off?"

"No, not yet. She said I was to wait a minute in the kitchen till — Pshaw! She's a-wavin' to me now. Well, anyway, I'll stay and help you a few minutes. I'd like to get a job here. I'd like it first-rate, now school's shut up. It was a boy she advertised for, anyway, and not a girl."

This remark restored Nancy's drooping spirit by rousing her indignation, and she exclaimed:

"Of all the mean things, Jimmy Lincoln, that's the meanest! To try and take another boy's place away from him — "

"I'm not! I ain't! I never!" protested Jimmy, flushing. "I only said both of us. Say — "

But Nancy paid no further heed to him, though she fell upon the task of resetting the violet roots with a vigor which soon finished it. Then it was dinner-time, and it was a very

hungry girl who sat down to the stoop-table and a bowl of Jane's good vegetable soup. But she had first made a visit to the brook-side and plentifully dashed the water over her heated face and thoroughly washed her soiled hands. The rebellious red curls were also brushed, with her own little brush that had been sent from home, and her clothing neatly hung in the cabin.

All this was observed by Miss Halpine, and again Nancy rose in the lady's favor, who reflected:

"She surely is the tidest, sunniest child I ever saw. Her homely face is growing positively beautiful in my sight, she is so honest and willing. Her blunders — well, Solomon and I must come to an understanding on that subject. Conflicting orders will make havoc of all my treasures. I wonder if that James will come back again, as he promised. If he does, Nancy shall have at least one happy afternoon, to compensate for her morning's tears. So he was the 'ghost,' it seems, from

what I overheard, but why he should have come here at night I fail to understand, nor will I question either of them about it. Apparently, no harm was done. and I suppose children are 'prankish,' as Jane avers."

Jimmy did return, and ahead of the hour set by his new employer.

He had announced at home that he had been engaged by the mistress of Cedarcroft, "to do her teamin'," and had swaggered absurdly, after the manner of his kind when suddenly elevated to a position of trust. But he had not been forbidden, because Mr. Lincoln knew, as the boy had himself boasted, that he was a capable little horseman, who certainly could manage a sedate animal like Dandy, the Cedarcroft sorrel.

So, when Nancy was about to resume her seemingly endless task on the great lawn, Miss Lucretia explained:

"You need not dig any more dandelion roots to-day, my child. But put on your rubber boots and get a trowel from the tool-

house. A basket, too, though I shall take my big tin box, and we may not need it. We are going to the woods, Nancy, and I always feel so delightfully excited over my first visit to them of the season. They're just in condition, after the rain, for transplanting the ferns I need to replenish the big fernery in the shady corner under the weeping birches. It may be too early for them to have started, though I hope not, and I'm most anxious about one sort, the only specimen I ever found, and belonging to the only genus native to our country: a Lygodium Palmatum, or climbing fern. Then I hope to get a few roots of Asplenium Rhizophyllum. That is a plant which is called 'walking' because it bends its fronds over backward till they touch the ground and strike new roots. And we must bring home great quantities of Adiantum Pedatum, and — Eh? What is it, James?"

The boy had come up to the steps and stood listening respectfully while the lady was speaking, but he was evidently in great

excitement, and as Nancy afterward informed him, "fairly goggle-eyed at the big words Miss Halpine used so easily."

"He — he — Well! Huh! He says that Dandy ain't fit to drive, and I say it is. The hind shoe's a little loose, but if he wasn't so cranky and'd let me have a hammer and a few horseshoe nails, I'd tighten it lickity-cut. Huh! 'Taint the first old horseshoe I've set. No, sir. Why, say, if you'll believe it, sir, once I regular shod a horse, all four shoes. True's I live I did. My father, he was in a hurry, and the smith, he couldn't leave off another, and say, I up with his hoof just this way, and on she went slick as a whistle. Stayed on the whole time that horse was out, they did. And he — ain't he a queer old stick? Pooh!"

"James, you must not speak so about an old man. He's very careful, both of Dandy and of me. I'll go to the stable with you and see him."

Poor Miss Lucretia was the most disap-

pointed of the three. She kept but two animals on the place, old Dandy and the still older Rover, and it seemed to her that she never needed either of these but that there was something wrong with them. She had anticipated a great deal of pleasure on this proposed outing, for now she would not feel that Solomon, who had heretofore driven for her, was getting tired and fretful waiting for her to finish her woodland visit. Besides, she wanted to give Nancy a happy afternoon, and it was with more than ordinary decision that she informed her old gardener:

"We are certainly going to ride, and if the horse has lost his shoe he will have to do without it. Please help James to harness."

Solomon stared and obeyed, saying nothing, even to Jane, who appeared on the scene, objecting in her own turn:

"Well, Miss 'Cretia, honey, I hope you'll bring a safe neck home with you. I surely never expected to see the day you'd trust yourself in the hands of a tacker like that.

The pair of 'em together haven't sense enough to — well, well! Have you got on your rubber boots? Would you like a bite of lunch? If folks are set to go into danger, reckless so, they'd better do it on a full stummick."

Miss Halpine laughed, and was about to decline the luncheon, but just in time caught a glimpse of Jimmy's eyes and accepted. She remembered reading somewhere that boys were always hungry; and food would help to keep the lad patient, holding the horse, while she and Nancy explored the forest.

So it was settled, and the mistress of Cedarcroft had not for long felt either so happy or so young as she did when they drove away eastward, in the light wagon, and Dandy stepping out as if he recognized a new and determined hand upon the reins. It seemed to her that she had almost begun a new life, in which the childish laughter of her small "helpers" was opening a world of innocent delights. And, indeed, a joyous

time it proved for all the party. Riding in any sort of a vehicle was the rarest of experiences for Nancy, and though Jimmy scoffed at Dandy's gait, with the superiority of one who owned a "liberty" stable full of faster animals, he managed to keep that venerable steed jogging at a rate which surprised even itself.

When they reached the forest, Miss Halpine directed the lad where to stand, on a grassy level widening of the mountain roadside, gave him all but two of the sandwiches, and bade him:

"Wait exactly here, on this very spot, until we come back. Do not go anywhere else. You'll find a book under the cushion of the front seat, so that if you're tired you can read. Don't be afraid; and you are perfectly safe."

James grinned at the mention of fear, and exchanged a mischievous glance with Nancy, who shook her head, but laughed aloud, too happy now to be silent. And oh, what an afternoon there followed! To be in the great

forest, miles from any house, on the very top of the highest hill there was in that locality, breathing the exhilarating air, with one to whom every foot of the ground was rich with interest, was joy beyond words. And more and more, as they penetrated the wilderness, it grew upon the lady, also, that she had chosen well in this keen, responsive child, whose love of nature was as great as her own.

Naturally, two such wood-lovers tarried long ere they thought of leaving the fascinating place. Miss Halpine's great tin box was full and pressed down, with the specimens she had secured; most precious of all, a tiny root which she was sure was the rare Lygodium; and Nancy had filled her own basket to the brim with anything and everything which caught her fancy.

But suddenly it occurred to them both that it was growing very dark.

"Do you suppose it is going to rain again, so soon?" asked the girl, anxious that her

beloved patron should be exposed to nothing hurtful.

Miss Halpine looked toward the west and laughed:

"This is nightfall, not cloud. Why, we must have stayed long beyond our time. See, how fast it darkens. Now that I've stopped searching the ground and looked away from it for a few moments, it has already become almost impossible to distinguish the different plants. We are far in the wood and must make haste out. Poor James! I fear he will be disgusted with driving for me."

They were, indeed, far deeper in the forest than they had thought. The way back to the road seemed long and difficult, since they had no longer the excitement of plant-hunting, and their burdens were heavy. Nancy had long ago, at Miss Lucretia's insistence, eaten the two sandwiches, and yet now felt hungry, while the other, who had eaten nothing, began to grow faint and dizzy.

"Never mind, Miss Halpine. We'll soon

be there. Are you sure we're going right?"

"Yes, we're on a trail I know, though I never followed it so far inward before. A wood-cutters' road, though disused for years, and much overgrown now. But I've been coming to this forest all my life. I came first with my — We are safe enough; though I shall be thankful when we get back and can rest in the wagon. It will be too late to set out any of our specimens to-night, but they'll keep safely in the damp old dairy till morning."

A few rods farther they came to an abrupt halt, and Nancy, seeing as yet but the amusing side of the affair, burst into a little chant:

"Two fern-hunters, lost in a wood,
Said one to the other: 'How good
It would be to see
That butternut-tree,
'Neath which Jim and Dandy once stood.'"

"But, Nancy, Nancy! We are not, cannot be lost," remonstrated Miss Halpine, with a

nervous laugh and a sharp note of anxiety in her voice.

"No, indeed, not lost. But I don't remember that boggy place, do you, Miss Lucretia? It seems to spread all the way across, and the trees are not so thick. This side looks the best. I'm littler, I'll go first. When I find a place I don't slump in you come. When I do slump, you don't. Adrian's rubber boots are so big I may lose them, but — here goes!"

She thrust out her foot, tentatively, and fulfilled her own prophecy — the boot stayed in the mud, while her foot came out of it. This meant delay, and they retreated to the safer, higher ground, as soon as the girl had recovered and replaced the boot. Then Miss Lucretia suddenly discovered their mistake and cried out:

"See, child! We've been going north instead of south. Just exactly in the wrong direction, though by the same road."

"How can you tell?"

"By the trunks of the trees, which are mossy on the north side, and lean toward the south. I know my way now, and we'll soon be at the road."

Thus Nancy had acquired another item of woodcraft, and pleased her instructor by saying, as they faced about:

"I like Nature's school the best in the world, and you are the dearest teacher, Miss Lucretia."

"Thank you, and I hope we will both always be loving pupils of that school. Ah! There's a familiar landmark, that tells me we are about ten minutes' distance still from our carriage; but that doesn't matter, since the danger of having to stay all night in the forest is past."

"Then even you were afraid of that? I was, I know."

"Yes, for a little while. But look yonder. I think I see the worm fence that borders the road."

They were soon out of the wood and upon

this road, at a point but little above that where Jimmy was to await them, and hurried downward to that very butternut-tree which Nancy had versified, and where should have been the promised "Drayton." There was no mistake as to the spot, for there was the box in which Jane had packed their sandwiches; there lay in the ditch the copy of "Thaddeus of Warsaw" that Miss Halpine had provided for Jimmy's reading; there were the wheel and hoof prints; there were many signs of Jimmy's presence; yet, alas! Jimmy, horse, or vehicle, there was not!

CHAPTER X.

THE APPARITION

Mr. Lincoln was just closing his office for the night when a small girl rushed into it, caught his hand, clung to it a moment for support, then sank down upon the floor, where she gasped, rather than spoke :

" A — carriage — quick — quick ! "

The gentleman turned up the light and exclaimed :

" Why, it's little Nancy Bates ! You poor child, what has happened ? "

Her face, at first frightfully flushed, now began to grow as alarmingly pale, though she tried to smile into the kind face above her and eagerly accepted the glass of water he hurried to offer. Then, though her breathing was still labored, she explained :

"Please get a — carriage for — Miss Halpine. Quick, quick!"

"Certainly. At once. What sort?"

"Any — any kind that she can ride in."

"Very well. There, sit still. Don't try to explain till you are rested. See. I'll set this pitcher of water beside you, but don't drink too freely of it. I'll get up a rig instantly, for all the men have left for the night. By the time I'm ready you'll be all right."

Nancy laid her head against the chair beside which she had dropped, and slowly recovered herself. She was still wild with impatience, yet felt that she had accomplished her task, and that all would be well even if this deadly faintness should not pass. If she could keep her senses long enough to direct Mr. Lincoln, her beloved Miss Lucretia would be cared for, and the rest didn't matter.

However, she was a perfectly healthy child, and soon felt more like her ordinary self, so that at the end of the very few minutes which

were required for the livery keeper's harnessing, she could explain her errand, though she still trembled from the great exertion she had made.

"Miss Halpine's left on the top of Lookout Mountain. Jimmy didn't wait, and she's faint, and you must go quick. To take her home."

"Jump in. Tell me as we go. Here, put this light lap-robe around you, and I'd best throw two or three more into the trap. We're off; and what's that about Jimmy?"

Nancy then told the predicament in which her employer and herself had been left, not attempting any further explanation of the boy's peculiar behavior. Her anxiety was only and wholly that they should get to Miss Lucretia, "before she takes a dreadful cold or faints away alone."

"Nancy, did you run all the way from the top of Lookout?"

"Yes. I had to. I'd have run twice as fast if I could."

"Child, don't you ever do such a thing

again. It's a full five miles, and you might have killed yourself. The strain on your heart — "

"Oh! It wasn't hard. It's down-hill all the way, you know, and — do make him go as fast as he can. Think! My darling Miss Lucretia's all alone up there. In the dark, and with, maybe, wolves and things. She is too tired to walk any more, we walked so much in the forest, looking for specimens. She promised to sit right still on the big rock we found, and she's got 'Thaddeus of Warsaw' to sit on. We tore him all to pieces and made a cushion of his leaves, so she shouldn't take cold, but she'll be terribly lonely, and maybe frightened sick. Solomon and Jane have taken such care of her, as if she were a little child, it's made her tender. Oh! they'll be so worried! And what, Mr. Lincoln, what could make Jimmy do it?"

The gentleman had taken his swiftest horse, and, though the night was dark, was driving as rapidly as possible over the smooth road

of the valley and the rougher, narrower one of the mountain. But he now gave close attention to his small companion, as she clung to him, bumping and bouncing about on the leather cushion, and demanded:

"What did Jimmy do? How is he connected with this matter?"

"Why, didn't you know that he was going to drive for Miss Halpine?"

"Yes. But I supposed it was to be only around the place, or to the town. I haven't seen him since this noon, but if he's been guilty of mischief, such as this, he'd better look out."

If it had been for almost any other person, Nancy would have tried to excuse the lad's behavior; but to run away and leave Miss Lucretia, her darling Miss Lucretia — well, he ought to be punished!

There was but one road up the mountain, and they travelled it in silence for the rest of the distance, until they came to the top and the memorable butternut-tree, against which,

dimly discernible in the gloom, Miss Halpine was heavily leaning. Fortunately for her, she had passed part of her waiting time in sleep, though she had roused at the sound of wheels, and cried out in fear of being overlooked:

"Here am I! Nancy, James! Why, you have been, as you promised, very quick."

Then, standing up, she saw that this was not James, but a man, who said:

"Not that scapegrace, madam, but his mortified father. Allow me to help you in. Whoa, sir! Climb over into the back of the wagon, little girl, while I tuck these baskets and things in front."

The return to Cedarcroft was speedily made, and Miss Lucretia was welcomed and wept over and cossetted by the anxious pair, Solomon and Jane, who had been, as the weeping housekeeper declared:

"Scared out of a year's growth when Dandy came walkin' home alone, with his traces hitched up, and no wagon anywhere in sight."

"He is home then?" asked Miss Halpine, weakly, too tired to care very much about anything save bed and rest. However, she was made to eat some of the nice supper, which had been kept waiting all this time and to which Nancy, at least, did ample justice. Then quiet fell on Cedarcroft and the mystery rested till the morning should bring explanation.

This came by way of Jimmy, that day the saddest boy in Norwich. On Mr. Lincoln's return from his trip to the mountain, he had tracked his son to his hiding-place in the attic, and of the interview between them Jimmy did not care to speak. Sufficient to say that part of the punishment meted out was a personal visit and apology to the lady of Cedarcroft, with the prohibition of "touching any horse-flesh for six months to come."

It was Nancy who saw him arrive, creeping sluggishly along the road, though now unburdened by anything save his own guilty conscience.

"Heigho, Jimmy! So you're alive, are you? I was afraid you were hurt. What happened?"

"Where's the woman?" was the brief response to her greeting.

"Up at the house. Do you want to see her?"

"No, I don't. But I've got to. No, you needn't come. Stay back with your old dandelions, where you belong."

"Aren't you going into partnership with me? If a girl can earn fifty cents, a girl with a boy can earn — how much was it?"

But Jimmy had passed on without pausing, and soon stood, a most abject little person, before the wide veranda where Miss Lucretia was reading, and feeling still too much overworn by her last night's experience to plant even her choicest specimens of ferns. But she could only pity the unhappy lad, whose very knickers took a downward, dejected droop, and bade him a kindly "Good morning."

"Morning. I — I — I — knew he needed shoein'. That old Thaddeus was a noodle. I et up the stuff. Then I drove him to the blacksmith's and some boys said football and I belonged to the Juniors and had to go course and we stayed late and I forgot and when I went he wasn't and I was scared and knew you'd lick me or if you didn't my father would or old Solomon either one and the hateful old horse had left his wagon behind him at the shop and my father he'll send it home to-day right off and I wisht I'd never come and that's all, so there."

Poor Jimmy! In the agony of his confession his words tripped each other up without stop or hindrance of any sort, the perspiration stood thick on his tear-stained countenance, while his stubby fingers nervously clutched and twisted the bottom of his jacket, as if he would wreak upon that a vengeance for his own distress. But, as soon as the confession was ended, he darted down the path, and so vanished from Cedarcroft, vowing to

himself that never, never would he visit it again.

Then followed a week of peace and industry for everybody on that lovely old place. Help had been secured to put the vegetable garden in working order, and Solomon's lameness had become so slight that he could "make" it after his own fashion and leisure. In the other garden, among the flowers, toiled Miss Lucretia and happy Nancy: each day bringing fresh delight and the heathful fatigue which made their slumber sound. The milkman had now become the messenger from the Bates household, and while his news was not very encouraging, it was not greatly the reverse. In any case, Nancy had scant leisure to worry, and since the prescribed fortnight was not yet passed in which she must not enter the big house, she still occupied the cabin. Indeed, she had already grown to be very fond of it, and was not at all afraid there. On each night when there happened to be a strong wind, there recurred

the unexplained moans and groans, which came from the rafters, "where the ghost hides," according to Solomon's statement.

"Well, so long as it hides and doesn't harm me — let the poor thing wail, if he likes. But I believe my father, and *he* says there is always an explanation of such things. I'll find it yet, see if I don't. Two or three nights I've meant to stay awake and try for it, but I'm always so sleepy."

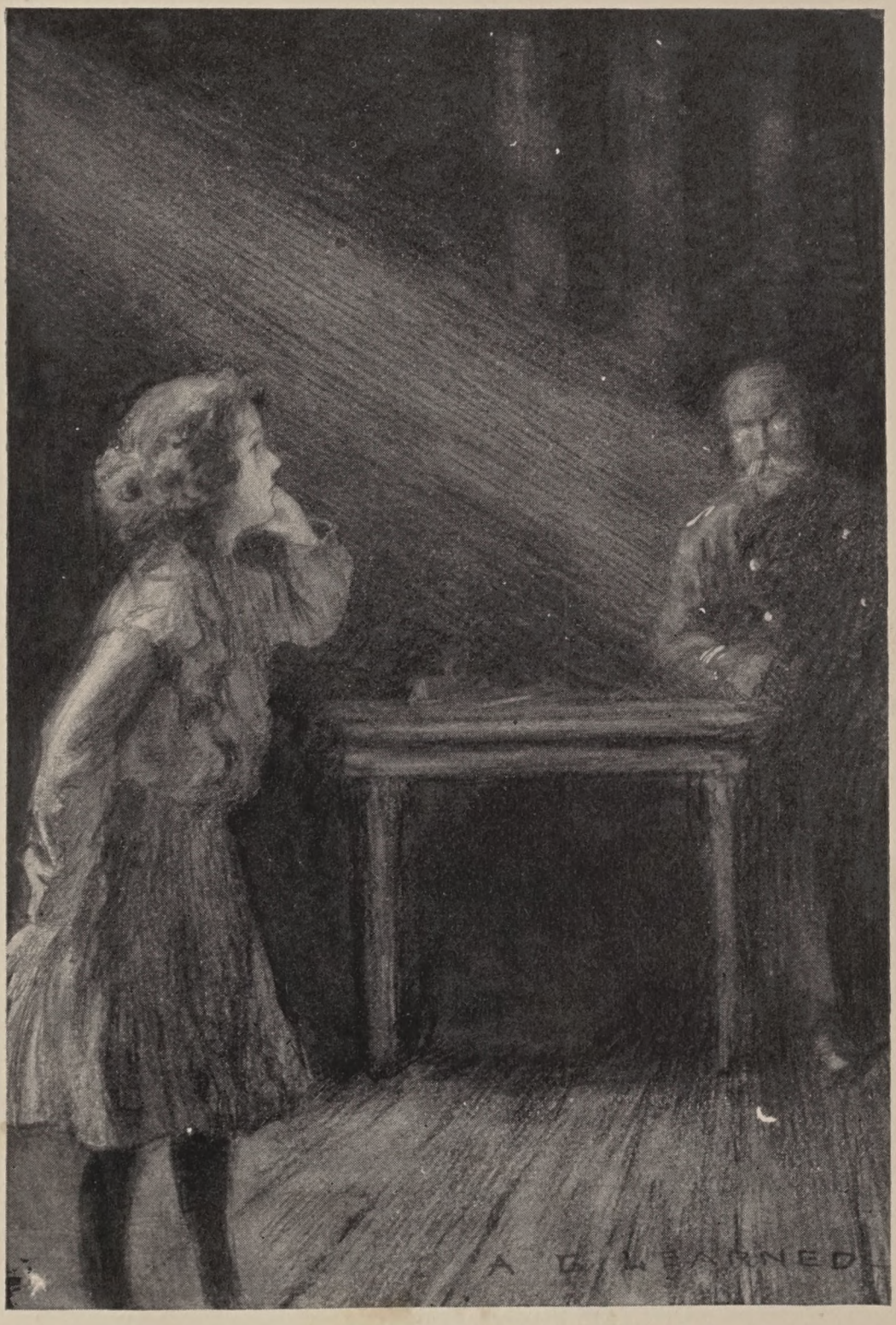
Solomon had regarded her with disfavor, when she made this sensible assertion, and had remarked:

"Somethin' must be a-wantin' in your make-up, Sissy. Never saw a young one afore that wasn't scared into fits at the very idee o' ghosts; and as for sleepin' in the house with one, you may be too stupid to care, but I've been again' it from the word go. 'Tain't no kind of place for a growin' girl,' I've said to Jane; but what could I do? She's more afraid of the measles 'an she is of ghosts, and I don't know but I agree with

her. I hope it won't hurt the property none, you a-laughing th' apparition to scorn, so to speak. We're the only folks in these parts has a ghost, anyway, and — "

"And you'd like to keep it! Oh, you funny, proud old Solomon! Well, I shall not disturb it, for as I said, I cannot stay awake."

Yet that very night following this talk she was destined to prove her own words false. Depressing news from home had made her wakeful, so that, unable to sleep, she had wandered out in the starlight and along the brook, feeling utterly desolate and homesick. Up and down she paced, till she watched the last light go out in the big house across the lawn, and then returned to her own room. It was still early, for households less simple and regular than Cedarcroft, but Nancy felt she ought not to remain up "after hours," even if her doing so could disturb nobody. The faint rays of a young moon brightened the bare interior of the cabin and, as she crossed its threshold, there confronted



"'SIR, ARE YOU — THE GHOST?'"

her, sitting upon her own chair, with his head bowed on his hands above the table — *what?*

A motionless figure of a man clad in a uniform, whose buttons glittered in the moonbeams, and whose bowed head and all that she could see of his flesh were white as the apron she wore.

For a moment poor Nancy paused, afraid to move, almost afraid to breathe, and dreading what the next instant might bring with it. As she stood thus, gazing in terror, the soldier — he was certainly such — lifted his head and turned a luminous glance upon herself. Luminous! His eyes were discs of fire, his face pallid, his hair and sweeping mustache as colorless as those of any regulation spook should be.

For a brief time the pair regarded each other, and then Nancy's courage slowly and surprisingly came back to her; all other emotions suddenly blending in an unconquerable curiosity, as she whispered:

"Sir, are you — *the ghost?*"

The spectre fixed its unearthly eyes upon the child, yet answered in a voice that seemed wholly mortal and very gentle :

" Alas ! yes. A ghost ! But harmless."

Still curious, but strangely unafraid, she moved a bit nearer and asked again :

" Whose ? "

" The ghost of a boy who grew up on this old place, and often slept beneath this narrow roof, when some mad prank had banished him from the broader shelter yonder."

" How — how long ago — was that ? " faltered Nancy, for the first time realizing that she was doing a daring thing, and slowly retreating toward the doorway.

" Long, long before you ever saw the light. Come back, now, for one last glimpse of the beloved scene."

" Oh, then you are not a dead ghost at all ? "

" Worse, maybe, for I am a living one. But who are you, little miss, and what are you doing out-of-doors alone at night ? "

"Oh! I'm not such a little one, and I'm just Nancy. This is my house to sleep in now."

"Do you belong to the lady of Cedarcroft?" was the stranger's next question; and, now convinced that he was nothing but an ordinary man whose curiosity was as great as her own, Nancy sat down comfortably on the door-step as she answered:

"I do and I don't. I'm the boy that's working for her; so, in a way, I belong. But I'm my father's, of course. He is Wilson Bates —"

"Wilson Bates? The little chap who was my fag at school, and the jolliest youngster that ever fished for minnows with a crooked pin. My! How it all comes back, till it was only yesterday it might have been."

"Then did you know my father? Oh! tell me, who are you, please? No ghost whatever, I know that, of course. And now I see what made your eyes look so queer. It was your spectacles catching the moonlight.

Any spook might have had them, and they weren't spirity at all," said the young hostess of the "Haunted Cabin," feeling very friendly toward one who remembered her father's boyhood.

Suddenly the visitor leaned forward and scrutinized the girl's face, as the rising moon lighted its honest plainness. Then he asked:

"Nancy, can you keep a secret as well as your father used to do?"

"I'd be ashamed if I couldn't. Do you want to tell me one?"

"I'm inclined to trust you. I came here for a brief call, but I'm moved to tarry. If I tell you who I am, will you help me? Will you promise not to disclose my identity until I give you leave, if ever I do? Will you let me stay in your house, as you call it, and not betray that I am here? Will you pass me off for the 'ghost,' the real one, and so hide me from the eyes of the curious?"

Nancy caught her breath at this daring proposal. Then she asked:

"Why, and would it be right? It's Miss Lucretia's house, not mine, you know. And — oh, the measles! You might take them."

The ghost laughed as if he were, indeed, very much alive, and said:

"I should say we were both Yankees, answering questions by asking others. This much I assure you: I would not ask you to do a wrong thing. What I *have* asked may lead to the greatest possible good, even to that 'Miss Lucretia' who owns this cabin. If it fails to do that, it can certainly do nobody harm. Now if you're not too sleepy, tell me all you know about this place, about — everything. I'm eager for news of the old town and its people. Then I'll go away and leave you to think over my request."

There followed a long, earnest talk between the soldier and the child, mostly of questions on his part and replies on hers; and at the end of it he rose from the wooden chair and loomed before her, so tall his white head almost touched the ceiling.

"Good night, Nancy. To-morrow evening, at this same hour."

"Good night, Mr. — Who?"

"Spook, my dear. Colonel Spook, of the Army!"

He was on the point of departure, and his gray uniform looked as white in the moonlight as that of any real ghost should; but Nancy was not afraid to lay her hand upon his arm and remind him:

"You forgot the measles!"

"Oh, I'll risk the measles. Good night. It's a compact, remember!"

With that he gave her a military salute and disappeared around the corner of the cabin, his form as erect and his tread as firm as if he were marching at the head of his regiment.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE TANGLES OF MYSTERY

NANCY was down upon her knees beside the big bed of pansies, from which it was her daily duty to remove the seed pods that, if left to ripen, would prevent the further blooming of the plants. She loved this task best of all which came to her, for the flower-faces seemed almost as intelligent as human ones, and she was now singing to them:

"There once was a soldierly spook
Who came to my house by the brook;
With hair snowy white
And eyes gleaming bright,
He frightened me so that I shook."

"Nancy! Nancy! What is that you are telling the pansies?" demanded Miss Halpine, drawing near from the rose-border be-

yond, where she had been cutting away the dead branches.

"Oh, Miss Lucretia! I didn't suppose you could hear my nonsense."

"I hear and see a deal, my dear. For instance, I see that though you are outwardly merry you are troubled about something. I thought all your brothers were now improving."

"So they are, the milkman says, and that it won't be long before I can go home. Oh, how happy I shall be!"

"And I for you, child. You've been very brave and patient."

"I have? Well, I didn't know it. But, Miss Lucretia."

"Say on, Nancy. I've soon to go in."

The girl stood up and, with a face that was now quite grave, inquired:

"When you make a promise and it seems all right, and yet you keep thinking maybe it isn't, and you don't like doing things that you can't tell, what then?"

"Well, then, if I were seeking advice, I'd try to make my meaning a little clearer," answered the lady, with a smile.

"But if you couldn't?"

"I shouldn't attempt things I couldn't. What is it, Nancy?"

"I can't tell you, please. But I just wanted to know."

"Very well; yet I will tell you, my child, that you have acted very queerly several times of late. Aren't you well? Are you afraid to stay in the 'Haunted Cabin' after all? Because, I'm sure now you are safe to sleep in the big house; only you seemed so to love the little one."

"I do love it. I wouldn't leave it for anything. Please let me stay there until — for ever and ever so long. And I am not one bit afraid. How could I be with a sol— Oh, my! I almost said it!"

"Nancy, was there any truth in that jingle you were singing to the pansies? I ask you a second time, and seriously."

Nancy's face grew almost as red as her hair, and for one instant her brown eyes fell before the searching gaze of the mistress she loved. Then she lifted them again and answered, frankly:

"Yes, Miss Halpine. There was. But please don't ask me anything more about it. You've always heard the place was 'haunted,' you just called the cabin that, and — it's 'haunted' still. But I am not afraid; and maybe some time it will all be explained. Oh, how I hate to be tangled up in a mystery, and yet I thought I should like it. There. I've almost finished this bed. What's next, this morning, please?"

Miss Halpine did not immediately reply. Her gaze rested upon the little stone house at the foot of the lawn, but in an absent, speculative way, as if she were thinking deeply. Suddenly, she asked:

"Nancy, why did you put newspapers up to cover all the windows? And why do you

so carefully lock the door — since we rarely lock any doors at Cedarcroft?"

"I — I didn't put them up, and I didn't lock the door," answered the girl, fidgeting and flushing, yet speaking truthfully.

"It's always closed after you come out, and the windows are certainly covered. If you wish to keep your house so shaded, you may take some old holland blinds from the store-room over the carriage-house. Jane gave you but few things to use, she was so afraid of infection, but you are welcome to supply any deficiencies from that old rubbish-room. We are to transplant the geranium cuttings from the glass-house. I like to get them in early, for the cold nights make them strong; though the same cold would injure tenderer things. Too bad about Solomon getting lame again, just as he was ready to re-spade the ground for the smaller beds. Fortunately, he held out long enough to plant the coarser stuff, but I don't see where we are to turn for further help. There seems to be no farmer

disengaged, or willing to take so short a job. Ah! my lilies. They are coming on finely. In late June this whole driveway from the house to the gate will be a glorious sight, such as I think nobody else can show. Lilium Candidum, the stately old beauties that my mother planted, and that have multiplied until there are thousands of bulbs in the rows. Never disturb your lily bulbs, Nancy."

"No, Miss Lucretia, I never will — when I get them!" laughed the girl, showing her white teeth, and infinitely relieved that her mistress had so fully dropped the subject of the cabin, as well as touched by her kindness in offering fresh furnishings. Indeed, so full of this idea was she that she could hardly wait until her "nooning," when for an hour she was free to do what she liked.

For two nights succeeding that of his first appearance, "Colonel Spook" had come to the cabin after dark, each time bringing a few articles, without which even a short stay there could not be comfortable. A hammock

and blanket supplied all the bed this old soldier required, and this was slung in the third room of the building, of whose existence Nancy had not known until he showed it to her. It was beyond the middle one, which she called "Rover's bedroom," and had been quite as empty as that. On the second visit he had brought a folding bath-tub; and with his traveller's dressing-case, and one camp-chair, he had declared himself satisfied.

But already Nancy had grown so fond of her "ghost," that she wished luxuries for him that she did not desire for herself, and it was a very busy rest-hour she took that day, acting upon her employer's permission. But it was also a very curious and disturbed Solomon who watched her piling his light push-cart with a faded rocker, a folding table, the holland blinds, and various other furnishings which the lumber-room revealed; and he finally expressed himself to Jane with a vehemence that brought that busy woman to his

side, to see for herself these fresh "doings" of Nancy.

"Plague take that young one any way! There she goes with that old stuffed chair was Master Maxwell's, that was put out there the very next day after he ran away. And that there table, why, he drawed all his pictur's on that! My land, woman! I wouldn't have Miss 'Cretia see this performance no sooner'n I'd cut off my hand. 'Twould break her heart, what's left of it. 'Twould break it all to flinders. From first to last, it's been the same way: nothin's sacred to that meddlin' boy-girl, from artichokes to dead men. She ain't right, Nancy ain't. Don't stand to reason any little girl, 'less she was born without natural feelings, 'd dast to stay alone in a house with a ghost a-moanin', as she does. And the worst of it, she not only stays, but — gets fat on it. She actilly does. Now, that ain't *right*, is it?"

"'Tisn't the ghost that's so fattenin', Solomon Smith; it's the victuals she eats. She

says herself she never had any like 'em to her pa's house. He couldn't afford it, course, and she's a-makin' up for lost time. But — Oh! oh! look there! Will you look a-there? That's more'n I can stand. What's she got hold of now but that very pictur' of General Washington that our poor boy used to have hung over his own mantel-shelf? I'll stop that performance or know why I can't!"

So as Nancy was starting down the path with her last load, Jane's hand fell heavily upon her shoulder, and Jane's stern voice demanded:

"How dare you do this, Nancy Bates? I wouldn't have Miss 'Cretia see you for a farm!"

"You wouldn't? Why, it was she who told me I might, else, of course, I shouldn't have dared. You can ask her, if you like. And it's almost time to go back to work. Please let go of me, so I can finish."

Jane's eyes seemed to pierce the child's

very soul, but finding therein neither fear nor falsehood, the woman released her hold, exclaiming in an utterly subdued tone:

"Well, my sake! You could knock me down with a feather!" and returned to her kitchen almost as limp as if that remarkable operation had been performed upon her.

Quite as deeply moved, but by a far different emotion, Nancy's refugee received the articles she had brought. He, also, sat down upon his camp-chair as if strength had suddenly left his vigorous body, and his rich voice was scarcely raised above a whisper, as he asked:

"My little woman, how came you by these things?"

"Oh! Miss Lucretia told me I might take them. But you seem almost as surprised as Jane was. Never mind. It's all right. Now you'll have something nice to do all this afternoon, fixing up. And see, I saved my glass of milk for you. It seems so dreadful for you to have no nice drinks, while I have so plenty.

"Don't you worry, Miss Bates! On my trip to town last night I procured a spirit-lamp and fixings, and now could stand a regular campaign; and certainly can the short time I shall be able to stay here, undiscovered."

"And aren't you ready for me to tell yet? Not yet? When it would —"

"Not yet, child. Maybe never. But, how came you to get these things?"

"Miss Halpine saw the papers at the windows, and I guess she didn't like them. And I was singing about a spook and she heard me. Then she asked me if there was one, and I said yes, and that I wasn't a bit afraid. And she said, since I was so much interested in my little house and wanted to fix it up, there were these things in an old lumber-room and I might have them. Sometimes I think she fancies I'm playing doll-house like, and sometimes — I don't know. I do wish — I will be glad when the time comes. But I must hurry now. There's such a lot to do,

and nobody to do it, 'cept her and me. Solomon's all 'rheumaticky,' and the garden, his part, is just standing still. None of the beds of fine stuff planted, nor even spaded. I'll tell you what. Some night, after everybody's asleep and won't see me, I'm going to get that littlest spade and dig the things myself. Won't my darling Miss 'Cretia be pleased? She's that particular she can't bear to have any single thing go slipshoddy, not even old lettuce and radish beds. There! How my tongue does run on! Of itself, 'seems if.' Jane says it's hung in the middle and goes both ways. Good-by till supper-time, you dear, dear 'Ghost'!"

"'In the lumber-room,' were they? In — the — lumber-room! Ah, well! Then, little Nancy, I was right and you were wrong. If she cared so little — *the lumber-room!* It's a pity I tarried. An hour's visit would have sufficed, and I should not have had my tough old heart softened by sight of scenes and faces familiar to me, but which have known me

not. Well, hurry away, then, you little conscientious creature. And hurry back. We'll have one more quiet evening here in the old quarters, and then I'll be off."

"Off? *Off!* When you've just spent money for all these things, and I've brought the rest? Why, I thought it was to be a long, long time, till my folks got well and you let me tell and — Oh, dear! And I was never in a mystery before, and though I don't like it when I'm with Miss Lucretia, I do like it when I'm with you, and — and — "

"Never mind the things. What I have bought may all be yours and welcome. That brother you love so well may be able to use them some day. As for the others, they are as well here as in any other 'lumber-room'!" he ended, with bitterness.

But it is possible that something of this bitterness ebbed from the stranger's lonely heart; for, when night fell, and his accustomed hour for exercise arrived, he set out townward again, and came back — whistling!

Nancy was waiting, listening for the quick, firm tread, but not expecting the whistle. When she heard that, she sped out-of-doors and down the hedge-bordered road, in haste to meet and warn this new friend of the risk he ran. Seizing his hand, she shook it impatiently, whispering:

"Why, you mustn't do that! How dare you, unless you're ready for — They might hear you!"

"Let them, Little Mother. Let them. Who cares? I'd give a hundred dollars to see Solomon's old visage, if he did. Or Jane's, she of the snapping eyes, sharp tongue, and loving heart. Or — but no further. It's a lark, my Lady of the Cabin. The whole affair has been a boyish lark, and to-night shall see another feature of the farce. But to-morrow — why, to-morrow, little Nancy, Willy Bates and I will run away from school and go a-fishing! Down by the old Eddy, where the fish are wary and gamy, and where generations of Norwich mothers have prophesied

their sons would certainly be drowned. I went to it last night, when all the world was asleep, and its depths, its coolness, its peacefulness were balm for 'a life's fitful fever.' There, Brown Eyes, stare no longer. Your whimsical Colonel of Spooks is neither crazy nor plotting harm to anybody. Now, I order you to bed; and if you dare to keep an eye or an ear open — beware!"

He gave her his now familiar salute military, held the door open that she might pass into her own room, and carefully closed it behind her; and she made ready for bed, fully intending to keep that prohibited one eye open and learn what his proposed "lark" might be.

But "the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley." In less than five minutes she was sound asleep; and at the end of ten, assured of this fact, there emerged from the eastern door of the cabin a figure which was spectral indeed. It was garbed in white

from head to foot, and it moved noiselessly houseward, with a directness of purpose which was unmistakable. What was that purpose?

CHAPTER XII.

THE GHOST IS LAID

THAT was to be an eventful night for the courageous little mistress of the "Haunted Cabin." She was roused from her dreamless sleep by the moaning and wailing as of human creatures in distress, and yet with a tone in these wailings that seemed not wholly human. On many a night she had listened to sounds that were similar, since she had been under that roof, but never to quite such as these. Fresh from slumber, she fancied them more terrible than anything which had gone before, and it was useless to tell herself that:

"I've heard them lots of times and they've never hurt me yet. I'm not afraid, I won't be afraid. Oh, but I am! I am! I daren't

move. I can hardly breathe. My hair feels queer — my arms all goose-fleshy — I — I — My! there must be a terrible storm, besides. I wish — Oh! Oh! Oh!"

A perfectly demoniacal shriek now sent the terrified child's head under the covers, so that this fact, combined with the horrible din, prevented her hearing a sharp knock on her door, and the voice of her cabin-mate asking:

"Nancy, are you awake?"

But when there came a brief lull in the hurricane that was raging without, the door was partly opened and the colonel spoke again.

"Nancy, don't be afraid. I'll take care of you. But now's our chance. Get up and dress and we'll settle this 'haunting' affair, while it's at this pitch. Besides, it does seem as if the old cabin might blow over. It rocks like a ship in a gale, and you'd better be prepared to face what happens, with your thickest things on. I'll stay right here in Rover's room with him till you're ready. Poor old

dog! He's whining as if he were an unhappy ghost himself."

Evidently, her friend was talking to reassure her, and Nancy felt most thankful that she was not now alone in the building. Her courage was not equal to this assault upon it, and sooner than she had ever dressed before, she had finished and was out in the empty middle room, clinging to her protector.

Though at first she scarcely knew him. He had lighted the lantern, still the only "lamp" allowed her, and through its glass sides the candle-flame flickered over his white attire and brought out lines of his face that she had never noticed. But his smile was as bright as ever, and his voice as kindly resolute.

"We're having a sort of cyclone, I think. I thought I should never get back to the cabin, and once I was blown flat upon the path. But it's passing, and I hope the three people up yonder haven't been too much alarmed. It's a stanch old mansion, and has

withstood many a storm. Hark! Hi! They're at it, aren't they, in full force? Well, sirs, we'll be with you. If it's wise to 'set a thief to catch a thief,' it must be equally wise to set a spook to catch a spook. Eh, Nancy?"

"Oh, sir! what are you going to do?" she cried, still more frightened than she had supposed she ever could be.

"Why, hello! Is this my dauntless little comrade? What I am going to do is simply this: I'm going to step on the table in your room and trust to luck it won't break down with me. Then I'm going to slip that scuttle in the wooden ceiling, pull down a narrow folding ladder, which used to be there, and climb into the space under the rafters. Though it's too low to be called a garret, it's the very spot, I've heard, where that unhappy Britisher hid to meet his fate. If I can do anything to comfort his restless soul — Why, Nancy! What? A scream, and from you? Forgive me, little girl, please. I've felt as senselessly mischievous as a boy this whole

night. Hear me. There *is* no ghost. The Britisher was never killed here, but, I trust, came to a peaceful end upon a comfortable bed in his own country. The noises overhead are not so loud now, do you perceive? Also, do you notice that the wind is dying away? Well, two and two makes four, or used to when Willy and I had to study the arithmetic we hated. The wind and the spooks arrive together: therefore, the wind is the spook. He is the wild northwest fellow that turns many things topsyturvy. He has long ago found out some weak spot in this crumbling roof; but the cedar shingles and the oaken rafters have resisted his efforts to blow them away, and have, poetically speaking, moaned in their struggles against him.

"There, miss! That's a long-winded, plausible explanation of our Cedarcroft ghost. Ah! the ladder! Just as it used to be! An odd contraption made, I've heard, by an old slave. Now, I'm going up and must take the lantern. Will you come, too, and be in at the finish?"

"Indeed, I will! And I don't see how I could ever have been afraid of just a noise, and I never was until to-night. I wish Jimmy was here, though I guess he'd have had a fit, nearly. He's the 'fraidest boy there is. Yes, I'm at the top, and you can creep ahead. I'll follow. It's from the farthest end, isn't it? And getting quiet now, as if it were ashamed of itself for fooling people all these years!"

It was exactly as the colonel had explained. When they had crept from beam to beam, along the whole of the roof space above the three rooms, they found a spot where the shrill whistlings and rattlings were again almost deafening; and laughing, well satisfied, they made their way back to the floor below.

"Oh! we're cobwebby and dirty — My! That nice white suit of yours — it looks just like a street-cleaner's —"

"It *is* a street-cleaner's, therefore can be washed. To-morrow I'll have that roof fixed

— I mean, to-morrow, you may tell your mistress that you've found the lair of her ghost and will 'lay' him, if she'll pay the carpenter. Suggest to her that she employ my old friend, Willy Bates. And now good night. Or good morning. Is it at six you rise? Then I'll call you."

Nancy's first thought on awaking was:

"If Jimmy Lincoln would come now!"

She was to have her wish, though it was not to make her glad. When she ran over the lawn to the big house, she saw that all the household were out of doors, examining the wreck of the hurricane, and with a gay "good morning," hurried to join them. Then when she spoke of the storm, she found them strangely inattentive. On all three faces there was the same expression of amazement, and on the old servants' this surprise was tinged with fear. Scarcely noticing the child's salutation, Miss Halpine asked, sternly:

"Nancy, do you know anything about this?"

The girl glanced downward, whither the lady pointed, and saw that where, yesterday, had been a rough, uneven bit of garden ground, were now a series of well-shaped, thoroughly "worked" beds. The rain which had come with the wind had been but slight, and the surfaces of these beds were merely moist, not beaten.

"Why, Miss Halpine! Who did them? After dark, too, it must have been."

"That is what I am asking you. Solomon looked out of his window, just before the rain began, and saw something — he calls it a ghost — working here. He was frightened too badly to call out, and he watched whoever or whatever it was till the storm came on, and the — *it* vanished. He declares it did not walk, but melted away, though that's the sheerest nonsense. These garden beds have been spaded and raked by mortal hands. Yours are quite too small; but — *Nancy, who are you hiding in the 'Haunted Cabin'?*"

The directness of the question almost forced

betrayal; but the child remembered her promise in time, and saved her honor. Yet her face was most unhappy, for a moment, as she looked up into Miss Lucretia's face, and answered:

"I cannot tell you, please, Miss Halpine."

"Is it Jimmy?"

"*Jimmy!*" Nancy's utter contempt of tone was reply sufficient to that question. Indeed, above the little girl's head, looking roadward, the lady could see that same James coming toward the place.

"Do you know who did this work?"

"I don't know — really know — but I guess. Aren't you glad it is done, no matter how, Miss Halpine?"

"That's neither here nor there. The fact is that you, whom I trusted, and indulged in a fanciful housekeeping, even now that the time of danger is past, are deceiving me, doing something underhand. You, my little Nancy. Ah! you cannot guess what a disappointment this is. I had grown to love you, and looked

forward to such a happy season, to so many happy seasons — There, child. I'm sorry. But, of course, if you will not tell me whom you are secreting in my property, knowing, as you do, that for a reason sufficient to myself I can never enter the cabin again; and knowing that their fear of disease keeps these others out of it — Oh! Nancy!"

It seemed to the astonished little girl as if the world were being turned upside down. There were tears, actual tears, in her beloved lady's eyes, while Solomon and Jane glared upon her as if they would annihilate her for the pain she was giving Miss Lucretia. Then she rallied her own composure, and said, very gently:

"Please don't be angry with me, Miss Halpine. I'll try to tell you this very day. The next time I go there, at my 'nooning.' I promised I wouldn't, and I can't lie, I can't. I should never feel clean afterward. But I'll get permission — I will, I will. And — what am I to do to-day?"

"Nothing. I have no further use for a girl who defies my authority and hides — I suppose some tramp, prefers her word given a tramp to her allegiance toward me. Good-by, Nancy. Jimmy is coming up the driveway, and he can help you carry your things home. Solomon will pay you what you have earned to the end of the month."

The lady turned away, with a hard look in her eyes that Nancy had never seen there before. So must her old father, the Squire, have looked, when, as she had lately heard, he banished his only son from his roof forever. But she sprang after the slender figure in the soft gray gown, which now carried itself so haughtily, and caught the trailing garment, crying:

"Oh, he isn't a tramp! He isn't! He's the best, the splendidest man I ever saw, except my father. He's rich — rich as a king, I guess. And first he came to the hotel in Old Town, and every day he goes all about in a carriage or on a horse. He

pays money for that, and 'tramps' have no money. He's — I *guess* it was he who dug the garden beds, because he heard me say Solomon was lame and couldn't. A 'tramp' wouldn't do that. A 'tramp' wouldn't be so kind. You — Please— Eh? What? What is that you're saying, Jimmy Lincoln? My father sick? My father? My own father — sick — they've sent for me — Then it *is* good-by, Miss Halpine, and I — I hope you'll find out some day I didn't mean to do wrong, and — I will — Oh, dear! What ails me that I can't think?"

Wild with anxiety concerning the father she so dearly loved, and who must be ill, indeed, to summon her from her "contract," she fairly flew down the driveway toward the gate. But midway its length, she glanced toward the little, vine-clad cabin which had become also dear to her, and paused, remembering:

"He said he was going a-fishing with 'Willy,' my father. He'll be so sorry to know

he can't go, and I must tell him. Besides, I want to say good-by to him, and to beg him to tell Miss 'Cretia what I could not."

As she turned aside toward the old "quarters," a tall, soldierly man came boldly to its door to meet her. He had been, at first an amused and afterward a puzzled, spectator of the scene in the distant garden; and had feasted his eyes upon the graceful gentlewoman who was the centre of the group, just as he had been feasting them at every opportunity of these past days. He had seen Nancy's bewilderment upon Jimmy's arrival, and her keen distress which followed it. He did not look at all like the "tramp" Miss Halpine had suspected, nor like a man who liked hiding from anybody, save to spare that other pain. Neither was he a man to desert a friend, and he quickly stepped down to meet the child, who flung herself upon him in a frenzy of grief.

"My dear, my little comrade, what can have happened?"

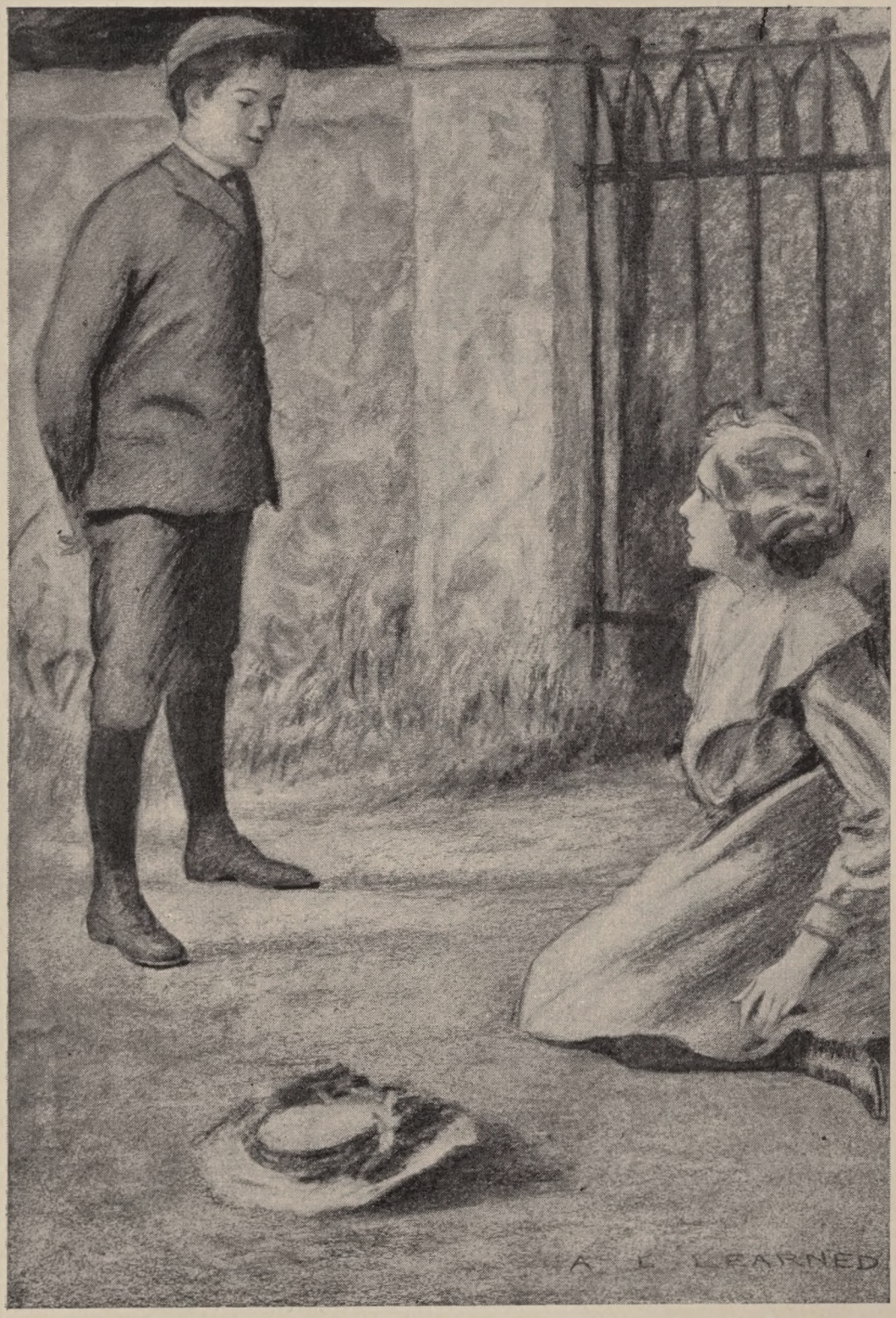
"You must come — my father — she doesn't believe and I promised — I've got to go — 'sick to death,' Jimmy said, and I'm hurrying home. Oh, go and tell her, please! I love her, she mustn't blame me so. And I love you, too, but good-by, good-by!"

She was off again, rushing recklessly forward, and at the very gate colliding with Jimmy, who had made a less rapid, but more direct passage to it. The shock of their impact sent them both to the ground, from which James, the valiant, was first to rise, and to angrily demand:

"Where's your manners at, Nancy Bates, runnin' into a feller like that?"

"Oh! I didn't mean to. Are you going home?"

"Well, I guess I ain't a-goin' to stay on this hateful old place, I ain't. No, sir. Wisht I'd never seen it. Wisht I was my own boss, 'stead of bein' sent by any old body a-doin' errands for punishin'. If I ain't been punished just for getting the old woman's old



"AT THE VERY GATE COLLIDING WITH JIMMY."

horse shod, I'd like to know. To hear my ma talk, you'd think I'd disgraced the whole connection, and my pa won't let me touch a single one of all our stable-full. Say, how long you goin' to stand it?"

They had again walked rapidly along the homeward road, but Nancy turned her surprised face toward her mate, sobbing out:

"Why — you know. It's all over, course. My father — Oh, Jimmy, did you see him? What is it? The measles? Jane says old folks always die when they get them, and don't tell me he has. Don't!"

Jimmy halted, planted his copper-toes firmly in the mud, thrust his hands into his pockets — for he never could "think" without doing so — and uttered a prolonged, amazed: "W-h-e-w!"

Then recovering somewhat, he asked:

"Who's got the measles? What you cryin' for, anyway? I never knew you was a crier, never. Say, Nancy, you've lost most your wits a-stayin' with them three old ones

and not never havin' no fun no more. Say, tell me, whisper it if you dare — did *it* ever show *itself* again? Say, did it?"

The tortured little girl decided that if she were witless he was doubly so, and as a means of restoring his wandering faculties, put her hands upon his shoulders and shook him soundly, commanding him to:

"Tell me the truth this instant, Jimmy Lincoln. The very exact message that my father sent me."

"Shucks! Is that all? Well, there's nothin' to cry about in that, as I see, 'less you've got to likin' these rich folks better'n you do your own family, and —"

He was interrupted by another vigorous shake, which produced the long-delayed message, thus:

"'Tell my little daughter that I'm "sick to death" for a sight of her bonny face, and that she is free to come home now, any time. Tell her that Step-aunt-mother has made one of her favorite cakes for supper, that the

house has been fumigated, and that the doctor says Nancy is perfectly safe in coming, so that the whole family is just waiting for her day's work to be over, and that even Frank will be on hand at the Bates' cottage to welcome her. Then come back and let us know if she'll be here.' Huh! That's all. Every blessed single word, true's I live. Hey? What?"

For with a rapturous cry, — Frank would have called it "squeal," — Nancy again seized his shoulders and shook him, bent forward and kissed him, then gave him a shove toward home, while she herself returned at breakneck speed along the way she had come.

Jimmy wheeled about and looked after her, but caught only a glimpse of her gingham skirt and red head vanishing within the stone gateway. Then he took out a very soiled calico handkerchief and wiped his cheek.

"Kissed me! The second time! That girl did. Well, I've done now. If she thinks I'm goin' to stand that — Shucks!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FINAL DELIGHTFUL DOINGS

Miss Halpine had watched Nancy's flight, and détour to the cabin, with sorrowful interest; but when her gaze fell upon the soldier who came to its door and greeted the child, her strength suddenly forsook her so that she sank down upon the garden bench, unable longer to stand.

Jane and Solomon, also, were keen spectators of the scene, and as the little girl tore herself away from the stranger's grasp and fled down the avenue, uttered a mutual groan and turned their frightened glances upon her whom this most concerned.

The man came straight to them, but his dark eyes regarded only their mistress, though under all the changes which forty years had

wrought, they recognized him at once. How would their beloved lady take it? The answer came swiftly, for reading in the soldier's look the fact that, after all this weary waiting, he was still the same as when they parted, she sprang up and into the arms which opened to receive her, crying:

"Maxwell! Maxwell, my brother! At last, at last!"

"Lucretia! my sister!"

Then they loosed themselves and held one another at arm's length, each searching in each for the changes time had wrought, and behold! the changes were outward merely. A fair and high-bred couple, still beautiful with the beauty that comes of lives well spent, and glowing now with the joy of reunion. There was a brief, firm hand-clasp for each of the astonished, delighted servitors, and then the colonel drew his sister down upon the bench again, while she eagerly demanded:

"Well? Talk, explain — everything, every-

thing. Why did you never come before? Why never write?"

"Would you have welcomed me, Lucretia? I knew how proud you were, and how you shared — or I thought you shared — my father's fury against me. I was a silly boy, and had the old Halpine temper. I thought: 'If she cares, she will summon me,' and I expected that you would when — he died. I —"

"But I never, never shared his anger, as you thought. And when he died I did not know on what part of this earth you were. I knew you were in the army; then I heard, or read, that you had gone abroad. Then, since you did not come or send a single word of sorrow or of sympathy, I made myself forget you. I would never read the army news, and no one was allowed to mention your name. I felt — I felt that I was being true to father, so; yet now I know that if he were still alive he would remember nothing but that he loved you. Oh, my brother!"

When her emotion somewhat subsided, he talked with her at length of the wretched quarrel which had kept these two last members of one household strangers for a lifetime. And finished his story, saying:

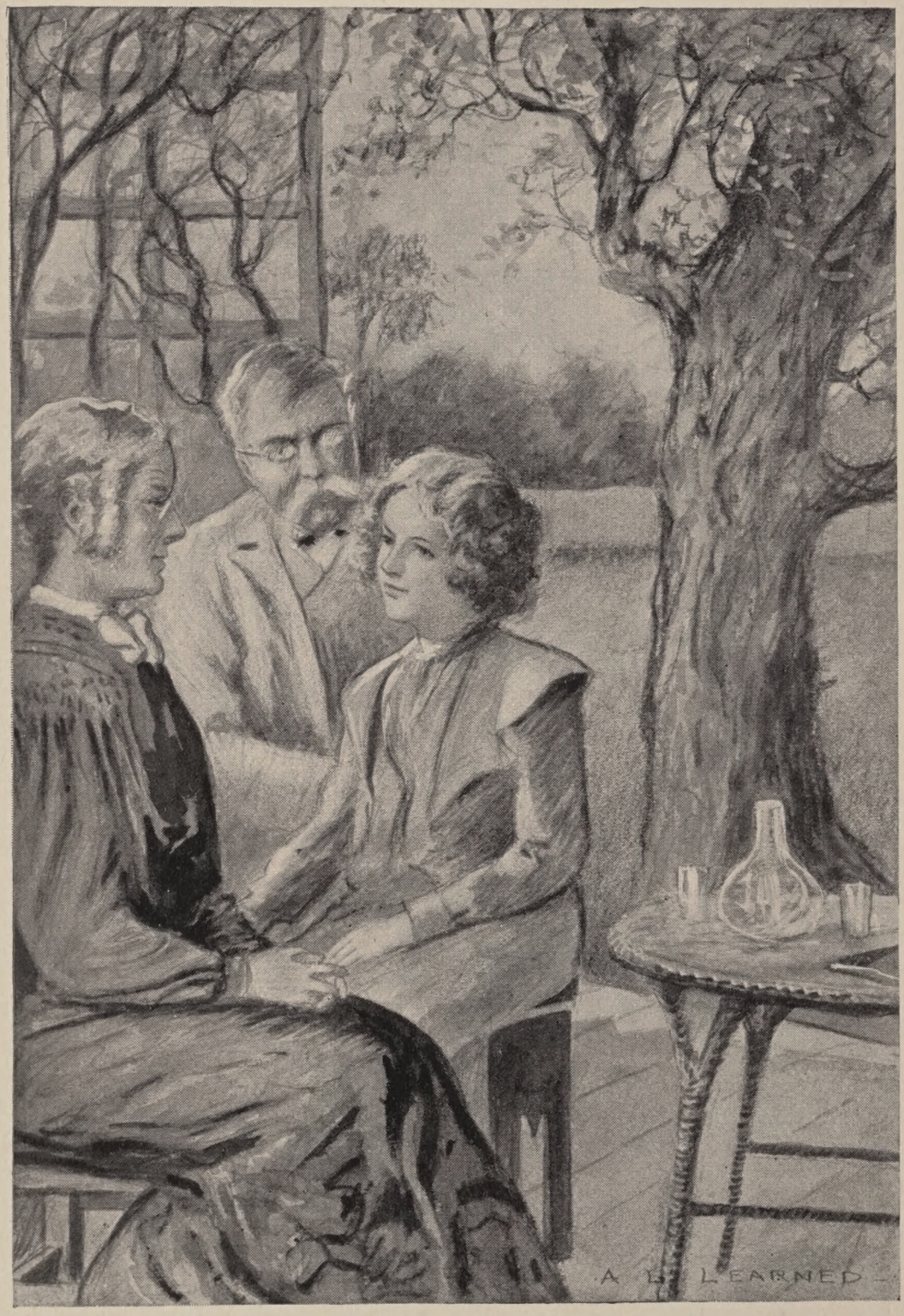
"I had decided to go abroad again, to end my days in sunny Italy. But the whim seized me to come back and take a last look at the old place before the chance was past forever. And, to think how slight a matter may alter the best laid plans! It's all along of your bright-faced, red-headed little gardener-girl that I did not do so. I sought shelter in the deserted cabin, meaning to spend but the night there, and after all was quiet up here to wander over the grounds, have a glimpse of you, if I could, and depart, myself unseen. Nancy's doings upset all that."

"Thank God!" cried Miss Lucretia, caressing the hand she held.

"Amen, and amen. She mistook me for the spook — by the way, that's banished, or will be — and I mistook her for somebody

belonging here. Then we grew confidential, without my revealing my name, and I found how she was working for a trifling sum in order to help her brother. She was eloquent on the subject of that brother. She reminded me of a little sister of my own, who, in the days before her 'idol' fell under a ban, considered him, as Nancy considers Frank, 'the splendidest boy in Norwich.' Then I pondered: 'Is this an ordinary sister's love? Do all sisters love their brothers so? Would this affection outlive a silence of years?' So I asked her opinion. Children are radicals, always. A thing is out-and-out right or wrong. We entered into a compact. I would stay on in the old cabin, and she would keep my secret. If it seemed probable that I would be forgiven and welcomed, I would let her tell you I was here. If not — she was not to betray me."

"She didn't. Oh, the poor, dear, loyal little thing! She longed to tell me when I blamed her, but said she couldn't lie, for she'd



"'AND DO YOU FORGIVE ME NOW, YOU SWEET MISS 'CRETIA?'"

never be clean again, if she did. I loved the child, Maxwell, and now she's gone home to a sick father, feeling herself in disgrace with me. We must go and find her, at once, brother, and set that matter straight. We must see that her father — " cried Miss Lucretia, rising.

" Sit down again, dear. She is already coming back to us, and see! A transformation! Her little freckled face was so sad, a few minutes ago, but it's certainly glad enough now."

She reached them almost before he finished speaking, and the delight of her good home news was doubled by the sight of this gray-haired brother and sister, looking so happy and so young in their reunion.

" Oh! I see, I see! It's all right, isn't it? And do you forgive me now, you sweet Miss 'Cretia, for keeping him in hiding till it was just the very rightest time there could be? Isn't he the finest sort of a ' tramp ' ever was? And Jimmy told a story. I don't mean that, but he only said ' sick to death,' and I was to

come home, when it was only my father's way of saying he couldn't wait to see me, hardly. It's all right there, too. Everybody's well again, and the house has been sulphured out or something, like Jane did to my clothes when they came from Mrs. Wakeman's; and after my day's work is done I can go, and I needn't stay all night again."

"Heigho, Little Comrade, and Fellow Spook Hunter! Why cast so wistful a glance toward our old barracks? Sit right down here between us, and hear me talk. You've been a very patient listener, in the past days, to an old soldier's reminiscences, and as a reward he'll treat you to some prophecies. You listen, also, sister, and set me right if I go wrong. We cannot by any possibility spare our young gardener, and it seems that neither can he who was Willy Bates spare her; so, since Solomon Grundy Smith is now quite limbered by surprise, he will proceed to harness that sedate nag I've seen here, and we three will drive to town. We'll overtake

that unfortunate Jimmy on the road, and give him a lift. We'll beg of his father to 'let him off this time,' and we'll get him to drive a fine white horse, I've been using on my rides about, to the hospital. We'll fetch Frank home if he hasn't already been fetched, and we'll let the Polypodium-Lyodium-Lycopogdiums take care of their own green selves, for one livelong day! Work? I guess we won't. Ah, Nancy! I know your sufferings. I've been through that same mill, and been ground fine upon the wheels of Saponaria-Scutellaria-Specullaria-Stelarias, till I've wished my learned sister had never heard of a botany. Eh, Lucretia?"

"You're a bad, teasing boy, still, Maxwell Halpine, despite your glittering straps and bars."

"Hope I always shall be one, my dear. But I was prophesying, wasn't I? I will buy that white horse of the 'liberty' stableman, name it the Spook, and present it to Miss Nancy Bates, her heirs and assigns forever, as a memorial gift of our happy secret in the

'Haunted Cabin.' I will get Wilson Bates, after he and I have been a-fishing, to put a new roof on that same cabin, and so give the unhappy northwest wind a rest. As a sensible thing to do with some of the money which has come to me, I will build a big library for my old town, and so realize one, at least, of my boyhood's dreams. I will get that master carpenter, this child's father, to do the real building for me; and the unfortunate Frank to bring himself and his plaster cast out here to the Spookery, and go to housekeeping on his own account. It will be a fine quiet place for him to do all the 'figuring' his father will need; and to make his first essay as an architect in planning the library and some new beautiful greenhouses."

"Oh, Maxwell! Can you? Will you? Then you'll realize one of my own lifelong dreams!" cried Miss Lucretia, clapping her hands.

"I surely will, my dear. But you should never interrupt a prophet. I've always longed

to see a fine cottage on yonder little hill, that looks down on Cedarcroft and belongs to it; and now I see it building, in truth. It is to be the home of the Alphabetical Bateses, and of Solomon, the money-eater. There is to be another fair garden up there, all around that cottage, and there is to be the most friendly rivalry between that new young garden and this venerable stately one. I see that, since now this 'splendidest' Frank can earn his own brace, his sister will waste her substance on Rosaceæ-Violaceæ-Ericacæs or other foolishness; and I see — Solomon Grundy, faithful old Solomon Grundy, staring the prophet out of countenance! Well, Solomon?"

"If you please, Master Maxwell — Land, don't that come easy and sound nateral? — If you please, there's a man calls himself a gardener, a real one, and not no make-believe boy-girl, that wants to have a word with — with — well, whoever it is that's bossing this place, now."

They all stood up, smiling and gay, like a

trio of happy children, of which Nancy was by no means the youngest in spirit, and the colonel answered, laughing:

"Well, Solomon, I reckon that's *you*. Isn't it? It's been a lifelong occupation of yours, and it's a bad business changing so late in the day. Hire whom you please, boss whom you please, but fetch Cedarcroft back to its old estate, when you and I were young, my Grundy, and send the bills to me. There! *Your* dream fulfilled, too? Ah! how good it is! How good it is! But, while you 'bargain' with your man, just be hitching up, please. And, Jane, do you get up a good fire. I want one of your old — or young — chicken pies for my supper. I'll send the market-man out from town. I'm not to blame for your having to cook it. It's all the doings of Nancy, who's kept me living on canned stuff down there in the cabin, till I'm as hungry — as hungry as I used to be!

"Now, you dear big and little pair of sisters, how do you like my prophecies?"

"Oh! they're splendid, splendid! And, the best of it is, they'll all come true, because you're a soldier and an officer, and such a one never lies. I know. My father told me. Only, please, you mustn't — about the Spook horse, you know. It's too much for just — me — I — "

"See here, Little Comrade. The men in the ranks never contradict their commander-in-chief. Insubordination has to be put down at once. Doesn't it, Lucretia?"

"Yes, yes; and it's almost too good to be true," said that happy creature, laying her cheek against her brother's shoulder.

And he, lest they should all grow sentimental, suddenly pinched Nancy's ear, though tenderly, and ordered:

"Tip us a 'Limerick,' Little Comrade, tip us a 'Limerick,' suitable to the occasion."

So, not daring to disobey her officer, she pondered a bit, then sang out:

"There was a fine soldier who would
Make every one glad if he could.

The pictures he drew
Were bound to come true,
Because he so willed that they should."

Miss Lucretia laughed, but the colonel cried:

"Lame — lame! That last line needs a crutch. Hear me. I'll try:

"Oh! strange are the doings of Nancy,
A maiden of most lively fancy.
By quaint witching arts
She conquers all hearts,
That dear little red-head named Nancy!"

THE END.