

THE · JACK · IN · THE · BOX · BOOKS

The Bottle Imp



MARION AMES TAGGART





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The Jack-in-the-Box Books

THE BOTTLE IMP

MARION AMES TAGGART

The Jack-in-the-Box Books
BY
MARION AMES TAGGART

Illustrated by
ANNE MERRIMAN PECK

AT GREENACRES
THE QUEER LITTLE MAN
THE BOTTLE IMP
POPPY'S PLUCK





"MY! SOME ISLAND!" CRIED MARK.

The Jack-in-the-Box Books

THE BOTTLE IMP

BY

MARION AMES TAGGART

AUTHOR OF "THE LITTLE GREY HOUSE,"

"THE DAUGHTERS OF THE LITTLE
GREY HOUSE," ETC.

Illustrated by

ANNE MERRIMAN PECK



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DEDICATED
TO
MARION TAGGART GERHART
WITH LOVE FOR
THAT DEAR LITTLE GIRL

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THE BOTTLE IMP

THE BOTTLE IMP

CHAPTER I

MARCHING ORDERS

CHÂTEAU BRANCHE taken one way was not as fine as it sounded; from another point of view it was finer than a mere name could convey.

It was a platform strongly built in the lower—not too low—branches of a noble old tree; near enough to home to make it possible to go there whenever one chose; far enough in the woods to make it feel like being a wild creature to climb up to sit there, listening to the humming of the brook close by.

Mark Hawthorne's wonderful father, the "daddy" who knew all about birds, beasts and flowers and consequently never forgot what children liked, had built Château Branche for Mark and his friends. He had made it large enough and to spare for Mark and the three little girls from whom Mark was never long separated—Isabel Lindsay, Prue Wayne and Poppy

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Meiggs, whose name really was Gladys, but nobody remembered it without an effort.

The four children were sitting in—perhaps it would be more correct to say *on*—Château Branche this lovely May afternoon, which was all sunshine and fleecy clouds above, and all blossom and young green below, with a warm breeze uniting the upper and lower parts of the loveliness, a day so summerlike that a bat should have stayed awake to play around in it.

Yet the four children in their tree-playhouse, usually such light-hearted, happy comrades, sat amid the May-time beauty almost silent, their faces gloomy, their eyes dim. Poppy's and Prue's eyes were swollen and reddened by crying; Isabel's and Mark's were dilated by unshed tears.

"Well," said Prue breaking a long silence, "if you've got to go to get well, Isa darling, then there's no sense in fussing, not over your going. The thing to make us die would be for you not to get well! So if going away cures you, I shall try 's hard's I can to want you to go. But I don't! I do *not*!"

"H'm!" exclaimed Poppy scornfully. "Who would? You needn't talk 's if Isabel Lindsay was only your summer-knocking-to-pieces-best-beloved! I guess summer'll be one awful holler

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hole for me if she goes off—Mark, too! And it's only just starting! I'll be just all ravelled out and dragged all over the place, like the kitten did to that awful knitting Motherkins tried to learn—teach me, before it comes around September! Oh, my land!" And Poppy choked.

Isabel put out her hand and gently patted Poppy's flaming red hair with the soothing, motherly touch with which she so often calmed excitable little Poppy.

"Never mind, dear," she said in her mother's own manner. "I'm sorry enough myself to be going, and I'd no idea I had anything the matter with me when I felt so draggy last winter, except that I did feel draggy, but the doctors all said exactly the same thing. I've got to spend this whole summer out of doors. You'd think there would be enough out of doors around Greenacres to hold small me, but the doctors say the only way to get well is to go right off somewhere, because at home I'd be sure to crawl into the house—like spiders in the fall!" Isabel ended with a laugh.

"I don't understand," said Mark slowly.

"What?" demanded Prue sharply.

"Anything," Mark smiled, but his eyes, which were exactly the color of the russet oak leaves which cling to the branches in winter, were dark,

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and did not smile. "But they all say you'll be quite all right after you've done what you are told, don't they, Isa Bell? They do, don't they, Isa Bell?"

"Sure-ly!" cried Isabel with the utmost emphasis. "I'll tell you! There's a spot on one of my lungs, but it's a spot like the ones on my lovely voile, the one I had last summer which faded so. It will go right off in the sun and air. All three doctors stethoscoped me, and tapped me, and murmured nice little sounds themselves, with their ears on my sounds, and they all three liked my sounds quite well. They said 'it would clear up completely.' You might think they were each one of those funny little men which pop out of barometers, and that I was a storm! But they did say my lung 'had a spot' and must be kept out of doors this whole summer. So I've got to go. It's bad enough for me to go off alone; you haven't thought of that! You'll all have one another. Of course my darlingest blessing of a mother is going too, and we have fine times together, so we'll like a camp in the Maine woods, and father will try for a long vacation and spend it with us, but—I like my chums!"

Isabel's voice broke as she ended her long reply to Mark's question.

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With a sudden swift dart Poppy plunged forward and clutched her knee, paying no heed to the fact that she sat on the extreme edge of the platform. She would have gone off headlong but that Prue caught her by her skirt, and held her.

“For goodness’ sake, Poppy Meiggs, what’s the matter with you?” demanded Prue, with the pardonable wrath of a sensible person whose nerves were badly shocked.

“Skeets!” said Poppy, squirming around into safety, but rubbing her knee with all her might as she did so. “They’re eating me. I didn’t know I was on the edge. Ain’t any of you bit—bitten? They’re fierce. They come out these hot days in May, ’specially around pines. I bet it’s as big as a hick’ry nut, this bite; on my knee, too, where it’s too boney to get much good going for it. I’d like to get a whack at all the skeets in the world with one awful lick! I’d like to keep a crocydile to sit under this tree with his big mouth open to snap at ’em, same’s Bunkie does, only the crocydile could snap the whole gang, ’most, in one shut of his big mouth; Bunkie don’t do n’ good.”

Poppy leaned forward to survey the ragged little terrier who sat under the tree with his mouth open, patiently waiting till the children

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should descend to him again. He was panting from the sudden heat; he wagged his tail enthusiastically as Poppy spoke his name and peered over at him, and he snapped at the mosquitoes violently, as if wishing to come up as far as he could to the crocodile standard of capacity to catch them.

Isabel, Prue and Mark laughed, and felt better. It was not the first time that Poppy's imagination and actions had broken up a sober mood.

"What I don't see," Prue resumed the important subject in hand with her customary air of experienced common sense, "is just what you sort of began to say a while ago, Isa: Why you can't stay around Greenacres and just keep out of doors right here. I should think there was enough room to do it!" Prue made a gesture with her right arm that indicated the woods in which they sat and all the adjoining country.

"If you didn't want to go into the house couldn't you stay in your tent? And there's one sure thing: We'd all pretty near camp out with you! We'd hang around like, like—hang around every day! I thought the doctors said it didn't matter what out of doors you stayed in—out—what on earth ought I say there?—as long as it was a sunny and airy out of doors. And every

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one says Greenacres has the very best climate going, every one who lives here, and so really knows about it.”

“Yes, but they say the way to get well is to keep away from your own house, because you’re pretty sure to go into it,” explained Isabel over again. “We’ve got to set out to do something special—like a camp, or something. It wouldn’t do any harm to stay around here, because, of course, Greenacres is perfect, but we wouldn’t hold out—that means stay out!—unless we had a kind of special program.”

Now there are a great many days in real life, outside of story books, in which nothing happens at all, and it is rarely that something comes along at precisely the right instant, as if it were in a play, waiting at the stage wings for the word to be spoken which is its entrance cue.

Yet this happens once in a while, and it happened to-day when this devoted quartette of friends was cast down by the on-coming separation from the dearest one of them all—if there were a dearest where all were dear.

“Would there be anything at all like three girls and one boy in these woods, I’m wondering?” called a rich, throaty voice.

A man came in sight, somewhat above medium height, stockily built, dressed in a rough and

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ready fashion, with a rough and ready air upon him.

His face was round and red, weather beaten, yet his skin still showed its natural fineness of texture after years of exposure to winds and sun. He had bright blue eyes, close-cropped hair, beginning to turn a little gray around his temples, and such a look of merriment upon him that it was almost like hearing laughter to see him.

“Oh, my cracky! Mr. Burke!” shouted Poppy, and hurled herself out of the tree in such wise that she almost miraculously landed whole at the ruddy man’s feet.

“Mr. Burke! Oh, Mr. Burke!” echoed the other three, and rapidly descended after Poppy.

“Sure!” Mr. Burke agreed to their identification of himself. “I’m that same noble bottle collector and dealer in bottles. I left the wagon, with Cork hitched to it, over beyond and came in here to call on ye all. How’s the missus?” He seemed to have heard Prue’s inquiry for his wife though he was talking loudly. “She’s fine and dandy, never better—nor never worse, if it comes to that. In body and heart and soul it’s Mrs. Thomas Burke of 906 North Street, Hertonsberg, that is the one to be counted on for steadiness at the best grade. But what about all of

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you? I can see that my friend Poppy is not ailin'! Poppy, since the day I overtook you runnin' away on that dusty high road, and took you on home with me to be put in cold storage till called for, you haven't done a thing but grow taller and healthier lookin'. Sure, it's fine you're lookin', my dear, and it's your intimate crony, Thomas Burke, Bottle Dealer, that's proud to see it and claim the honor of your friendship! Cork's much the same as ever, maybe less ambitious, but well and thrivin' and good for many's the day to come. How's your own Hurrah?"

"He's getting lovelier every minute, Mr. Burke," Poppy assured him solemnly, and the bottle dealer winked at the others; Poppy's enthusiasm for the old horse which had been given her was a standing joke. "Hurrah goes along faster than he ever did, and you know how he could trot if ever he wanted to! And he's handsomer than ever, and you know how handsome he was when I got him, after he'd been a little bit fixed up."

"Great!" said Mr. Burke. "If there's one thing I like better than any other thing it's a blooded horse that's well looked after."

Poppy eyed him suspiciously, but Mr. Burke looked gravely earnest.

"And the rest of you now?" he hinted. "I'd

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be tempted to say you was not up to your jolliest, could that be likely. How's yourself, Isabel, ladybird?"

"Isabel's not well, Mr. Burke," Prue answered for her.

"She looks a little droopin', now you say it," said Mr. Burke commiseratingly.

"What was that rumor I was hearin'? I stopped in to your place, Mark, lad, as I come past and I was talkin' to that small, thin, queer little man, Ichabod Lemuel Rudd, and to Flossie Doolittle. Of all names that might misfit that woman who works for your little grandmother, it would be hard to beat Flossie Doolittle! Ichabod Lemuel Rudd for that poor little misshapen man, and Flossie Doolittle for that woman sure would walk away with the whole bakery, let be who would competin' to take the cake! Well, be that as it may, Ichabod and Flossie kind of gave me to understand that our Ladybird Isabel was not what you'd call robust this spring, and was ordered to stop out of doors the livelong summer, campin' away from home." Mr. Burke paused with a questioning look at the four sober young faces before him, waiting for confirmation.

The three little girls silently nodded. Mark

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looked up with an imperfect imitation of his customary bright smile.

“She doesn’t seem up to the pitch,” he said carelessly. “In fact we were all sort of talking it over when you came along, and we don’t much like it. Isa’ll be all right again by fall. But she’s got to go away, and we don’t quite see how we’re going to get on through this summer without her.”

“Just so,” agreed Mr. Burke. “I don’t quite see it myself. Why would you be tryin’ to, if I might put that to you?”

“Oh, she has to go,” cried Mark. “We wouldn’t think of holding her back, even if we could, and of course nobody’d listen to anything we said about it. But we’d want her to go, if there’s no other way to get her strong. The doctors all say there is no other way, but that this will do it—I mean for her to live right out of doors, in some sort of camp fixing, and that then this mean spot on her lung will go off where it should have stayed in the first place.”

“Just so. But what has that to do with your gettin’ on without her?” Mr. Burke looked around him with a bland expression, as one desiring information.

Prue was down upon him in an instant. Both she and Isabel—Mark, too, for that matter—

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shared Poppy's immense admiration for the bottle dealer; they all four regarded him as a person from whom almost anything might be expected, best of all, that the unexpected might be looked for from him.

"You've thought of something!" Prue shouted, much as Sentimental Tommy's follower, the adoring Corp, pounced on Tommy. "What is it?"

"I've often thought of something," said Thomas Burke with his twinkle. "Sometimes it's been a thing worth tellin' about; more times it's not."

"Tell this, quick!" ordered Prue, standing on one foot, her other ankle clasped in her hand, swinging herself violently around, which was her way of indicating intense excitement.

"Tell! Tell! Tell!" screamed Poppy, dancing up and down, holding Mr. Burke's coattail and waving it with her motion.

"Come on! Have you thought of something?" cried Mark.

"Oh, Mr. Burke, please!" implored Isabel breathlessly.

"Well," began Mr. Burke slowly, as if unwilling to speak—but his eyes laughed, "what's the use of puttin' things into your heads if they won't

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ever be let go further? 'Tisn't likely your parents would hear to it."

"Mr. Burke," said Isabel, clasping and unclasping her hands, her cheeks burning, her eyes big and black, "if you don't say quick what it is I'll die before your eyes!"

"It's sure to be something perfectly grand if you think they won't let us do it. Tell!" shrieked Poppy at the top of her shrill voice.

"Well, it's like this," Mr. Burke said. "I do be drivin' around the whole of the entire summer. Not a chick nor a child have we; they are all gone to heaven and left us. So Ellen Burke has no one to hold her at home when I'm ramblin' around the country, drivin' me old Cork, an' gettin' together what bottles is to be had, an' sellin' tins wherever a pan is wanted. Now tins is good company. New tins is about the brightest, most cheerful companions a man could be travelin' with, let alone the nice tunes they rattle off if you don't keep 'em too strict, give 'em a bit of freedom to move around in. So I'd think a little girl, say about thirteen, and especially one with big grey eyes and brown hair and a nice, sweet, fine lady way with her, for 'ninstance, would get well sooner ridin' round in my cart than in any camp, more especially if she could have goin' along with her three nice

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kids. Say, for 'ninstance, a boy that's more like a wood-sprite than a boy, an' about, we'll say, fourteen years of age, an' a nice, plump, sensible girl of her own age, who was her best friend, an' a will o' the wisp of a red-haired little girl, we'll say, for the sake of sayin' something, about two an' a half years younger than herself. An' we'll say, for the sake of sayin' something, as before, that the little spark of a red-haired girl had a horse whose name sounded cheerful—why, we'll call him Hurrah, for the sake of givin' him a name! If she went along, an' Mrs. Burke went along to look after the whole outfit, an' the whole blessed summer we just drove an' drove, hither an' yon, sort of stoppin' where 'twas nice, an' takin' our time to our sellin', an' doublin' on our course, so we could pop in an' call in Green-acres an' let our families know all was well with us, it sort of strikes me that would be a good way to spend a summer, an' sorra a spot could stay on any lung that went off to this kind of a sanyetorious instead of a camp."

The children had been uttering queer little rapturous notes, jumping up and down, and in all sorts of ways revealing the impatience with which they waited to hear the end of this beautiful program, once they had grasped its import. Bunkie leaped about, barking madly; he had

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caught the excitement in the air and shared it. Semper Fidelis, Mark's big dog, rose, stretching, and swung up to thrust his nose into Mark's hand as if imploring to join the expedition.

"All right, Semp!" cried Mark. "But may any of us go? Cracky, wouldn't it be great?"

"Come ask! Come ask!" screamed Poppy, pulling madly at Mr. Burke's sleeve.

"Yes! Oh, yes! Hurry!" cried Isabel. "Ask my mother first, because if she won't let me go nobody else can go, because it's for me. Oh, wouldn't it be perfectly blissgorgeous! Hurry! Ask!"

The four children started on a run, but slowed up for Mr. Burke. He was too stout to run, especially through the wood paths. However, out of mercy to their impatience, he made his best speed, and the big man, the two dogs and the four young people, wild with excitement, came dashing out of the woods as if they were early settlers and the Indians were after them.

CHAPTER II

THE CREW OF THE BOTTLE IMP

COMING out of the woods upon the road the children found Cork, Mr. Burke's reliable horse, tethered to a tree, unchecked, browsing patiently on whatever was edible and within reach. As he was not hungry, but was munching much as one eats candy, for entertainment, it did not matter that last year's dried stalks were almost all that happened to be within reach.

The covered wagon to which Cork was harnessed was viewed in a new light by the four youngsters, seeing it for the first time as a possible headquarters for their summer.

It was long, was painted blue, and had side curtains which could be rolled up, or let down at will. It was big enough, if that was all, being quite a long-bodied wagon, but that was all that was exteriorly to be discovered, though Isabel, Prue and Mark scanned it anxiously, with new critical observation. Poppy had at once dashed to Cork's head, jerked it up from his browsing, and vigorously rubbed his nose, so glad to see him

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once more that she would not let him continue to enjoy anything else but herself.

"We'll all get in," said Mr. Burke, fastening Cork's check rein. "We may as well ride as walk, not to say it's better to take Cork and the wagon along than to leave 'em for whatever might happen 'em."

"Queer you haven't an auto-truck, Mr. Burke," said Prue clambering into the wagon after Mark. "I never thought of it before, but it's funny to see a horse and cart."

"When a sissin', fussin', smellin' truck can be my friend, like Cork here, I'll have one," said Mr. Burke indignantly. "When it can understand me ways as Cork does, I'll have one. I'm free to confess I don't understand their ways, if it comes to a show-down. Crankin' never feazes 'em when they're not minded to start, but Cork here goes on for me if I whisper I'd be startin'. Come on, now, Corky, boy!"

To prove the justice of his boast, Thomas Burke whispered this suggestion in a hissing, loud stage whisper, and Cork, hearing, heeded it, immediately beginning to move.

"I'm s'prised at you, Prue Wayne!" said Poppy severely. "Cork's just like another Burke. He's a real family horse."

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“Oh, gracious, no! Don’t get a truck instead of this outfit, Mr. Burke!” cried Mark.

“I didn’t mean I wouldn’t rather have dear old Cork,” Prue defended herself. “I only meant a wagon looks something like Noah’s ark going along the road now. My mother says there weren’t any auto-trucks on the country roads when I was born. It makes me feel quite old, for they look fearfully old fashioned—I mean horses and wagons do.”

“It suits me to jog along easy, seein’ the small, as well as the big things God puts beside the ways we travel,” said Mr. Burke. “Why would I be behind an engine that wouldn’t let me hear the tins playin’ tunes to me, nor me eyes wander off the dirt track ahead long enough to notice a small bird wid his t’roat swelled out to burstin’, singin’ on the slender top of a young tree at sunset? No, my ladies and gentleman, Thomas Burke an’ Cork in the blue wagon suit fine an’ dandy my ideas of what’s the way to get the good of the country. And more by token, there’re no end of sort of growin’-old women takes pains to gather me up bottles, an’ trade wid me who wouldn’t bother a hand’s turn did I not have the horse and wagon that puts ’em in mind of the time when they were kids on a farm, an’ their father drove home at night wid just such another

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blue wagon an' honest horse. They've told me that again an' again. So it's good for business, Cork is, as well as for me personally."

"Cork is a darling; it would be fearful to have a car instead," said Isabel. The children had not been paying close attention to Mr. Burke's remarks, except Mark, who dearly liked this sort of talk.

"My mother is out," Isabel continued as they came up to her home. "She had a potted plant on the steps to take up to your house, Mark. It's gone, so she has taken it to Motherkins."

"Could you go there, Mr. Burke?" suggested Prue. "We've got to find out whether they'll let us spend the summer the way you said. We could ask Isabel's mother and Mark's father, and Motherkins Hawthorne, all at once, if you didn't mind going on there, and find out quick. Then if they all should happen to say yes—though it's 'most too much to hope for!—my mother wouldn't say no all by herself."

"I've no manner of objection to drivin' back to Hawthorne House," said Mr. Burke. "I'll make the turn around your drive, Isabel, for there's a wheel likely to stick, cuttin' under when I turn short, till I get to a shop to fix it."

Accordingly Mr. Burke drove into the Lindsay place, made the circle in the rear, and came

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out again upon the road, headed for Hawthorne House.

“There’s my mother!” cried Prue as they passed her home. “I can see her sitting by the table letting down a tuck in my white skirt, now it’s been washed and shrunk. But there’s no use asking her first; better find out what Isabel’s mother says; she’s the one the doctors ordered to camp out.”

“You’ve good eyes, Prudence, if you can see your mother letting down a tuck! All I can see is that she’s over there by the table,” said Mark.

“I see her by the table, and I know what she was going to do this afternoon,” said Prue with dignity.

“There’s more than you, Prudy, who see what they expect a person to be doin’, however much they may have dropped all notion of doin’ it,” said Mr. Burke with a laugh. “Nor is it always such a charitable opinion as to be sure it’s a kindness is gettin’ done!”

The great Hawthorne house had been at an earlier date a fine mansion. It was still a fine mansion, but not all of the house was used by Mark’s dear little grandmother, who was too tiny, and still too young to be regarded as a grandmother; to the children she was always “Motherkins,” which was Mark’s name for her.

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Mrs. Hawthorne had borne bitter suffering without bitterness for many years, during which she had not known whether her one son was alive or dead, and she had been desperately poor. Then her son had returned to her, bringing with him his son, the dear boy, Mark, to enrich her, and enough money to establish them all in comfort in the beautiful old home which had been lost to Mrs. Hawthorne for so long. It was while she was so poor that she was certain of neither a roof over her head, nor enough food to eat that Mrs. Hawthorne had taken forlorn little Poppy Meiggs under her wing, the shabby, scrawny, red-haired child whom nobody wanted when her father had died and her mother had deserted her, and the other pretty Meiggs children had found homes. Mrs. Lindsay and Mrs. Wayne believed that it was because of her goodness to friendless, ill-favored Poppy that Mrs. Hawthorne had recovered her son, her home, and plenty, not to mention the wonderful boy who had been given her to love and to love her, as a sort of extra premium of reward.

The Hawthorne house was so big that all its rooms were not needed for three people living quietly. It was a beautiful house, simple and dignified. It topped the pretty, sleepy town of Greenacres, standing on a height above it, and its

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old-time flower gardens, restored by Mr. Gilbert Hawthorne, Mark's father, for his mother's pleasure, were the talk of the countryside.

"Isn't it lovely, Mark?" cried Isabel, as the blue cart mounted toward the fine old place. "Once in a while it comes over me how awful it would have been if Ichabod Lemuel Rudd hadn't come to tell all he knew about the place being really yours, and you had lost it!"

"I know. I wake up cold sometimes dreaming that Ichabod had sworn we didn't own it, instead of that we did, and we had to go away after all," said Mark.

It had almost happened that the Hawthornes had lost their home through the dishonesty of a worthless man, and Ichabod Lemuel Rudd had come just in time to tell what he alone knew of the case, and to save the Hawthornes.

The danger had made the previous summer an exciting time, but it was forever over and done with now.

"I live there!" exclaimed Poppy, proudly, but needlessly, since they all knew it. "I've been thinking! This summer I mean to get to be a lady. I mean to have such manners they'll pretty near kill me. I'm going to put it all over every one of you, even Isabel. I'm going to be so grand 'n' elegant I'll be Miss Gladys Meiggs, not a

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Poppy left to pop! So how about this cart?"

Mark steadied his voice carefully, but he was red in the face as he asked: "The cart getting to be a lady, or popping, or what about it, Lady Gladys?"

"Say, you look out how you kid me!" warned the budding fine lady, wrath on her brow and fire in her eye. "You might know I mean what about riding around all summer in a cart, a blue cart and tin pans? Is it all right if you're getting a polish put on? Though I guess the polish's up to me to put on, wherever I'm at! I'd love like ginger to do it—I mean go 'round in the cart—but I'm going to be a lady this summer, if it takes my head, so there!"

"Good for you, Pops! I'm not making game of you, not really, only a little fooling," said Mark quickly, for he saw that Poppy was in dead earnest.

"I don't believe the cart would jolt nice manners off. And, say, Poppy, you might go, you know, and practice English for this one summer. That would be a dandy start on polishing. Sort of throw out slang as you go along—say, for instance, things like 'up to me,' and 'kidding,' don't you see?"

"Say, you got one over on me that time all right!" cried the would-be princess, and the

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others shouted, Poppy, her wrath quite gone, shouting louder than any one else in joyous recognition of the joke on herself.

Thus they came laughing up to the steps of Hawthorne House to find tiny Motherkins out, reveling in the warmth of this perfect day, Mrs. Lindsay and Mr. Hawthorne with her.

“Well, well! Here is Burke back again with all our youngsters!” cried Mr. Hawthorne. “Are you ready to accept my invitation now, Thomas Burke, and spend the night here?”

“I’m none too sure you’ll have me when I tell you—or the kids tell you—the projecting I’ve been putting out,” said Mr. Burke scratching his head dubiously, making the most of his sudden fear lest he had been stirring up disturbance by a suggestion that might be disapproved, hoping thus to dispel objections. “I had a right to have spoken to you first about it before I got the children goin’, but prudence is a rare virtue, so ’tis, and the Irish are always rash, as is well known.”

“Away with you, Thomas Burke!” cried Mr. Hawthorne laughing. “That is the Irish of the story books! There’s no longer headed schemer than the real Irishman! What have you been suggesting these children to do? What’s afoot?”

“Sure it’s not afoot at all, and that’s the point of it!” Mr. Burke burst into his jolly, noisy

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laugh. "It's a camp on wheels I was projectin'. Instead of the bonny Isabel goin' into a camp to get rid of the small polka dot she's got on her lung, and leavin' her friends desolate for the live-long summer, I was sayin' 'twould be fine all around for her and the other three cronies to go along with me in my wagon. Poppy's Hurrah and the buckboard followin' after to insure accommodations, as well as style and dignity, and drive the surroundin' country over—drivin' bargains the while—and maybe drivin' folks crazy, by the same token! We'd be doublin' on our tracks about once in so often—say, for instance, every new and full of the moon—and look in on Greenacres to see how far you'd all gone on your sure highway to ruin for the want of us. 'Deed I was thinkin' we'd have the fine times, and get healthy enough to hew tall pines for telephone poles, ridin' around by day and sleepin' out by night, and likely meet with adventures fit for a king's story book! But belike 'twas foolish I was to think you'd trust me that far." Thomas Burke broke off with a heavy sigh, and waited for an answer with a humility somewhat damaged by the twinkle in his watchful blue eyes.

"Dear me!" gasped Motherkins and Mrs. Lindsay together, completely amazed by this suggestion. And Mrs. Lindsay added, to gain

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time in which to see it better before replying:

“But who would look after the children? All sorts of things might happen on the road. Suppose one of them were ill, or needed mending—bones or clothes—what then?”

“I honor you, Mrs. Lindsay, m’am, for askin’,” said Mr. Burke with a deep bow. “It’s like your reasonableness not to say no first and find out afterward why you said it. Herself—that’s my wife, Ellen Burke—would shut up our house and take to the road with us, like Maid Marian who followed Robin Hood’s fortunes in the greenwood. And though it’s said to be bad manners praisin’ what’s your own, I’ve never seen it that way, for who could know the worth of a woman—or her worthlessness!—like the man who married her near twenty years back? And I make bold to declare there’s no better nurse, nor better cook, nor better care-taker, nor better woman, take her how you will, than Ellen Burke, wife of Thomas Burke, bottle dealer of 906 North Street, Hertonsburg, and that no children, whoever they’d be, would want for anything, herself lookin’ after ’em. ’Deed, Mrs. Lindsay and Mrs. Hawthorne, and Mr. Hawthorne, though I’ve less dread of a no from him, I wish you’d consent to my scheme, for I’ve taken such a notion to it that I wonder at myself.”

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The four children recognized this as the proper moment to plead for themselves. "Motherkins, yes, yes, yes! Let us, let us, oh, let us!" cried Poppy flinging herself upon little Mrs. Hawthorne with such tempestuous force that the dear little woman staggered.

"Mother-beloved, I would so love to do this! And I should get well! And be out just as much as in a camp—more! And it would be such fun, *delicious* fun!" begged Isabel, putting both arms around her mother and rubbing her own cheek against her mother's like an affectionate kitten.

"Daddy, if you could see it our way I'd like like everything to sign up for the Bottle Imp," added Mark, making up for a boy's obligation to avoid adjectives by the fervor in his voice, and the light in his eyes.

"Bottle Imp?" repeated his father inquiringly.

"It's the wagon's name," Prue explained, taking up her share of persuasion, though her mother was not there to be persuaded. "We're to play she's a sort of ship, and we're her crew, and the Bottle Imp is to be her name. Please, please, dear Mrs. Lindsay and darling little Motherkins, let Isabel and Poppy and Mark go! I know my mother won't even *think* a word against it if you don't! And we would be almost as good as

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gypsies, traveling around in a wagon, and Isabel would get quite, quite well, and we'd not lose her one minute while she was doing it!"

"Evidently I'm not to mind doing without her!" laughed Mrs. Lindsay. "But to be sure, Mr. Burke would bring you all home at intervals to prove you safe and sound! I suppose I may confess that I have not been able to see how I could go camping this summer, but if Isabel's health demanded it there was nothing else to be done. I can see what wonderful times you four would have adventuring through the country in this fashion. I don't know— What do you say to the mad notion, Mrs. Hawthorne, Gilbert?" Mrs. Lindsay checked herself to ask, turning to her friends.

"I haven't the faintest objection to it, in fact I like it tremendously," said Mr. Hawthorne. "But my child is a mere boy, not to be done up in tissue paper, like a girl, not half so precious, eh, Mark, lad?"

He laid one hand on his boy's shoulder and tipped his face upward with the other. There was a look in his eyes that left little doubt that his boy was as precious to him as any girl could be.

"I can't see why it would not be good, Margaret dear," said Motherkins slowly. "I am

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perfectly willing to let Poppy go, and Mark, and I would advise Isabel and Prue's going. I think I should have felt it hard at their age if such a chance had been snatched from me."

A shriek arose that seemed to rattle the chimneys of Hawthorne House. It brought Ichabod Lemuel Rudd, the queer little dark man who devoted himself to the Hawthorne family, and Flossie Doolittle, who languidly did its housework, out to see what was wrong, and it sent Pincushion, Mark's round gray pet cat, scuttling back as she was sauntering forth to join her friends, though she should have been used to the joyous shrieks these four youngsters often uttered.

"Oh, you peacherino, Mrs. Lindsay!" cried Mark.

"You adorable Motherkins!" screamed Isabel.

"But I haven't said yes!" Mrs. Lindsay protested as Poppy half choked her. "Isabel, I can't decide it without laying it before your father!"

"No, of course not," agreed Isabel happily. "But it is decided already by the way you lay it before him. What you like for me, he likes. Oh, my goodness, I'm glad!"

"The Crew of the Bottle Imp!" shouted Mark, with a gesture that embraced Mr. Burke, Isabel, Prue and Poppy. Then, by way of including

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himself, he stood on his hands and paddled about on them, legs straight up in the air, "hurrahing with his heels."

"It's honored I am to be your superior officer," said Mr. Burke with a military salute.

"I'll deserve your confidence, Mrs. Lindsay and Mrs. Hawthorne, and not a boy or girl less than I set out with will I return to you, and in good health, more betoken, at the end of the summer voyage of the Bottle Imp."

CHAPTER III

THE BOTTLE IMP WEIGHS ANCHOR

WELL!" gasped Isabel breathlessly.

"Well!" echoed Prue, and then they looked at each other out of dilated eyes, shining above flushed cheeks.

For the unbelievable had happened, the plan of camping out that summer had been given up and Isabel's father and mother had consented to her going a-gypsying, instead, in that good ship (on wheels!), the Bottle Imp, under the command of Captain Thomas Burke.

"Did you ever in all this world think they would?" demanded Prue rapturously.

For, as Prue had foreseen, her mother had made no objection to her going where Isabel might go. Isabel, the one child left to her mother by the cruel disease which had taken all her other children from her, dainty, gifted Isabel, was guarded as so priceless a one treasure naturally would be, and Mrs. Wayne could not hesitate to let Prue go voyaging in the Bottle Imp if Mrs. Lindsay thought that the trip was safe for Isabel

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to make. As a matter of course Poppy was to go, and Mark's father could not hold back a boy from anything that girls might do. Therefore the undivided quartette of friends was going on the Bottle Imp.

"No," Isabel replied slowly to Prue's ecstatic question. "I didn't really suppose they would. You couldn't seem to think of its happening, it was so lovely. But I couldn't think of its not happening, either. Only imagine giving it up after we'd heard of it, and my having to go off camping alone! Gracious!"

"Gracious!" Prue fervently echoed her again and they fell on each other's neck and danced a rapid two-step, pounding each other on the shoulder as a substitute for words which would have been too feeble to express their joy.

"Too bad you haven't a dog to take, Prue," panted Isabel as they halted.

"I'll take Bunkie, and Mark will take Semper Fidelis—of course Semp will count for Poppy, too—so if you only had a dog there'd be one for each of the crew. And Poppy has Hurrah," she added as an afterthought.

"We've just bought a cow; I might take her," suggested Prue, and they both giggled.

"It wouldn't be half-bad to lead her along and have fresh milk all the time," laughed Isabel.

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“Fine milk we’d get from a trotting cow, trotting all day at the end of a cart! She might give butter, though,” said Prue.

Then Isabel and she fell on each other’s neck again, shrieking with laughter. It doesn’t take the very funniest fun to call out laughter when one is thirteen and at the top-notch of happiness.

There was a week of intense preparation for this queer summer. Clothing, woolen and rain-proof, with a wise allowance of thin materials for the heat that was sure to be great at times along the dusty highways, was the mothers’ first care. To the children’s disgust sleeping bags were insisted upon by the Higher Powers, but protest won no farther concession than permission to discard them for blankets if there were downright excessive heat, and if Mrs. Burke considered it prudent. Mark reached a decision upon what he would take with him for entertainment at the beginning and never wavered. A bat, two baseballs—you never can tell what chance to get into a game may arise as you drive through country villages—“Ivanhoe” and “The Talisman,” his craft book that taught how to make almost anything, from a high explosive to a jigsaw-cut box for an elder sister’s jewels, these were Mark’s choice of provision for a rainy day.

Prue and Isabel took three games apiece; a

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doll apiece which they were dressing for some poor child at Christmas, the "poor child" now wholly unknown, but a convenient excuse for the delight of dressing a doll which the dignity of thirteen years forbade indulging openly, for their own sake.

Isabel took a volume of selected poems which she loved, "Little Women" and "Our Mutual Friend." Prue took only the three "Katy Books" which had been her mother's, and which she liked too well to risk leaving off reading to try something else. They both took the "Tams" which they were crocheting for each other, and which showed hopeful symptoms of being done in time for another winter's coasting.

Poppy had a hard time settling her kit for the Bottle Imp; true to herself she changed her selections every day as long as there was time.

On the last day, the morning of starting, she stowed away in the wagon her favorite doll, who betrayed in her infirmities what it cost a doll to be the favorite daughter of so stormy a mother; a small dictionary, "because," she explained, "she meant to keep learning to speak words while she was gone"; a melancholy grayish scarf, supposed to be white, which she was knitting for Mother-kins; a box of kewpie dolls of assorted sizes, with scraps for their clothing, and a bottle of castor

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oil, because, as Poppy again explained when the other three laughed at it, she “perfickly detested it, and she thought she ought to have it along when Motherkins let ’em go and she might get sick.”

Thus, on the sixth day of June, early Monday morning, so early that Sunday seemed hardly to be fully finished, the Bottle Imp was loaded with all that was to be taken on the trip—had shipped her cargo, perhaps would be better said, since the wagon was masquerading under a nautical title—and all the elders of the departing voyagers’ families were gathered to see the start.

Mark, Isabel, Prue and Poppy were fairly dancing with excitement. Mrs. Burke sat up on the driver’s seat, her pleasant face wreathed in smiles as she held the lines, waiting for her husband to get in to take them, and watched the antics of the children below her.

Bunkie sat beside her, head on one side, ears cocked crookedly, tongue out, also alertly watching, but perfectly understanding that Isabel would soon join him. Calm and responsible, Semp sat on the rear of the buckboard which waited behind the wagon, Hurrah in its shafts browsing while he waited. Hurrah never lost a moment in which he might eat.

“Whatever you do, Mark lad, look well after

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Semp; I could not spare him," said Mr. Hawthorne, his hand on the dog's noble head, pulling his ears. "You won't get out of Mark's sight, Semp, old chap? Don't lose yourself!"

"And, Poppy, do precisely as Mr. and Mrs. Burke bid you do, in all things," warned Motherkins for the unnumbered time. "Remember that you are on your honor. Try to be patient and obedient, and don't fail to change your clothes, if you get wet."

"I have promised, Motherkins," said Poppy with a hint in her manner that she had to strive to forgive a doubt of her. "If I meant to be bad I'd never have took the castor oil along, would I?"

"Good-by, Prue, dear. Don't forget to mail a postal card, at least, in every post office you pass; have you the cards safe?" said Mrs. Wayne.

"Here, mother," said Prue, pulling forward a shining new leather writing case which she wore on a strap slung over her shoulder. "The whole hundred are here, but we'll come to Greenacres before that."

Her mother understood that she meant before the hundred postal cards would be required, and kissed Prue over and over as she put her foot on the wheel hub and prepared to climb up into the wagon.

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"Oh, my precious little Isabel, I hope I'm doing right!" sighed Mrs. Lindsay, as with tears in her eyes she kissed the dear child clinging to her.

At the last moment Isabel realized that, delightful as this expedition was, she had given up for it a summer's camping with her mother, and her heart almost failed her.

"You've done exactly right, Margaret; I am sure it is exactly right," interposed Motherkins, gently urging Isabel into the wagon. "Oh, Poppy!" she gasped, for she had been seized from the rear in such a sudden, crushing hug from Poppy's lean, but wiry little arms that her breath gave out.

Then Poppy took a flying leap for the buckboard's step, missed it, fell flat, scraping her bare knee, gathered herself up with a wry face, tried it again, this time successfully, and picked up the lines, jerked Hurrah's head out of the bracken, and seated herself with a wave of her left hand, ready to start. Mark joined her in his customary place on the rear of the buckboard, beside Semp, his feet hanging over.

Prue and Isabel by this time were in the wagon, seated on a board which Mr. Burke had fastened into place behind his own higher seat, and upon which had been smoothly spread the blankets for the night, making it a soft and cozy

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divan. Bunkie tumbled over to join his Isabel, and sat between her and Prue, quivering in every muscle and whispering little whines, because he did not understand the plan afoot, but knew that it was extraordinary.

“Good-by! Good-by, good-by!” cried everybody in the cart and on the ground.

“Good-by. I can only hope for the best,” groaned Flossie Doolittle, wiping an eye on the corner of her apron.

“Good-by. I fetched an old shoe to shy at you. Luck’s luck, I guess, whether it’s a wedding or not, and old shoes bring weddings luck,” said Ichabod Lemuel Rudd, moving his queer little crooked body sidewise, ready for a good swing of his right hand holding a rundown shoe that undoubtedly had once been Flossie Doolittle’s.

“Heave the anchor, my hearties! Or is it: Up with the anchor! ’Deed and I don’t rightly know, havin’ never traveled, for ’twas my father, so ’twas, that came by sea to this country, leavin’ his son to come in by dry land as best he could! Well, whatever the nautical term, it’s off we are! So good-by, kind friends, whose children I’m borrowin’, and may God be good to us all, goin’ and comin’!”

So saying, Mr. Burke gave Cork the signal to start, which he instantly obeyed. The big wagon

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in front, and the buckboard in the rear, rolled off down the street, and Mr. Burke's throaty, pleasant baritone came back to the watchers in the Lindsay driveway singing:

“When first I saw sweet Peggy
’Twas on a market day;
In a low-backed car she rode, and sat
Upon a truss of hay.”

For a time the marvel of being actually started upon a summer of wanderings under these strange conditions, which seemed the stranger for being no longer a dream, but an accomplished fact, kept the children silent.

But this could not last long. Poppy, who had a truly marvelous voice, began to sing, and then to shout as she stood up in the buckboard urging on Hurrah after the fashion of a Roman charioteer, which was hardly fair, since Hurrah could not go any faster than Cork, in the wagon ahead, allowed him to travel.

Then Mark also stood up on the floor of the buckboard and raised his beautiful voice in song, but his song was not, like Poppy's, merely a safety valve for joy. Catching Mr. Burke's attention, Mark sang:

“Where do we go from here?”

Mr. Burke turned around grinning.

“It doesn’t matter a tupenny bit where we go first, Marcus, but I was thinking we’d pass through East Harland about before long, and maybe stop there for a little business,” he said. “’Tany rate, Cork’s got a shoe I want fitted on better, lifted a little on the one side, and there’s no better blacksmith goin’ than the one in East Harland, be where ’twill. Then I know the blacksmith will be glad to have my missus make tea on his forge fire, and we’ll all eat our dinner outside his shop. He’s on the river bank, and the stream is kind of dammed there, so it makes little falls, and it’s a pretty spot. The blacksmith—his name is Leander Lamb—he’s had a hard sorrow to bear, and I’m sorry for him. I make it my way to drop in on him whenever I can, and he takes it as friendly as ’tis meant. He’d be greatly pleased if I brought four children to see him. He loves children, and it’s worse than havin’ them dead to lose them the way he did, set against him and taken from him, as his were.”

“Dear me!” cried Isabel. “How many ways there are to be unhappy! I thought it was worst of all to lose children by diphtheria, as my darling mother did. It will be nice to stop and cheer up your sorrowful blacksmith, Mr. Burke.

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Wouldn't it be lovely if the Bottle Imp could go along showering happiness, like a sort of watering cart?"

"We're agreed," Mark called from the buckboard; he had not heard what Isabel had said. "Say, Mr. Burke, if the wagon's the Bottle Imp why aren't we Imp-possibilities?"

"Mark, what a fearful, frightful joke! It isn't a joke at all, and besides we are not one bit impossible; we are nothing but the crew," cried Isabel.

"We are true-blue crew," added Prue.

"It's a pretty day, I'm thinkin'," said Mrs. Burke, swinging around toward the children. "And is there a way to improve on this shady road?"

"Isn't it too beautiful!" murmured Isabel. "All those shadows! Where is East Harland, Mr. Burke?"

"Right about here, the edge of it; you'd be stubbin' your toe on it if you were walkin'," said Mr. Burke. "Yonder's the river, and further along a piece we'll come to the Lamb smithy."

The road grew lovelier as they advanced into the sleepy old village of colonial foundation which had ceased to grow almost at the same time that it had ceased to be an English colonial village. The children sank into silence as they went

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along, watching the gleam of the water through over-hanging elms.

The Bottle Imp drew up at a picturesque blacksmith shop of the sort that the invasion of motor cars has almost destroyed. It was low, blackened by time and storms, but it stood in a spot of ideal beauty, and beyond it little falls from a dam that had once turned a wheel, dropped contentedly down to go with the river seaward.

“Leander, Leander Lamb! Say, Leander, man!” shouted Mr. Burke.

No answer came, but the shop door was open; the blacksmith must have been there.

“Step in and look around, Mark, will you?” said Mr. Burke.

Mark jumped off the buckboard and ran into the smithy. Instantly he came to the door, his face white, and beckoned frantically.

Mr. Burke leaped down and ran to him. Mrs. Burke followed her husband, and the children followed her.

There on the floor lay a small man whom Mr. Burke bent over, crying to him to say what was the matter.

“Don’t you see, Tom, he has a letter there?” Mrs. Burke murmured. “He’s fainted, the poor man! Whist, he’s movin’!”

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The blacksmith opened his eyes, stared blankly up at Mr. Burke, then scrambled to his feet.

“And you came and found me, Tom! I was taken sick,” he said, and hastily hid a letter that he held crumpled in his hand.

“You’re right now? Sure?” asked Mr. Burke anxiously. “Good to hear! See, I’ve brought four mighty fine children to see you. Sit down till I tell you the story of the Bottle Imp and how she’s voyagin’.”

Under this plea he got Leander Lamb to a seat and kept him there while he set forth the story of the gypsying summer as Thomas Burke alone could tell it. When he was through, the blacksmith was laughing, and immediately became upon the best of terms with Isabel, Prue, Poppy and Mark.

He fanned up the fire on his forge with his foot-bellows, and soon had it blazing. Whereupon Mrs. Burke, as if a forge fire were the most natural place in the world to make tea, soon had the kettle on, fresh-filled, which Leander brought from a closet where he kept supplies for his solitary dinners, and at that fire it was not long till the kettle was singing in the most domestic manner.

Out of the wagon the crew of the Bottle Imp brought forth cold meat, cheese, preserves,

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crackers, cake, milk, sugar, salt and pie, and out under the trees, beside the pretty singing little falls, they ate the first dinner of their adventurous travels.

“My, my, my!” said Leander Lamb, eating with immense relish and with a dog’s look of grateful admiration in his eyes as he regarded his hosts-and-guests. Then again he murmured: “Oh, my, my, my!”

“Yes, that’s what we all think, Mr. Lamb,” cried Mark with a gay laugh. “It’s great!”

“You came in a good hour, for I was cast down,” said the little blacksmith, and, remembering how he lay on the floor, the children thought that he was.

“I’d like to talk to you, Tom, afterwards.”

“Sure! Talk and smoke while the crew cleans up. And I, for one, can eat no more,” Mr. Burke said, slapping Leander’s knee. “Come along with me, man, till I hear to you.”

CHAPTER IV

A LAMB ASTRAY

THE small blacksmith got upon his feet and started around his shop, toward the falls. Mr. Burke went with him; it was pleasant to see how protectingly the big man laid his arm across the thin shoulders of the little man, bending his head to hear what Leander Lamb had to say to him.

Mrs. Burke rose up with an ample sigh, shaking the crumbs of dinner out of her lap.

“Not always will we be havin’ a fire to heat water for our dishes, so we’ll do well to make good use of our chance,” she said. “Mark, will you fill that tea kettle again—from the well, mind, for I misdoubt river water to put on dishes; there’s no tellin’ what it’s met on its way to us. I never pumped up a forge bellows to quicken a fire, but I have no doubt I’ll make a go of it.”

“Oh, please, please, Mrs. Burke, let me do it!” begged Prue. “I wanted to try it fearfully when Mr. Lamb did it.”

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“Try away, Prudy, but I’m thinkin’ it takes longer legs than yours to work that bellows,” said Mrs. Burke.

She smiled as Prue went at her task with vim—and soon left off trying it, with both vim and breath gone.

“Now I’ll have a try myself,” she said, supplanting Prue, who fell back panting against a set of wheels which stood against the wall.

Ellen Burke was tall, a woman of brawn, and she worked the big bellows with such vigor that almost at once the dull coals in the middle of the forge began to glow, the glow spread outward till it included the embers around the fire’s edge, and in the middle burned in crackling flames.

Mark’s refilled kettle, brought back dripping from the well, was set, sputtering, on the forge fire, and Mrs. Burke, with her three girl assistants, gathered up the dishes of their dinner to wash them when the water was heated.

“Ain’t it dandy here!” cried Poppy, holding the plate that contained the remnants of the feast at a threatening angle while she looked around her admiringly. “I’ll burn these pieces?”

“Never! Birds, Poppy!” cried Mark. “Throw them under the trees. ’Tis pretty fine here. The forge and the fire and the falls——”

“And the firs and the ferns and the fun!”

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Isabel interrupted him with a laugh. "Why do you love the place with an F, Jack-in-the-Box? You seem like Jack-in-the-Box here, more, even, than in our woods, where you were our Jack-in-the-Box when we first saw you!"

Prue regarded Mark consideringly, scanned his slender length, his grace, his shining, wood-brown eyes, his sensitive, quicksilver face.

"You do look just like a woods fairy; we always said so," she remarked. "And this blackened, low shop under these trees, and the river, and the falls, and the forge, it all seems like being in a Grimms' fairy tale."

"Make it one!" cried Isabel. "Let's pretend! Under this forge there is a lovely princess, enchanted. She did nothing but the greatest kindnesses to every one from the very first minute that she could understand what people said that they wanted. There was a baneful old witch-queen in the next kingdom to hers who coveted the lovely princess's realm in order to make her own the greatest realm in the land by uniting the two. So she put a spell upon the lovely princess and imprisoned her below this forge. But, because no one can do great harm to a truly loving heart, she could not prevent the lovely princess from helping any one who happened to come here to seek her help. Of course

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she could not go out to help any one, nor do anything that she could not do without being seen, but she has power to grant wishes to any one who lays a birch twig on the forge fire and makes a wish while doing it. Oh, I forgot to say that the enchantment was for only five hundred years; that was as long as the wicked witch-queen had power to hold her enchanted. But if any one happens to come here and wish one certain wish, then, instantly, the spell is broken and the lovely young princess is free!"

"Oh, Isabel!" sighed Prue, overwhelmed anew with the admiration she always felt for the imagination of her beloved Isabel.

"Say, Isa Bell, that's all right!" cried Mark with no less appreciation than Prue's. "Sure we'll wish! That's what you meant we were to do, wasn't it?" Poppy stood with her mouth open, her dish towel hanging in her hands; they were drying dishes when Isabel began to spin her story web, but they had all suspended labor to listen to it.

"Oh, gee!" Poppy exclaimed fervently, moving for the first time. "Oh, *gee*, Isa! I'd like to wish the thing that would set her free; what is it, Isa? What's her name?"

"Her name," said Isabel promptly, "is Princess Carita, the Beloved. Carita means love,

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you know, and she was named this because when she was born a wise woman told the queen-mother that the princess would grow up to love everything, birds, beasts and flowers, as well as human beings. And the wish that will set her free will be one wholly for some one else; it won't be the least bit in the world for the person wishing it. I'm allowed to tell this because that kind of a wish is rather hard to make. Now hurry, finish these dishes, and then we'll gather birch twigs and wish when we lay them in the forge fire. You know what really makes this fire burn so warm is the warm heart of Princess Carita, the Beloved, lying below it under the wicked spell."

"You're something of a witch yourself, Isabel Lindsay!" declared Mrs. Burke. "As sure as I'm standin' here I've been half believing what you've been tellin' us!"

Isabel held up a warning finger.

"Not half believing, Mrs. Burke! You must believe it every word, with all your might, or else we may not get our wishes!"

"One thing sure, I sha'n't set Princess Carita free," said Prue emphatically. "I shall wish you'd get quite well, Isa, and that's more for me than it is for you."

"Go on and gather your birch twigs," said Mrs. Burke, when the dishes were all washed and

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dried. "I'll pack these things away myself, for I know how they do be best fitted. Get your charms and make your wishes, for when Tom comes around he'll be ready to start on the road again."

Isabel, Prue, Poppy and Mark dashed off in pursuit of a birch tree.

"Suppose there isn't a birch, would anything else do?" asked Poppy.

Isabel waved her hands as if to convey her helplessness to alter the law.

"That is the magic; we have to follow the rule laid down in the spell. There *must* be a birch; we *have* to find one," she said.

"Make any difference whether it's black or white birch?" asked Mark, whose eyes, quick to see, and trained by his father to note all sorts of woodland things, had espied a clump of birches, shimmering in the sunshine some little distance down the river bank.

"No," said Isabel gravely. "Either will do. It is the quick little ways of the birch leaves that make them the only tree we can wish on."

"Come on, then," cried Mark. "I see a clump of black birches. You never find one birch tree, or not often. They always get into bunches. I suppose that's because they are so twittery-nervous, they don't like to stand alone."

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“Oh, hurry up!” cried Prue impatiently; she did not care so much to play fairy fancies as the others did.

The children clambered down over the bank of the stream, and Mark bent over to the girls the largest of the bright birch trees. Carefully, and almost persuading themselves that the choice mattered seriously, Isabel, Prue and Poppy each picked out a twig for their purpose and broke it off.

Mark climbed up a maple that grew beside the birches and reached over to take a small branch from the extreme top of the tree.

“If ‘the top of the mornin’ to you!’ is a good wish, as Mr. Burke says it is, then the top of the tree ought to be a good thing to wish on,” he explained when he had slid down again to his feet.

The four rushed back to the smithy and prepared to carry out Isabel’s orders.

“March three times around the forge—we’ll have to scrooge to get around in the back—and nobody must speak. The third time around we must put our twigs on the fire, one after the other; the first in the line puts the twig on first, then each one in turn right after that. And nobody must speak aloud, but when we lay our twigs on the fire we must each say our wish to ourselves,” Isabel commanded.

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"I brought you a twig, Mrs. Burke," said Poppy, and Mrs. Burke looked grateful. She was enough gifted with imagination to like to play this game.

The line formed, Isabel in the lead as the High Priestess of these mysteries; then Poppy, Prue, Mark and Mrs. Burke, bringing up the rear.

Five solemn, flushed faces were circling the forge when the blacksmith and Thomas Burke came back to the shop at the second round of the procession.

"Well, my grandmother Jane!" exclaimed Leander Lamb, staring open-mouthed.

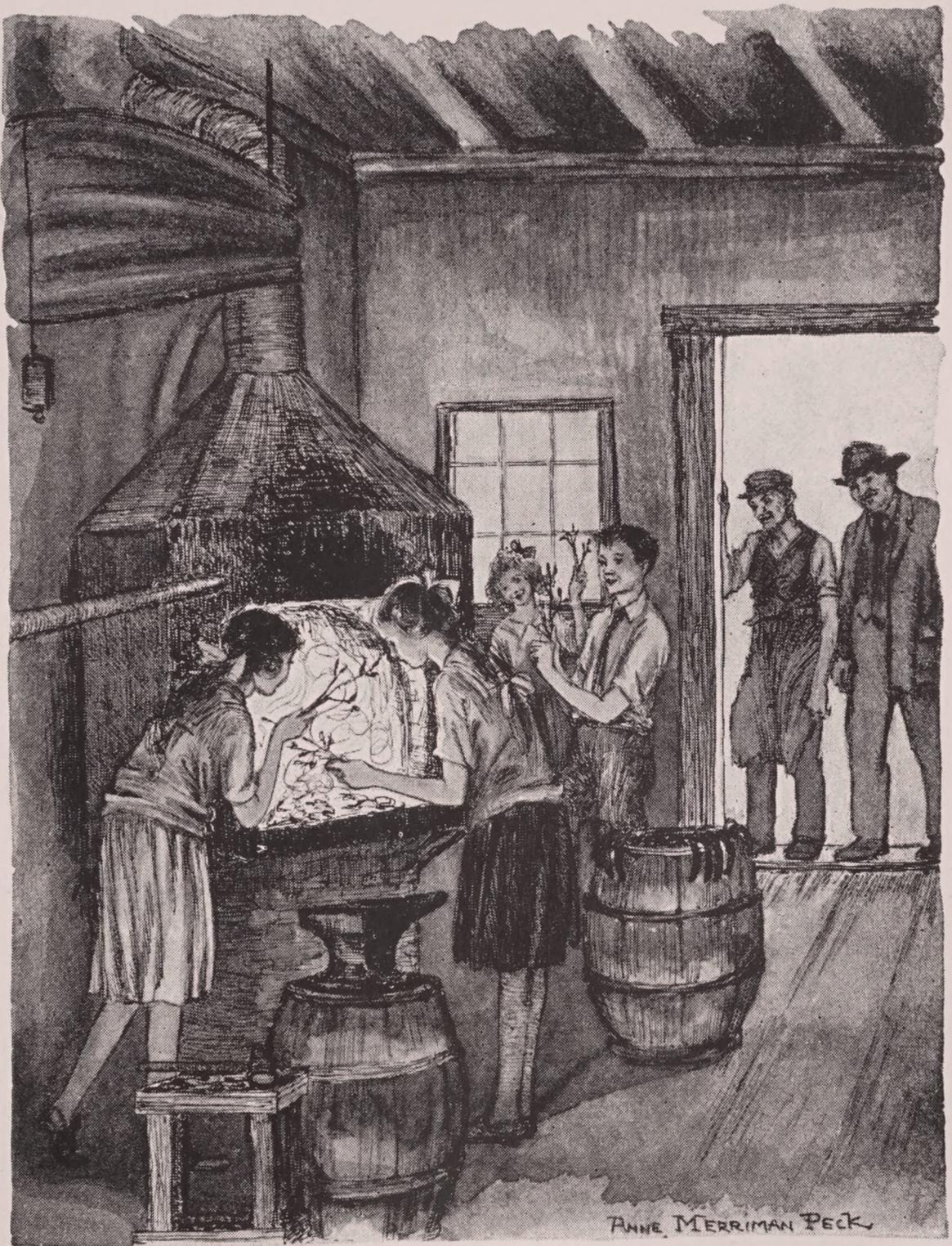
"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Thomas Burke as each marcher solemnly laid a birch twig on the fire.

"Ellen Burke, what unholy monkey shines are you takin' part in?"

"It's not unholy and 'tain't monkey shines!" cried Poppy dancing over to him, her flaming hair wildly tossed, her sharp, elfin face almost as red as her hair.

"Ah, go along, Tom, man!" cried his wife. "It does the wisest no harm to slip behind the almanac and get back to childish wiles, let alone the likes of me."

"Slip where you will, Nellie Burke, as long as you don't give me the slip," retorted her hus-



"WELL, MY GRANDMOTHER JANE!" EXCLAIMED LEANDER.

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band. "And now I'm thinkin' we'd better all be slippin' back to the wagon—I mean the Bottle Imp—and resume our way. Let you and me each take a pail of water out to Cork and Hurrah, Mark, and go along."

It was a pleasure to water the grateful horses. Poppy insisted on going, too, to let down Hurrah's check and see him "put his nose in soak," as she called it.

"All aboard!" called Mr. Burke when each horse had drunk a pailful and a half of water, and everybody was back in place.

"Good-by, then, Leander Lamb, and don't be frettin' more than you can help. I'll do my best for you."

"And I've a strong hope your best will be better than another man's best, Tom," said the blacksmith. "All luck to us both, and to your sweet load."

"It's a queer thing," began Mr. Burke thoughtfully after they had driven in silence for a quarter of a mile along a road fragrant with sweet fern, and bright with mountain laurel, "to find a man knocked down and out by sheer sorrow, as was Leander Lamb when we came upon him to-day."

"Sorrow is it?" cried his wife, her voice sharp from sympathy.

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“Sorrow,” assented Mr. Burke. “I’m to tell you about it, because we’re to hunt for what you might call a little Lamb astray.”

“Is that on account of his name?” inquired Prue.

“Well, yes, that and the age of the lost one, which isn’t above five years, something less, in fact,” said Mr. Burke. “You see, Isabel and Prue—Oh, let us have the other two in here with us to hear about it; we will tie Hurrah to the cart-tail and he’ll come along, makin’ no outcry!”

Isabel laughed; the idea of Hurrah’s making an outcry struck her imagination. The arrangement was effected, and Mr. Burke went on, Poppy watching him with eyes hungry with curiosity, and Isabel trying to keep Bunkie quiet; he had conceived that there might be adventures along the roadside. Semp lay in solitary dignity on the floor of the abandoned buckboard.

“You see, children,” Mr. Burke went back to his beginning, “it’s contrary to nature that a mother shouldn’t be motherly, and most of ’em are, and more than that. But once in a long while there’s one turns up that wouldn’t have any standin’ as a mother in a congregation of snakes! And that sort is no good in any way. Leander Lamb’s wife was that sort, yet while she took no

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decent care of her children she wouldn't let him look after 'em, as he was anxious to do, bein' a good and lovin' man, though not what could be called altogether a strong one. The wife set his children against him, tellin' 'em all sorts of rigamaroles about their father, an' at last she went off, takin' the three children with her, an' there was no gettin' one of them back without a long law fight, for which Leander had no heart, nor no money. He's been that lonely you wouldn't believe! Now, just to-day, before we came along, he got a letter that told him the littlest one has been given away by that unnatural mother to some one, he doesn't know who, but whoever 'tis they're livin' close around here, somewhere. So I'm to look for a small, pale child with big brown eyes, not yet turned five years old, shy an' quiet-mannered, an' if I find him—her——”

Mr. Burke hesitated, looked puzzled, stopped speaking and struck his knee hard with the open palm of his hand.

“Blessed if I know whether 'tis a boy or a girl I'm to look for, an' how'll I tell when I've found it, not knowin'?” he cried.

“Oh, Tom, such a omadhaun!” sighed his wife with a look half admiring, half impatient. “What's the child's name? Or did you forget to ask that, too?”

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"No," said Mr. Burke with an ashamed laugh. "I didn't have to ask it, for Leander kept callin' it. Jean he called it, an' that's as likely to be a boy's as a girl's name, an' the same the other way about. How'll I ever find it, sayin' it's here to be found? I was to gather up this stray lambkin if I discovered it, an' take it to its father. What'll I do at all?"

"You won't find many children five years old with pale faces and brown eyes, named Jean," said Prue, sensibly, but instantly greatly excited, as were all three children, by this quest upon which they found themselves unexpectedly launched in the Bottle Imp. "Take them all and carry them back to Mr. Lamb's smithy and let him sort them out."

"Will they let you?" demanded Poppy, after they had all laughed at Prue's considerably mixed suggestion.

"Will who let me, Poppy, an' do what?" asked Mr. Burke.

"Take all the Jean children off in the wagon," said Poppy.

"'Deed, then, I'm fearin' that there'd be trouble gettin' so much as the one I wanted, if I found it!" admitted Mr. Burke. "It's a puzzle."

"Well, I'll steal it for you," cried Mark, looking much pleased with the idea. "We're gypsy-

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ing, anyway, and gypsies always kidnap, at least in stories."

"It certainly is exciting," said Isabel. "We expected adventures, but think of walking right into a big one the first morning!"

"Does he always faint away? Would he faint if we brought him a lot of Jean kids to pick one out of 'em?" cried Poppy.

"Leander's not well," Mr. Burke replied with that great solemnity of his that always seemed to make his eyes twinkle more than usual. "It might be a risk. What we'll do is to take in one Jean at a time, first a girl Jean, then a boy Jean, an' tread softly not to scare him, an' Poppy will be fannin' him the while. But no jokin', it would be a good job done to find his child for poor crushed Leander Lamb, an' the Bottle Imp might be proud of her voyage, if 'twas done. Ellen, do you remember that pretty glen we once saw a little farther on this road, the one with old revolutionary breastworks thrown up around it, much like what they tell of fairy rings in the old country, only far bigger, I'm thinkin'?"

"Well I remember it; what about it, Tom?" said Mrs. Burke.

"What do you say to goin' no farther, but spendin' our first night sleepin' in the middle of

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it, an' dreamin' of the patriots an' red coats, maybe?" suggested Mr. Burke.

"No better place," agreed Mrs. Burke, and the children beamed with delight at the suggestion of a night spent encircled with revolutionary earthworks.

"We have been on the road only one day—part of one!—and we haven't traveled many miles, yet look how interesting that smithy was, and now breastworks!" Isabel's voice was aweladen. "It is quite disgraceful not to have known what a very, very interesting country it is right around Greenacres!"

"Yes," chimed in Prue. "It's just like people going to Rome to see St. Peter's, and never seeing the Statue of Liberty."

"You'd be likely to see it on your way to Rome, though, unless you went by land, because you'd sail past it going out of New York harbor," laughed Mark.

"I'm only saying that for instance, Mark," said Prue with a dignified frown. "But the Bottle Imp is making us improve our minds."

CHAPTER V

“GENERAL ISRAEL PUTNAM”

THE Bottle Imp made her moorings in the harbor for the night—to speak of the wagon, as a ship, which the children remembered to do about half of the time. The spot which Mr. Burke had picked out was a slight natural depression between hills of which the neighboring militia in the Revolutionary war had taken advantage. They had thrown up all around it breastworks to shelter them as they defended the outlying villages, in case that which did not happen should have happened, and the British soldiers had come up the river to attack. The breastworks had never been used, but it thrilled the crew of the Bottle Imp to come to rest amid them; it was wonderful to imagine the times in which they had been thrown up, to be twentieth century children running over the defenses laboriously made with pickaxe and shovel in 1776.

The glen was a lovely spot, as well as an interesting one, and now, as the Bottle Imp en-

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tered it at sunset, was filled with soft tints, making lengthening eastward shadows of its luxuriant trees. Just over the western edge of the breastworks the slenderest of new moons showed its clear, narrow curve amid the after-glow, resting, apparently, on the top of the mounded earth that encircled the glen.

“Oh, hush!” Isabel said softly, unconsciously voicing her feeling that a word would jar on the beauty.

But that was for only a moment. It was not long, nor was there time to let it be, till the Bottle Imp was making ready for the night.

Like old and accustomed adventurers, as they were, Mr. and Mrs. Burke did not fuss over their sleeping accommodations, but tipped up the driver's seat on the wagon, made hinged for this purpose, and beneath its space arranged their blankets—and their bedroom was ready.

There was room, or room had been made, at the rear end of the cart for Isabel, Prue and Poppy to sleep in a row, a narrow row, much like three peas in a pod. Bunkie was to sleep at their feet, or was if he would stay there.

Every one who knew him knew that Bunkie would creep up as near to Isabel's face as he could get just as soon as he made sure that she

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was too sound asleep to order him back to his own place.

As they had done once before when this band of friends had spent a night out of doors, traveling with Mr. Burke's wagon and the buckboard, Mr. Burke and Mark turned the buckboard over to make it a roof shelter, and beneath it Mark was to sleep in his no-longer despised sleeping bag, with *Semper Fidelis* to live up to his name and keep him company.

After the night arrangements were made there was a supper as delicious as Mrs. Burke and Prue could make it, aided by the fresh river breeze to flavor it. Poppy flew around meaning to help, and fondly believing that she did help; but Poppy's way of working was rather too much like a fly's way of buzzing up and down a window pane to be particularly helpful.

Isabel and Mark went over and climbed to the top of the breastworks to see the last of the afterglow colors reflected in the stream.

"Run right along, both of you; Isabel and you are not the kind to get supper," Prue said in a grown-up tone of competence.

It was not often that Prue did not feel at a disadvantage beside Isabel, but when it came to matters like eating and arranging, Prue had the best of Isabel, being a most housewifely little

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soul. It was pleasant once in a while to take the lead over her gifted friend. They had reached the cake stage of the supper when Prue suddenly cried out:

“Oh, my goodness me!” in a tone of utter dismay.

“What’s wrong?” demanded Mark.

“We never passed one post office, so I forgot all about my postal card to mother. And this is our first day away, so she’ll be more anxious to hear, because she hasn’t got used to it. Oh, my goodness me!” sighed Prue.

“Well, that’s no joke!” cried Mark. “I’ll be beheaded if I didn’t forget all about mails and writing Daddy and Motherkins!”

“I didn’t forget,” said Isabel slowly. “I’ve been worrying about it, but I didn’t like to say anything, because we didn’t come to a post office, and I hated to bother Mr. Burke.”

“Now see here, my Lady Isabel, none of that!” cried Thomas Burke. “How much bother is it to go a bit around, when your time’s your own an’ you’re not aimin’ to do anything particular with it, but go stramivatin’ over the country? Don’t you get to thinkin’ you’re not free to speak out your wishes! Isn’t the whole party for you, anyway? Write your letters, or cards, or whatever ’tis, each of you, an’ I’ll step over to West

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Harland, an' mail 'em for you. It's but a stroll of six miles, three there an' three back, an' what's that to a healthy man that's not yet old?"

"Oh, but Mr. Burke—" began Isabel, when Mark interrupted her.

"Captain Burke, of the Bottle Imp, please detail me for that service! I'd love the walk; it wouldn't take me more than an hour and a quarter at the most—and I wouldn't make it at the pace that needs the most! You know nothing could happen to me. You tell the way to head and I'll head that way—foot it that way I mean! Say, Mr. Burke, honest, I'd like to go, heaps."

"Why, I don't see why you couldn't go, Mark," began Mr. Burke slowly, and Mark cut him short.

"Good for you! 'Course you don't see why! Write whatever you want to write, girls, only don't write too much, because it's nearly eight now. I'll send a card to dad and tell him I'll write to-morrow. Pops, you write Motherkins, and come along with me to do it, so we'll each tell something the other doesn't say; that way two postal cards ought to carry pretty much all that there is to tell."

Mark started up, all energy, shaking the ink down in his fountain pen to be ready when he had found the postal cards he had in his case.

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For ten minutes there was complete silence, broken only by Poppy who asked, "if it could still be June 6th; it didn't seem as if it could be the day they had started."

Mark stuffed the four cards into his jacket pocket, whistled Semp, and was off, having first listened attentively to the instructions which Mr. Burke gave him for finding the West Harland post office, and repeating them after him, to make sure that he had them right.

Although they were deeply interested in Mark's safe return, Isabel, Prue and Poppy found themselves so sleepy from the motion of the wagon and a whole day in the open air that they gave up and went to bed without waiting to hear how he had fared.

Mark sped along most joyously, head up, the cool evening wind from the river blowing against his brow and ruffling his brown hair.

Semp kept close to his side, being doubtful of this whole expedition, and more than doubtful about Mark's separating himself from his companions, and striking off in the evening, alone, across a strange country.

But Mark went straight to his destination, making no false turns, and enjoying immensely his walk under the summer stars.

He found the post office closed, but he slipped

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the postal cards into the opening made for this purpose outside the door, and turned on his heel to return, whistling the air of a lovely Schubert song which his musical daddy had taught him to sing.

Semp showed relief of mind on turning back, and allowed himself to leave Mark's side for short excursions into the growth along the roadside to see what it might hide. It was once when he missed the dog that Mark, turning around to look for him, saw a man.

He was a queer looking person, his face smothered in beard, his eyes hidden by convex glasses, so large that they seemed to look almost as big as port hole window-glasses.

"Good evening, youngster," said the man, catching up with Mark. "That's an odd song for a country boy to be whistling."

"Is it?" said Mark shortly.

He felt sure that he had been followed and he resented it, besides which he disliked the man's voice, chiefly because it had a foreign sound, and almost any American boy instinctively distrusts people who are born in some other land.

"Ah, come now, why be unfriendly?" the man said. "Where did you learn that song?"

"My father taught it to me," said Mark.

"A singer?" hinted the man.

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"No. That is, we sing for fun, the way everybody does," said Mark.

"Not everybody sings for other people's fun, though," said the man, and laughed. "That is one of the truly fine songs. Live here?"

"No, I don't. All right, Semp, all right, old man; easy there!" said Mark, for Semp, returning from his investigations, growled at the stranger and began to walk stiffly around him.

"I fear dogs," said the man, and dropped back, allowing Mark to get so far ahead of him that soon he was left out of sight.

The meeting took all desire to whistle from Mark. He went on more rapidly, nervous and inclined to be afraid, holding the feeling sternly in check.

He got back to the glen without mishap, nor further adventure, passing on the way no one more dangerous than a neat looking woman, leading a snubby-nosed child, whimpering from sleepiness.

Mark found the Bottle Imp quiet, wrapped in darkness.

"I believe they have all gone to bed!" he thought.

He was not in the least sleepy, and the night was growing more enchanting as it went deeper into itself, farther from day.

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Mark decided not to go to bed, but to taste the unwonted pleasure of watching the stars from the top of Revolutionary breastworks. He climbed up the side of the breastworks and began to pace the top, arms folded, an imaginary tri-cornered hat pulled down over his eyes—he was bare-headed—striding with military pace, making believe that Washington slept in a tent represented by the Bottle Imp, and that he, Mark, was the sentinel on guard over the Commander-in-Chief's rest.

After a while Isabel wakened, peeped out under the curtain beside her and saw the solitary figure pacing the top of the mound with military tread.

To her lively imagination it looked at least full grown; it never occurred to her that it could be Mark.

She touched Poppy, who was instantly awake, and prodded Prue hard till she, also, was awake.

“S-sh!” warned Isabel in a whisper, glancing toward the curtain that separated their end of the wagon from the forward end where the Burkes slept. “Look!” She lifted the side curtain and showed Prue and Poppy the figure upon the breastworks.

“O-o-oh!” moaned Prue, instantly terror-stricken. “What is it?”

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“Gosh! A ghost!” said Poppy aloud in an awful tone. “Israel Putnam!” Isabel was well-frightened, but she had to laugh at this.

“Oh, Pops, why should it be Israel Putnam?” she said.

“Why shouldn’t it?” Poppy answered indignantly. “It’s a Revolutionary ghost. But I just said him; he come first.”

“If there ain’t ghosts this ain’t one,” whispered Prue, her teeth chattering and betraying her extreme terror by her English, of which, when she was herself, Prudence was careful.

“What else is it? Sure it’s a ghost, Revolution ghost! Marching like that on the Revolution place; sure it is! I’m going to get out of here. I never could stand ghosts!” Poppy spoke as if ghosts had been a frequent experience in her short life, and she was preparing to slip out over the tail of the wagon, but Isabel held her.

“I’m terribly frightened,” Isabel admitted, “but how can it be—that? Why don’t Semp and Bunkie growl?”

“Dogs can’t see ghosts!” said Prue, almost scornfully, though this was Isabel. “Cats can; Pincushion might see it, if we’d brought her along, but dogs can’t.” As they whispered in chill fear, the figure, which to them all looked tall and unearthly, outlined against the stars, still

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stalked up and down, down and up, and Isabel, like a true descendent of the Highlanders, as she was, resolved to brave the worst. She must know what she was seeing. Better anything, any certainty, than to let that mysterious figure go on stalking forever in her memory, not known for either man or ghost.

"I'm going over there," Isabel said, and clutched her clothing.

"You are *not!*" said Prue, and clutched Isabel.

"Not on your life!" added Poppy, holding to one of Isabel's ankles.

"Don't you know, you crazy thing," Prue said with utmost vigor, "that they just troll you over to 'em and then—" She waved her one free hand to end her sentence.

"If you try to go over there, I'll yell for the Burkes."

"Prue, don't you dare! I've got to go!" Isabel said earnestly. "I'm scared green, but I've GOT to go! Don't call the Burkes! Maybe we're the only ones can see it. I don't know why, but if I didn't go I'd hate myself all the rest of my days. Don't you try to stop me. I've got to *see!* Let me alone."

Isabel had a force within her that usually convinced her mates of her right to do what she set out to do.

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Now Prue released her and groaned.

"Oh, Isa, my dearest," she sighed, but as one who had accepted what had to be borne.

"Well," said Poppy, freeing Isa's ankle, "I suppose old Israel Putnam wouldn't do anything to a real American, anyhow. We're on his side."

Isabel rapidly, though with trembling hands, drew on her clothes, snatched her raincoat as a substitute for her dress, and resolutely went down over the wagon wheel. By the light of a lantern hung on the side of the axle Prue and Poppy saw that her face was blanched, and that her eyes were big and dark, shining with a light which Poppy whispered "was 'most as awful as a ghost."

"I ought to go, too, but she wouldn't let me," groaned stricken Prue.

Isabel sped straight across the grass toward the breastworks, knowing that if she dallied, or let herself consider, she could not go on. Bunkie, who had hastened after her, frisked and whined with pleasure, highly approving her course.

"It's so," thought Isabel. "Dogs can't see them."

The marching figure was still clear before her eyes, but Bunkie ran toward it, behaved as he always did, except that he seemed to be particularly pleased. Then suddenly the figure

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turned toward her, waved its right arm distinctly, as if saluting Isabel, and dropped out of sight.

Bad as it was to watch it, this was worse! To have it go out like this, and with a parting salute to her! Horrible!

Isabel's knees melted under her; trembling she sank in a wretched little heap on the grass and hid her face, bowed down in her icy hands.

Bunkie came back and thrust his sympathetic nose between her palms, nobly abstaining from the licking which he longed to give her cheek, but which he had been taught was ill-mannered.

"Oh, Bunkie, Bunkie!" moaned Isabel. "Help me get back!"

Bunkie did what he could, but before he could encourage Isabel to her feet, Mark came up and stooped over her.

"Isa! Isa Bell, what is it? What's wrong? Were you after me?" he cried. Isabel clutched his hands and let herself be drawn up.

"Mark, where did you come from?" she gasped.

Mark laughed a little shamed laugh.

"I was enjoying myself, like a ninny," he said, "out there on top of the breastworks, sort of making believe, you know; imagining I was one of the old fellows back again, guarding the Chief, or something—the way you and I always

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go off." Isabel stared at him, then she understood.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she began to laugh hysterically. "Israel Putnam! Oh, oh, oh!"

She told her story to Mark, who shouted rapturously over it.

"Such a Pops!" he gasped. "If it had been a ghost, why would it be Israel Putnam's ghost? You're a plucky girl, Isa, to come out alone to investigate! Let's go back and get some sleep.

Semp arose, stretching, from the place where he had napped, waiting for Mark to return to their buckboard cabin, and girl and boy and dogs went contentedly to their quarters, one more ghost forever laid.

CHAPTER VI

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

ISABEL climbed back into the wagon to find Prue and Poppy shaking with laughter, buried under the blanket to stifle it lest the Burkes should be wakened. They had seen Mark and Semp come back with Isabel and knew what she had found on the breastworks.

“Well, say! Well, say!” Poppy kept repeating, quite unable to comment on the way their fright had turned out.

“I’m not going to say till morning,” Isabel whispered. “It must be after ten, and we’re all miserable sinners to be awake!”

The result of this vigil was the natural one of over-sleeping in the morning. Mrs. Burke had to call the three little girls at half past seven; they were snuggled under their blanket side by side, sleeping as tight as dormice, quite unconscious that the sun was high, though they had planned to beat him rising on this first morning in the Bottle Imp.

There were several sheltered spots along the

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river bank, with sandy beaches and shading trees, where bathing was a joy.

The children had brought bathing suits, and Mrs. Burke appointed two natural little tree-enclosed bathing houses to the service of the little girls, and of Mark.

"Tom and me had a dip before you found out you were alive," she observed. "Go on now, and try how fine it is, but you can't be too long in the water, if we're to get anywhere to-day, which promises to be pretty warm around noon."

It was Poppy, of course, who did the most daring things in swimming, and it was Mark who swam best; Isabel and Prue were good swimmers, but Mark had a variety of strokes, and could swim equally well on his side, or back, as breasting the water, and could hold his breath to swim under water longer than the girls.

"I'm going up that tree and dive," announced Poppy and made for a slender tree that hung over the stream.

"Poppy, no!" cried Isabel instantly distressed.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Prue, which was always the wrong way to check Poppy.

"Well, I wonder if I've got to mind you, Prue Wayne?" Poppy's tone implied no doubt that she did not have to mind Prue.

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She went over to the tree and prepared to climb it.

“See here, Pops,” said Mark, following her and putting one hand firmly on her shoulder, “you really must not try that stunt. You don’t know how deep it is, nor what sort of a bottom the river has here. You might stick in the mud, or you might break your neck, hitting something. Come on and swim, Pops, but no high dive, unless you know you’re in clear, deep water.”

Poppy shook off Mark’s hand impatiently.

“You might think you was all old women—’fraid cats! Do you s’pose I’m ’fraid? I’d darst—why, I’d darst dive *anywhere!*”

“Well, take it out in knowing you’re not afraid,” laughed Mark. “You know we’re not cowards, but it’s silly to take a chance like this. Rivers around here aren’t deep, and they’re usually full of rocks, and tree trunks, and stuff. Safety first!”

“I’m going to, so there!” declared Poppy in the grip of her hot temper and wilfulness.

She began to wriggle up the tree, but Mark caught her ankles.

“Now, Pops, don’t spoil everything!” he implored. “I can’t let you do it, honest! I can’t, because I know the danger. You know I’m not trying to stop you for the fun of it. Please be

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nice, Pops, when we're having such a good time! You'll say afterward I was right."

But Poppy was kicking and struggling to free her ankles, and that is not likely to dispose a person to listen to reason. She was getting furiously angry with Mark for holding her and what he said rolled right over her head, from which her wet, yet still brilliant hair hung in funny rat tails.

Poppy was a wirey little person, with plenty of strength, and when she was angry she was more than Mark could master alone.

"Lend a hand, Isa and Prue; she's got to come down," Mark said.

"Let go, Poppy, or you'll be scratched, pulling over the bark," said Prue, completely disgusted with this unnecessary trouble, resolved to have Poppy down, whether whole or in pieces, but yet desiring to spare her where it might be done. Poppy fought hard; Mark had a scratch down his cheek in a moment, and Prue and Isabel's hair caught ugly tweaks from nervous little thin hands twisted in it. But, of course, she could not hold to the tree against three pulling her down, and at last she lay on the grass at its foot, kicking, crying, trying to scold, and failing of words, yanking up handfuls of grass and biting them.

"I'll—I'll do it yet!" she managed to say.



"I'M GOING TO, SO THERE," DECLARED POPPY.

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"We'd better not leave her till she gets over being crazy. Let's sit on her," said Prue.

Isabel was angry, so was Mark, though, in spite of his smarting cheek, he could not help laughing at the poor little fury, but Prue was disgusted to the utmost depths of her soul, which was Prue's way of being angry. In the struggle to dislodge Poppy she had lost every bit of toleration for her.

"Oh, no, we can't sit on her; she hasn't any breath left as it is," said Isabel.

"Poppy, won't you be good to us and not spoil the fun? You've hurt us."

"Glad I did! Butinsky!" panted Poppy.

"Oh, well, we're all too warm and tired to go in swimming again," sighed Isabel.

"Let's go back."

"And tell the Burkes to send Gladys Meiggs back to Greenacres, and let us go the rest of the trip in peace, without her," added Prue.

Isabel noted that Poppy seemed to be listening to this suggestion, that her violent emotions ceased for a moment.

Knowing that Poppy's temper burned down quickly, and was as quickly followed by contrition as great as her fury had been, and that the one way to manage her was to appeal to her

strong and ardent love for them all, Isabel said gently:

“Oh, dear me, no, Prue! You know we wouldn't enjoy one single instant without our Poppy! We love her too well to get on without her, and she doesn't always hate us and hurt us; not even often does she scratch and bang us, because she knows we love her. I say, let's go back to the Bottle Imp and leave her here. She doesn't want us. Oh, Poppy, why do you hate us when we want to keep you safe?”

Isabel's voice, always a lovely one, soft and thrilling, like a caress, was so moving now that Poppy could not hear it and retain her wrath.

She flung herself over on her face and began to shake with sobs.

Isabel and Mark exchanged eye telegrams, saying that now everything was all right; when Poppy cried this way, after one of her fits of temper, the day was won.

“I wish—I wish I was 'way down under here, with fish worms crawling all over me!” poor Poppy moaned, her tense little body heaving.

“I wisht I was dead and dead! I ought to of dived, and broke my horrid red head off. Go along back and leave me die! What'jer care if I had stuck in the mud at the bottom f'rever'n'ever? Oh, oh, oh!” Poppy burrowed

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deeper and kicked harder. Isabel motioned to Prue and Mark to go on and leave her with Poppy, who adored Isabel more than any one else on earth, unless it were sweet little Motherkins. When they had gone, Isabel, without speaking, sat on the grass beside Poppy and drew the damp, blazing head into her lap.

Still silent, she stroked the red hair till Poppy, with a swift motion threw up her head, seized Isabel around the neck in a violent embrace and humbly kissed her ear.

"Come to breakfast, Poppy dear," said Isabel. "It's all right. Just one more time to begin again. You don't go off half as often as you used to. And when we're really sorry, you know, why it's just as if nothing had happened. Come!"

"Oh, I'm *awful*," groaned Poppy. "I hit you, and I yanked your hair half out!"

"No, you didn't!" Isabel laughed. "I've just as much as ever! But I'm nearly starved, and it takes a little while to get dressed. Please come along, Pops!"

"What'll they say?" whispered Poppy.

"The Burkes?" asked Isabel, then as Poppy nodded, added:

"You know perfectly well that Prue and Mark won't say a word, and I'm sure I won't. But I do think, Poppy, you ought to tell Mark you're

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sorry you fought him, and that you know he was right, and tried to take care of you; because diving is very dangerous in shallow water, and none of us know deep this is."

"Yes," said contrite Poppy meekly, proving that her contrition was sincere by her readiness to make amends.

Then she slowly arose, needing Isabel's help, for after one of her outbursts she was always exhausted. Together she and Isabel went to the grove-like bath house and dressed, the other two having preceded them. Then they followed Prue and Mark to the Bottle Imp where the fragrance of Mrs. Burke's breakfast announced it to them ahead of their arrival, and cheered even limp Poppy, into a run.

"Well, I'm thinking, Crew of the Bottle Imp," began, Mr. Burke, spearing a bit of ham and agreeably blind to Poppy's pallor and sadness, and to Mark's scratched cheek, "I'm thinking that I'll be combining a little business with a great deal of pleasure this morning. I'm going out after bottles, for all I've taken you along, an' it seems more like a picnic than my regular rounds. More betoken, I'd not mind selling, or trading some of my tins. An'—still more—if we don't go to the houses around an' about, an' talk to the women folks, sorra a word will we be by way

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of hearing of Leander Lamb's little lamb, Jean, which it's likely is a boy, or else a girl, but never a one of us knows which! So by your leave, my hearties, we'll steer the Bottle Imp to a nice, shining farmhouse, where there lives Mistress Irene Brewer, no less! An' her name'd mislead you, for Irene is to my ears dressy-like, an' she's not what I'd call a dressy lady. But soon you'll be seeing her."

Cork and Hurrah had breakfasted early, and now they drank abundantly before setting out, and Semp, being minded to walk, took his place under the buckboard, in which Mark had joined Poppy again in order to seal the compact of peace between them. But Bunkie jumped up on the seat of the big wagon; being a small dog he guarded his dignity as *Semper Fidelis* was not obliged to, and always held himself in the first rank.

The Bottle Imp rolled with the pleasant clanking sound of its tins to announce its coming, through a road that gently rose and fell, winding up over low hills, down on their farther side, under varied patches of beautiful trees and no less beautiful, tangled shrub-growth bordering it.

"Don't you want it to go on and on forever? It's such a lovely road, and it is so good to us, so shady, sunny, fragrant—evrything! And the

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birds! I've seen three I never saw before. I'd like to go on and on." Isabel spoke softly, as if the beauty were sacred, as indeed it is, when it is unspoiled country beauty.

"Ah, my lass, no road on earth could go on being beautiful forever! Follow it long enough and 'twill fail you! It's just to troll us on to beauty that is without end that we're given these sweet spots on the earth, I'm thinkin'," said Mrs. Burke. "But I love you for lovin' it, sweet Isabel, and I'm always thinkin' how my own little girls play where 'tis far more beautiful, and doesn't end!"

"Oh, Mrs. Burke! And my mother's other children! Isn't that lovely!" breathed Isabel, her eyes shining.

The Bottle Imp turned suddenly, without warning, from the road, into a private lane, grass-grown in the middle, with brown trodden ground on the sides where horses had walked abreast, and more grass between their track and the wheel track.

It was a densely shaded road; branches of trees scraped the top of the wagon, and Mrs. Burke laughed when Prue and Isabel, sitting under the top and low down, stooped as if they might be hit by them.

They came at the end of the lane to a yellow

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farmhouse, with white trimming and green blinds, marvellously clean and picked up; its hens and cocks, under the lilacs, looked as if they had never rumbled their feathers in a dust bath. A woman sharing the neatness of the house and poultry came out of the side door, upon the broad door stone, to see who was coming.

“Upon my word, it’s Mr. Burke!” she exclaimed, and Mr. Burke cheerfully called to her: “Right you are, Mrs. Brewer!”

“It’s Irene Brewer!” whispered Poppy to Mark; she was feeling quite herself by this time.

“Well, are you collecting bottles or children? Have you turned your wagon into an orphan asylum?” demanded Mrs. Brewer, surveying the crew of the Bottle Imp and the additional buckboard with amazement.

“I’m collectin’ bottles an’ sellin’ tins, an’ takin’ along some friends of mine to see the country. More particularly the best farm for miles around,” said Thomas Burke with his winning smile. “This is Miss Isabel Lindsay, Miss Prue Wayne, Miss Poppy Meiggs an’ Master Mark Hawthorne, all of Greenacres.”

“Is this the boy whose father came back to Greenacres when everybody thought him dead, and saved his mother from poverty, and set her up in their old home again? I’ve heard the

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story," said Mrs. Brewer with keen interest.

"The very same, an' there couldn't be a story with a happier end to it," said Mr. Burke. "Have you bottles for me?"

"I have two dozen of one kind, because my daughter took to using a patent medicine, and laid in a case of it. I wish I could give 'em to you full; it did her harm!" said Mrs. Brewer with a snap, tightening the shiney leather belt that held her black and gray calico gown in at the waist. "And I want milk pans, and I need a saucepan. I waited for you to turn up; I don't mind saying I like to trade with you."

"'Deed an' I'm honored, m'am," said Thomas Burke with his best bow. "Why should you mind sayin' a kind thing, kindness being the nature of lovely ladies? I have milk pans that'll bring cream thick to the top to boast of 'em, an' a saucepan that's more like a poem than a saucepan! I'll get 'em for you. Let you tell me where the bottles might be, an' I'll fetch 'em out."

"In the cellarway. Dear me, you might be excused if you were adopting these four children; I wouldn't mind keeping them, or some of them, myself!" said Mrs. Irene Brewer.

"All but me!" cried Poppy, instantly conscious that her brothers and sisters had found homes when they were all deserted and orphaned, but

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that her lack of good looks had made her undesired, till Motherkins had befriended her.

“Well, they’re not for the likes of me,” said Thomas Burke. “They’re more than well-off and well-loved. But do you think adoptin’ is a wise course? Do there be many around here takin’ little children who need homes, for instance?”

Mr. Burke put his question with great innocence of manner, and the crew of the Bottle Imp listened eagerly for the answer, knowing that Mr. Burke was throwing out feelers for Jean Lamb.

“I don’t know a case of it, except down toward Lyteltown. Everybody around here had as many children of their own as they cared to look after. But I heard old M’am Jarvis had taken a child lately. She lives near Lyteltown. If she lived at Salem, and that two hundred and fifty years ago, she’d be hung for a witch. She’s a witch in our meaning of the word, if not theirs! Poor child! I’m sorry for a child in her hands,” said Mrs. Brewer angrily.

“Dear me, dear me! I hate to hear of a child in wrong hands!” said Mr. Burke sincerely. “Is this a young child, did you say, an’ is it a boy or girl?”

“Yes, it’s young, four or five,” said Mrs. Brewer. “I don’t know whether it’s boy or girl.

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It has one of these names that may be either one—Jessie, or Marion, or Frances—I don't remember its name.”

“Jean is one of those double-barreled names,” observed Mr. Burke.

“And that's the very one it is!” cried Mrs. Brewer, striking her skirt emphatically.

“Well, the poor thing!” said Mr. Burke. “Let us hope 'twill be delivered from the old creature that's not fit for it! In the cellarway those bottles are, did you say? I'll fetch 'em up. An' in the meantime, here's your tins, an' you be lookin' 'em over to see don't they be fit to cook the king's feast in? Or rise the cream for the baby princesses?”

Mr. Burke loaded the case of empty bottles on the wagon, and Mrs. Brewer expressed her admiration for the saucepan and milk pans, which she bought.

The Bottle Imp then drove away. After they had gone on a short distance in silence, Mr. Burke brought the lines down on Cork's back with a slap that made the amazed horse jump.

“Well, it's a work of mercy to find the child, an' bring it home to its father, so 'tis!” he cried. “An' it's helped we are to put it through. Ellen Burke, say your prayers for thankfulness, an' for

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the good finish of it! We've smoked the child the first time tryin', which no one, let him be the most hopeful, would have dared look to have happen!"

CHAPTER VII

THE ISLAND

THE discovery of a clue, as they hoped it might prove to be, to the whereabouts of the Lamb child, did not lead as quickly to the discovery of the child as it seemed to the children likely to.

There were many reasons why the Bottle Imp could not go at once to Lytelton.

One of these reasons was that it could not go so far and be in Greenacres again at the end of the second week of its voyaging, according to the agreement made upon its setting forth. It would never do to fail to keep this compact. It was a great sacrifice on the part of the crew's families to let the children make the trip; the least that he could do, Mr. Burke felt, was to bring them back regularly to let the mothers and fathers see for themselves that no ill had befallen them, and this was especially true the first of the summer, before anxiety had been set at rest by a few such returns.

Now, that first visit of report having been

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made, the Bottle Imp was on its way again, with Lytelton its aim.

There were no particular adventures for the first week of this second setting-out, but, although adventures were most interesting, yet it was pleasant to go jogging along uneventfully, watching the changing loveliness of roads and sky, even idly watching the wheels roll around, flattening down the ridges of dust in the road and scattering it on both sides of the wide tires.

"I think I'm getting well, more and more every minute!" Isabel said breaking a long silence on one of these sweet, sleepy days.

"It's all so nice that I can feel it soaking into my chest and melting the spot right off my lung. I *know* I'm getting well! And I certainly am having a good time!"

"It wouldn't be likely to do you much good if you didn't have a good time, I'm thinkin'," said Mrs. Burke. "It do be pretty hard to cure a person that's not content. But it's gettin' better you are, Ladybird, as I can easy see, and it does my eyes good to see it."

"Isabel is all right," Prue said with the certainty of a whole college of physicians. "Mr. Burke, I've been thinking: you don't do much business this trip. Don't you mind if you don't? Don't

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you—don't you—well, want to make what it costs?"

Mr. Burke slapped his leg in high delight.

"Prudence," he said, "it was not for nothin' you got your name! Sure, you're one to make a person believe them who say babies grow up true to what you call 'em, an' so you should be careful to start 'em right with a good name."

"I don't think I'm like Gladys," observed Poppy, who was riding in the big cart for a while for the sake of variety.

"No more do I," Mr. Burke agreed with her. "But then if you didn't notice how things turn out different from the general rule once in a while, you might not notice, either, that there was a rule. Prudence is a correct label for Miss Wayne, and that's no lie for me! Well, Prue, don't you be worrying lest we get run into a poor-house on the way for lack of funds. Your mother an' Isabel's, an' Mark's father see to it that I'm no loser through feedin' me crew, an' for the rest of it, me an' Mrs. Ellen, here, own our house an' have enough saved to leave to a charity we're fond of. We don't need much for ourselves, an' all our little ones being gone where there's nothing lackin' them, we don't mind if we don't get together much more than we have already. So a bit here an' there, not to have the whole

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season with no earnin', is enough, an' we like goin' about this way so well that we get out of it more worth than money'd be. An' it's the thoughtful, sensible girl you are at thirteen to be considerin' these things!"

"Oh, Prue Wayne's *sensible!* Motherkins is always saying how sensible she is, and why ain't I." Poppy looked at Prue with a dissatisfied expression. She was fond of Prue, and yet she never wholly liked her, perhaps, in part, because she adored Isabel and Prue was her dearest friend. But it was also because Prue had scant patience with Poppy's ups and downs, and treated her with a sort of determination to be good to her as her duty, not at all like the affection that Isabel, out of her sweet pity, found easy to give Poppy. For Poppy, though she was a little keg of dynamite, was loyal, unselfish, truthful and devoted, and these are qualities noble enough to blot out many a defect.

"Say, Mr. Burke, where are we going now? Which way?" Mark's voice interrupted the financial discussion in the big wagon, calling from the buckboard.

"We're on our way to the island," Mr. Burke called back. "We're to spend the afternoon there, doin' nothin' at all with forty horse power, an' sleep there the night."

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“The island?” “An island?” cried Isabel and Poppy together. “How do you get to it?” Poppy added.

“To be honest, we bein’ by ourselves, I don’t mind tellin’ you that you can easy reach it drivin’ right smack through the river, which isn’t deep there.” Mr. Burke spoke in a confidential tone. “But once you’re on the island you’d not believe yourselves that you got there that way, for the water, seen from the island across its top, looks as deep as anything! So it’s a most cozy an’ castaway island, fit for Crusoe or any one with a taste for desert islands.”

“I like islands,” Poppy said decidedly. “I like them. I like water all around them.”

“Now that’s a good thing, when you come to think about it, because most of ’em come that way,” said Mr. Burke without a smile. “We turn off here to get to our island; yonder’s the river.”

The Bottle Imp turned to the left, into a little-travelled road, and Hurrah followed Cork. Mark sat reading “The Talisman” for the tenth time straight through; he often opened it and read here and there, for he never could get enough of Richard the Lion-Hearted. The lines hung loose in his hand; there was no necessity to drive

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Hurrah; he followed Cork with entire safety and fidelity.

Now, as they neared the river, Mark tucked his book under him and began to notice where he was going. The new road was somewhat sandy; evidently centuries ago the river had flowed as far afield as this and had left its deposit of fine ground gravel behind it.

Mark noted this; he was one of the lucky ones, gifted by nature with this sort of sight, trained by his father to use it.

Coming at last to the river's brink by this sandy and sunny road, Mr. Burke tightened rein on Cork's bit, and the Bottle Imp descended into the water. Cork was wise, careful; the wagon went down smoothly, tipping but slightly, and scarcely splashing above its hubs. Poppy squealed, but that was only because it seemed to be a squealing occasion, not because there was anything alarming.

Mark went out on the buckboard shaft to Hurrah's head and let down his check rein. Hurrah stepped gingerly into the water, Mark sprang on his back, and thus they forded the stream, Hurrah sucking up great drafts of the water and enjoying it around his legs.

It was somewhat of a pull to get the big wagon up on the island's bank, out of the river, but Cork

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was equal to it, bracing himself against his collar with a will, as was the duty of a horse that rarely had anything hard asked of him.

“My! Some island!” cried Mark as Hurrah brought him triumphantly to shore. From his perch on Hurrah’s high back he could see farther than the others, so had a longer view of the island.

It was truly beautiful, a small hillock amid stream, wooded, green, yet rocky, with all sorts of tempting nooks and coves on its bank, inviting openings higher up between its trees.

“Oh, wait; let us out!” cried Poppy.

The girls jumped down from the wagon and ran beside Mark on Hurrah, instantly in love with this totally uninhabited island.

“If ever I’m married here’s where I shall live!” announced Prue. “I shall make my husband buy this island and build a dear island house right on its top.”

“Sell us each a lot, quarter the island, Prue,” laughed Mark. “It wouldn’t be any fun for you to live here without us, only with someone you don’t even know now.”

“It is the loveliest place in all this world!” cried Isabel. “I’ve always been dying to be on an island. It’s true, what Mr. Burke said: You’d never think we came here, driving through the river. It’s as cut-off as anything! Oh,

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mayn't we call this Bottle Imp Harbor, and keep coming back here, Mr. Burke? Oh, he is in the wagon; I forgot he couldn't hear me. Oh, let's each sleep all alone in some nice spot to-night and pretend we're shipwrecked, and washed-up, and not a soul saved but us—I mean each of us! It's too beautiful!”

“That would suit me, Isa Bell,” said Mark. “This certainly is a place! Couldn't we have lairs and things, and play dandy here, if we could stay here awhile? And my goodness, it's a pretty island! So rounded up and kept together!”

“It looks like a nice plum pudding,” said Poppy, after which no one attempted further praise of it.

Prue and Poppy were not inclined to accept Isabel's proposal that each one should have a separate bit of the island for a lodging, but Isabel was so anxious for this, and Mark so enthusiastically backed her, that it was so arranged. They drew lots for first choice of sleeping places. Poppy drew first choice, Mark second, Prue third, so that Isabel, who most wanted the arrangement, chose last. This did not matter, however, for Poppy and Prue selected places quite near to the wagon, in which the Burkes meant still to abide; this left the more lonely, distant spots to Isabel and Mark, who wanted them.

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Isabel found an entrancing place, beneath two hemlock trees, quite on the other side of the island, and Mark picked out another equally solitary nook, sheltered by a rock and moss-grown.

“Well, what you want to get ’way off like this for, Isabel Lindsay, I don’t see!” said Prue, surveying her friend’s temporary chamber with disgust. “Suppose it thunders and lightnings? Suppose there are animals? Suppose the island isn’t uninhabited and a man came around in the night to kill you?”

“‘Supposing, supposing your highland lad should die,’” sang Isabel. “I don’t think any of these awful things will happen, but I’d come over to the wagon if I heard thunder, and I’d be glad to see any animals, and if the man asked me to let him kill me I’d be perfectly polite, of course, but I’d ask him to excuse me; I’d tell him I really couldn’t be killed, because I knew my mother would be annoyed about it.”

“It’s all right to laugh, Isa, but you ought to keep near us,” said Prue. Then they all set out to explore the island together, getting more infatuated with it at every step.

Right on the top of the island, which was neither more nor less than a hill rising out of the river, that night they made a bonfire around which the Captain of the Bottle Imp, his first

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mate, known when he was not voyaging as his wife, and the crew, sat telling stories till the hour at which curfew would have rung had there been a curfew bell on the little island.

It gave a most shipwrecked sense of reality to the crew to sit around this hilltop fire by night, a sense of being cut off from the world of fact and plunged into the joyous land of Notso, whose capital is Pretending.

Isabel and Mark held rigidly to their determination to sleep afar from their comrades of the voyage, and went away, each with a blanket under the right arm and a pillow under the left one, thrilled by the chance of something happening to them. Now that it was night, and the stars looked down on the dark island, instead of the illuminating sun, it seemed less improbable that one of the dangers outlined by Prue, or still another, might not lurk waiting for them.

“Call, Isa, if you want me; I can hear, and I waken easily,” said Mark, halting at the point where his and Isa’s paths diverged. He had come to dislike seeing Isa go off alone in the other direction.

“Oh, I’ll call, but what could I want?” said Isabel with a lightness of manner intended to hide her dawning doubt of her course.

“Good night, Jack-in-the-Box! Mind you

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wake up early for the swim, and if *you* want anything mind *you* call *me!*”

“Sure! To shoot a squirrel trying to carry me off!” cried Mark. “Good night!”

Isabel carried a flashlight. She turned it on and followed the slender trail between the trees which by daylight she had marked as leading to her sleeping place.

“Well, it is a little, weeny bit queer!” she thought, using a milder term for the feeling the place inspired than would have been allowed by perfect truth. However, Isabel had the sort of high courage that feels fear, but will not yield to it. Her sleeping bag, which she had come to like as much as she had scorned it when her mother had insisted upon it, she spread out, ready to slide into it, and she arranged her pillow and blanket, undressed and got into her soft flannelette nightgown, the additional protection against dampness upon which Mrs. Lindsay had insisted for Isabel’s nights out of doors.

Then she knelt to say her prayers, awed, as if she had been in a vast cathedral, by the profound depths of her solitude under the stars, where the familiar prayers of her sheltered childhood took on a meaning that she had never felt in them before.

As she knelt something stumbled over her feet.

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Not Bunkie, because he was already curled up at the foot of her couch, waiting for her. It was something far bigger, stronger than Bunkie; it was not Semp, besides he would not have left Mark. Isabel kept her face hidden in her hands, too frightened to move. Then something leaned over her and a whisper came.

“Isa, don’t be mad! I couldn’t let you stay here all alone!” It was Prue, timid Prue, who had come to keep her friend company.

“Oh, Prue!” gasped Isabel. “You nearly finished me! I’m all right! But I am glad you came; it wasn’t half as nice as I thought it would be. How did you ever dare come after me? Did you come alone?”

“Yes, Isa,” said Prue, depositing her own pillow, sleeping bag and blanket beside Isabel’s, and, dropping on the hemlock needles fallen and dried beneath the trees, beginning to take off her shoes. “I was half scared to death coming, but the more scared I was the more I knew you couldn’t stay off here by yourself. I didn’t want Poppy to hear, or she’d have come, too, and I didn’t want to bother Mr. and Mrs. Burke, so I started. I wasn’t sure I’d find you, but I did! It was perfectly fearful coming in the darkness, but I was more afraid of letting you stay alone than I was of the horrid old black spots under

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the trees!" Prue shuddered. "I do wish you weren't so kind of funny about things, Isa, but if you weren't you wouldn't be you, I suppose. Kathie Stevens and Dolly Harding are perfectly sensible girls, never go off the way you do, but who wants 'em?"

Isabel laughed at the hint that she was not "perfectly sensible," but she hugged Prue hard.

"You are a pretty good little Prudy to suffer for me!" she said. "I do think you're heroic, for I know you're a scarecrow, and it's not heroic not to be born a scarecrow, but it's very heroic to be a scarecrow and not be scared off! I'll own up; it was going to be awfully still out here alone! And I just about knew a screech owl would screech and make my spine go all up, as if it were shirred! So I'm glad you came, you dear old Prudence, and let's go right to sleep, for I'm so sleepy I never could say how sleepy!"

Each in her sleeping bag, on blankets side by side, with Bunkie on Isabel's feet, but beginning to edge farther up by cautious degrees, the two little girls fell quickly into deep slumber.

They were soon awakened.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INVADER

IT seemed a long time to Isabel and Prue that they lay awake, talking in low tones not to interrupt the conversation of the two hemlocks under which they lay, and which were keeping up a murmur in the night breeze to which the human pair of friends was unconsciously listening while they, also, talked.

In reality they were not waking long, but soon were deep asleep, the freshness of the river-cooled air blowing over their faces.

There was no way of knowing what time it was when they were wakened by a heavy splashing in the water and something large scrambling up the bank.

“Prue!” whispered Isabel.

“I hear it,” answered Prue.

“Is it a wild animal?” whispered Isabel.

“I think they’ve all been tamed around here,” said Prue.

“What can it be? Not a man? It’s too heavy for a dog,” Isabel persisted.

“Might be a cow,” suggested Prue.

“Why should a cow wade over here from her own home? Cows don’t water their own milk before the morning milking, do they? Does yours?” Isabel tried to laugh, but just then Bunkie sat erect, growling deep in his throat in the way that always means more than mere excited interest.

Crackling branches, a footfall on spots bare of grass or moss, announced an approach—not a dog, not an animal of any sort, unless one were to be a modern scientist and class human beings as animals.

“Be asleep! We can’t get away,” said Isabel, shutting her eyes tight, cold from head to foot.

“Any idiot would know we couldn’t sleep with Bunkie going on like that, and I’m shaking so he’ll think I have fits in my sleep,” whispered Prue in a sort of rage of terror.

Isabel gave a tiny hysterical laugh, which she instantly smothered in her blanket, and then lay in frozen stillness, Bunkie fairly raging over her, so that Prue was right in thinking that no one could possibly be deceived by their feigned slumber.

Steps came nearer, so near that they were

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now audible, even in the grass, the steps of a man, slow and deliberate.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if he’d rush on us!” thought poor Isabel, and, finding the nerve strain unbearable, she peeped out through the fingers of the trembling hands which she had pressed over her eyes.

She saw a man about medium height, bearded, his eyes completely concealed by enormous spectacle lenses, his thick hair cut short and standing erect from his forehead. Altogether a man so masked by beard and glasses that one might be justified in believing that villainy alone would be so concealed.

“By all that’s wonderful!” the man said aloud, gazing down on the little girls in amazement. “You beast, you’re right to guard them, but stay where you are! Say, my Babes in the Wood, how can you sleep with such a dog barking on you? I think you sleep not, say? I think I have made you sleep as witches do, so that no noise can waken you, yes? Come now, open your eyes and be honest, as such young girls must be, and tell me what you do here by night, on my island?” He spoke with a foreign accent that increased Isabel and Prue’s death-like fear. His island! Was it a robber’s lair? What would he do to them for coming to it? How could they escape

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to warn Mr. Burke to get away before he was attacked. Still they lay motionless, hands pressing eyes, bodies quivering uncontrollably, and still Bunkie kept up his threatening, deep-throated growl. The man did not attempt to come close to the side of the children's couch; had he done so, small though he was, the loyal little terrier would have seized him and taken whatever consequences awaited his courage.

"Well, well, my poor little girls, you know no one could imagine you were sleeping!" said the man, and Isabel, catching pity in his voice, let her hand drop and openly stared at him. "You are so frightened that I can see how you shake under your blankets! I would not harm you; I am safe to trust. Hark till I show you!" He began to sing in a wonderful voice, a rich, highly trained baritone, with a quality so sweet that it sounded like hearing an exquisite fragrance, or like looking into the heart of a deep red rose, and hearing it, instead of seeing it. And he sang in Italian that swinging slumber song, *Dormi Pure*, which Isabel and Prue knew quite well, and also knew what it meant.

Instantly there came upon them both the conviction that no one who sang a song which they had so often heard repeated at home by their Victrolas could be dangerous. Together they

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let their hands drop, and gathered the blankets tight under their chins, while they stared at the stranger with dilated eyes, trying by the moonlight to make out his features behind the beard and glasses, and listening entranced to a voice that hundreds nightly in winter paid large sums of money to hear.

The wonderful music woke Mark; he came running to discover its source, half prepared to find it supernatural.

He stopped, frightened, marveling, when he saw a man standing singing under the trees in the moonlight beside Isabel and Prue's couch. And he marveled still more, when at Isabel's cry of: "Oh, Mark!" the man turned, and he saw the bearded person who had overtaken him the night that he had gone to West Harland to post the crew's first messages home.

"The boy! The singing boy—no, he was a whistling boy!" exclaimed the man, taking a step toward Mark with an air of pleasure at meeting him again. "Also the dog who loved me not, as do I not love dogs! Be so kind as to hold him back, my young sir, and assure him of the truth, that I am a harmless person! Thank you! What was it that you whistled so correctly, so pleasing to me? The *Serenata*? The *Ave Maria*? No! Yet it was Schubert?"

"*Who Is Sylvia?*" Mark supplied the desired name, wondering whether he were not still asleep and dreaming the queer things that were happening.

"That it is!" The man beamed his satisfaction, but quickly added: "What is this? Another one?"

Isabel, Prue and Mark, the former two no longer afraid, but beginning to feel that this strange being was an old friend, turned to see Poppy coming toward them under the trees, occasionally lost in shadow, then again showing plainly by the little electric searchlight which she carried to illumine her path.

A queer little figure she made in a flannelette gown that hung close around her painfully thin little body, and made her look long and ghost-like. Her flaming hair flew around her with the effect of a small Brünhilde, surrounded by the magic fire. So intense was its color and vitality that even in the moonlight it shone. Her feet were bare, and her sharp, small face was particularly elfin, seen thus.

"Heard music and it sounded over here—Oh, gosh!" Poppy espied the stranger as she spoke and promptly sat down in "a cheese," covering her feet, and turning off her searchlight, though the moon remained beyond her powers.

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It did not occur to Poppy to be afraid because, by the time that she arrived upon the scene, a friendly atmosphere prevailed, although no one could have said that it was an ordinary scene.

“Get up and come under my blanket, Poppy; you’ll take cold out there like that. Don’t be silly! Barefoot is nothing!” Prue cried.

Poppy meekly—and Poppy was not usually meek—obeyed. She arose and got under Prue’s blanket, but she got under it at Prue’s feet and sat erect, with the blanket end huddled around her shoulders, staring with great eyes at the amazing events before her.

“She is a young Valkyrie,” laughed the singing man. “You are four very unlike children to be in one family.”

“We are not in one family; we are not related, no two of us,” said Mark. “We are gypsying together in a wagon, going about.”

“Not professional artists?” said the man, then seeing that Mark looked puzzled, added: “Not singers, musicians?”

“Oh, dear no; just people,” said Mark.

“You are not so far from right in that hint, which you meant not, I am sure: musicians often seem hardly to be really quite people!” The bearded stranger laughed, yet sighed. “Still will you sing for me, I make sure! Sing the charm-

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ing Schubert song that you have so well whistled.”

Mark had no small airs of vanity. He had a beautiful boy soprano voice and had been taught to use it wherever, however, it might give pleasure.

He at once began to sing, and sang the three stanzas of the song through with a correctness as to key and notes, and a sweetness of tone that delighted the stranger. If Mark had known to whom he was singing it is likely that even his straight-forward modesty might have been a little self-conscious.

“Indeed I thank you, my dear boy!” said the man in a tone that proved he spoke sincerely. “You sing by the grace of God, naturally, as the birds sing, and your ear is perfect.”

“Oh, but it is Poppy who sings! We all sing; Isabel has a sweet voice, but Poppy! Sing, Pops!” said Mark.

“Out here in my nightgown, done up in a blanket! I know I’m crazy, or something! Who’s awake? Am I dreaming you, or are you dreaming me? What’ll I sing?” said Poppy all in one breath.

“Sing the *Cradle Song*, and sing what you call: ‘I Dare You,’ ” said Isabel, before Mark could answer.

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With her sharp face looking whiter than ever in the heavy moonlight shadow, and the blanket held tight around her shoulders, Poppy began to sing a Russian cradle song. She sang it wonderfully, giving the pathos of its minor strains full expression. And then, when her last, crooned note had hardly died away, without moving, the queer child burst out into Brünhilde's stirring war cry, and sang it as if she were hurling defiance at the lightning.

"Wish I had a sword and a white horse when I sang that!" Poppy said at the end. "Motherkins showed me how she looks, in a picture. Wish I had some peanuts!" she instantly added, and the bearded man laughed, but nevertheless he went over to her and caught Poppy's flaming head between his hands, and kissed her forehead reverently. Bunkie, convinced like the children, that everything was all right, made no objection to his action.

"Genius!" the man said. "Not talent, genius! Wonderful! Little flame-white thing, you have a gift!"

"They call me reddy, and things like that," said Poppy serenely. "I guess I'm not white, so's you'd notice it. You mean I can sing? Sure I can sing; so can lots o' folks, only I can sing pretty high, and I kinder like to sing. When

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I get old enough so my voice'll be big and go anywhere, I'm going to git up on a high mountain and sing so the angels will hear and sing back, and we'll keep it going, like church, when the men and boys answer across, singing at the two halves of the choir. I'm going to sing so the angels will hear me, on a mountain-top, you see'f I don't!"

"If you use your gift for God's glory and to help souls, angels will hear you, no matter how soft you sing, nor in how lowly a spot," said the stranger, and once more he kissed Poppy's head, like a true Latin, unashamed of feeling and piety.

"Now who am I, and what am I doing here? You are polite children, for I know you must want to ask this. I am a singer myself, and I am spending my summer where no one who knows me can find me, for I was tired by my hard work. So I have this beard and big glasses, and no one would see me, the real *me*, behind them, if one who had seen me on the stage came upon me. And I found this island, this nice little island, and often I come to it, as to-night, by night. And I am tramping this part of your pretty country, staying at farmhouses, drinking milk—sometimes milking it first—and I am hav-

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ing as fine a summer as a man could have! My name is Raoul de Nerval."

Mark gave a long, low whistle, quite unable to speak. Isabel sat up, forgetting that she was tied fast in her sleeping bag.

"Oh, not really!" she cried, clasping her hands.

"Gosh!" said Poppy fervently. "Oh, *gosh!* We've got a record—three records of you!"

Mr. de Nerval burst out laughing and the children, after an awed moment, joined him.

"I shall, with your permission, call on you again, under more ordinary conditions," said the great singer. "By daylight."

"But it isn't like being really in bed; it's just a blanket and our sleeping bags," said Prue.

Her constant desire to make everything clear and straight led Prue often to explain what might better be left to others' perception.

Isabel pulled her sleeve.

"It's all right, Prue, and we have to act as though we were at an evening party," she whispered.

"But now you should be asleep, nice children," Mr. de Nerval continued, "so I shall go on my way. Little ruddy lark, mayn't I carry you back to the other side of the island, where you were evidently sleeping? You are bare-footed."

"I'd love it, only I guess I'd be heavy; I'd

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hate you to strain your voice," said Poppy to her friends' surprise, for she was most independent and could not endure to be "babyed."

Again the famous singer laughed; he had taken an immense liking to this queer, talented child.

"You do not look heavy, small, thin elf, and I shall not carry you by my vocal cords, but by my arm muscles. Come along, then, and tell me where to take you."

As he spoke, he lifted Poppy, wrapped her blanket around her, and set her on his shoulder as if she had been but four.

"Bow that sun-clad head when we pass under low boughs," he advised. "Good night, very welcome new little friends! I shall see you when daylight comes."

"Well, talk about adventures! Raoul de Nerval! Everybody talking about his singing, and he just walking in on us, the way Ichabod Lemuel Rudd goes in and out at home! I should say we were having a trip! We'll have to write half the day to-morrow to tell about this! Good night again; hope you're sleepy; I'm not," said Mark, departing to his nook, Semp at his heels.

Isabel and Prue were not sleepy. For a while they lay talking over the coming of Raoul de Nerval.

"He stood just there and sang to us! Sang

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to *us*, here in the woods! And he is one of the greatest singers in the world, and he sang just to *us*, in our sleeping bags! Oh, I wish the sun would come up so we'd know we weren't asleep, or seeing things!" sighed Isabel when they were both completely talked out.

Then, because they *were* completely talked out, they fell asleep to dream in a confused way of what had happened. When they really were asleep and dreaming they had no doubt that their dreams were realities, which is a queer trick of the brain when one stops to think it out, that makes waking visions seem unreal, and dreams seem true.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE ROAD TO LYTELTON

INSTEAD of waking particularly early the following morning, as Isabel and Prue had planned to do when they went to sleep, they slept later than usual, a pardonable mistake, considering their loss of sleep and excitement in the night, but trying to them because they wanted to be there when Poppy told the Burkes about Mr. de Nerval.

“Swim we must,” said Prue with a sort of firm regret, “but I say don’t swim long! Just enough so we won’t cut it out. Say, Isa, I’d call Mr. de Nerval moun—you know! The French word for mister, if I could pronounce it. It would sound much better for a foreign singer, and with that de in his name, but I never can say it right!”

“Well, of course you can’t!” agreed Isabel. “I suppose it’s better to say mister, right, than m’sieur, wrong; anyway he wears that beard and those terrific big glasses, so it isn’t so bad not to use a dressy word for him.”

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“Oh, dear, Mark has had his swim and gone over to the Bottle Imp! Now he and Poppy will have all the fun of seeing how surprised and delighted the Burkes are, and we’ll miss it!” groaned Prue seeing on their way to the river that Mark had already played the Arab, folded, if not his tent, his bed, and silently stolen away.

However she and Isa need not have felt so disappointed for, at the same moment, Poppy and Mark were deciding honorably to wait till the other two had come, before unfolding the wonder-tale.

Nor need they have minded if it had been told! When they came running up to the breakfast room, which was the grass alongside of the wagon, and took their part in the great story, Mr. Burke heard it with a stolidity that betrayed, not merely that it did not interest him, but that it somewhat annoyed him. Mrs. Burke paused in her task of slicing bacon, and listened with extreme disapproval.

“Now would you harken to that!” she exclaimed angrily. “That settles your going off to sleep by yourselves, let it be on an island, or wherever, and let it be beside a river, or in mid-ocean! To think of a man stravaging through the water by night, and coming upon you inno-

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cent children sleeping! Suppose he'd have killed you?"

"But it wasn't a man; it was a famous singer, and he sang for us, just for us! And Mark and Poppy sang for him, and he said Poppy had genius. Think of it; he said just that!" cried Prue, bewildered by this reception.

"Well, then, my missus is right," Thomas Burke said. "What's a singer, famous or not? An' more by token, a foreign one! We do be getting too many foreigners in America. I mis-doubt there's a ha'penny tu'penny's worth of difference between the one with a voice to sing, an' the one with a hurdygurdy to grind, barrin' the pay they get, an' that's not a difference in the man, but in the music. No, no; I don't half like it, but we're movin' back to the road to-day, an' we'll leave him his island to himself."

Isabel, Prue, Poppy and Mark got together alone, and consulted as to this unexpected way of receiving their important news.

"Well, of course," Mark said at last, trying to be fair and reasonable, "Mr. Burke's an all-round peacherino, but he doesn't know these things."

Mark was seeking for a way to express delicately that their friend lacked somewhat of cul-

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tivation, had not a full realization of what it meant to be a great artist.

“The main thing is to meet Mr. de Nerval, and not let him get to the Bottle Imp, because, on the other hand, he’d never understand Mr. Burke, if he wasn’t quite nice to him, and of course he wouldn’t be if he looks at it like this.”

“And most likely Mr. de Nerval sings every night in winter with roses piled up around his knees, he gets so many thrown at him,” sighed Prue, letting her imagination paint a tragic contrast to the picture of the great artist, snubbed, when he came to the Bottle Imp.

But even as the crew debated how to act, Raoul de Nerval, whose energy would have done credit to a laborer, came toward the Bottle Imp.

Catching sight of the children he broke into a cascade of song, all runs and rippling trills and happy cadences. Though the words he sang were but “Good morning, good morning,” over and over, it was a song of rare beauty.

It brought Mr. and Mrs. Burke out from making the wagon ready for the day, and it bore away their prejudice as if it really were the cascade it sounded like, washing away all barriers against the singer.

“Saints in heaven, but he can sing!” muttered Mr. Burke, and returned the salute that Mr. de

Nerval made him, with a sense of shame that he had mistrusted so marvelous an artist.

The children had said nothing to the singer of whom they were with, nor how they were traveling. Isabel and Mark suddenly became conscious that the Bottle Imp might strike Raoul de Nerval as somewhat curious; they were a little uneasy about this, as well as about his reception, now that he was here.

They could not know that an artist, who was also partly French and partly Italian, would never fail in understanding.

Raoul de Nerval grasped the situation at once at only the barest suggestion that Isabel had been ill, ordered to spend the summer out of doors, and that the bottle dealer had taken her, with her comrades, to drive about with him all summer, "combinin' business with pleasure," as he himself said.

While Mr. Burke smoked his pipe, Mr. de Nerval sociably smoked cigarettes; his long, flexible fingers had a fascination for the children as he rolled and lighted cigarettes, which seemed to disappear in smoke very fast.

In a short time he was singing Irish songs, to the boundless delight of Mr. and Mrs. Burke, and singing them as if he had never heard any other music, though he followed them with

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French songs, ballads of Naples, and the lovely Scotch songs, and sang them all as if each were the songs of his native land. Then he had the four children singing for him, unafraid, then each one alone, last of all Poppy, whom he put through almost her entire list.

“Ah, yes, little *enfante rouge*,” he said rising to go. “You have it all, ear, temperament, voice, understanding! You may one day be a famous *artiste*, small Poppy! It is not the name for you; poppies make to sleep. You are most awakening. I see that it would not be useful to talk to you, Mr. Burke, of this child’s future. I did not know that she was not here with her guardians. Mr. Gilbert Hawthorne, of Greenacres, is your father, you say, *mon fils*? And your Poppy has no roots? She is but under your protection? I shall, with your father’s permission, come to see him before this wander-summer is over. With him I will talk of Poppy, and what she may do. I thank you for your hospitality, and for your singing. Seldom does one meet such dear children as I have found here, on my little island. May I kiss your cheek in parting, Isabel and Prue? And Mark, we, in France, do not think it unworthy our manly dignity to receive and bestow a kiss?

He kissed each fresh, firm young cheek with

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evident affection for the three children, and Poppy he kissed on both cheeks, and held tight her thin hands.

“Poor little red lark!” he said. “It is a great gift that was given you, but you will find it costs, my dear, it surely costs!”

With which Raoul de Nerval went away, leaving behind him echoes in memory of his wonderful singing, and golden opinions of himself, not only in the children’s minds, but no less in the minds of Mr. and Mrs. Burke.

“Well, this will turn no wheels for us, crew of the Bottle Imp!” said Thomas Burke rising with a heavy sigh. “It’s long past time that we should be on our way! It’s my intention to get to Lytelton sometime to look for that child we heard of from Mistress Irene Brewer, an’ if we don’t hit a better pace than we’ve been makin’, sure I’m thinkin’ the frosts will get us before we get poor Leander Lamb’s boy—or maybe girl! So pile in, all of you, an’ Mark, you’d better take the buckboard through the river, for though Hurrah’ll follow Cork all right, it might be he’d need easin’ up over the bank, an’ if he tipped any one over, ’twould be you could stand it better than Poppy.”

“I can’t bear to leave the island!” sighed Isa-

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bel. "It's my very first island, and I've always wanted one dreadfully."

"And it's a beauty little island!" added Mark. "But never mind, Isa; Prue's going to buy it, and settle on it, and divide it with all of us, so we're to return."

"I said if I married I'd live here," said Prue stiffly. "I think it's more'n likely I shall be a doctor, and never marry."

"Buy it anyhow, for a sanitarium, and let us be patients!" cried Mark.

The Bottle Imp went up on two wheels going down the river bank, but it righted itself, and was none the worse for having shaken up its passengers.

The buckboard seemed to entertain a thought of doubling itself up in the middle as it dropped down, somewhat too quickly, but it, too, brought itself on the level, and after this the fording the shallow water was, as Mr. Burke truly said: "No trick at all."

"There are two ways to Lytelton from here," observed Mr. Burke, "an' I don't see that you gain or lose, whichever you take, so Isabel, since this party is for you, tell me now will I turn, left or right, at that fork in the roads, yonder?"

"Mercy, when I don't know a thing about either of them, how can I choose?" cried Isabel.

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“I’m tellin’ you it makes no difference, but for the sake of playin’ the game, choose you one of ’em. There’s never any sayin’ what may be anywhere where we’re not lookin’ for it, an’ it’s good to leave matters to some one to pick,” said Mr. Burke; neither the children nor he knew whether there were meaning, or not, behind his mysterious sounding words.

“All right, if I must! Take the left,” said Isabel, and left it was.

It proved to be a wise choice, as far as smoothness of road and pretty glimpses of scenery went. Mr. Burke stopped at some of the frame houses which occurred at intervals, and in all but one gathered a contribution of empty bottles, and in three of them sold tins.

“There’s been a run on saucepans,” he remarked, surveying his stock with a practiced eye after his last sale, when he returned to his wagon. “You might say all the housewives had been leavin’ their saucepans go dry an’ burn on ’em, the way they’re after new ones! Well, bless their hearts, they’ve got votes; why shouldn’t they get saucepans? Here’s a house, now, that I’m goin’ into, yet something tells me ’tis no welcome I’ll be gettin’. Mark the shades tight drawn! Fear of sunlight’s a poor thing in any creature made to live by it, like us humans.

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Come in with me, Isabel an' Mark; I'm timid!"

He winked at his crew to comment on his brand of timidity, and Isabel and Mark, in high glee, came down, and followed him up to the door.

A sallow woman, tight drawn as to hair and features, opened it a little way in response to Mr. Burke's knock.

"Bottles? No, I hain't, hain't got any. We don't use medicines to our house, and I'm a prohibitioner, and my man's given up takin' Jamaica Ginger all the time, like he uster. We use a tonic, but there hain't any bottles empty of it. Go along; I hain't time to stop this mornin'," she said in a high, rapid-firing voice.

"Well, well! You women who keep your house the way I see this one's kept"—the door was open only about five inches, and Mr. Burke gave Isabel a comical glance as he spoke—"you don't get the time you've a perfect right to. Bottles I collect for my own benefit, an' to get 'em out of the way. But tins! Ah, tins now, those I *sell!*"

Mr. Burke threw into his voice an impressive note, as if this were almost the last thing any one but he would have thought of doing with tins.

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"Tins I don't want, nor need; got enough," the woman snapped.

Just then a child, a dull, sickly little girl of four or five, came and thrust her head out of the door, below the woman's hand holding it open, pushing it farther ajar to do so.

"I've alphabet plates for the little ones!" cried Mr. Burke triumphantly. "The very thing for this little one to learn off of, while she eats, an' no trouble to her to learn, nor you to teach her, and she'll start school a whole year nearer her graduation from it, for this help toward her education. Mugs, too, I'm carryin'; everything you could ask for, in fact."

"Don't remember asking for anything," snarled the woman. "Get along in there, Jean. I'm going to shut the door, and let everybody tend to their own business, same's I do."

Isabel and Mark had started and looked quickly at each other as they heard the child's name. She was just such a forlorn-looking mite as one would expect to find the unfortunate Lamb child to be.

Mr. Burke betrayed no interest, except that his eyes flashed, and then their lids fell. He shot a look at Isabel, as if to beg her to prolong the conversation somehow.

"I'm riding with the bottle man, Jeanie," Isa-

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bel said. "I have my little dog with me. Wouldn't you like to see him? He's a raggedy little dog, and his name is Bunkie, short for Bunker, because I got him on Bunker Hill day, once upon a time." Isabel had no idea what she was trying to do with the child, but she understood Mr. Burke's glance, and tried to obey it.

"She doesn't look well, not a bit like you. I'm not well, myself, or I wasn't."

Isabel smiled up into the woman's face with the smile that almost always won for her what she wanted.

"See here, little girl, Jean ain't going to see your dog, nor no other dog! And I'd thank you to not be meddling with her. She's well enough; a poor sort of young one, same's her mother. She ain't my child. Here, didn't I tell you to go back in?"

The woman swung the child around roughly by the shoulder, though she did not hurt her, and shut the door with a slam.

Mr. Burke took Isabel's hand, and went out to the wagon without speaking. They climbed in, Mark after them; Poppy was again driving her own buckboard in solitary state.

"No one can ever tell; didn't I say so?" Mr. Burke said solemnly. "Is it any wonder you

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chose the left-hand road? There do be wonderful things happen, we don't know how."

"Do you suppose that is the Lamb Jean?" asked Isabel, awe-struck by the idea that her choice of road might have brought about this discovery.

"I do that!" declared Mr. Burke impressively.

Mrs. Burke and Prue demanded to be told what they meant, and they were as sure as Mr. Burke was, that the small stray lambkin was found.

"Whatever will you be doin' to get her, Tom darlin'?" asked Mrs. Burke, all excited longing to rescue the child.

"That's what must be decided. I believe my best course would be to keep on to Lytelton. We'd be there for Sunday, anyways, an' it's a good place to be that day. Then I've a lawyer friend there—he's me mother's cousin's son, so would be glad to do his best for me—an' him I'll consult as to proceedin's. I don't know what claim to title that woman may be settin' up, but well we know she has no claim she can prove against a livin' father's claim. The poor little creature looked pale and frightened, as well she may in the clutches of that human mangle! I'm thinkin' 'twould be a pretty child, let her be fed

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up, an' let play as a young lamb—whether 'tis a lamb by name or nature!—should do.”

Good Mr. Burke was profoundly stirred by the hope that he might play the part of guardian angel to the sad little Jean, albeit a queer angel, in loose blue serge, driving his wagon and collecting bottles. But angels, which after all means God's messengers, appear under odd guises.

“I think,” said Isabel most slowly and impressively, and as if she had not said the same thing countless times, “I think that we are having a perfectly wonderful voyage, in this splendid Bottle Imp!”

CHAPTER X

LYTELTON AT LAST!

NOW, with their destination almost attained, and stronger reasons for wanting to reach it, the Bottle Imp crowded on all sail and made her greater number of knots an hour to get there. That would be the way to put it if one were, as the children were, remembering to make believe the wagon was a ship, but if one's imagination were not equal to seeing it as anything but a wagon, then one would say less impressively, but more truly, that Mr. Burke urged Cork to do his best to get rapidly over the miles that lay between the house where the little girl, Jean, was, and Lytelton.

Cork could travel well if he were so minded, and now he did so. Saturday afternoon he brought the big wagon into Lytelton, and Hurrah came after him with the buckboard, in friendly, but ambitious, rivalry.

Lytelton was a pretty little city; the children were surprised to find it decidedly larger than Greenacres. They had an undefined feeling that,

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while the big cities—New York, Boston, Philadelphia—were larger than Greenacres, any less well-known place would be likely to be smaller, just because Greenacres *was* Greenacres!

There was a business district that extended along the river while it remained a wholesale business district, but it went on up, near the houses, and there it became a retail shopping district. There were streets and streets of comfortable houses, schools, cinema theatres, a hospital or two, many churches, altogether everything required to set up in life a sizeable city.

“We can’t sleep in the wagon, nor under the buckboard to-night, I’m thinkin’,” said Mr. Burke. “I’m takin’ you to a cozy little hotel I know, kept by Johnny O’Rourke, who’s a friend of mine, an’ kept neat an’ decent. Then I’m goin’ to hunt up my light-o’-the-law, Jim Hay, an’ find out what’s best done to get that sickly, pinched little Jean away from the human mangle, an’ back to her father. ’Deed my heart aches for the child, an’ I keep seein’ her!”

“’Deed and so do I, Tom dear,” sighed Mrs. Burke. “Had she no father, I’d beg you to let me try to get her for ourselves.”

“That like you, Ellen,” said her husband admiringly. “’Twould be a lucky thing for her, I’m thinkin’! Look after the crew, First

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Mate, for I'm goin' to take you in here, an' be off myself to find Hay."

He drove into the stableyard of a small inn, engaged a large room, with three single beds for the three girls, and a small room, with one bed for the boy, and a third room for himself and his wife, hastily gave his wife a resounding kiss, and hurried off to discover his legal friend.

The Take-Your-Ease was the remarkable name of the small house to which Thomas Burke had brought his crew. It was a queer little place, entirely clean, not in the least pretty, but decidedly attractive. Its furniture was old-fashioned, good and comfortable; it was hung generously with old-time bright-colored prints, representing high-hatted men, with wasp-like waists, high pointed collars, moustaches and empty smiles, escorting, or chatting with ladies who wore curls and drooping hats, lace shawls and an air of frail elegance, and who seemed afraid to lift their large eyes to reply to the gentlemen, who certainly did not look alarming. "Johnny O'Rourke," who had taken over the hotel as it stood, respected these pictures too profoundly ever to disturb one of them, so they adorned all the walls of the Take-Your-Ease, and Isabel and Prue and Poppy, Mark no less, found them fascinating. They fell to making up conversation

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between these elegant people, and to telling stories about them, till they got themselves into gales of laughter. Thus they found the time too short, till Mr. Burke returned.

“You wouldn’t think we’d be able to stand staying here after the lovely way we’ve been spending our nights, but honestly, it’s lots of fun to be here!” said Prue wondering at the fact.

“I’ve never stayed at a hotel before,” remarked Poppy. “I think it’s great, an’ I do wish you’d let me give orders at the table, Mrs. Burke.”

“Bless your heart, all you want to! If ever you get to be a singer, as Mr. de Nervey, or whatever you call him, said you would, you’ll have plenty chance to order, most like over in Europe,” said Mrs. Burke with a laugh.

Mr. Burke came whistling in, and threw his hat on the table of the small reception room in which he discovered the crew of the Bottle Imp.

“Found Hay,” he announced needlessly, for he showed that he had good news. “He said I could take the child, if I had power to act for Leander from himself. So we got him on long distance, an’ he telegraphed what Jim told him to say, an’ had it sworn to by a justice at East Harland, who sort of witnessed the telegram. An’ Monday morning we’ll get an officer to go from here with us, an’ back we’ll drive, take the

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little girl, an' be off for East Harland, an' Leander! Think of givin' a child back to her father! I don't know how Leander'll live till we come, knowin' we've found her and are tryin' to get her! I hated to call him up and tell him because it'd put him through such weary hours, but it's a true sayin' that grief never kills, so I think he'll weather it."

"It's been a blessed trip, Tom dear, and that's the truth!" Mrs. Burke beamed on her husband as she spoke. "It wouldn't be in nature to grudge the child to her poor father, but I covet her myself. I'd like the chance to feed her up, and teach her to run, screamin' with joy, at play."

"We'd better go to bed early, for little sleep did these children have last night, an' we'll all be goin' off to church betimes," said Mr. Burke. "Ellen, it's you will need to go, if you're covetin' lonely Leander's small Jean, against the law of nature an' the Ten Commandments!"

The small inn lived up to its name of Take-Your-Ease as to its beds. Poppy intended to lie awake and play that she was a great singer, resting in her hotel after a concert, and that the flowered cushions of the rocker were flowers sent her to celebrate her triumph. But she was too sleepy to play anything; all three little girls slept



ANNE MERRIMAN PECK

SHE GATHERED HIM INTO HER BROAD LAP AND BEGAN TO ROCK HIM HARD.

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so deeply that Mrs. Burke had to waken them to go with her to church.

“Mark, and the other gentleman of our party, are dressed and gone down to wait for us, girls dear,” she said. “You must hurry a little.”

Isabel, Prue and Poppy had simple white frocks and white straw hats with them for occasions when they would be required. They were such a spotless trio, so sweet and maidenly in them, as they came downstairs, that Mr. Burke looked down on them with loving moisture in his eyes.

“May you always be clad in white-innocence, dear blossoms of God’s garden!” he exclaimed, with the fervor of his sentimental race.

It was a fairly large church to which Mr. Burke guided his charges, but it was filled to overflowing. Near where she and Mark sat, apart from the others, Isabel noted a large, coarsely-built woman, with whom was a little boy with dark hair, large dark eyes, a delicate face, and a crooked foot, which she could see made him lame, though this, of course, was to be seen only when he stood. He had a way of sucking in his under lip and holding it with his two small front teeth that suggested a timid rabbit.

Coming out of church Isabel became separated from Mark, and found herself directly behind

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the woman and the child whom she had seen during the service.

“Lame or not, step up here,” the woman snapped at the child. “Whatever made me bring you, I don’t know, Jean Lamb!”

“Oh!” cried Isabel.

She turned and waded her way through the throng, to the indignation of several, and forced herself up to Mr. Burke.

“Mr. Burke, oh, dear, Mr. Burke, I’ve found him! He isn’t a girl at all; he’s a boy, and he’s right over there, and he’s a little lame! Get a policeman, or whatever you have to have, and take him! Hurry! Over there!” Isabel panted.

“Whatever in all this world are you tellin’ me, Isabel?” demanded Mr. Burke.

“Jean Lamb! The woman—he’s with a big, cross woman—called him that. He’s a dear little fellow. Do hurry! The girl’s another Jean. She said Jean Lamb. If you don’t hurry, you may lose him, there’s such a crowd!” Isabel wrung her hands.

“Take Prue and Poppy back to O’Rourke’s, Ellen. Isabel come with me. I’ll have Mark, too, if we can find him; he’ll be waitin’ us at the gate, anyway,” said Mr. Burke. “It’s a queer tale, but we must look into it. Is the world turn-

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in' altogether into Jean kids, girls and boys? Come, then."

They found Mark, or he found them; he was looking for them, and Isabel pointed out the large woman and small boy, limping slightly, at her side.

"We follow them, an' ask questions in the neighborhood," muttered Mr. Burke. "Truth, Leander was much such another boy, when he was twice this child's age an' I first knew him! I'm forced to believe that this, an' not the girl, is our prize.

They followed the woman to a street where the houses were small and plain; a neighborhood that might be described correctly as "poor but respectable." Mr. Burke had intended to go about getting the child cautiously, inquiring in the neighborhood what was known of his history, but the woman, talking to the little boy, more for her own benefit than his, spoke of "taking the train," "getting him ready to go away," "not having enough time," so that he decided that delay might be dangerous.

"Pardon me, m'am," Mr. Burke said, acting on a swift resolution, and touching the woman on the arm, "but would you tell me what you're doin' with this little lad, the son of Leander Lamb of East Harland, his own name bein' Jean?"

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“And who are you?” cried the woman.

“My name is Thomas Burke, bottle dealer, of 906 North Street, Hertonsburg, m’am,” said Mr. Burke most politely. “I’m travelin’, in a way, an’ in a way I’m out on my business. My friend, Mr. Lamb, has given me power to act for him to get his child, an’ bring him home to his father. I have the authority from him with me, witnessed. I thought I was on the child’s trail yesterday, an’ notified my friend last night, an’ he’s told me to go ahead.”

“That’s no lie for me,” thought Mr. Burke, as he waited the effect of his announcement, “an’ if ’twas another trail, an’ another child, an’ what’s more a girl an’ no boy, still it’s the truth I’m speakin’ to her!”

The woman eyed Mr. Burke suspiciously, angrily, at first, but no one could long resist the steady kindness in his eyes. The woman’s manner softened.

“I took the boy from his mother, who is an unnatural woman, and would have done ’most anything to get rid of him. I’ve no place, nor time, nor wish for him, but I knew he could be worse off than with me, and I let her leave him with me. She must have a spite against the father, for she told me he was dead. I’d have made her take the boy to him, had I known he

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was living. If that's what you'll do with him, you're welcome to him, but I'll have to have proof. I haven't much use for children, but I've got to make sure the boy'll be in right hands, since he's been left in mine," the woman said.

"You're right, m'am, an' behavin' like a lady with a conscience, if I may make so bold as to say so," said Mr. Burke. "I've a lawyer friend in town, Mr. James Hay. Do you know him? Would it suit you to come with me to the nearest telephone station, an' let Mr. Hay set you at ease as to me, an' what I'll do with the boy?"

"It would," said the woman shortly. "Let him stay with your two children till it is done. He's lame and can't walk fast, and I'm in a hurry to get a train at noon. Jean, sit on the steps with this boy and girl till I come back."

Little Jean, who was small for his age, evidently was used to doing anything that he was told to do; nothing seemed to surprise him. Indeed the poor child had led a hard life with his unnatural mother.

"Our steps is here," he remarked, and led the way for Isabel and Mark to the steps, and patiently sat down upon them.

Isabel turned up her snowy skirt and placed herself on the child's right; Mark rested one foot on the second step and stood; there was nothing

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he could do to protect his white linen knickerbockers, and the steps were amazingly dusty.

“Did he mean me?” inquired Jean.

“Who, dear?” asked Isabel gently.

“The big man with the blue eyes, that knew some one I belong to,” explained Jean. “He said a father. Is it? Is he my father? Where’d I get him? I had one; he used to be Dadlamb, I called him, but he’s dead. I keep going around now.”

“Oh, you *dear* little fellow!” cried Isabel throwing her arms around Jean in a burst of pity. “I am sure your ‘Dadlamb’ isn’t dead at all, and that we’re going to take you to him! Oh, it was me—I—who happened to notice you in church, and heard your name, and so found you! Really me, myself! Oh, I’m *glad!*”

“Do you suppose it only *happened*, Isa? It was in church, you see,” hinted Mark, shrinking from a more direct expression of his feeling in regard to it.

“You’re a lovely, white girl,” said Jean solemnly. “You are the beautifullest, and all your eyes go in and out, bigger and bright and blacker! But they’re blue. I think I love you very much indeed. Here comes Mrs. Ursula Ludwig back, with the tall man.”

Isabel and Mark looked hard at the pair as

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little Jean spoke. No need to ask the result of telephoning! Mr. Burke almost strutted, he was so proud and glad.

“Well, little Jean Lamb, I’m to take you ridin’ in my big wagon, an’ I’ll have you back to your father in no time!” he cried.

“You’re going away with these children, Jean. Your father is alive, and sent for you,” added the woman, whom the child had called Mrs. Ursula Ludwig. “Come into the house while I put up your clothes. Better come inside,” she added to Mr. Burke and the children.

They all went into the neat little house, and were left alone while Mrs. Ludwig bore off Jean to be prepared.

Presently they heard him coming down the stairs, a step at a time, with his little lame foot.

“Could I take my kitty?” he was asking. “I want my kitty. She loves me. No one loves me but my kitty, and she has stripes all over her; she’d die ’thout me.”

“No, you can’t take the kitten. These people wouldn’t be bothered with a cat,” said Mrs. Ludwig, not unkindly, but without any sympathy for the child’s love for his pet.

“Oh-h-h!” Jean wailed in a heart-broken, unchildish way, and Mr. Burke rushed out into the narrow entry.

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“Sure you take the kitten, lad dear!” he cried. “Take a whole litter of kittens, an’ throw in the old cat for good measure! Is there a basket stout enough to hold this kitten that I could buy, an’ will you catch it and bring it to me, m’am, to tie up for the little lad?”

“Well, I guess Jean’s coming into different days,” said Mrs. Ludwig with a smile, as she went toward the kitchen.

She came back with a stout basket, a long string and a small tiger kitten.

“There’s no old cat, and no more kittens than this,” she said, and laughed. “I’ll contribute the basket.” She let Jean kiss the kitten at his request, and put her into the basket, which Mr. Burke tied securely.

“They break out when you wouldn’t think they could, such strength is there in them, bein’ nervous, when they’re scared,” he said. “Ready now, little Jean! Good-by, m’am.”

“Good-by. I’m glad to be free of the care of the boy, yet he’s a good child. Kiss me good-by, Jean. God bless you, you quiet little creature.”

Mrs. Ludwig showed a little feeling as she kissed Jean twice, but the child took it all in his steady, patient manner, and slipped his hand into Mark’s. His eyes showed a dumb admiration

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for the beautiful, tall boy, who was just old enough for a little boy of five to adore, and brilliant enough to seem to Jean like a sort of unearthly vision.

“The rescue party,” as Mark called it, came out into the street, and turned toward the Take-Your-Ease. They walked on slowly, because Jean’s lame foot dragged as he walked. He held tight to Mark’s hand; Mr. Burke carried the kitten’s basket. Isabel followed, a little back of them, in order to contemplate and brood joyfully over the rapid, the amazing events of this warm Sunday morning, in the little city of Lytelton.

Coming up the stairs of the inn, Mr. Burke tucked Jean under his arm, to run up more swiftly.

“Ellen, Ellen, we’ve got the child! Little Jean Lamb! Will you mother him?” he called.

Would she mother him? Would Ellen Burke mother any forsaken, lonely child?

She sprang up from the rocker in which she was musically resting, soothed into a half nap by its creak.

Instantly she had little Jean in her arms and was smothering him with kisses, murmuring all sorts of blessings upon him, as she kissed him.

Then she gathered him into her broad lap and began to rock him hard, singing a low, wailing

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air that her own mother had sung to her at Jean's age, and which she, in turn, had learned from her mother on the Irish coast.

Jean nestled his head into her shoulder, and looked up at her with his big, dark eyes, trying to understand what this warmth of heart could mean. Yet he knew, the poor little worse-than motherless child, well knew!

"I'd like to have my kitty rock with us," he said, and the kitten was released.

Jean held the kitten to his heart, and let himself rest on the heart of the kind woman who had lost all her children, and whose tears stood in her eyes to think that this living child had not been precious to his mother.

"Well, praises be, there's few like that!" she said to herself, and with a touch of her hand gathered Jean closer, and tucked the sagging kitten up closer to Jean.

CHAPTER XI

LITTLE JEAN AND LESSER JEAN

EARLY Monday morning the Bottle Imp was ready for her crew, and the buckboard was no less ready for its one, or more, passengers. There never was any telling how many it would have; sometimes there was but one in it, driving it; again it would carry two; sometimes all four children piled on it, with a dog or two for good measure, and sometimes, when a long stretch of straight road lay ahead, Hurrah would be tied to the big wagon, and they would all get under cover in the Bottle Imp, and have a gay time together.

The Bottle Imp and the buckboard looked that Monday morning as if it were indeed washing day, and the washing had been done early, which, as far as they were concerned, was exactly the case.

Mr. O'Rourke, the proprietor of the Take-Your-Ease, wishing to do something quite special to prove his pleasure in his friend's staying at his house, gave orders that the wagon and the buck-

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board should be scrubbed up before they went away. Scrubbed they were, and polished dry with soft cloths, so that they positively shone in the sunshine when the hour for starting off came. And that hour was but seven, so the stable hands who had done the washing must have been up before the sun, or no later than he was, to get it done and highly finished so early.

“Good-by, Tom. Good-by, Mrs. Tom,” said the beaming proprietor of the Take-Your-Ease as, with all his crew disposed in place and the small Jean and his little striped kitten wedged between him and his wife, Mr. Burke gathered up the lines and chirruped to Cork.

“I’ve never seen the like of the combination you’ve got there—three little girls and a boy, and all of them of a pattern that’s their own, and the little grave child, and two dogs and a cat! My word, Tom, but you’re like the ark on wheels, no less! But it’s fine and welcome you were, and I wish you luck, and that you’d come back next week, if you brought with you a laughin’ hyena and an elephant, a pair of twins, and two sets of triplets, and a cage of monkeys!”

“I’m thinkin’ I’d need a band wagon and some gilded chariots in that case, John, for ’twould be a circus I’d be, and no bottle dealer!” cried

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Mr. Burke. "Good-by, and I'll be back one of these days, whatever I bring with me."

"I want to go back the way we came, Tom," said Mrs. Burke, and her husband looked over his shoulder to smile at Isabel.

"I know why!" he cried. "You're thinkin' of the poor little girl-Jean, who turned out the wrong one, lookin' all the time as if she needed to be some one's right one!"

"And if I am," maintained his wife stoutly, "I'm not ashamed to pity a forlorn mite like that."

So Mr. Burke, who, if the truth were told, had the same thought as his wife, drove back toward East Harland, which was a two days' journey away at the rate they progressed, by the roads over which he had come.

Bunkie was greatly disturbed by the presence of the kitten, as long as it was shut up in its basket; when it was out in sight he paid no attention to it whatever. Isabel had made a ribbon collar for it, ending in a rosette of the ribbon gathered into a circle, in order that Jean might put a string through the collar and thus could hold the kitten in his arms, to enjoy the scenery and calm Bunkie's feelings.

The kitten showed no desire to escape, how-

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ever; it was like Jean himself, a good deal subdued.

“We had to keep her in the house, because there were so many wickednesses in the yards ’round there, and they’d of stoned her,” Jean explained. “So she never did know ’bout running around a lot. Do you think at my Dadlamb’s she can play out?”

“Indeed she can! It’s the dearest place, Jean! So can you play out! Don’t you remember how nice it was?” asked Prue.

Jean shook his head. “I think I was young when I went away,” he said.

It was noticeable that he never made the least mention of the unnatural mother who had stolen him from the father who loved him, and had so strangely failed to love him herself.

“What’s the kitten’s name, Jeanie?” asked Isabel.

“She didn’t have a name ’cause none was pretty ’nough,” said Jean. “Now her name is Mr. Burke.”

And by this funny choice they knew that silent little Jean was both happy and grateful.

“I’ve an idea, Tommy,” said Mrs. Burke as they drew near the road in which was the house where they had seen the other little Jean. “In a country place all that’s to be known of one an-

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other the neighbors know—and oftener than not it's more! So let you go to some of the other houses near by, and hear what's to be learned of that woman who has the child with her—and how she came to get the poor little mite.”

“I've a feelin' we'd better not be seen, if there's anything for us to do in the case, for that woman took a mislikin' to me,” said Mr. Burke.

“'Twas not to you, but to every one, then, Tommy,” said Mrs. Burke, not willing to admit that any one could dislike her Tom for himself.

“We'll make a camp for the night, over in those little woods to the right, an' from there I'll go on foot, with a handful of tins an' to gather bottles. Have you thought what we'd do, Ellen, should the little girl need befriending'?”

“Well you know what we'll do, Thomas Burke!” replied his wife, and he smiled.

The Bottle Imp turned into a—well, what should one call it? Not a road, for it was not clear enough for that; merely a trail where depressions on each side showed that some sort of vehicle had, at some time, been driven in there more than once. It led into a small woods, out of which the first growth had been cut, leaving space between the young trees. It was an attractive place to camp for the night. As Isabel said, they had found only good places for camping

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all the way. In the morning Mrs. Burke begged to be allowed to go to ask for bottles, and try to sell tins in her husband's place; she felt sure that her woman's sharpness to read symptoms would discover more about that little girl, Jean, than he could.

"Oh, you may all come along," she said, this being settled, as the crew was discussing who should go with her. "The small boy must stay with the captain of the crew, but what harm can it do if I have a bodyguard?"

"Let me ask for bottles, please!" Poppy begged. "I never in all my life went to a house and asked for bottles!"

"Who ever did?" cried Mark. "Try it different ways! Your bottles or your life!" Mark struck a threatening attitude.

"Sweet lady, bottles, please!" Isabel whined after him.

"Bottles, oh, bottles!" shouted Poppy. "Ginger pop bottles for poor Poppy!"

"Just one milk bottle for my starving baby," moaned Prue, piteously.

Then the entire four shrieked with laughter, and went prancing along, singing in chorus the foolish jingle which Mark chanted first:

"Bottles, bottles for our pains;
Bottles, empty like our brains;

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Bottles big, and bottles small,
Bring us bottles; we'll take all,
Bottles, bottles! Hear our cry!
Give us bottles, or we'll die."

The utterly senseless rigamarole filled the children with glee, and they went dancing along, two by two, swinging hands and shouting it, until Mrs. Burke protested.

"Oh, ye mad creatures!" she cried, laughing. "Will you stop your craziness? What do you suppose I'll learn about that poor child if you have every one shuttin' doors on us for a travelin' lunatic branch asylum? Not a bottle will you get; sure they'll be afraid to trust you with a bottle, lest you throw it at them, as a lunny would! Quiet now, and act sensible. I'll try that house first," she added." It was a small house, and a small woman opened its door to the knock. Poppy was the one who summoned her.

"I have no bottles," said the little woman who looked patient and forlorn. "I rarely buy anything in a bottle, and when I do I get the old one filled. Are they all yours? Twins?" She pointed to Isabel and Mark.

"No, but you picked out the two who are most alike," said Mrs. Burke. "They're not mine,

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none of 'em. Mine are all dead. Have you children?"

"No, not one," said the woman. "I'd like to take a girl, but laws-a-me, I couldn't keep her."

"Who's the woman down a bit from here, who's taken that little girl called Jean?" asked Mrs. Burke, venturing a shot in the dark.

The shot hit the mark. "What do you know about her? Where'd you hear of her?" cried the woman. "Come on in. It's the worst story! If you know any of the child's kin, do for mercy's sake get 'em to come take her away! Mrs. Jervis ain't any more fit—— Why, the poor child'd better be dead than there—and will be, too, soon."

"I don't know one thing, but my man saw the child and the woman, and it didn't need more. What's the story? Has she a right to the child?" cried Mrs. Burke.

"No, no more than nobody has a right to her. Her father and mother got killed on the track down here; they were Polish people, real nice, too! And Mrs. Jervis took in the child, thinking to raise her to work. She's sick of the bargain, and takes her sickness out on the child. What makes you ask?" cried the woman eagerly.

Isabel and Prue and Mark fell to liking her at

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once for her evident excited sympathy for this unfortunate little girl.

Quickly Mrs. Burke made her decision, though of course it had been pretty well made during the days since she had heard of the child and had been longing for her.

“The reason I ask is I’m ready to take her,” she said, flushing deeply. “My little children are all in heaven; I need the baby, and she needs me. My husband is willing. We’re comfortable people, not rich, not what I’d call poor; just right off, and dear knows, we’d be good to the child!”

“I’d know that without your telling me!” cried the tiny woman, much excited by this amazing announcement.

“Do you go tell that woman you’re willin’ to try keepin’ the child. Get her, and then hand her over to me,” Mrs. Burke spoke fast, and grew very red. “I’m afraid if she saw me she’d begin to hem and haw, and want to make a fuss, me bein’ strange to her. Let you bring the child—right away! Our wagon is down in the woods. We’ll take the child, and do our best by her. We live in Hertonsburg, 906 North street; you can ask about us, but don’t wait now! And Mr. Burke, my man, will make it all right with your town officers, only let you get the child!”

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“My, but you’re quick!” gasped the woman, yet she took a sunbonnet off its nail and put it on, going toward the door.

“Way to be,” said Mrs. Burke, and watched her depart.

It seemed a long time to the impatient waiters before she returned, but when she did come, she was leading by the hand the little girl Jean, who looked smaller and paler, and more wretched than the Bottle Imp friends had remembered her.

“Mrs. Jervis was kinder minded to hang on to her, when she found she could hand her over to me, but she was that tired of her that she gave in quick, especially when I made out I wasn’t particular, but only made the offer to try it,” the little woman said, entering. “She hadn’t any papers; all she had to do was to hand her over, as I hand her on to you, now. I’d keep her and welcome, if I wasn’t as poor as a church mouse, and a good deal rheumatic.”

“Come here, my darlin’!” cried Mrs. Burke, kneeling and holding out her arms, with tearful eyes, as she looked at the pinched, timid child, whose great dark eyes seemed to be two-thirds of her delicately cut face.

Small Jean walked over to her slowly, staring at her, afraid, yet half-trusting. As Mrs. Burke gathered her close to her warm heart the great

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eyes softened, and the little head went trustfully down into her deep shoulder.

“God love you, my sweet!” murmured the good woman. “And now, m’am, I’m beholden to you for the help you’ve given me and the child, both. It’s been a good day’s work. I’ll take her down to our wagon, where my husband is, and we’ll settle it with the town, and be off.”

“Would you let me know if there’s any trouble?” asked the tiny woman. “And I want to kiss the child good-by.”

“You’ll see her again, I promise you,” said Mrs. Burke holding up little Jean’s head for the kiss, already with the air of a mother’s authority. “And we’ll find a way to do something to prove we’re grateful to you, never doubt it. Good-by.”

She swung little Jean up in her arms; the child was four years old, but scarcely heavier than a child of two. Then Mrs. Burke strode away, holding the baby tight.

“Well, my goodness, of all happening voyages!” remarked Poppy, who had been a dazed and amazed witness of these rapid events.

“I think it is the most beautiful, the most heavenly thing in all this world, to go riding through the country, gathering up miserable little children and taking care of them! This is

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two; only think! Two children safe in the Bottle Imp, and going to keep safe! I don't care whether I get well or die, or what, I am just thankful I came!" cried Isabel walking along in an ecstasy.

"Oh, die nothing!" exclaimed Poppy, instantly angry at the suggestion. "You're weller and weller, Isabel Lindsay! Ain't you ashamed talking like that? And all the children we get are Jeans; boys and girls, and all kinds, are Jeans!"

Mark promptly stood on his head and walked a short distance on his hands.

"Poppy always says something!" he chuckled. "But say, Isa, you and I are crazy about the Round Table and knightly deeds. Isn't it queer, but, honestly, isn't the big wagon, and the way we ride around, about the same as the caparisoned charger and the way the knight on him rescues maidens? It seems queer to think of it—a bottle dealer's wagon, with tins, but isn't it, honest?"

Isabel considered, then she said slowly: "It is just the same, Mark Jack-in-the-Box, and we know why! It is being good, and doing the right, and trying to help. That's what my dearest motherums always tells me, that goodness is of no place, nor time, nor class. It is perfectly beau-

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tiful, it surely is, and we are going about precisely like knights of old!"

For a moment Isa looked sweetly serious and uplifted, then her eyes danced and she began to laugh.

"And don't you think that the knight's armor must have sounded a whole lot like Mr. Burke's tins, rattling, you know?" she asked.

There was brief delay in getting the right to take away the small Jean. Nobody wanted her; the town officials were only too willing to get off their hands the cost of her maintenance; people were already grumbling at them for increased taxes, and even this small human being added to the poor rates. It proved that her parents had been Italian, not Polish, but no one was sure what her name was. "Dessantow," it was spelled on the records, and the Burkes greatly admired Isabel and Mark because, between them, they figured out that it must be di Santo.

"And if that means, as you say it does, 'of a saint,' then I'll take it as the best of omens, for what I'll be able to make of her," said Mrs. Burke, cuddling her new treasure close. She was so happy in the possession of this little creature that her husband's eyes filled with tears, watching her, and seeing what she had suffered in the loss of her own babies.

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Little Jean, with the sweetness of her affectionate race, already began to expand in the sunshine around her. She, like the first Jean, the little boy, attached herself to Isabel and Mark most of all the four children, and they found her budding promise of beauty irresistible, as well as her soft, shy ways of loving them.

Everything settled as to the little girl Jean, the Bottle Imp prepared to set out for East Harland as fast as it could travel. Leander Lamb must be counting the slow minutes before the coming of his Jean.

Isabel and Poppy rode in the buckboard, with Jean Lamb and the kitten between them, and Mark behind them, at least, in starting.

Prue stayed in the Bottle Imp, being seized with one of her housewifely fits, and undertaking to darn stockings for herself and the other three, as they drove along.

The lesser Jean sat between the Burkes, shyly showing her new doll the pretty things that they passed, bird and tree and flower.

“I think,” said Prue suddenly looking up from the stocking which she held high, drawn over its darning egg, in her left hand, “I think we can’t say how wonderful our trip is, though goodness knows, we don’t seem to say anything

else! And Mr. Burke, Mrs. Burke, don't you honestly think Isa is heaps better?"

"She looks just as fine as silk; not a thing wrong with her looks now." Mrs. Burke answered emphatically the anxious note in Prue's voice.

"I'll lose my guess if the doctor doesn't say there's not a sign of a spot left on her lung when she gets back to Greenacres, an' he harkens to her through his cross between a pair of compasses an' a garden hose, which they call a stethoscope," added Mr. Burke with his twinkle.

"I think we really ought to sing the Te Deum, only I don't know how it goes," said Prue, so seriously that Mr. Burke and his wife dared not laugh.

CHAPTER XII

THE GLOWING FORGE

NOW bounce along, Cork, my friend, as becomes your name," Mr. Burke called to Cork, "for East Harland is not so far away now, an' it's the last hour of waitin' for a good time comin', and that always has no less than twice its sixty minutes in it!"

Cork may have understood, or it quite possibly may have been due to the tightening of the lines which accompanied this remark, but whatever it was that made him, he started off at a good pace.

The jolting of the wagon, and the consequent increased rattle of the tins, put an idea into Mark's head.

"We ought to have a band playing when we drive up to the smithy. Aren't we coming as victors, isn't this a triumphant entry? Well, then, we need a band playing! Let us string the tins together, and hang them up, so they'll make a lot of noise. Say yes, Mr. Burke?" Mark cried.

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“Well, I never mind a lot of noise when I feel like celebratin’,” admitted Mr. Burke. “Do your worst, Mark, lad, as long as you don’t lose my tins, nor scratch an’ dent them past sellin’.”

“Come on, crew!” Mark ordered, as he fell on his knees to rummage for rope under the seat where an extra supply was carried.

Under his directions Prue and Isabel worked rapidly, stringing tins that had handles by those handles, and making nooses to hold pans, which it was to be hoped might hold them, but which Mrs. Burke eyed with doubtful disfavor.

Poppy, alone in the buckboard, scolded at being cut off from these preparations, but Isabel comforted her by calling back to her that all the real fun would be hanging these festoons of hardware on the wagon, and this they would not do till lunch-time when they stopped, and she could help in it.

There are no end of lovely, modest little spots tucked away out of notice along nearly every country road. To-day, as every day, there was no difficulty in finding one of them in which to halt for lunch, to feed and water the horses—also the dogs and cat!—and rest cramped muscles by moving about.

“Now this is not the Bottle Imp, not for a while,” announced Mark. “This is the triumphal

“We were all badly frightened, Poppy,” said Mrs. Lindsay. “But, as you say, we came to know the Burkes through your naughtiness, and we are all fond of them.”

“I used to be a pill,” said Poppy mournfully, unconscious that she had relapsed into the slang discarded faithfully since she had been within Rena’s hearing. Poppy was intent upon being a Good Example, as the more fortunate, though the younger of the Meiggs sisters.

“A pill coated with wintergreen; that’s red!” cried Rena, enchanted with her own wit.

“It isn’t pretty on this highway, but it’s a pretty nice day,” observed Prue. “Isn’t this the ravelings of Hertonsburg? Isn’t the city only a little way off?”

“Ravelings!” Mark turned around in the seat to laugh. “Hertonsburg *ravelings*; our party’s *revelings*! Now watch the town knit up the ravelings! Houses getting right together, solid; stores coming in between! Dirty babies playing all over everything! Can you dodge them, Mrs. Lindsay? I’m going to invent a car with a scoop-front, like a cow catcher on a locomotive; scoop kids up and toss ’em till they’re scared, and cured of making themselves a nuisance under wheels, and then throw ’em into a basket on top the car, to be collected at so much each.”

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watching trees and things going past when you're on the road."

"Dad and I read *As You Like It* out doors, in the woods, just this last May, it was fine," said Mark. "There's something in it about 'books in the running brooks'; that's our library this summer!"

"That's all right," said Poppy with an air of finding it quite wrong, "but it doesn't learn you to talk to watch for tadpoles and things. Yes, I know it, Prue, I know I hadn't ought to say learn; it was teach, but that's just what I say: I gotter read dictionaries, and keep up, 'cause I'm going to be a lady, or fade right out."

"That sounds more like being cotton stuff in the wash," remarked Prue, but she looked kindly at Poppy, feeling greatly older than she was, and much wiser, though there were but two years and a half between them, and Poppy's lacks were the result of circumstances; she was far more clever than Prue.

Poppy's deft fingers now came into play to advantage; she hung tins on the sides of the wagon, as if she were a spider stringing fibers across space. However, Mrs. Burke distrusted her thoroughness.

"Just look to Poppy's knots, will you, Mark and Prue and Isabel?" she hinted. "She gets

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over the ground 'most too quick to have it hold."

When the nearly-two hours of nooning which the heat of the day made Mr. Burke take, instead of one hour, were past, and everybody was stowed away for the final stage of the drive to East Harland, the former Bottle Imp, which for the time being was to be regarded as a triumphal chariot, instead, looked decidedly queer, strung over with tinware. Nevertheless, it shone in the sun's rays to an incredible degree, and it rang with rattling tins, even beyond the decorators' fondest hopes.

"I'll have a pretty sixpence to pay if we meet any teams, for there's not a horse with any self-respect that wouldn't bolt, meetin' such a glitterin', rattlin', crazy contraption as you mad youngsters have turned my respectable wagon into! But it's good for me that we don't be meetin' horses often, the roads bein' hummin' with cars that scare, but don't get scared," said Mr. Burke, giving Cork the signal to quicken his pace, and so set the "garlands" jarring into a noise that could be heard for a great distance.

"It makes my kitten a little bit jumpy to hear 'em rattlin'," observed Jean, the boy, energetically scratching the kitten's neck and holding her tighter.

Although Cork and Hurrah steadily did their

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full duty, keeping up a good jogging gait that asked no allowance because of the increased heat of the day, still it was nearing sunset hour when the big wagon, tins and noise and glitter and all, with its precious freight, passed the boundaries of Harland, which were marked with large billboards. One of these read: "Town Boundary. Fifteen miles speed limit." Another, on the right, bore the word: "Welcome!" in very large letters, while on the left—which would be the right going the other way, out of the town—there was its mate, bidding drivers: "Good-by! Come Again."

Mrs. Burke rapidly gave polishing touches to little Jean Lamb, to make him ready to be received by his father. Then she aroused her own sleepy little Jean, and brushed her soft, dark hair into rings over her fingers, and changed her tousled pink chambray frock for an immaculate white one. Though little Jean, the girl, was not likely to receive notice when Jean, the boy, was getting a welcome, Mrs. Burke was so fond of the sweet little creature that she wanted her to be at her best when any one, whether interested in her or not, saw her for the first time. And indeed she was an exquisite little thing, and now that the warm summer air and sunshine, good food and loving petting encircled her, already the

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tiny face was losing its pinched look and was developing real beauty.

"There's the smithy!" said Mark, pointing, a thrill in his voice as he spoke. Silence fell on the group in the noisy wagon. It was not possible to be calm as they drove up to where they knew that Leander Lamb was watching and waiting for his child's coming.

"I think I 'member it here," little Jean Lamb broke the silence to say.

There in the doorway of the low, weather-blackened shop, stood the thin, somewhat bent figure of Leander Lamb. There was no doubt that he saw the wagon; there was not the least chance that he would not have heard it, but he did not move.

"Bowled over, he's so glad!" murmured Mr. Burke, and drew his cuff over his eyes, wet with sympathetic tears.

"Come, Leander, man; come get him!" he called, and held up little Jean for his father to see.

The sight broke the spell that held the father, a prisoner to his overpowering joy.

Leander Lamb started with a queer cry, and came running, staggering slightly, and wavering, but, nevertheless, straight to the wagon and to his boy.



HE HELD UP HIS ARMS AND MR. BURKE PLACED LITTLE JEAN IN THEM.

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He held up his arms, and Mr. Burke, leaning over, placed little Jean in them. They tightened over the child, and Leander kissed him, kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his nose, his eyes, his chin, his thin little throat, sobbing and shaking, yet laughing, as he did so, and saying over and over:

“Little Jean, little Jean, oh, my little Jean!”

“I know you now, Dadlamb; I ’member you now! Has you got a jawbreaker in this little pocket?” Jean said.

And Leander Lamb laughed out with sudden relief and triumph.

“She didn’t make him forget me, after all! He does remember me, the little lamb! I kept big candy balls in that pocket for him, always!” he cried, and bore the child into the smithy, never once thinking of the Burkes, nor gratitude, at least gratitude in form. As to that his heart was near breaking with grateful joy.

But no one minded in the least; they all understood.

“Well, if there’d been nothin’ else but that happened good in my life, I’d be glad I was born,” said Thomas Burke, wiping his eyes openly, unashamed of tears. As to the children and his wife they were all crying heartily.

“Now get out, all of you,” said Mr. Burke.

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“Sure, Leander forgot to say so, but he’d be wantin’ us in to tell him every last syllable about how we came upon the boy.”

And as he spoke, Leander Lamb, remembering his manners, but still more his desire for this very information, came out to bid the rescue party come into the shop, just as they started to do so.

While the three grown-ups sat on the bench along the wall, hearing and telling the story of the little boy Jean’s finding, and the companion story of the little girl Jean’s rescue through it, both little Jeans dozing in loving arms while the story was telling, Isabel, Prue, Poppy and Mark explored the smithy. It was a fascinating place of dark shadows, with all sorts and sizes of bolts and bits of iron scattered about, and the scent of horses and burnt hoofs, not wholly pleasant, yet far from downright unpleasant, hanging around its rafters. Any quantity of wagon parts lay or stood against the walls, and parts of automobiles jostled them, for Leander Lamb did simpler repairs on these and other machines. Far at the darkest end that abutted on the river, the children discovered a great sliding door that could be withdrawn, and a water wheel hung out over the stream, which had once been daily

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turned by the water from the dam, but now was seldom used.

“My, it’s a nice, funny, horrid place, isn’t it?” said Poppy. “It’s spookish!”

“You could make up all kinds of stories about it,” said Isabel slowly. “I’d like to stay here awhile, and pretend things.”

“Oh, Isa, we did pretend things when we were here before!” cried Prue. “I’d forgotten all about it! We laid birch twigs on the forge; don’t you know? And you made up a fairy story about wishes, and the enchanted princess. Can’t we finish it somehow? It was so nice.”

“Ye-es, I suppose we can.” Isabel considered how it might be done as she answered. “Well, first let’s draw up around the forge. Mark, ask if we may pump up the fire. It would be more like magic to have the fire going.”

“He says yes, he doesn’t mind,” said Mark, coming back with both the little Jeans. “The kiddies wanted to come too, so I brought them.”

“You darling!” cried Isabel, hugging Jean-girl, who had completely ensnared Isabel with her deerlike eyes and gentle ways.

“Now then, let’s pump up the fire. That’s coming! I don’t suppose we should burn the coal—no, it’s wood!—too much. That ought to be enough; we don’t need more than a glow.

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First of all, we must each tell what we wished. Mark is the oldest. Mark, what did you wish?"

"I wished Isabel would get quite well," said Mark.

"Oh, did you, Mark dear! Prue, what did you wish?" Isabel went on.

"I wished Isabel would get quite well," said Prue.

"Oh, both of you! For me!" cried Isabel. "Poppy, now yours."

"I wished Isabel would get quite well," said Poppy solemnly.

"Every single one of you the same, and all for me!" cried Isabel much touched. "Aren't you the dearest things! I said if there was one perfectly unselfish wish that the enchanted, beautiful princess would be set free! They were all unselfish! So now the princess is no longer under the spell, but——"

"Hold on, Isa Bell! You're wrong about that. There wasn't one unselfish wish, so far. They were all the same; that you'd get well. Call that unselfish? That's straight for ourselves! I'd like to know anything worse for us than if you did not get well!" Mark interrupted her.

"Yes, Isa, that's true," echoed Prue. "It's the thing we'd want most, if it didn't do you any good."

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“Well,” said Poppy impatiently, “you all do a heap of talking about Isabel Lindsay. I guess I wished that for my own self, just’s much!”

“What did you wish, Isabel? Unless you wished something unselfish, that poor young princess is stuck! We didn’t free her,” cried Mark.

Isabel blushed. She did not want to tell her wish, because hers was for something truly unselfish, that she particularly dreaded to think might happen.

“I wished that Mark might go away to school next winter, if it was best for him, since he wants to go,” she said unwillingly.

“You’re a dear chum, Isa,” said Mark. It never occurred to him to pretend not to know what it would cost Isabel if he really were to go away. He was far too humble to pretend humility, but rather took Isabel’s love for him, and need of him, as part of her own sweetness, but none the less true.

“You did it!” cried Prue. “You wished the unselfish wish; you even wished for what you hated, for Mark’s sake! So you’ve set the princess free yourself! What shall we make believe happened when she was set free?”

“Do I have to say?” asked Isabel, but being

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used to telling stories and making up events for the others, she at once began.

“The lovely princess, when she found that her day had come, slowly rose and came out from beneath the forge, which had burned brightly, because her loving heart had kindled its flames. She came out far below the earth’s surface, and she turned to right and to left, wondering which way to go to reach her father’s kingdom, from which the spell of the wicked witch had stolen her, and as she looked, she saw at her right hand a noble youth, all dressed in satins and velvets, who doffed his plumed hat and said to her:

“Princess Carita, oh, Carita, Carita, my beloved——”

Little Jean-girl looked up, her face so wreathed in joyful smiles that Isabel thought her the prettiest child she had ever seen.

“Yes, me, me! Mamma’s Carita! Mamma, si, mamma, here is your Carita!” she cried.

Isabel stopped short in her story-weaving and stared at the child’s lovely, excited face, while Prue, Poppy and Mark also gazed at her, wondering.

Then Isabel understood.

“Oh, Carita is an Italian name! It must be that her poor mother called this sweet thing Carita, and that she is glad to hear her name

again! No wonder that she did call her Carita! That means darling, and only look at her! Is that your name, sweetheart? Are you Carita?" Isabel added, kneeling and taking the soft flushed face between her hands.

"Si, si, si!" cried the child in Italian. "Mamma! Where is mamma? Mamma's Carita; Carita di Santo am I." She dropped a funny little curtsey as she spoke. Plainly she had been taught thus to answer when asked her name, and thus to curtsey.

"Some one has called her Jean since her mother died," said Isabel, gathering the child in her arms and speaking softly over her head. "She was named Carita; she shall be our Carita, again. Oh, it has all come true! Just as if I wasn't making it up as I went along, it is true! Your wishes are granted, for I'm well, I know I am! And there *was* a lovely princess Carita under the spell of the old witch, and we have set her free! Really, isn't it wonderful?"

"*You* set her free, Isabel; you wished unselfishly," said Prue gravely.

"It surely is wonderful! When I get back I shall have to have my family pinch me black and blue, or I'll never believe all the wonders of this trip!"

CHAPTER XIII

ANY PORT IN A STORM

ONCE more the Bottle Imp set sail on the waste of waters! In other words, early in the morning, after a night in camp not far from the smithy, Cork was backed into the shafts, and Hurrah was got into the lesser vehicle the best way it could be managed. Hurrah always strongly objected to backing into the shafts, and curved himself, and went ahead, instead of backing, in a manner which was, as Poppy truly said, "something scanderloose." Then the travelers were ready to go on their way. They certainly did "go on their way, rejoicing," this time!

Leander Lamb stood beside a stump to see them off. A night with little Jean in his arms had helped to make him realize that his child was actually found, and returned to him; his face shone like the bright east, where the sun was newly arisen.

On the stump, with both his thin arms around his father's neck, stood little Jean. He looked

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somewhat downcast at losing his friends, especially Isabel and Mark, to whom both Jeans were entirely devoted, but he had been promised to be allowed to watch his father shoe horses, even to hold the nails for him, and Mr. Burke told him that he would come often, and bring the children, to visit the smithy, so, though the shadow hung over Jean's face, it was not really a heavy one; there was compensation for his regret.

"Well," said Poppy, her own face not wholly cheerful, "I suppose we'll just kind of go along the rest of the trip; 'tain't likely we'll keep finding children, and singers, and things like that."

"I've been on these roads a good many years, Poppy, an' I've got to own up that bottles was about the most I gathered up, till this time," said Mr. Burke.

"It's the hottest morning yet," observed Prue discontentedly.

"Aren't we all funny!" said Isabel. "We act grumpy! Not Mrs. Burke, nor Mr. Burke; just the crew."

"Why would I? I've still got my Carita," said Mrs. Burke, drawing the dark-eyed mite closer to her. "And I'm that pleased her name is Carita instead of Jean!"

"Are you!" cried Isabel greatly relieved. "I

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was so afraid you'd rather call her Jean! It's easier, but isn't Carita pretty?"

"And with a pretty meanin'," supplemented Mrs. Burke. "You little fawn!" She hugged Carita harder, and the child looked up at her with eyes very like a fawn's.

"I don't know, my dears, as I can hold out to finish the trip for as long as I meant to make it. I'm anxious to get back home, to 906 North Street, and sew up some tasty little dresses for the baby. I've been thinkin' how to make 'em, since I got her, and I've got some beauty ideas in my head."

"Oh, if you didn't stay, we couldn't!" cried Prue. "Still," she added on second thought, "I wouldn't mind so dreadfully, if Isa didn't have to keep on living outdoors. It's been the loveliest trip ever was, but we couldn't keep it up forever."

"That's not the way to say it. It's sad that you can't keep up anything, anywhere near forever," said Mark.

And this grown-up sounding, melancholy speech was so unlike Mark of the eyes that were the color of dead leaves in the woods, and danced as leaves did in the wind, that Isabel stared at him.

"We *are* funny!" she repeated, as if proud of

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agreeing with herself. "I said we were, and we *are!* We're all like a glass of soda water that's been standing."

"U-gh-h!" Prue shuddered. "Makes me sick! I feel sort of sickish, anyway."

"You haven't caught anything, have you?" Mrs. Burke asked anxiously. "You never can tell what somebody's down with in a back room, or upstairs, when you go into a strange house."

"I think before the day's over we're goin' to have a thunder shower that you won't have to listen to to hear, an' that's what ails the whole bunch," said Mr. Burke. "It's so hot that if we went a-fishin' all you'd have to do is leave the fish lyin' on the bank a few minutes, an' he'd be done to a turn, crisped at that, ready for the table, brown, an' maybe peppered, though I'd not go so far as to promise that."

"I'm going to get out and lie somewhere in the sun and bake my hair brown; I'm sick of red hair," announced Poppy.

"Why would it make us all feel cranky, if a thunder shower were coming?" asked Prue.

"Now there's the naturalist of this expedition," said Mr. Burke, pointing his whip at Mark. "Why would it, professor?"

"It's warm; the air is heavy before showers, and dad says nerves get jumpy when the atmos-

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phere is heated and electrified," said Mark. "I'm going back to the buckboard, untie Hurrah from this wagon, and drive alone, if no one minds." No one minded, and Mark carried out his suggestion.

Prue and Isabel undid the knots in the rope which had "garlanded" the wagon with tinware the day before, and neatly rolled it up, not talking the while.

Poppy lay out at full length; little Carita-Jean napped, and cuddled her doll on waking. It was the first time that the Bottle Imp had gone along so quietly, but the air grew more and more oppressive.

"My, oh, my!" exclaimed Poppy at last, starting up on her elbow. "*Ain't* it hot!"

"If you want to begin to be elegant, Miss Gladys Popham Meiggs, you'll say: 'I feel really quite warm,'" suggested Prue sarcastically.

"I don't!" Poppy was decided in her refusal. "It would kill me to talk soft, like that, about it, when I'm pretty near melted, and all in."

Then suddenly there came the first roll of thunder, loud enough to make it prudent to seek shelter rapidly. The sun was darkened quickly, also; the shower had been coming up to the rear of the wagon, unnoticed, and it had risen so

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swiftly, that its first warning rumble did not allow much time to escape it.

“Queer, but I thought I remembered houses along this road,” muttered Mr. Burke, touching Cork with his whip.

Cork needed no urging; he knew as well as human beings did, in fact better, that a violent thunder storm was near. He broke into a run, and the wagon went clattering behind him, along a road that seemed to have as many stones on it as it had few houses.

“There’s some sort of a poor shack yonder,” said Mr. Burke. “We’d do well to get under whatever offers, for there’s nothin’ in sight beyond. I’ve taken another road from the one I was aimin’ at, that’s sure, for the one I wanted has plenty cozy farms an’ houses its full length. There’s a roof on that shack, though it doesn’t look to be too proud for leakin’.”

It was indeed a tumble-down shack toward which Mr. Burke guided Cork, with Mark following, striving to hold back Hurrah, who was so eager for a barn that he almost collided with the big wagon, trying to pass it.

There was a shed, poor enough, but equal, in its degree, to the shack that stood for a house. Mr. Burke and Mark got Cork and Hurrah under the shed roof and covered them with their

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rubber blankets; the big wagon, its curtains fastened down, standing at the shed opening, would serve to keep off part of the violence of the rain.

“Come, then, in,” said Mr. Burke. “It’s on us.”

The rain had not set in, but the sky was black; the wind raged in eddying gusts that swept everything loose into circling piles, each pile the central point of its own miniature cyclone. The lightning flashes were frequent now, the thunder seemed continuous. Mrs. Burke clutched little Carita close to her breast, and threw her skirt over the child, though the rain had not begun. Head down, she ran to the shack.

The children streamed after her, Isabel and Mark, white to their lips, with their eyes big with excitement; Poppy so frightened that she stumbled as she ran. Mr. Burke picked her up and slung her under one arm like a meal sack, to save her from falling. Prue was the least disturbed of them all.

“What’s the use?” she said. “It’s coming just the same. Some one’s got to get these dogs out of it. They’re frightened into fits.”

It was true that Semper Fidelis and Bunkie needed good offices. Cowering and trembling, they slunk close to Prue, grateful for her atten-

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tions, when Isabel and Mark were too excited to think of them.

The small shack in which the officers and crew of the Bottle Imp found themselves had never been more than a two-room cabin, occupied once as a house by some one whose poverty must have been great. Now one end of it was pretty well caved in; it was dark, dusty, dirty, and no one could have seen it without at once saying: "Oh, rats!" and not meaning it as slang, either! The first thought that the forlorn little cabin suggested was of rats, and mice, and spiders.

If the little girls had been less hard-pressed they never would have dared to go into it, but when a frightful electric storm is at one's back there's no chance for squeamishness.

Something scuttled around at the tumble-down end of the room when they came in. Bunkie, who was mostly Scotch terrier as to his descent, pricked up ears and courage, and went to investigate.

"Oh, I'm thankful for Bunkie!" breathed Isabel.

Just then the storm broke, directly over their heads, and she forgot to be thankful for anything.

Thunder showers always made excitable, highly-wrought Isabel sick. She and Mark

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were affected alike, with headache, nausea, chills. Now they held each other's cold hands and, cowering, waited for the end, benumbed by the glare and noise.

Poppy, on the other hand, could not keep still. She sang, danced about, shook out her gleaming hair, and acted beside herself. Now that the storm was actually upon them, her fear turned to a sort of madness of excitement.

"You're really awful, Poppy," declared sorely-tried Prue. "I'm not so scared, but it's no joke, and it's awful to carry on, in such lightning."

"I can jump's quick's it can, and how can it hit me when I'm all over?" cried Poppy.

There is one comfort in anything that is very bad: it cannot last long when it is violent; thunder storms, fits of temper, great trouble, all wear out the sooner for getting to their climax and raging with all their might.

This storm, which was a particularly bad one, passed on fairly soon, true to this rule. The rain kept up, but the lightning grew less frequent; the thunder rolled in longer waves, getting fainter, and the refugees from the Bottle Imp drew long breaths of relief.

"Smells nice outside, now," announced Prue,

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going to the door and sniffing the freshened, rain-washed air.

"I don't care much for the musty smell inside; guess I'll go out," said Mark.

"It's a dreadful place," said Isabel, looking around her with abhorrence. "My headache is gone; it always goes when the lightning stops. I'd like to go out, too."

"Mustn't be ungrateful to the tramp house! It's a good deal like a ragged old tramp, though it doesn't tramp much, I'm thinkin'," said Mr. Burke. "It kept us dry. It's any port in a storm, you know, crew of the Bottle Imp! 'Deed, then, 'tis a sorry lookin' heap of decayin' wood! It looks like a thieves' den! I'd rather my roll was in the wagon than here, at night!"

"You shouldn't talk of your roll, Mr. Burke," said Isabel, with a quick glance around, her imagination fired at this hint of adventure. "There may be thieves hidden."

"Well, there may be, but not so many, considerin' the space," laughed Mr. Burke. "We'll go our ways; there's no rain fallin' now to harm us."

The horses were put into the shafts again and the small procession started. It was delicious to drive along the road, with puddles substituted for dust, and every least green thing giving off

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its faint odor, made pungent by the rain. The birds sang ecstatically, preening and shaking themselves, grateful for refreshment after the heat.

“Why, where is Bunkie?” cried Isabel when they had gone a little distance. “Mark, you haven’t Bunk back there, have you?”

“No; only Semp,” Mark called back from the buckboard.

“Oh, my dearest little Bunkie-dog!” cried Isabel distressed. “To think of not missing him till now! Please let me out, Mr. Burke. I want to run back along the road, and call him. He’ll hear me quicker than any one else.”

“All right; you can’t come to harm along this road. I’m goin’ to stop a little farther on for lunch; there’s a spring near here. Go back, Isabel; Bunkie will be right after us,” said Mr. Burke.

Isabel jumped out and started back along the way they had come, expecting every moment to meet Bunkie, scenting along on the wagon’s track.

But this did not happen. She went on till she began to get quite alarmed, and finally she came to the tumble-down hut in which they had sheltered from the storm. Whistling and calling frantically, for by this time Isabel was thor-

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oughly frightened about the small dog, she heard a yelp, as if Bunkie had been struck, and a harsh voice, bidding him: "Shut up!"

Isabel did not know what fear was when danger threatened anything that she loved. She dashed into the house, and the joy of seeing her gave Bunkie additional strength, while it so startled his captor, holding him, that his hands relaxed. Therefore, from both causes, Bunkie jumped clear of him and dashed, whining and leaping, upon Isabel.

Isabel gathered him up in her arms, though he was a good weight for her, and glared at the person who had captured him. She saw a young man of about seventeen, with a face that might have been handsome, but for the wickedness of its expression.

"Well," said this person, "what you doin' swipin' my dawg?"

"It is my dog, as you probably know," said Isabel coolly. "I'm taking him with me."

"*Maybe* you are!" said the big boy. "Then again maybe you ain't! You talk pretty big for your size. Don't you know, Miss Smarty-Cat Duchess, I could hit you once, and him once, and there wouldn't be much left of you, nor your dawg?"

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Isabel did know it; she also realized how far from the wagon she had come.

"I haven't time to talk to you," she said, with a wave of her hand that belied her throbbing heart. And she turned to go.

"Say, you're some bluffer!" said the youth with admiration. "But that doesn't go, my airy princess! Climb down! I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll let you go with the dawg, safe, if you'll tell me what you're doin' with my sister?"

"Your sister!" cried Isabel, turning back, and forgetting her fear in surprise.

"Red-headed Gladys Meiggs. I'd know her anywhere, though she's grown since I seen her," said the youth nodding hard. "Your folks adopted her?"

"No. No one has adopted her. She is taken care of by a lady," said Isabel.

"Well, I'll go after her, an' I'll make that kid sick tellin' her I'm her brother, Garland, and a few other things I could tell her, if you don't do what I want you to," said the young man. "I seen her when you was in here, keepin' dry. It's not me that wants her; I don't care what becomes of her, but if you don't want me interferin' with Gladdy, you just do's I say."

"You haven't said," suggested Isabel. "And I don't think you can harm Poppy—Gladys."

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"You call her Poppy, do you? Her second name's Popham; family name!" laughed the rough, ugly looking youth. "You bet your life I can harm Poppy, sweet girl! You get me money, fifty dollars, an' see I have it in four days, or I'll make the kid's life no joke. 'Sif I was goin' to live poor, an' have her livin' on Easy Street! Who's she, anyway?"

"I'm not afraid of you," said Isabel, hoping this was true; she did not feel as afraid as she had at first. "You can't harm Poppy. But I'd hate her to know you were her brother. No one belonging to her has ever done her any good, and what could a little girl do for you? She hasn't any money; not anything."

"Her friends have," said the brother of poor little Poppy.

"I'll do my best to get the money you want, but I haven't it myself, and I'm not near home. But I think I can get it. I'll mail it to you, shall I?" said Isabel.

"Yep," said the youth, almost laughing at Isabel's dignity and polite speech.

"General delivery, Lytelton; I'm goin' back there. Garland Meiggs's the name. Is this honest truth?"

"I never break my word," said Isabel, and he let her walk away, head in air, Bunkie under her arm.

XIV

RASH ISABEL

ISABEL hurried along for a short distance, her wrath mounting, as she thought over the big brutish person whom she had just left; his threat to bother Poppy; his demand upon herself for money, and, not least, the fact that he had caught and struck Bunkie, apparently intending to steal him. She began to wonder whether he really had meant to steal Bunkie. She also wondered why she had agreed to send this Meiggs youth fifty dollars. Of course she should not have done this; she would not have so much to send. Even if she were successful in getting money, as she was vaguely planning to get it, she could not hope for so much, nor ought she give so much to an entirely worthless person, if she were to get it.

Isabel never broke her word, but she was so angry with the Meiggs youth, when she came to consider him farther, that she decided that her promise to him must not be kept. Being Isabel, she would not withdraw from an agreement with-

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out due notice to him, whom lawyers would call "the party of the second part."

Like a high-spirited and honorable, but foolish little girl, Isabel turned face-about, and returned to tell Garland Meiggs that she would not fully keep her agreement with him.

"I'm not the least bit afraid of him, now," she thought, head high, and a bright spot of color burning in each cheek. "I can't be afraid of him when I despise him so. There isn't room in me for both feelings."

Which was a fine spirit, but not wise, since there is often the best of ground for fear of a person to be despised.

Isabel found the Meiggs youth lying on the grass in front of the shack. He jumped up when he saw her.

"'Fraid I'd take cold on the ground after the rain?" he asked. "Come back to see how I was? That's a nice kid, but I'm all right, thanks."

"Did you—what were you going to do with my dog?" Isabel demanded.

"Say, did you come—Well, what'd yer know about that! Why do you want to know? Goin' to give him to me, if I was goin' to swipe him? That's what I was, sis! He ain't such a much of a dog, but I'd get fifty cents for him," said the youth.

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“Fifty cents! For that dog!” Isabel’s angry scorn made her almost unable to speak. “You *were* going to steal him? I thought so!”

“Great head! What else’d I do with him? Keep him for a pal, or eat him?” sneered this unworthy brother of poor little Poppy.

It was the recollection of how wretched Poppy would feel if she could know that one of her brothers was such as this, and the fear that he might reveal himself to her, that forced Isabel to speak patiently to him.

“I’ve been thinking that I should not have promised you fifty dollars—”

The Meiggs youth took a step toward her, scowling horribly, fist upraised.

“Here you, none of that! You do what you said, or I’ll get busy,” he threatened.

“I know I’ll never be able to get fifty dollars,” Isabel went on, not flinching from his furious face, and menacing fist. “I didn’t stop to reckon. I intend to do what I said, but I can’t send so much. I’ll send what I can get.”

“Say, did you come back to tell me that? Don’t you know I can kill you, an’ keep the dog? Who’s to know?” demanded Garland Meiggs wondering, and unwillingly admiring this singular courage in slender little Isabel, whom a blow from his brawny hand would lay low.

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"I don't seem to be afraid at all, now," said Isabel truthfully, looking steadily up into his face. "You're so dreadfully wicked, I just despise you. I came back because I knew I couldn't do what I'd said I'd do, and I had to give you notice."

The Meiggs youth swore softly under his breath, and stared at her, frowning. He did not seem to know how to deal with such an extraordinary little girl.

"What will you do, then? How much'll you send, you young freak?" he demanded.

"As much as I can. I can't ask any one for money to send, for no one would let you have it, so I mean to earn it, and I know how I can get quite a little," said Isabel.

"Twenty five?" persisted Meiggs.

Isabel considered before answering, and shifted heavy Bunkie, whom she had not dared let down out of her arms.

"Say! Put him down, you lunny; I won't touch your cur," Meiggs said. "If I wanted to, yer hangin' to him wouldn't stop me."

He was beginning to admire plucky Isabel.

"I think, maybe, I can send you twenty-five dollars, but I don't like to say positively, unless I know," Isabel said after a pause of calculation.

"That would be a hundred people, if we

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charged twenty-five cents apiece, and that would be a good many people, yet I'm afraid we couldn't charge more."

"What's the idea?" asked Meiggs curiously.

"A concert," said Isabel turning away; she had no intention of entering into conversation with him. "Now I've notified you, which I had to do as long as I'd promised too much. I'll send what I send where you told me to."

She walked away, not hurrying, still with head held high, and an air of unruffled dignity.

The Meiggs person watched her away, without an attempt to interfere with her. He had never encountered anything at all like this timid, yet brave little person, who not only despised him, but told him so, yet who returned to what she unmistakably feared and loathed, to explain wherein she must alter a promise. There was no doubt that she would keep her word, Meiggs said to himself, and whatever she sent would be a windfall without labor on his part. Better let her go unharmed, dog and all, than torment her. Yet he longed to catch her and drag her back, just to see what the plucky little creature would do!

Isabel met Prue and Mark coming to look for her; everyone whom she had left in the Bottle Imp and buckboard was getting alarmed over her delay.

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“Isa, where *have* you been?” Prue reproached her as soon as they were within earshot.

“Well, only listen to what I’ve got to tell you!” cried Isabel. “I’m so glad you came! Poppy mustn’t know, and I was wondering how to get you off alone. Let’s sit down here, just a few minutes. I’ll talk fast, and I must tell you by ourselves! Besides I’m tired. I’ve been holding Bunkie, and he’s pretty heavy, when you’re standing up. Then I went back, and you know it’s quite a distance.”

“Goodness me, how do we know!” cried Prue, impatiently, but reasonably. “We don’t know where you’ve been. But the Burkes are worried, I can tell you, and Carita’s crying for you, so we can’t stay here more than a jiffy.”

“All right.” Isabel agreed, and dropped wearily upon the grass.

Then she poured out her story, making it short, and arose to go on, for the distance to where the Bottle Imp had been halted for lunch was great enough to allow discussion of plans before reaching it.

Mark and Prue were more amazed over what she told them that she had expected them to be.

“Of all things I *ever* heard!” exclaimed Prue, almost panting.

“See here, Isa, it doesn’t do to be too brave,

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and I don't honestly think you owed any explanation of why you sent less money to such a good-for-nothing as that," said Mark, already with a man's sensible outlook upon obligations. "But you sure are a queer, dear piece of pluck! And you're dead right to keep this chap from tormenting Poppy. Poor kid! And she's so anxious to learn, and to be fine and nice! It isn't as though he'd ever been anything to her. He must be like their mother; she ran off, and left the whole lot of children. I suppose the father was all right, because he looked after them till he got killed, and then they were all scattered everywhere. But I'm not sure about giving him money, Isa. Most likely he'll keep at us, if he gets it once, and Poppy'll find out about him in the end."

"But you must help me this time, Mark Jack-in-the-Box! Because I've promised, and I've got to keep my word. You see I had to promise, because Bunkie and I were there alone, and he could have killed either of us, or both of us, as easy! I *had* to do something! And if he tries to get any more money, we'll tell our fathers and mothers, and let them settle him. But this time, Mark, we've got to send money."

"I wonder where we'd get it?" hinted Mark.

"I have some; dad gave me enough for the

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trip in case anything terribly necessary had to be bought—ice cream sodas, or anything like that—and you have some, both of you, but we couldn't scrape together much, now that we're headed toward home and more supplies. Mine's nearly gone. How much do you have to send?"

"Twenty-five," said Isabel feebly.

"Dollars?" cried Prue, before Mark had time to speak. "Isabel Lindsay, you're crazy! I should think Mark *would* ask where we're to get it!"

"I thought a concert—" began Isabel, but got no farther.

"A what?" Prue almost shrieked. "What concert? Whose concert? Who'd give it?"

"We would," Isabel rallied to her own defense. "We'd take a barn or something—somebody'd have to lend it—and we'd sing and—and—maybe we could act?"

Isabel weakened as she saw the amazement, and the strong disapproval on Mark's face, while Prue looked positively aghast.

"Crazy! I said so!" murmured Prue.

"It doesn't seem to me we'd get much money, but I do think we might have a lot of fun," Mark said, feeling that he must come to poor Isabel's rescue. "We'd get twenty-five dollars' worth of sport, giving a concert to the natives!"

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“What should you tell Mr. Burke? He’ll never let you send money to that man,” Prue objected.

“Yes, he would!” Isabel smiled happily, knowing from experience that Thomas Burke could not deny her.

“Here comes Poppy! We’ve got to stop talking about it. Let’s ask her to let us three drive on the buckboard this afternoon; then we can finish up,” said Mark.

Poppy came rushing upon them, warm and breathless, waving her arms frantically.

“First you go, Isa, and we all thought you’d died or fainted away! And then Mark and Prue go to hunt you and don’t come back, and now they let me come, and I’m going to make you hurry!” Poppy called in broken sentences, as her breath let her speak. “Who’s come—s’pose? Guess!”

“Couldn’t,” said Prue. “Must have come since we left.”

“Well, ’course, if you didn’t see him!” Poppy scorned her. “Guess, I tell you!”

“I know who I wish it was,” said Mark slowly, “and that’s Mr. de Nerval.”

“Guessed first time!” Poppy cried triumphantly, clapping her hands. “Only you didn’t

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guess; you said you *wished!* Well, that's who 'tis!"

"Oh, Mark, if he would!" gasped Isabel, knowing why Mark had wished that the arrival might prove to be the great singer.

"I'll bet anything you like he'd think it the best kind of fun!" said Mark. "He's the kind that knows fun when he sees it, and he's a whole lot boy, still.

The four who were the crew of the Bottle Imp "hastened to rejoin their ship" as Mark described their rapid trot down the road toward the wagon.

They found the Burkes exceedingly uneasy over the absence of all their charges at once. They were inclined to censure Isabel for staying, till they heard from her the story of her adventures, omitting the important part of them that would have revealed who the young man was that had attempted to steal Bunkie.

Mr. de Nerval looked delighted to see the children again—Poppy he had already seen. He was seated with Carita on his lap, talking to her in Italian, and the little creature was listening intently, sometimes replying with a few words in the same tongue. Her short memory of but four years in the world, stirred under the spell of her mother's language and she watched Raoul de Nerval's face intently; plainly she was puzzled

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by something, she was far too young to know what. Then he sang to the baby, and she sang to him. With but a few repetitions Carita learned from the great singer the delicately pretty setting of Robert Louis Stevenson's: "Singing."

"Of speckled eggs the birdie sings
And nests among the trees;
The sailor sings of ropes and things
In ships upon the sea."

"She has the gift of her parents' parent-land, this little one," said Raoul de Nerval. "She is too tiny to prophesy as to her voice, but ear and feeling has she! What memory of his childhood had Stevenson! Not memory so much, as keeping forever a child. I greatly love that tiny song—and the tiny singer!" he added, kissing Carita's flushed cheek with a fervor that won all that he might have lacked of Mrs. Burke's regard.

"Mr. de Nerval is goin' with us a little way," announced Mr. Burke. "He came along the road, never lookin' to see us, an' the wagon, when here he found us! He was just trampin'. He's goin' a little way with us in the wagon, which you'll be none the worse for hearin', I'm thinkin', hearties of the crew!"

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“Oh, how nice!” “Oh, how lucky!” cried Isabel and Mark together.

“Please, Pops, let Mark and me have the buckboard a while, and you stay with Prue in the Bottle Imp! We’ve something we want to tell Mr. de Nerval, but you’ll know it after we’ve told him, and got his advice. Would you mind driving with us, all by ourselves, just a little while, Mr. de Nerval?”

“I’d like it exceedingly, Isabel, dear little lady,” said Raoul de Nerval with a deep bow. “I am honored to be selected as confidant and councilor.”

“Well, I like secrets myself, and I like to ride with Mr. de Vernal—Nerval,” said Poppy, half minded to object.

But she thought better of it, and added: “But whatever Isabel wants, goes!”

Isabel seated herself on the floor of the buckboard, at Mr. Nerval’s feet, in order to be where she might not miss a word, nor an opportunity to say a word, while Mark drove and Mr. de Nerval sat beside him, on the single seat of the old-fashioned vehicle.

Isabel told the story of her adventure once more, and this time told it entirely.

“I promised, because Poppy must *not* see that person,” she ended. “And now I must get the

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money. Do you think we could have a concert, sell tickets, and all of us sing? Get the country people to buy, stop somewhere that the people need fun? Would it be very awful—our singing?”

“What strange children are the American children!” said Mr. de Nerval, eyeing Isabel with amazement. “I should lecture you, my dear, on your imprudence, but I am not fond of prudence, especially, and I find your anxiety to save your little glowing, singing friend beautiful. I think your singing would give much pleasure to any one with appreciation. It is sweet to hear children sing, who have talent! But mes petits enfants, have you lost sight of the sport it will be? Such a lark! And larks are the birds that sing, above all others! I cannot understand a lady and gentleman of your age, forgetting that they are proposing an immensity of fun, n'est-ce pas? Now one word: Would you permit that I add myself to your company for a few days, and take part in this proposed concert? With your permission I will train you in some comedy singing that will delight your bucolic audience. And—you graciously consenting!—I will, myself, sing.”

“I don't care how famous you are, you're a straight good sport!” shouted Mark, so loudly

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that the others ahead of them in the big wagon heard, and turned to see what was happening.

“Oh, Mr. de Nerval, how kind, how dear and kind you are! It is too good to be true that you’ll help us, and approve of us!” cried Isabel, almost overcome by this great good fortune.

“It is only good enough to be true. Nothing can be perfectly true that is not good. It may be actually *so*, but not *true*, because many things are true—that is they are so—which are not good, but anything that is perfectly true must be perfectly good,” said Mr. de Nerval, smilingly enjoying his successful attempt to puzzle this girl and boy, whom he had come to like greatly, and to admire. “And if you will only think of me as dear to you, sweet Isabelle, as you just now called me, I shall be repaid if I take trouble for you—but this concert will not be trouble; it will be the greatest sport, as I have said. When shall it be?”

“Soon; it must be soon, because if the money is not soon sent, that awful man may bother Poppy,” said Isabel.

“We must select the best place to hold it and begin to train for it at once,” declared Raoul de Nerval with refreshing enthusiasm.

XV

THE LUCKY NATIVES

MR. DE NERVAL'S enthusiasm did not cool. Mark had been quite right when he had said that he was "the kind that knew fun when he saw it," and also that he was "a whole lot boy, still."

Mr. de Nerval began at once to get ready for the concert; of course this was necessary since it must so soon be given. He explained to Mr. Burke that he would like to join his travelling party for a few days; he suggested getting a horse to ride beside the Bottle Imp, and, as there really was not room in the wagon for another person, this was done. The horse was hired from a small livery stable in the first village through which they passed, to be returned by Mr. de Nerval when he was through with him. He deposited a hundred dollars, as a guaranty that this would be done, much to the wondering admiration of Poppy, who had no notion of how nearly her happiness was concerned in the events now befalling them all.

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At his request Mr. de Nerval was left to tell Mr. Burke about the concert plan. Just what Mr. de Nerval told him the children could not know; they warned him, repeatedly, not to betray the object of the concert, so perhaps he did not. Then again perhaps he did; understanding better than the children could that the whole affair would amuse Mr. Burke tremendously.

Whatever he was told, Mr. Burke whole-heartedly agreed to the concert-giving, and looked at Isabel with eyes twinkling more than ever during the few days of lively preparations.

“We make for Uplands to give your entertainment,” said Mr. Burke. “Do you get yourselves ready for it, an’ I’ll do the rest. At Uplands there’s never a chance for an evenin’s good time, an’ I’ll lose my guess if the country people don’t turn out to hear you sing to ’em.”

For two days Mr. de Nerval trained his artists. He gave Isabel two sweet and pathetic little songs to sing; they suited her low voice, which had a natural pathos in its tones, rarely heard at her age.

Prue had no solos; she was to help in the choruses, but he taught Poppy to sing three brilliant songs, which her flexible, soaring child’s voice well produced. He taught her also an exceedingly funny little song, which she was to

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sing in costume, her radiant hair to be washed in especially sudsy and soda-charged water to dry it, in order that it should fly around her as she danced the small dance required between the verses. Mark had two songs, and a duet with Isabel, and he offered to whistle bird calls. His father had taught him perfectly to imitate the notes of many birds, and he could whistle like a whole pieful of four and twenty blackbirds. Mr. de Nerval accepted this offer with new enthusiasm.

“It’s going to be *good*, downright good! Not merely a frolic!” he declared. “And I’ll sing at the end, because a grown voice would spoil the effect of children’s voices following it.”

He did not say “the voice of one of the greatest singers in the world,” though it would have been true.

“And the baby must sing: ‘Of speckled eggs the birdie sings,’” declared Mr. de Nerval. “She will not be afraid, and she will delight the audience. Now I’m going to see what I can buy by way of costume for Poppy. Mark, will you come with me? And I want also to see if I can hire a piano, somewhere, and what we’re to do for a hall. And we must announce ourselves, somehow, but not with my real name.”

They had reached Uplands, a pretty, sleepy

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village, encircled by hills and fertile farms; the concert was to be on the next evening.

Prue looked at him, with her characteristic foresight, considering these facts, and guessing at what this would cost; none of the other children gave expenses a thought.

"I should think," observed Prue, "that twenty-five dollars would cost less." By which she did not mean that twenty-five dollars was on the market for sale, but that sending the sum promised, outright, to the Meiggs pirate would be less expense than paying the costs of the concert.

Isabel frowned at her warningly, for Mr. Burke was within hearing. He did not appear to hear what Prue said, which made astute Isabel wonder if it were possible that he knew from Mr. de Nerval the whole story of giving the concert.

Raoul de Nerval turned instantly upon Prue.

"It is not merely the profit, my dear," he said. "Think of the art at stake! And never pause to consider the profit!"

"And think of the lucky natives who'll hear us!" Mark supplemented him.

He departed with Mr. de Nerval to attend to the three important items which he had enumerated.

Mark came back, glowing with enthusiasm for Raoul de Nerval.

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“My gracious, he’s not only an artist; he’s a wizard!” he declared, taking the three little girls successively by the arm and talking hard, his left hand waving. “Why those country Jakes were dead set against the whole thing, letting us have the schoolhouse—there’s no hall here—renting a piano, coming to the concert, everything! They acted as if they were sure we were going to blow them up, if they came into a building we were using! They noticed Mr. de Nerval’s accent, and you could see they were sure any one born outside of America, probably, even of the state, was a criminal! I’ll never tell you how he did it, but he did it! He got them to let us use the schoolhouse, and a cranky old spinster said she’d rent her piano to us, and they all kind of said they’d come. They wouldn’t say it straight out; I think it would give them a pain to say something straight out that some one else wanted them to say!—but they’re coming all right! And Mr. de Nerval’s a wizard! He bought a costume for Pops that will be great. There wasn’t such a thing in Uplands as a costume, but he bought some different things that will make a hit, when you put them together. Oh, he’s a wizard!”

But Mr. de Nerval gave credit to the boy himself for much of his success. “He is such a charming lad, so modest with his great charm, his

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beauty, his grace, his cleverness, that no one could resist him," he said to Mrs. Burke. "I got Mark to coax a little, in his winning manner; as if he was sure no one could refuse to do anything so kind and pleasant as the thing he asked them to do, and one could see the somewhat surly sons—and grouchier daughters!—of the soil, thawing fast under the sunshine of Mark's irresistible smile."

"Mark's like no boy I ever saw," agreed Mrs. Burke. "He has all sides in himself; he's gentle and manly; brave and sensitive; beautiful and clever, yet without a bit of vanity. He's more like you'd think a boy might have been in Eden, than any child I ever saw, for he's full of something that puts you in mind of a creature that grew out of doors, unharmed by human beings—and indeed, that's what he is!"

The next day was so filled with business that it flew away, and yet seemed long, as time does when one is using it to its utmost value.

Poppy, alone, refused to come to terms with duty. She behaved somewhat as Hurrah did when he was to be put into the shafts; she fooled and played, and would not rehearse properly, hardly would stand still to let Mrs. Burke fit the really effective costume which Mr. de Nerval's cleverness had got together for her.

“Now, Poppy, you’ve got to! There’s just one thing about it: you’ve *got* to! How can you, when Mr. de Nerval’s so interested? And if you only knew—” Prue said. She got no farther. Isabel jumped up, and down crying:

“Oh, is it a bee? Is it a bee?” wildly dashing at an imaginary something in the air, till she caught Prue’s attention, and threatened her behind Poppy’s back, warning her to be careful what she said; and the day was saved.

“It is the artistic temperament that afflicts Poppy; she is nervous, but she need not be,” said Mr. de Nerval kindly, so kindly that Poppy was ashamed of her flightiness, and submitted to being fitted.

“Let us go to the schoolhouse, Marcus *gracilimus*,” suggested Raoul de Nerval. “I must try how I can make the piano sound least ill. I suspect it will be quite bad.”

The piano had been brought into the schoolhouse. Mr. de Nerval opened, and tried it. It justified his suspicion of it; a thin-toned old piano, never good, badly in need of tuning, with two important keys requiring to be poked up, before they could be struck down to emit a sound.

Raoul de Nerval sat down to it, and, in spite of its infirmities, not to say fatal diseases, he succeeded in getting out of it sounds that filled Mark

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with new wonder and admiration for this musician's extraordinary talent.

"Oh, we shall get along with it, Mark, never fear!" he said. "Now our early supper, then our grand performance! I feel sure that our audience will gather early."

It did. Mrs. Burke was to act as doorkeeper, Mr. Burke holding himself ready to render services with heavier tasks.

Twenty-five cents was the admission price, adults and children alike. Mr. de Nerval had guaranteed "money back if the performance was not satisfactory."

Remembering the hundreds of dollars paid him nightly for singing, and the prices at which seats were sold for hearing him, he greatly enjoyed giving this pledge. The schoolroom was early filled, and Mrs. Burke had thirty dollars in the bag, with which she had provided herself to carry the receipts. Her duty done, she slipped into a vacant seat, leaving stragglers, who were both late and dishonorable, to come in without paying, if they would, and gave herself up to enjoying herself.

A tuneful little chorus opened the concert, followed by Isabel's first solo; then a solo by Mark, and next Isabel and Mark's duet. By this time the audience was eagerly listening;

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they had not expected such pleasure from children's singing.

When Mark gave his bird calls, a man in the audience laughed aloud from sheer pleasure.

"Catbird, b'gum! And a chewink!" he cried. "Say, you've got 'em down right, boy!"

When Poppy sang there was a hush of surprise over the crowded room, for by this time it was crowded. She sang wonderfully; the clear, true, child voice soaring up and up, trilling like a lark. Poppy had instantly understood Mr. de Nerval's instructions, and her singing imitated that of a trained artist in a way that delighted everybody, but him most, as best knowing its value.

"I bet she'll beat Putty!" called out some one, and Isabel and Mark, at least, knew that the woman meant Patti. They went into spasms of laughter, crouching out of sight behind staid Prue. There was no space behind the platform; the artists had to sit on the stage awaiting their turns.

Mr. de Nerval signalled to Mark, who went down to the front row of seats, and took little Carita by the hand, to lead her to the stage. The little creature, with her large soft eyes gazing up at her friends on the stage, came, unafraid, and took her place alone, in the middle of the stage.

There was a burst of applause, instantly

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checked for fear of frightening the child, but she showed no sign of consciousness.

Isabel bent to her and hummed the first line of her song. Mr. de Nerval softly played the air; Carita had not been trained to sing with a piano accompaniment, but the small girl sang without a mistake her dear little song, her thread of voice reaching to the door.

“Such a baby!” cried one woman. “Such a darling!” cried another. “So pretty, too!” a third.

Then the applause came, a storm of it. Mrs. Burke was crimson with pride in her treasure. The childless woman was so happy in having Carita that it was pathetic.

“Oh, God love her!” she said aloud, wiping her eyes.

“Well, doesn’t He?” said the Methodist minister, sitting next to her; a long, solemn-looking man, not in the least like one to join in such an expression.

All the other numbers went off well, but Poppy, in costume, with her floating, glowing hair, and her little dance between verses, was more than a success. She received such applause that there was nothing to be done but to repeat the song, which she did, with ten times its first spirit, being by that time wound up to the highest pitch by her own performance.

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Then, all the children being through with their contributions, Raoul de Nerval sang.

There was not a sound in the room as the marvellous voice filled it; deep and high, sweet and brilliant, indescribably lovely. No one there had ever before heard such singing. No one knew that they were having a treat for which the world would have sacrificed much, but the audience knew that it was listening to almost unearthly beauty of sounds, and it listened, spell-bound.

Everything must end. Raoul de Nerval fell into a melody of Schumann's as a finale, and the concert was over.

"Say, young boy, he can sing!" said a farmer to Mark.

"Yes, he can," agreed Mark.

Then he had an inspiration. "He's a great singer, a famous singer," he said. "He doesn't want his real name known. I'll ask him to send it to you next fall, when it won't make any difference; his vacation will be over. If he will do this, you'll know who you've heard, and that he surely *can* sing!"

"Well, whatever his name is, I guess we're on to his singin', as 'tis," retorted the farmer. "You've given us an awful good show, and a real pleasant evenin', and instid of gettin' our money back,

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I, for one'd be willing to pay at least a quarter more a head, for my whole fam'ly."

"No, indeed; glad you liked it a quarter's worth!" cried Mark laughing, and joined the others, gathered around Mrs. Burke to count up results.

"Thirty one dollars and fifty cents. Six people came in late, and hunted me up, afterwards, to pay their admissions," announced Mrs. Burke. "I understand I'm to hand it all over to Isabel—that right?"

"That's right," said Mr. de Nerval, and Isabel looked embarrassed. Suddenly she realized that it would be difficult to explain what she had done with the money. Consequently, being embarrassed she cried:

"But what shall I do with the six dollars and a half?"

Instantly Poppy pounced upon her, crying:

"Six dollars and a half! What'll you do with the—the—other part, the most of it?"

Although she was quick at arithmetic, Poppy was too excited to subtract six and a half from thirty-one and a half, on the spot. Her brain was throbbing under her out-standing halo of hair, that looked more than ever like flames.

"That," said Prue, with admirable presence of mind, and such solemnity, that even irrepressible

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Poppy was subdued, "is something that you cannot know yet, Poppy, because Isabel may not tell you, but you shall know, just as soon as the right time comes. You must not ask."

"You must all get to bed, and to sleep just as fast as you can," declared Mrs. Burke, rocking Carita in her arms, whose dark head was nodding. "You all look as if you were going to fly away, you're that excited—except Poppy, and she looks as if she had flown away! Up some chimney, and lighted here! It's late, and to-morrow we'll be startin' away from Uplands betimes. What's my man, Tom, doin'?"

"He's gone after the men to take away the piano. Mr. de Nerval had to promise to get it home to-night, or the woman who owned it wouldn't let him have it," explained Mark. "Mr. de Nerval, we couldn't thank you, Isa, Prue, Poppy and I, but we do."

"No, dear boy, it is I who thanks you for the best frolic I've had in years," said Mr. de Nerval sincerely. "It was all fun for me, and you are talented youngsters. Do you think, Mark, that I should be received if I rode with you to Greenacres to see your father? I should like to talk of Poppy to her protectors. As to my horse, I will write his owners that I will get him back to them later; they have my deposit for him. Should

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I be frowned upon if I rode beside you to Greenacres, will you honestly tell me?"

"Indeed you would not be! Indeed you'd be welcome!" cried Mark. "Will you go? We were wondering how we could say good-by to you! You're not the great singer to us now; you're some one we love!"

"What a truly sweet speech, dear boy!" cried Mr. de Nerval, throwing his arm over Mark's shoulder, and drawing him close. "I may be a great singer, but I am also a lonely man, and I love your love!"

"Come now," said Mr. Burke, suddenly appearing, "I've got the carters here, an' let my crew be off to sleep! In the mornin' we start toward Greenacres, for, alas, an' worse luck, the voyage of the Bottle Imp is nearly over!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE BOTTLE IMP COMES TO ANCHOR

THE road from Uplands ascended in the direction of Greenacres.

The Bottle Imp, and its attendant buckboard, climbed the hills on the morning after the concert, and soon Uplands looked like down lands, lying as it now did below them.

Isabel and Mark had risen early to dispatch twenty-five dollars to Garland Meiggs, at Lytton, according to agreement; they were waiting at the post office of the small village for it to open, which it did not do till seven; they had to wait nearly an hour.

Mark wrote an excellent hand, quite a grown-up hand, so he folded the postal money order within a sheet of paper, on which he boldly wrote:

“Any further attempt to annoy will not only not get any money for you, but will be properly punished.” And he signed it with a great flourish: “Mr. M. Hawthorne.” Which signature, though not in correct form, looked most manly and decided.

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It was a real relief to get the money off, and the whole unpleasant matter closed, as Isabel and Mark believed it to be, although it was to open up again later on.

The girl and boy hurried back to the Bottle Imp, and were late to breakfast. They had a hard time fending off Poppy's questions, who was no end curious as to what they had been doing, where they had been. She was much too sharp not to see that there was a mystery afoot, that was a mystery only to her, clearly understood by all the others.

"Oh, it's so lovely, so perfectly lovely, to be driving along these roads early every morning!" sighed Isabel, sniffing the pungent odors of hemlock and pine as they slowly mounted the hills, plentifully grown with these trees.

"Do you think we shall not go off again, after we get to Greenacres this time?"

"Would you be sorry to stay at home?" asked Mr. Burke.

"I miss home a great deal," said Isabel considering. "You know my mother is my dearest, most intimate friend! And Mr. Harvey Lindsay, my father, is a gentleman I like ever so well! And I miss Mark's house, and Motherkins, and his nice dad, and Château Branche, and our woods, and the brook, and everything!

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But this has been such a very lovely trip, such a wonderful trip, when you think of all that's happened! I believe I'd like to start out once more! Shall we?"

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Burke, "that's accordin'! If you're not so well that you don't need it, we'll go, and be glad to. But if you're all cured—and it's my belief that's what the doctors will tell you—then I'd want to settle down in my own house, at 906 North Street, and begin livin' with my little girl, that the good God sent; me needin' her and her needin' me! And she's needin' dresses, and I'd like to be fixin' her up the way you can't, livin' in a cart. So we'll see, Isabel, my sweet, and it's sad I'll be, myself, endin' this summer, which has been such a fine one, however I'd like to be at home with Carita."

"Don't you think it's rather like riding in a closed coach, with a knight on horseback guarding you, the way they did in old-time stories, to have Mr. de Nerval riding that horse beside the wagon?" asked Prue unexpectedly; it was usually Isabel, or Mark, who made this sort of suggestion. "But, of course," Prue continued, "they always rode a steed, and I suppose you couldn't call that livery horse a steed; he's too calm."

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Isabel, Poppy and Mark laughed; the livery stable hack was surely at least "calm!"

These final four days of the journey were long, because they were filled with conflicting feelings. The children clung to each hour left them of this happy gypsying, yet with home ahead of them, and all that they best loved awaiting them, it was not possible to escape the strain of impatience to get there.

Isabel expressed the contradictions of these days when she said:

"I feel as if I were two cherries tied on each end of a string, and two chickens had picked up each of them, and were walking off in opposite directions! I want to hold the wheels still, so they can't turn, yet I want to jump up and fly home!"

"When you want two things that can't be had at the same time, then be glad of whichever you get, and forget all about the other," advised Mr. de Nerval, who was at that moment riding on a walk beside the buckboard in which Prue and Isabel were just then driving alone.

On the fourth day, after three wonderful nights in camp, when Mr. de Nerval had sung and sung to them beside a blazing fire that the August evening chill made welcome, and beneath which they roasted potatoes, while corn roasted in the coals, the Bottle Imp began to

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descend toward the river. It turned into a familiar road, at the end of which, though still some eight miles distant, lay Greenacres.

“Oh my!” cried Poppy later, when the tallest spire of the town came in sight. “My grandmother, just look there!”

“Not your grandmother, Pops; your mother-town though!” laughed Mark, but his own eyes were bright with gladness, and his cheeks were flushed.

Greenacres surely looked pretty to the children as they came into it. They had seen many charming villages; a succession of lovely meadows and wooded hills, and one large, thriving town, but Greenacres, with its neat streets; its great overhanging elms; its orderly lawns and well-designed houses; its glimpses of the river every now and again, as one went past cross streets revealing it—where was there another such beautiful town as Greenacres?

“Well, it takes the cake here!” cried Poppy, jumping up and down in her seat, in a frenzy of joyous welcome to her home.

Mr. de Nerval laughed at the enthusiasts, but it was with a tender understanding, and he bent over from “his steed” to sing softly to the children:

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“‘A charm from the skies seems to hallow us
there

Which seek thro' the world is ne'er met with
elsewhere.’”

Whereupon all four took up the refrain:

“‘Home, home, home, sweet home!’”

The melancholy old song had never before seemed to them so alive, so true.

That was it! Other places might be ever so beautiful; Greenacres was *home*, where their hearts stayed. They discovered, to their surprise, that all this time, in all the delights of gypsying in the Bottle Imp, their hearts had been right here, in Greenacres!

And then, oh, then the Hawthorne house came in sight! Mr. Burke had made a turn that took him directly thither.

Isabel and Prue nobly restrained any expression of longing to fly, first, to their own homes, much as they yearned to hug their mothers and to be hugged by them, and Prue had sisters for whom she longed, though at times they tried her somewhat when she was at home.

They could not know, for they had not been told, that a telephone message had been sent on the way to Greenacres, asking Mrs. Wayne and

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Mrs. Lindsay to be at Hawthorne House when they arrived, but this was the case.

Therefore as the Bottle Imp and the buckboard came up the driveway, with Bunkie wildly barking his satisfaction at coming home, and Semp out over the wheels and tearing ahead to get to Mr. Hawthorne, there on the piazza stood, not only dear little Motherkins, and "Mr. Daddé," as Isabel and Prue had called Mark's daddy when they first knew him, and Flossie Doolittle and Ichabod Lemuel Rudd, and Pin-cushion, with her twin kittens, but Isabel's mother and Prue's mother, their impatience evident as they espied their little girls standing up in the wagon, wildly waving to them.

"Great Scott!" shrieked Poppy, and out she went, without waiting for the wagon to stop, and sprawled full length in the driveway, so that the intelligent Cork had to step over her body as he went on, there being no time for Mr. Burke to check him. But Cork did step over her, and Poppy picked herself up and ran on, catapulting on Motherkins, none the worse for her rashness except that she had collected gravel.

"That Poppy!" exclaimed Mr. Burke. "Sure, I don't know whether she's saved to be a great singer, or not, but by all right she should be killed this long time, yet nothin' harms her!

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There was a tumult of welcome on the piazza when the other three children followed Poppy, but by the proper method of dismounting. Everybody uttered exclamations of delight at Isabel's browned cheeks and the soft color mingling with the tan on them.

"My darling, you look *well!*" cried Mrs. Lindsay, and there was a whole psalm of thanksgiving in her voice.

Mr. de Nerval sat on his horse for a few moments, observing the scene with high delight, glad to be forgotten for so good a reason.

But Mr. Hawthorne soon was conscious of the neglected and famous guest; he hurried down the steps to him.

"Not dismounted, Mr. de Nerval?" he cried. "I am mortified, but you know we are fond of these four wanderers! Pray come in! Ichabod, will you please take this horse?"

"I do not mean to intrude, Mr. Hawthorne," said Mr. de Nerval, studying and admiring his host's remarkably sensitive and handsome face, like and yet unlike to Mark's play of constantly varying expression. "I have come to discuss with you the future of that singularly talented bit of electricity which you shelter, and which you call Poppy."

"There is plenty of time for that, Mr. de Ner-

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val," said Mr. Hawthorne. "We are delighted, my mother and I, to have a chance to thank you for your kindness to our boy, and his little girl-comrades, of whom we are almost as fond as of Mark. So Poppy's fate can wait—I hope? You are not obliged to leave us immediately?"

"Ah, no; I am on a long vacation, hiding myself, because I was badly over-tired, but I had no intention of intruding," said Raoul de Nerval, and Mr. Hawthorne saw why Mark, in writing of him, had said that "he was like a big boy."

"I don't think that would be the word for a visit to us," said Mr. Hawthorne. His smile said more than his words, and Raoul de Nerval responded to it at once.

"You are, indeed, Mark's father!" he said, laying his hand on his host's shoulder, and accepting his friendship with his hospitality.

After they had supped, and the flood of talking had run somewhat slower and little Carita, who had instantly loved and been loved by Motherkins, had gone contentedly to sleep in her lap, the four newly-arrived children set out to explore their best-loved spots, while Mr. Hawthorne and Mr. de Nerval sat with their cigars on the eastern end of the piazza, enjoying the fragrant night air, the rising moon, and discussing unconscious Poppy, over whose future Mr. de

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Nerval wished to extend his help. He took seriously the queer child's promise of one day delighting the world with her voice, and her use of it.

"Let's go to the Toy Shop first!" cried Prue.

When Mark had been known to the little girls only by the nickname they gave him of "Jack-in-the-Box," because of his mysterious appearances and disappearances, they had called the place where they first met him "the Toy Shop," since only in a toy shop does one buy jack-in-the-boxes.

It was a pretty little glade-like clearance in the woods, dear to the children, but to-night there was not time to do more than to salute it happily, glad to see it again, and to see it unchanged. Then they ran on to Château Branche, and climbed up into it, still more glad to get back to this ideal playhouse.

"Oh, I don't know, Isa, about going in the Bottle Imp again," said Prue slowly. "It was perfectly lovely, and I hated to think we weren't going back in it, but now—well, isn't this great!"

"It is greatest!" affirmed Isabel, cutting out other comparisons.

"Even if you aren't quite—quite—" Prue hesitated; she disliked suggesting to Isabel that she might not be perfectly well.

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"Quite spotless? On my lungs? All right, Prue! If I'm not, what then?" Isabel laughed.

"I think, perhaps, you could get the doctor to let you sit here every day for the rest of the summer. It's so lovely up in Château Branche!" Prue finished her sentence and snuggled up Pincushion's twin kittens.

Pincushion was bringing up her children to follow Mark as she had always followed him; now she and the fluffy pair of innocents were in the tree with their human friends, though the kittens had been helped up. Bunkie sat below, just as he had always sat; Semp lay beautifully spread out beside him. It did not seem to the children that they could have been away.

Mrs. Lindsay came out to the tree, seeking Isabel. She paused beneath it.

"Isabel, dear," she said, "will you come back to Hawthorne House? Mr. Burke is anxious to have it decided whether he is to take you with him again, so we telephoned the doctor to come up and see how he finds you. He is waiting for you. You may come back to Château Branche, if Prue and Poppy and Mark care to wait for you here; it will not be long. Then I will come this way and pick you up when we go home tonight; Mrs. Wayne and I will come this way."

Isabel descended from the platform house in

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the great pine, and joined her mother. The other three watched her away, appearing and disappearing under the trees. The shadows of the limbs cut off the moonlight, yet the spaces allowed it to fall on Mrs. Lindsay and Isabel, fondly encircling each other with their arms, and leaning toward each other as they walked.

“Pretty nice, Isa Bell!” said Mark.

“No one else so sweet, so wonderful as Isa,” said Prue.

“Pooh! S’pose you think no one else knows it!” Poppy scorned her. Then she added in quite another tone, after a moment’s silence, what the other two were thinking.

“What’d you s’pose that old doctor’ll say? Suppose Isabel wasn’t well, like we think she is! S’posing she would never be, not *ever*!”

“Silliness!” cried Prue sharply. “Silliness! We know she is; she will be!”

After this the two little girls, and the one boy, sat in Château Branche quietly waiting in silence for Isabel to return.

At last she came running, catching her toe in a ropery root and tripping, but then righting herself and coming on, still running.

“It’s all right!” Mark breathed the words, his low voice tense.

Isabel halted under the tree.

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"Give me a hand up, please, Mark Jack-in-the-Box!" she cried gaily.

Then, as up she came, she said, and her lovely face was all alight with happiness, not merely over the good news for herself, but that she knew her comrades were to be made happy by it:

"Well, girls and boy, what do you think? Just what we *did* think! The doctor says I am not the least bit in the world spotted now! He says it has all gone off beautifully; not a sign of a spot on my lung now! That blessed Bottle Imp, and our fine times, have cured me!"

"Isa!" cried Prue, and hugged Isabel violently, while Poppy, managing to catch Isabel around the waist at the same time that Prue got her around the neck, nearly made her lose her balance and fall out of Château Branche.

"You nice Isa!" said Mark, as if all the credit of their escaping a keen sorrow were Isabel's.

"Then we sha'n't go out in the Bottle Imp again?" said Poppy.

"Not on a trip. Mr. Burke is going right back to Hertonsburg in the morning to let Mrs. Burke sew for that dear little Carita! She's so crazy to do it! I'm glad not to have to ask her to stay away from home any longer for me. Though what we'll do without that baby, I don't see! The sweet thing!" cried Isabel. "And, Poppy, Mr.

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de Nerval is to be a sort of guardian to you, with Mr. Hawthorne, and if you still can sing when you're old enough to be trained, he'll see that you have the best training, learn to be a fine, maybe even a great, singer. Isn't that news?"

Poppy turned painfully crimson, and choked.

"Me? Poppy Meiggs? Well, what'd you you know about that!" she gasped.

It was slang, forbidden to Poppy, but even Prue, the strict, felt that under such stirring circumstances, it was wise to pass it over.

"Our mothers are coming right along in a minute, Prue; it's after ten. We'd better be down, and ready to go when they come. They're having the nicest time up at the house, perfectly fine time! They're sort of celebrating our getting home, and my being quite, quite cured, Poppy's luck, Mr. de Nerval's visiting us, Mrs. Burke having the darling child, when she was so missing her own children, and even our finding little Jean Lamb—Mr. Burke was telling it all over again, though we did write it. Mr. de Nerval has been singing the dearest songs; out of the south of France, he said they were, and the doctor is perfectly happy. He says he'll never go on another professional call as long as Mr. de Nerval will sing for him! Poor, nice Doctor! He

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loves music dearly, and he doesn't get a chance to hear it, often!"

"We ought to have stayed up at the house," said Prue.

"No indeed!" Mark quickly set her right. "We have heard Mr. de Nerval sing, and we shall again. What is half as nice as Château Branche in this moonlight, with the piney smell all around us, and that little owl, over there, cheering about it? I'll bet none of you heard him! I've been listening to him for ten minutes, and now I see him all hunched up on a limb! And aren't we celebrating, too, in a quiet way? But I tell you Isa's cure is getting celebrated all right—by me, for one! And the little owl!"

"Oh, Mark, it is nice, isn't it!" sighed Isabel.

And at that moment her mother called:

"Isabel, Isabel, dearest! Ready!"

And Mrs. Wayne echoed: "Prue, Prudence child! Time to go home!"

"All ready, mothers both!" Isabel called back, and the four children came down from their beloved pine tree residence.

"All ready for home, motherums, and its going to be nice to get into my dear room and comfy bed, though gypsying was fine! Good night, Poppy and Mark! Good-by, for a while! Sleep sound and dream of our blessed Bottle Imp!

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Dream nice things about it, for it has cured me!"

"Good night, Isa, you peach! It had better cure you!" cried Poppy with a parting squeeze.

"So say we all of us, Isabel," Mark echoed. "Good night! And I, for one, think the Bottle Imp was more of a Bottle Angel to us! We've had a trip!"

"We've had a voyage!" Isabel corrected him. "A voyage which the crew of the Bottle Imp could never forget. But after all it's nice to be at anchor—anchored to my anchor!" Isabel put an arm around her adored mother, and held her close, to point her meaning.

Then the crew of the Bottle Imp dispersed, under the moonlight shadows, to a refreshing sleep.

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