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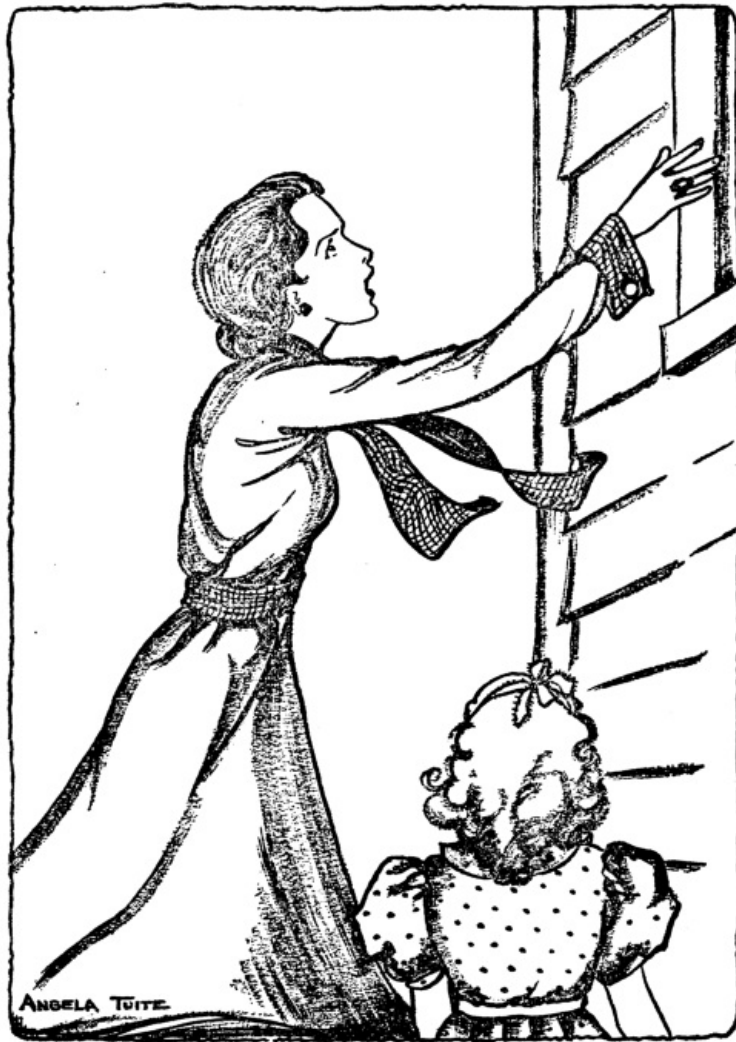
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Heart of Gold



"Peace, Peace! Come down. You'll fall! You'll fall!"

HEART *of* GOLD

BY

RUTH ALBERTA BROWN

Author of "At the Little Brown House," "The Lilac Lady," "Tabitha at Ivy Hall," "Tabitha's Vacation," "Tabitha's Glory," Etc.



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Heart of Gold

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CHAPTER I

THE GIRL WHO TOOK A DARE

"Attention, children! Close copy books and pass them to the right. Monitors, collect."

Tired Miss Phelps laid down her crayon, with one sweep of her arm erased the letter exercises she had so laboriously traced on the blackboard for her fifty pupils to copy, wiped the clinging chalk from her dry, chapped hands, and sank wearily into her chair beside the littered desk, as she issued her commands in sharp, almost impatient tones. Her head ached fiercely, her brain seemed on fire, the subdued scratching of scores of pens in unskilled fingers set her nerves on edge, and she was ready to collapse with the strain of the day. Yet another hour remained before the afternoon session would draw to a close. How was she ever to hear the stupid geography recitation, or listen to the halting, singsong voices stumble through pages of a Reader too old for their understanding?

Again she glanced at the clock. A full hour of torture, and she was simply longing for bed! A sudden determination seized her. She would read to her scholars instead of listening to the lessons they had prepared to recite! So, selecting a book from the row on her desk, she waited until the blotted, inky copy books had been gleefully whisked shut by their owners, passed across the aisle and gathered in neat piles by the monitors, who creaked solemnly up to the corner table and laid them beside the day's written exercises for the teacher's inspection later. Then they clattered back to their seats and waited with expectant eyes fixed upon Miss Phelps for the next command.

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"Take rest position!"

There was a brisk scraping of feet, a rustling of dresses, and fifty active bodies sat stiffly erect with hands clasped on the desk-tops in front of them. No,—not fifty. One child, a brown-eyed girl with short, riotous curls tumbling about her round, animated face, sat heedless of her surroundings, staring out of the window near her into the bright Spring sunshine, and from her rapt expression it was evident that her thoughts were far away from school and lessons.

Miss Phelps waited an instant, but the child was lost in her dreams and did not feel the unusual silence of the room. Following the gaze of the intent brown eyes, the teacher glanced out of the window and saw a flock of pigeons disporting themselves on the barn roof across the road; and as they fluttered and strutted, scolded and cooed, the little watcher at her desk unconsciously imitated their movements, thrusting out her chest, cocking her head pertly on one side and nodding and pecking at imaginary birds, just as her pretty feathered friends were doing as they basked in the warm sunshine. Involuntarily the woman smiled. Then, as the girl continued to mimic the doves, she tapped her foot impatiently on the floor and repeated emphatically, "Children, take rest position!"

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Stealthily the other pupils let their eyes rove about the room in search of the guilty member, for it was very plain from the teacher's manner that someone was out of order. Instantly a pencil rapped sharply on the desk, and forty-nine pair of inquisitive eyes jerked quickly to the front again. But the fiftieth pair continued to stare out of the window, until in exasperation the woman's voice rasped out, "Peace Greenfield, will you please give me your undivided attention?"

With a start of horrified surprise the culprit awoke from her daydreams, to discover that she was flapping her outstretched arms in either aisle like some exultant cockerel just ready to crow. Abashed and dismayed at having been caught napping, she thrust her hands hastily into her desk, seized her geography, and scrambling to her feet, started for the front of the room, remembering that her class was the next to recite. The children tittered, and Peace, much amazed to find that no one followed, paused uncertainly, searched her brain desperately to recall the teacher's command, and then glibly recited, "Brazil is bounded on the north by—"

The scholars burst into a howl of derision, and poor Peace slumped into her seat, covered with confusion. Even the tired teacher smiled at the child's discomfort, but immediately rapped for order, and said sternly, "Rest position, please! The geography and reading classes will not recite this afternoon. I shall read to you from our book of mythology, and when I have finished, I shall expect you to repeat the story. What was the last we read about?"

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"The wooden horse in the siege of Troy," shouted a score of voices.

"Correct," smiled the teacher faintly. "And today I shall tell you about Ganymede and how he was connected with the other characters we have been studying. Ganymede—repeat the name after me."

"Ganymede," roared the obedient scholars.

"Ganymede," whispered Peace to herself. "Ganymede—what a funny name! I wonder if he was any relation to those folks Hope was talking about last night. They were Medes and—and Persians. I d'clare, I 'most forgot that word. Hist'ry like Hope's must be int'resting. I'll be glad when I get big enough to study about the Goffs and Salts and—and Sandals and the rest of that bunch." She meant Goths and Celts and Vandals, but somehow words had a bad habit of getting sadly mixed up in that active brain which tried to absorb all it heard; and she was always making outrageous speeches in consequence.

"I don't like mythology. What do we care about Herc'les and his sore heel, or Helen or Hector?—I wonder if that's the man Hec Abbott was named after? I'd rather—My! what a lovely day it is for March! No wonder the doves are talking. Wouldn't I like to be up on that barn roof in the sun! Bet I'd do some talking too. S'posing I was a really dove. What fun it would be to fly away, away up in the blue sky. I wonder if they ever bump into the clouds. There goes a white cloud skimming right over the sun. Now it's gone and we're in the shine once more. Queer how it can shine in spots and be cloudy in spots at the same time. That's like laughing with one eye and bawling with the other. I don't b'lieve a body could ever do that. Wish I could, just to see what it would feel like.

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"'Twon't take many days like this 'fore the grass begins to grow and the leaves to come. The trees are budded big now. I am crazy wild for the cowslips and vi'lets to get here. Hicks promised to help us plant some flowers on our Lilac Lady's grave. It looks so bare and lonely now with the snow all gone, and only that tall white stone to tell where she is. I know where the loveliest yellow vi'lets grow."

"Peace Greenfield!"

Again Peace came to the earth with an abruptness that left her breathless and quaking. "Yes, ma'am," she responded meekly.

"You weren't paying attention, were you?" demanded the long-suffering teacher.

Peace pondered. She could scarcely say "yes" truthfully, and yet her intentions were good. She had not meant to lose herself again, nor did realize how very little she had heard of the story which the teacher had been reading.

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"Were you?" repeated Miss Phelps relentlessly.

"Partly," Peace responded haughtily.

The woman gasped; then as the scholars giggled, she said sternly, "Tell us what the story was about."

Peace opened her mouth. "Gan—" she began and halted. What *had* the story been about? Rapidly she searched through her memory. It was such a funny word. How could she have forgotten it?

The children sniggered audibly.

"Gan—what?" urged the weary teacher sarcastically.

O, yes, now she remembered it! "Gandermeats and pigeons," triumphantly finished Peace, with a saucy toss of her head.

There was a moment of dead silence in the room; then a jeering shout rose from forty-nine throats. But it was instantly quelled by a sharp rap on the desk, and when order was restored, Miss Phelps said encouragingly, "Ganymede and what, Peace? Surely not *pigeon*! You didn't mean that, now did you?"

But Peace had come to the end of her resources. If it wasn't pigeons, what was it?

"Tell her, children," prompted Miss Phelps, as Peace floundered helplessly.

"An eagle," yelled the chorus of eager voices.

An *eagle*! Queer, but she had heard no mention made of an eagle; and she trembled in her shoes for fear the teacher would ask still more embarrassing questions. [Pg 15]

Fortunately, however, Miss Phelps turned to the lad across the aisle, and said, "Johnny, you may tell us the story of Ganymede."

Johnny was nearly bursting his jacket in his eagerness to publish his knowledge; so to Peace's immense gratification and relief, he gabbled off his version of Ganymede's experience with Jupiter's eagle. And Peace breathed more freely when he sat down puffing with pride at the teacher's, "Well told, Johnny."

"Mercy! I'm glad she didn't ask me any more about the old fellow," Peace sighed. "I—I guess I didn't hear much she said, but that horrid mythology is so dry. I don't see why she keeps reading the stuff to us. I'd a sight rather study about physiology and *cardrack* valves and *oil-factory* nerves in the nose like Cherry does; though I don't see how she ever remembers those long words and what part of the body they b'long to. I'd—yes, I'd rather have mental 'rithmetic every day of the week than mythology about old gods that never lived, and did only mean things to everybody when they b'lieved they lived."

"Peace Greenfield!" sounded an exasperated voice in her ear. "If you would rather watch those pigeons across the street than to pay attention to your lessons, we will just excuse you and let you stand by the window until—"

"I wasn't watching a single pigeon that time," Peace broke in hotly. "I was only thinking about those hateful gods folks used to b'lieve in, and wondering why the School Board makes us study about them when they were just clear fakes—every one of 'em—'nstead of learning things that really did happen at some time. There's enough true, int'resting things going on around us to keep us busy without studying fakes, seems to me." [Pg 16]

Now it happened that the mythological tales with which Miss Phelps regaled her small charges from time to time were not a part of the regular course of study laid out for her grade, and at this pupil's blunt criticism, the teacher's face became scarlet; but she quickly regained her poise, and turning to the school, asked, "How many of you enjoy listening to these myths which I have been reading?"

A dozen wavering, uncertain hands went up. The rest remained clasped on their desks.

The woman was astounded. "What kind of stories *do* you like best?" she faltered.

"Those in the new Readers," responded the pupils as with one voice.

Mechanically Miss Phelps reached for one of the volumes, and opening it at random, read the New England tale of the Pine-tree Shillings to her delighted audience.

Peace tried to center her thoughts upon what was being read, but the lure of the Spring sunshine and blue sky was too great to be resisted; and before the story was ended, she was again wandering in realms of her own. Down by the river where the pussy willows grew, out in the marshland where the cowslips soon would blow, up the gently sloping hillside, far up where the tall shaft of marble stood sentinel over the grave of her beloved Lilac Lady, she wandered, planning, planning what she would do when the warm Spring sunshine had chased away the Frost King for another year. [Pg 17]

The book closed with a sudden snap, and the teacher demanded crisply, "All who think they can tell the story as well as Johnny told us about Ganymede, raise your hands."

Vaguely aware that Miss Phelps had told them to raise their hands, Peace quickly shot one plump arm into the air and waved it frantically.

"Very well, Peace, you may begin."

Peace bounced to her feet. What was expected of her? Why had she raised her hand?

"Aw, tell her about the pine-tree shillings," prompted boastful Johnny in a whisper, and Peace plunged boldly into the half-heard story, wondering within herself how she was going to end it respectably when she did not know the true ending because her mind had been wool-gathering.

"Once there was a man—a man—a man—" blundered the girl, trying in vain to remember whether or not he had a name.

"Yes, a man," repeated the teacher impatiently. "Go on. Where did he live and what did he do?"

"He lived in olden times," replied Peace, grasping eagerly at the suggestion.

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"Well, but in what country? Asia or Africa?"

"Neither. He lived in the New England,"—the New England chanced to be Martindale's largest furniture store,— "and he was very rich and had a buckskin maiden."

"A *what?*" gasped the astonished woman, dropping her book to the floor with a bang.

"A—a buckskin maiden," repeated the child slowly, realizing that she had made some mistake, but not knowing where.

"Buxom," whispered Johnny frantically.

"A—a bucksin maiden," corrected Peace.

"Buxom!" snapped the teacher irritably.

"Bucksome," repeated Peace, with the picture of a bucking billy goat uppermost in her mind, and wondering how a maiden could be *bucksome*.

"Go on," sharply.

"Well, this bucksome maiden wanted awful bad to get married, like all other women do, and so her father found a man for her, but she had to have a dairy—"

"Dowry," corrected the teacher. "What is a dowry, Peace?"

"A place where they keep cows," responded the child, sure of herself this time; but to her amazement, the rest of the scholars hooted derisively, and Miss Phelps said wearily, "Peace was evidently asleep when I explained the meaning of that word. Alfred, you may tell her what a dowry is."

"A dowry is the money and jew'ls and things a girl gets from her father to keep for her very own when she marries."

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"Oh," breathed Peace, suddenly enlightened. "Well, her father stood her in a pair of scales and weighed her with shingles—"

"With—?" Miss Phelps fortunately had not caught the word.

"Pine-tree shillings," prompted Johnny under his breath. "He had a chest full of 'em."

"Pine-tree shingles," answered Peace dutifully. "He had a chest made of them."

"Peace Greenfield!" Miss Phelps' patience had come to an end. Sometimes it seemed to her as if this solemn-eyed child purposely misunderstood, and mocked at her attempts to lead unwilling feet along the path of learning, and she was at a loss to know how to deal with the sprightly elf who danced and flitted about like an elusive will-o'-wisp. The fact that she was the University President's granddaughter was the only thing that had saved her thus far from utter disfavor in the eyes of her teacher; but now even that fact was lost sight of in face of the child's repeated misdemeanors and flagrant inattention. She should be punished. It was the only way out.

Drawing her thin lips into a straight, grim line to express her disapproval, Miss Phelps repeated, "Peace Greenfield, you may remain after school."

The gong rang at that instant, the notes of the piano echoed through the building, and surprised, dismayed Peace, after one searching look at her teacher's face and a longing glance out into the bright sunlight, sank into her seat and watched her comrades march gleefully down the hall and scatter along the street. It was too bad to be kept in on such a beautiful day! O, dear, what a queer world it was and how many queer people in it! There was Miss Phelps for one. She was so strict and stern and sarcastic,—almost as sharp and harsh as Miss Peyton, who had made life so miserable for poor Peace in Chestnut School the year before. But Miss Peyton did begin to understand at last, while Miss Phelps—

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"Peace, come here."

Peace roused from her bitter reverie with a start. She had not observed the teacher's noiseless return to the room after conducting her pupils down the hall, and was astonished to find the stiff

figure sitting in its accustomed place behind the desk which had once more been whisked into spick and span order for another day.

Peace scuttled spryly down the aisle, casting one final wistful glance over her shoulder at the doves across the street. How delightful it must be to be a bird! The teacher saw the glance, and putting on her severest expression, demanded sternly, "What is the matter with you, child? Have you lost your wits entirely, or—"

"O, teacher," the eager voice burst forth, as Peace pointed rapturously out of the window, "isn't this the elegantest day? Seems 's if Winter had stayed twice as long this year as it ought to, and it's been an awful trial to everyone, with its blizzards and drifts. I like winter, too. It's such fun coasting and skating and sleighing and snow-balling. But I've got enough for once. I'm *glad* Spring is here at last." Her voice sent a responding joyous thrill through the woman's cold heart in spite of herself. "The ice in the river is 'most all gone, the pussy willows by the boathouse are peeking out their queer little jackets, and the robins are beginning to build their nests in the trees. Grandpa says when the birds commence to build, Spring is here to stay; and I'm *so* glad. I've just been aching to go hunting vi'lets and cowslips and 'nemones. We are going to plant a heap of wild flowers on her grave—"

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"Whose grave?" the amazed teacher heard herself asking.

"My Lilac Lady's. It's so bare now. The grass was all dead when she fell asleep last Fall, and only the ugly ground shows now—just the size of the bed they laid her in. We're going to cover it with the flowers she liked best, first the wild ones from the woods, and then the garden blossoms—pansies and forget-me-nots and English daisies. I know where the prettiest vi'lets grow,—just scads and oodles of 'em—down by the stone bridge over Bartlett's Creek in Parker; and Hicks is going to help us transplant them. Only it's too early yet. They aren't even up through the ground now. But it won't take long, with days like this. It's hard to study with Spring smelling so d'licious right under your nose. Doesn't it make you want to get out and jump rope and play marbles and leap-frog, and—and just jump and skip and *ye!/?* I can pretty near fly with gladness!"

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Peace turned a radiant face toward the silent woman, and was dismayed to find tears glistening in the cold gray eyes. "Oh!" she exclaimed in deep contrition, "what is the matter? Did I—what have I said now to make you squall?"

"Nothing, dear," smiled the teacher, wiping away the telltale drops with a hasty whisk of her handkerchief. "I—I just saw in my mind a picture of the little old cottage where I used to live, and it made me homesick, I think. My head aches, too,—"

"Then you mustn't let me keep you here," cried the child, forgetting that she had been bidden to remain after school as a punishment for inattention. "You better go right home, drink a cup of good, hot tea, and go to bed. That'll make you feel all right by morning, I know, 'cause that's the way we fix Grandpa up when his head bothers. Here's your hat and coat. Just breathe in lots of air, too. It's pretty muddy under foot to walk very far, but the fresh air will do you good."

Before the woman could realize how it happened, Peace had coaxed her into her wraps, slipped on her own, and hand in hand with the astounded teacher was walking demurely down the muddy street, still chattering gayly. At the corner, faithful Allee awaited the coming of her unfortunate sister, and Peace, seeing the yellow curls bobbing under the blue stocking cap, gave the teacher's hand a parting squeeze, waved a smiling good-bye, and skipped off beside the younger child as if there were no such a thing as being kept in after school.

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"O, Allee," Miss Phelps heard her say as they pelted down the avenue, "do you s'pose Grandma'll let us go over to Evelyn's to play? It's dry enough, I'm sure."

"Cherry's gone on ahead to find out," Allee panted. "They are going to play anti-over,—Ted and Johnny and all the rest."

"Goody! I just know Grandma won't put her foot down. It's such a lovely day! Hear that robin say, 'Spring is here, Spring is here!' S'posin' we were robins, Allee, and had to hunt up horse-hair and hay to build our nests of—"

"Peace! Allee! Hurry up. We are already to play," screamed Evelyn Smiley, leaning over her gate and beckoning wildly to the racing girls. "Your grandmother says you can stay till five o'clock. Ted's 'it' this time. Johnny has a dandy ball, and we are going to play over the house."

"Oh!" cried Peace incredulously, "that's so high!"

"All the more fun," answered Ted, joining them at the gate.

"But we might break some windows."

"Fiddlesticks! Our ball is big and soft Couldn't break anything with it. 'Tain't like Fred's hard rubber one. Come on. This is my side of the house. You take the other."

The rest of the dozen children gathered on the front lawn scuttled away to the place designated, and the game was on. Such laughing and shouting, such running and dodging! Once Edith Smiley, Evelyn's aunt, beloved of all the children, came to the window and watched the boisterous, exhilarating frolic with an anxious pucker between her brows. "I am afraid someone will get hurt, Mother," she said in answer to the white-haired grandmother's questioning glance.

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"How can they? Seems to me they are playing a very harmless game."

"But the house is too high for 'anti-over.' They should have taken the garage."

"Nonsense! They are developing muscle. Watch that Peace fling the ball. She can throw almost as well as a boy."

"The lawn is so slippery—"

"They are nimble on their feet, and the ground is soft."

Edith retired to her piano practise and the mother resumed her knitting with her usual tranquillity. Suddenly above the soft strains of music that filled the house, rose a yell of dismay from a dozen throats outside.

"What's happened?" Edith glanced apprehensively toward the door.

"Their ball is caught on the roof," answered her mother, still smiling placidly. "Guess their game is over for tonight. Well, it is time. The clock is just ready to strike five."

Edith turned back to the piano, but before her hands had touched the ivory keys, there was a wild, excited, protesting shout from outside that brought her to her feet and sent her flying for the door.

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"Peace, Peace! Come down. You'll fall! You'll fall!"

"Johnny Gates, take that back! She's not a coward! She couldn't keep the ball from catching in that corner."

"Oh, Peace, never mind the ball. It's Johnny who's the coward."

"Hush! You will confuse her!" Edith's voice was low but vibrant, and the screams from the terrified watchers below abruptly ceased.

Peace had reached the ball wedged in a hollow by the chimney, and with accurate aim, sent it spinning down to its white-faced, tearful owner; but as she turned to crawl back the way she had come, her foot slipped, she wavered uncertainly, and fell with a crash to the roof, rolling over and over in a vain endeavor to stop her mad career, till, with the horrified eyes of the stricken audience glued upon her, she slid over the coping and landed in a crumpled heap on the sodden turf below.

Then pandemonium broke loose. Evelyn burst into uncontrollable sobs, Fanny toppled over in blissful unconsciousness, Cherry, beside herself with grief, tore down the street to break the direful news to those at home; and the boys danced and pranced in their terror, as they screamed, "She's dead, she's dead! Peace Greenfield's dead!"

For a brief instant, which seemed like eternity to Edith Smiley, she stood rooted to the spot, transfixed by the very horror of it all. Then loyal Allee's frenzied scream brought her to her senses, and she saw the golden head bending over the disheveled form in the mud, as the child repeated again and again, "She's *not* dead! She *can't* be dead! I won't *let* her be dead!" Swiftly Edith knelt beside the pair and sought to lift the older child to carry her into the house. But at her first touch, the brown eyes unclosed, and a roguish smile broke over the white face, as Peace looked up at the frightened figures above her and giggled hysterically, "I've often wondered what it would feel like to fly. Do you s'pose it makes the birds sick and dizzy every time they make a swoop?"

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"Peace!" gasped Edith, "are you hurt?"

"No, only things look kind of tippy 'round here, and my breath has got St. Vitas Dance." Slowly she stretched out her arms and legs that they might see that none of her limbs were broken; but when she attempted to sit up, her lips went white and she fell back on the trampled grass with a stifled groan.

"You *are* hurt, Peace Greenfield," declared anxious Allee, hovering over her like a mother bird over her young.

"There's a place in my back," whispered the injured girl faintly. "I guess maybe one of my ribs is cracked."

At this moment the distracted President and wild-eyed Gail pushed through the knot of children huddled about the fallen heroine, and demanded huskily, "How is she? Not dead? Thank God! Any bones broken?"

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"Nope, Grandpa," smiled Peace cheerfully. "I just got a *cricket* in my back, so it hurts a little when I wiggle; but I got Johnny's ball, too, didn't I?"

"I'm afraid there is something wrong," whispered Edith Smiley, with a worried look in her eyes, as she made way for the President. "She can't move without groaning."

The stalwart man stooped over the outstretched figure and gathered it in his arms, but as he lifted her from the ground she screamed in agony and fainted quite away. Thus they bore her home—the President with the still form on his bosom, Gail bearing the muddy red stocking cap, Cherry and Allee bringing up the rear, while a hushed, scared-faced throng of playmates followed

at some distance.

The next morning the corner seat by the window in Miss Phelps' room was vacant for the first time that year, and the teacher looked up in surprise when no familiar voice answered, "Present," when she called Peace Greenfield's name.

"She fell off the roof of Smiley's house," volunteered one scholar.

"And broke her back," supplemented another.

"What!" shrieked the horrified teacher, with a strange, sickening fear clutching at her heart.

The door opened, and the school principal entered the room, looking worn and distraught.

"Miss Lisk," cried the teacher, turning eagerly to her superior, "the children tell me that Peace Greenfield has fallen from some roof and broken her back." [Pg 28]

"O, it's not as bad as that," responded the older woman promptly. "She has had a nasty fall and is—hurt. How badly, the doctor is unable yet to say, but we hope she will soon be with us again." Lowering her voice so none but the teacher could hear, she added, "The physician is afraid that her spine is injured."

"Oh!" cried Miss Phelps, too shocked for further words.

"It is too bad such a thing should happen to her," continued Miss Lisk sadly. "She is such a lovable child, the life of her home."

Had anyone paid such a tribute to the lively Peace on the previous day, her teacher would merely have raised her eyebrows doubtfully; but with the memory of that flushed, joyous face still so vividly before her, and with the sound of the eager, childish prattle still ringing in her ears, she nodded her head in assent, and turned back to the day's duties with a heaviness of heart that was overwhelming. With that restless, active figure gone from its accustomed corner, the sun seemed to have set in mid-day and left the whole world in darkness.

CHAPTER II

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THE SCRAP-BOOK BRIGADE

When Peace awoke to her surroundings again, she was lying in the gorgeously draped bed of the Flag Room with old Dr. Coates bending over her, and she startled the worthy gentleman by asking in sprightly tones, "Well, Doctor, how are you? It's been a long time since you've been to call on me, isn't it? Do you think I have cracked a rib?"

"No, little girl," he answered soberly, but his wrinkled old face brightened visibly at the sound of her cheery voice. "I *think* you have put a kink in your back."

"Will it be all right soon?"

"We hope so, curly pate."

"By tomorrow?"

"O, dear, no! Not for—days." He could not bring himself to tell her that it might be weeks before he could even determine how badly the little back was hurt.

"Mercy!" she wailed in consternation, for bed held no charms for that active body. "And must I stay in bed all that while?"

"My dear child," he answered gravely, "do you realize that you are the luckiest girl in seven counties tonight?"

"How?" she asked curiously, forgetting her lament in her wonder at his words.

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"It's a miracle that you were not killed outright."

"Well, Johnny dared me."

"And you couldn't pass up a dare?"

She shook her head.

"Well, now my girlie must take her medicine."

Peace looked startled. "I didn't 'xpect to fall," she murmured, and two tears glistened in her big brown eyes.

The doctor relented. "There, there, little one," he comforted, "don't feel badly. We'll soon have you up and about—*perhaps*," he added under his breath.

So he left her smiling and cheerful, but his own heart was heavy as he descended the stairs after the long examination was ended, a pall of anxiety hung over the whole household when the door

closed behind his broad back. Peace crippled perhaps for life, perhaps never to walk without crutches again! It was too dreadful to be true. Peace,—their gay little butterfly! Peace, whose feet seemed like wings! They never walked, but danced along with the lightness of a fairy, tripping, flitting, never still. What a calamity!

"But Dr. Coates says it is too soon to know for certain yet," Hope reminded them, trying to find a ray of encouragement to cheer the anxious household, and they seized upon that straw with desperation, gradually taking heart once more, and trying to shake off the dreadful fear that Peace would never romp or dance about the house again.

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And it really seemed as if the white-haired physician's fears were groundless; for after the first few days when the slightest touch made the little sufferer whimper with pain, she seemed to get better. The soreness wore away, the drawn lines around the mouth smoothed themselves out, the rosy color came back to the round cheeks and the sound of the well-known laughter floated from room to room. Peace was undoubtedly better, and even Dr. Coates forgot to look grave as he came and went on his professional calls.

"She is doing nicely?" the worried President asked him anxiously two weeks after the accident.

"Splendidly!" the doctor answered with his bluff heartiness. "Far better than I had dared hope. If she continues to improve as rapidly as she has been doing, we will have her on her feet again in a month or two."

"A month or two!" gasped Peace, when Allee, who had chanced to overhear the old physician's words, repeated them to the restless invalid. "Why, I 'xpected he'd let me up next week *anyway!*"

"The back is a very delicate organism," quoted Cherry grandly, always ready to display her small store of knowledge, though she really meant to bring comfort to this dismayed sister. "When it is once injured, it requires a long time to grow strong again. Wouldn't you rather spend two or three months in bed than to hobble about on crutches all the rest of your life?"

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"Yes, of course, but—"

"Well, Doctor thought at first that you would never be able to walk without 'em." Now that Peace seemed well on the road to recovery, the secret fear which had haunted the household ever since the night of the accident took shape in words, and for the first time the invalid learned what a fate had been prophesied for her.

"*Without crutches?*" she half whispered.

"Yes."

Peace lay silent for a long moment while the awfulness of those words burned themselves into her brain. Then with a shudder she said aloud, "That's a mighty big thankful, ain't it?—To think I don't have to limp along with crutches! But, oh dear, two months in bed is *such* a long time to wait! Whatever will I do with myself? My feet are just *itching* to wiggle. I've been here two weeks now, and it seems two years. Two months means *eight whole weeks!*"

The voice rose to a tragic wail, and Grandma Campbell, hearing the commotion, hurried across the hall to discover the cause. She glanced reprovingly at the two culprits when the tale of woe had been poured into her ears with fresh laments from the small victims; but instead of scolding, as remorseful Cherry and Allee expected her to do, she smiled sympathetically, even cheerfully at the tragic face on the pillow, and asked, "Supposing you were a little tenement-house girl, cooped up in a tiny, stifling kitchen, with the steamy smell of hot soapsuds always in the air, and you had to lie all day, week in and week out, with not a book nor a toy to help while away the long hours. With not even a glimpse of the world outside to make you forget for a time the cruelly aching back—"

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"O, Grandma, not *really?*" interrupted Peace, for something in the sound of the gentle voice told her that this was no imaginary picture which was being drawn. "Is there such a little girl?"

The white head nodded soberly.

"Isn't there even any *sunshine* there?" The brown eyes glanced wistfully out of the window, beside which the swan bed had been drawn, and gloated in the beautiful April sunlight which was already coaxing the grass into its brilliant green dress.

"Not a gleam," answered the woman sadly. "The buildings are jammed so closely together, and the windows are so small that not a ray of sunlight can penetrate a quarter part of the musty, dingy little rooms."

"Is that *here*—in Martindale?" inquired Cherry in shocked tones.

"Yes, on the North Side."

"What is the little girl's name?" asked Allee, awed into whispers by this sad recital.

"Sadie Wenzell."

"How old is she?" was the next question.

"Just the age of Peace."

"O, a little girl!" exclaimed Cherry. "Will she ever get well again?"

The sweet-faced woman hesitated an instant. How could she tell the eager listeners that long neglect had made poor Sadie's case well-nigh hopeless? Then she answered slowly, "We are giving her every possible chance now, dearies. The Aid Society found her by accident, and got her into the Children's Ward of the City Hospital. She cried with happiness because the bed was so soft and white and clean; and when the nurse carries up her breakfast or dinner, it is hard to persuade the little thing to eat,—she is so charmed with the dainty appearance of the tray."

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"Oh-h!" whispered the three voices in awed chorus.

"Didn't she have anything to eat in her own house?" ventured Allee.

"Nothing but dry bread and greasy soup all the five years she has laid there—"

"Five years!" repeated Peace in horrified accents. "Without any sunshine and green grass and flowers! O, I sh'd think she'd have *died* before this! Didn't she ever go to school and play with other children?"

"Before she fell from the fire-escape—"

"Was she hurt in a fire?" interrupted Cherry with interest.

"No, there was no fire, but the fire-escape was her only playground, for her mother would not let her run the streets with the other ragamuffins of the tenements; and one day she fell and crushed her hip. But before that, she had attended a free kindergarten around the corner and learned her alphabet. Her mother has a little education, and she has managed to find time to teach Sadie how to read, but that is all the child knows of school."

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"O," sighed Peace, with a sudden yearning for the rambling old school-house, the high-ceilinged rooms, her low seat by the window, and even stern Miss Phelps, "what a lot she has missed! Here I'm feeling bad 'cause school will be out 'fore I am up again, if I have to stay in bed two months longer, and I'll be way behind my classes. But Sadie has never had a chance to go to school at all."

"Yes, dearie, you see how much you have to be thankful for, even if it is two months before you can get out of doors again by yourself. Until now, Sadie never knew what flowers looked like growing in the ground. I sent her a pot of your hyacinths when the Aid made their monthly visit to the Hospital, and Mrs. Cheever was just telling me that the child could not believe they were really alive. It is so sad to find one cheated out of so much in life."

"Isn't there something else I can send her of mine?" Peace anxiously inquired. "I've got so much and she hasn't anything. These puzzles are so stale I don't want to see 'em again and those books —"

"Suppose you make some scrapbooks to amuse her with at first," suggested Mrs. Campbell hastily, for when the missionary spirit seized this restless, active body, it never ceased working until she had given away not only all her own treasures, but all those belonging to her sisters which chanced to fall into her hands.

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"Scrapbooks!" cried Peace scornfully. "No one but babies cares for them. Why, even Allee hasn't been int'rested in such things for ages."

Mrs. Campbell smiled inwardly at Peace's contempt, but gently persisted, "Sadie is too weak to hold heavy books yet, dearie. The puzzles *might* amuse her, but she tires so easily that I know some small cambric scrapbooks would prove a boon to her just now. I agree with you that she would soon grow weary of looking at mere pictures; but I found some very unique and helpful little books in the attic the other day which might give you some ideas. Ned Meadows made them one summer for his own amusement while he was confined to his bed with a broken leg. He cut up a lot of old magazines and pasted the articles which interested him into some ancient notebooks Grandpa Campbell had lying around the house. He was always on the lookout for items concerning electricity, and one book was filled from cover to cover with bits of such news. Another contained nothing but jokes which had helped him laugh away a good many minutes; and still another was used for anecdotes of famous men, with perhaps a photograph or caricature to illustrate the little stories. He spent hours cutting and pasting just for his own pleasure and amusement; but without realizing it, he also stored away much useful knowledge in his brain while he was waiting impatiently for the leg to mend. Don't you think that would make an interesting play for you?"

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"Ye—s," replied Peace dutifully but doubtfully. She was not as fond of reading as were her sisters, and though her grandmother's plan *sounded* interesting when it concerned someone else, she had her misgivings as to its success when applied to herself.

"Then let's begin at once," cried Mrs. Campbell, trying to look intensely eager, as she noted the lack of enthusiasm in the round, cherubic face on the pillow. "We will make our books of cambric, because that will be of lighter weight than paper, and I have stacks of old magazines filled with short stories and bright sayings. Cherry, will you please bring me my scissors from the work-basket and that roll of colored cambric on the top shelf in the hall closet? Allee, wouldn't you like to run down to the barn and ask Jud to bring us those old 'Companions' from the loft? Here comes Hope. Just in time, dearie, to fetch us the paste from the library and the pinking iron which

Gussie was using last evening. We probably won't get as far as pasting anything today, as it is so nearly night now, but we will have everything ready for the time we shall need it."

Mrs. Campbell bustled briskly about, settling the invalid in a more comfortable position, arranging the light bed table where it would be most convenient for Peace to reach, and collecting the other necessary material for the "scrapbook brigade," as she laughingly called it, when Cherry, Hope, Allee and Jud came marching upstairs again, each bringing a contribution to aid in the good cause. All looked so eagerly enthusiastic and anxious to lend a hand that in spite of herself, Peace began to feel a thrill of interest tingle through her veins, and promptly began snipping up the pages which Jud dumped on a chair beside her bed. Mrs. Campbell cut the colored cloth into neat squares, Allee pinked the edges, and Cherry stitched them into tiny books with card-board covers to protect the pictures and stories so soon to be pasted on their pages. Everyone had a task of her own, and the dinner-bell rang before anyone had tired of this new play. Indeed, it was with actual reluctance that Peace surrendered her shears and saw her cluttered table cleared away for the night.

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"If it would only last!" sighed Mrs. Campbell, as she related the day's events to the little family gathered around the table for the evening meal. "But she is not contented with anything long, and will soon weary of this as she has of everything else."

"Then we must get our heads together and be ready with something new just as soon as we see her interest is flagging. Gail, you are the oldest. We will let you have the honor of first turn."

"All right, Grandpa," smiled Gail. "I will do my best." But it was really Gussie who accidentally found the next diversion after an unexpected and tragic ending of the scrapbook brigade.

Cutting, sorting, arranging and pasting proved an amusing occupation for several days, owing to the contagious enthusiasm of the other members of the household, who were constantly bringing in some bright little story, quaint anecdote or interesting bit of information to add to Peace's rapidly growing collection. At one time Mrs. Campbell would suddenly appear on the threshold with her hands filled with colored plates from some magazine article relating to birds or bees, plants or other nature study. Again Faith would bring in a bundle of laughable incidents gleaned from the "funny" pages of popular magazines; or Allee would lay a carefully trimmed bunch of short poems gathered from children's publications upon the white counterpane of Peace's bed. And once Hope triumphantly displayed a thick package of beautiful illustrations for articles already clipped out for pasting.

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"Where did you get them?" Peace demanded.

"Miss Page gave them to me when I happened to mention what you were doing," answered Hope, her face glowing with animation as she tenderly turned the pictures one by one for Peace to see.

"How did she happen to have so many?"

"She used them in her English classes when they were studying about Lowell and Hawthorne and Longfellow. See, here is one that illustrates 'The Children's Hour,' and here is another of 'Snow Bound.' This is a beautiful picture of Hawthorne's birthplace, and here is 'Old Ironsides.' You don't know much about some of the men yet because you haven't had their poems in school; but you've got stories about everyone of them for your scrapbooks, and if the pictures don't fit, we will hunt up some other articles that will go with them."

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Peace sighed, opened her mouth as if to protest, then closed it again; but a rebellious look crept into the brown eyes; and had Hope been less enthusiastic over her latest contribution to the scrapbook fund, she might have noticed the determined set of the expressive mouth, and suspected that something unusual was brewing under the brown curls.

As it was, no one but Peace was prepared for the host of children that marched up the President's front door steps the following afternoon, armed with paste-pots, brushes and scissors, and wearing big pinafores over their school dresses. Each demanded to see the invalid, and when ushered into the Flag Room was promptly set to work sticking pictures onto cambric pages.

"This can hardly be a coincidence," thought Mrs. Campbell, assailed by a sudden suspicion when patient Marie had shown the tenth visitor up the winding stairs. "Here come three in one bunch. Yes, they are turning in at the gate. Peace—"

The brown eyes glanced up from under their long lashes, and reading in the gentle, old face the unspoken question, Peace calmly announced, "Grandma, these are the Gleaners and their friends. They've come to help me stick scrapbooks. You 'member you said they might have their next meeting at our house?"

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"But—but that's more than a week off yet," stammered the amazed lady.

"The *reg'lar* meeting day is," Peace agreed, "but I was just swamped under with work, so I coaxed Miss Edith to call a special meeting just a-purpose to stick. They've all brung their own glue and stuff. All we need now is more tables. I was awfully afraid there wouldn't be many come, and I'm so deathly tired of hacking and reading and sorting and pasting all by my lonesome, that for two cents I'd dump the whole business right into the river, Sadie Wenzell or no Sadie Wenzell."

"Why, Peace!" murmured the surprised woman in shocked tones.

"Well, I would," the small rebel persisted. "Just as soon as I get one bunch of papers snipped up,

in comes Jud with a bigger pile, or the girls lug up a lot of truck. I've read till I'm dizzy and cross-eyed, and my wits are worn out trying to 'member all they've seen and heard. I've learned so much *inflammation* that it will be *months* before there's any space for any more to sink in. What do you s'pose Sadie's going to do with it all? There are a dozen scrapbooks all made and enough stuff cut to fill a dozen more. There goes the bell again. That must be Miss Edith. I know her ring."

Abashed at this unlooked-for outbreak, and musing over the abrupt ending of her cherished plans, Mrs. Campbell hastily withdrew and went to meet the superintendent, whose voice could be heard in cheery greeting from the hall below.

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Just fifteen girls put in appearance at the President's house that afternoon, and for two hours they worked like beavers under the direction of the small tyrant in bed. Then Peace abruptly commanded, "Lay down your brushes now and clear up. It's most dinner time and this room must look all right when Grandpa gets here. Grandma, will you please bring in the prize?"

"The prize?" echoed Mrs. Campbell in bewilderment.

"Why, yes. It's that box of bonbons on your shelf. I asked Grandpa to get it for me two days ago."

"Did—did he know what you wanted it for?" she queried.

"I don't s'pose he did ezactly," the child confessed. "But I was so afraid no one would want to paste pictures bad enough to come out today, that I promised 'freshments for all and a prize for the one who made the best book and Evelyn's got it. Evelyn, you better open up the box and treat the rest of us. A choc'lit drop would taste pretty good after working so hard. Gussie'll be up d'reckly with the 'reshments. I told her to make a whale of a batch of cookies and gallons of lemonade. We need something after finishing that job. But we've got most of the stuff stuck in somewhere and the books are plumb full. I'm so glad!"

And indeed Peace was right. Scarcely a scrap remained of the huge pile of pictures and clippings which had littered table, dresser and bed a few moments before the scrapbook brigade began to congregate; but more than twenty neatly pasted scrapbooks stood stacked in the corner to dry, and Peace was content.

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CHAPTER III

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GUSSIE'S NEW PLAY

The day following this unexpected meeting of the Gleaners, the invalid spent in slumber, so exhausted was she by her efforts to get the obnoxious books completed and out of the way; but the second day she was herself again and restlessly eager for some new diversion; and here it was that Gussie came to the rescue. It had been a hard day for them all. Outside the rain poured down in torrents, driven by a cold, fitful wind which seemed more like the blast of winter than the herald of returning spring; and inside even the cheerful glow of the open fires could not dispel the gloom and dampness of the storm without. It is just such a day as makes well folks cross and disgusted, and the poor, unwilling prisoner in the Flag Room upstairs felt forlorn indeed as she gazed down the deserted, flooded streets and across the soaked, sodden lawns which only yesterday had whispered of the coming of summer.

She was tired of reading,—the mere thought of it made her sick—the geographical puzzles which Allee and Cherry had laboriously cut out for her amusement quacked of school and duty; she could not play games all by herself and Grandma was too busy; dolls long since had lost their charm; it was too stormy for callers; and altogether world seemed a dull and cheerless place. Even when the girls returned from school the atmosphere did not clear. Peace was plainly out of sorts, and it was with a sigh of thanksgiving that the household saw the dismal day draw to a close.

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The dinner-bell pealed out its summons, and half-heartedly Allee pulled out the invalid's little table, covered it with a snowy cloth and sat down beside the bed. It was her turn to eat dinner in the Flag Room that night. Such occasions were usually regarded as a great privilege by this golden-haired fairy, who was a willing slave to every caprice of the brown-haired sister; but tonight she did not care much. Peace was so sulky,—not at all her sprightly, cheerful self,—and Allee felt out of sorts in sympathy.

Marie did not at once put in appearance with the usual covered tray, and Peace had just reached out an impatient hand to ring the bell when there was a sound of light steps on the stairs, and Gussie's smiling face bobbed around the corner.

"Good evening," she laughed, courtesying so low that the tray she bore tripped threateningly.

"What's happened to Marie?" demanded Peace, ungraciously. Then catching sight of the quaint garb the new waitress was wearing, her face lighted expectantly, and she cried in delight, "O, Gussie, how'd you come to think of that? Ain't that Swede dress pretty, Allee? 'Tis Swede, isn't it?"

"Yes," laughed Gussie, perfectly satisfied with the reception of her little surprise. "This is the way women dress in Sweden where I was born." [Pg 47]

"And I'll bet you've got something nice under that napkin, too," Peace hazarded, her eyes dancing with their old roguish gleam.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit," Gussie retorted, setting down the tray before the eager duet and carefully lifting off the white towel which covered it. The girls looked mystified,—a trifle disappointed, it seemed to the watchful cook,—and she hastily explained, "I've brought you a Swedish supper."

"A—what?" gasped Peace, still studying the queer dishes on the tray.

"A supper like the boys and girls in Sweden eat."

"Oh-h!" cried both girls in unison. "What fun!"

"Do they have this every night?" asked Allee, privately thinking that if they did she was glad she was an American.

"Oh, no, not always. This is just a—a sample supper. We have different dishes in Sweden just as you do here or in France or England."

"Then make us another Swede supper tomorrow night,—and every night until we've et up all your Swede dishes. Will you, Gussie?" wheedled Peace.

The older girl hesitated, frowned and said thoughtfully, "You would get tired of them very soon, girlie. Lots of you would not touch at all. For instance, sour milk and sugar."

"No, I shouldn't like that," Peace confessed, with an expressive shrug of her shoulders, "but—" [Pg 48]

"I'll tell you what I'll do," the obliging Gussie interrupted. "Tomorrow night we will have a French dinner, and you must tell everything you know about France."

"Oh, how splendid!" Both children clapped their hands gleefully. "And next night we'll have a German dinner, and then an Italian and a Spanish and a Denmarkish and a Swiss, and a—a—"

Peace paused to think of some other countries, while Gussie stood appalled at the result of her suggestion. But a glance at the glowing face on the pillow was ample reward, and suddenly realizing that she had given the weary prisoner a new and profitable play to occupy the long hours while the girls were away at school, she recklessly promised, "Dinners for every country in the world, if we can find out what each nation eats. But mind, you must learn all you can about the people and their land."

"It'll be fun to do that," Peace answered readily. "I wonder why they don't teach g'ography that way in school. It would be a heap more interesting."

Thus the long weeks rolled by, and unknown to Peace herself, she was not only keeping abreast of her classes in school, but forging ahead in her studies as she had never done before.

"It's so int'resting to learn that way," sighed the little prisoner blissfully, after a particularly impressive lesson supper one night. "The only thing is, we're going to run out of countries pretty soon, and then what *will* we do? Already we've reached Asia. I ate China last night and India tonight. Tomorrow 'twill be Japan, and then there is only Africa and South America left before we get around the world. They have all been such fun! Some countries know how to cook lots better than others. Now, I really dreaded getting to China, 'cause the books say Chinamen eat roasted rats, and I couldn't bear to think of Gussie's dishing up such horrible things as that; but the *slop chewey* and rice she cooked were simply delectious. I've always heard a lot about the India folks eating curry, too, and I thought it meant the hair they scratched off their horses with a curry-comb; so I was much surprised when Gussie made some for my dinner tonight. It's only soup with some stuff in it that makes it 'most too hot to eat." [Pg 49]

"I can't imagine what she will give me in Africa, 'cause we ain't cannibals, and she never will even hint what's coming next, but I guess she will get around it some way. Why, in some countries the people eat horrible things! In West Indies they bake snakes and fry palm worms! Think of it! Ugh, it makes me shiver! The folks in Brazil eat ants, and in New Caledonia it's spiders. The Mexicans cook parrots and eat dynamite. Do you s'pose they ever 'xplode? And in France where Marie was born they just *love* snails—raw! I'd as soon eat angleworms myself. My! I'm glad I'm a civilised *huming* being. Course Gussie hasn't fed me any of that junk, and it's been lots of fun traveling this way. I wish the world wasn't round, but just stretched away and away. Then there'd be room for more countries." [Pg 50]

"Maybe Gussie will take you around the world again," suggested Allee comfortingly.

"You'd better take a trip through the United States next," said Cherry, who privately thought Peace was having the most wonderful experiences that ever befell mortal man, and rather envied the invalid her easy lot,—for such it really seemed to her.

"Why, I never thought of that," cried Peace, enchanted with the idea. "But how could I, so's it would be as interesting as eating in other countries? We are all Americans here and cook the same things."

"O, there's lots of difference between our own states," Cherry stoutly maintained. "In Florida they raise oranges mostly, and cotton in Louisiana—"

"A person can't eat cotton," Peace broke in scornfully.

"I didn't say they could," replied Cherry as indignantly. "But they grow other things, too. Maine has the best apples in the country, Grandpa says; and Michigan the best peaches. Georgia grows sweet potatoes—"

"And peanuts," Peace interrupted, aglow with animation.

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"Yes, and peanuts," Cherry repeated. "California is noted for its grapes, and—oh, every state has *something* it raises 'specially. It would be as interesting traveling in the United States as in Europe, *I* think."

"So do I,—now," Peace conceded. "And Gussie does make such a splendid teacher! That's what she ought to be all right, 'stead of a cook, though she does know how to cook wonderful things. But I'm glad she has got 'most enough money saved up to take her through Normal College. She can poke more real education into a fellow's head in a minute than Miss Phelps can in a day."

So the unique lessons continued, and Peace almost forgot at times that she was a prisoner unable to romp and play in the sunshiny out-of-doors which she loved so well. She even whistled occasionally when the play was most interesting; and the members of the household, watching so anxiously over their idol, rejoiced that the color still bloomed in the round cheeks, and the merry sparkle so often danced in the big brown eyes.

CHAPTER IV

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PEACE LEARNS THE BITTER TRUTH

The school year came to a close, the days grew hotter, the nights brought no relief, and Dr. Coates, still a daily visitor at the big house, began to look grave again.

"What is it?" asked the President, feeling intuitively that something was wrong. "She is not doing as well?"

"No." The old doctor shook his head.

"The heat?"

"Possibly,—possibly. But she had stopped mending before the hot wave struck us."

"Then you think—"

"I'm afraid it means that operation I mentioned when she was first hurt."

The President turned on his heel and strode over to the window where he stood looking out into the warm, breathless evening twilight. When he wheeled about again, the doctor saw that the strong face was set and white, and great beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. "I—I trust you will not be offended, doctor," he said with a catch in his voice, "but I should like the opinion of other physicians—specialists—before taking that step. You say—it is—a very delicate operation?"

"Yes," the doctor admitted. "But I am afraid now that it is her only chance. However, it is perfectly agreeable to me if you wish to consult other authorities. I myself would be glad to hear the opinions of specialists."

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So it happened that a few days later a strange doctor bent over the white bed in the Flag Room, and when he had punched and poked to his heart's content and Peace's abject misery, another physician took his place.

"Dr. Coates said I hadn't cracked a rib," moaned the unhappy victim tearfully, as she saw the second unfamiliar face above her, "but I'll bet that man who just went out has cracked the whole bunch for me. Is that your business, too?"

"No, my dear," tenderly answered the big, burly specialist, beginning his examination with such a gentle, practised touch that Peace scarcely winced throughout the long ordeal. "My business is to mend cracked ribs—also cracked backs. Does yours feel very badly cracked?"

"All splintered up sometimes," the child promptly admitted. "It gets so bad in the night when there's no one here to rub it that I can't help crying once in a while. I tried to rub it myself the other night, but it took all my breath away and I could hardly get it back again. The bed is so hot! Dr. Coates said ages ago that I could get up in two months, but it's more'n that now and he shakes his head every time I ask him."

"Are you then so anxious to get out of this dear little crib?"

Peace stared hard at the kindly face so near her own, and then ejaculated, "'Cause it's a dear little crib doesn't make it any cooler nor any easier to stay tucked in when you are just crazy to

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be dancing about. Why, it's *June* now! They told me I'd be well so's I could plant the pansies on my Lilac Lady's grave, seeing as Allee had to set out all the vi'lets without any of my help. And now Hicks has had to transplant the pansies 'cause they will soon be too big."

"Tell me all about it," urged the specialist, as if every minute of his time was not worth dollars to him; and Peace poured her heart full of woe into his sympathetic ears. When she had finished he abruptly asked, "Supposing Dr. Coates told you that an operation would be necessary before you could get well, would you let him perform it?"

"What's a *noperation*?" asked Peace inquisitively.

"There is something out of place in your back, caused by your fall. It is pressing against the spine and must be lifted up where it belongs before—you can ever—get well."

"And can Dr. Coates lift it up where it b'longs?" Peace was breathlessly interested.

"Yes,—we think so,—we hope so," stammered the doctor, startled by the eager tone of her voice and the quick light in her big eyes.

"All right then, we'll have the *noperation*. I'd most begun to think I was going to be like my Lilac Lady. My legs don't feel any more, and she said hers didn't."

"God forbid," muttered the man, who had already lost his heart to the little invalid, and was deeply touched by the pathos of the case; and gathering up his glittering instruments, he hurried from the room. [Pg 56]

That night a cooling rain washed the fever from the air and the world awoke refreshed from its bath. The hot wave had broken, but to poor Peace the cool atmosphere brought little relief. The injured back hurt her cruelly and she could not keep the tears from her eyes.

"I knew that first doctor would crack a rib," she sobbed wildly, as the distracted President strove in vain to ease her pain. "Why doesn't Dr. Coates come and *noperate*? O, it does hurt me so bad, Grandpa!"

Laying the child back among her pillows, the stalwart man hastily fled down the stairway, and when he came back Dr. Coates and a sweet-faced, white-capped nurse were with him. The room across the hall was stripped of its furnishings and scrubbed with some evil-smelling stuff until the whole house reeked with it. Then the walls were draped with spotless sheets, and the next morning Peace was borne away to the improvised operating room, where only Dr. Coates, the kindly-faced stranger physician, their young assistant and the nurse were allowed to remain.

Peace looked about her curiously, murmured drowsily "I can't say I admire your dec'rations," and fell asleep under the gentle fumes of the ether.

It seemed hours later when she awakened to consciousness and saw about her the white, drawn, anxious faces of her loved ones. "Then I'm not dead yet," she exclaimed with satisfaction. "That's good. Did you get my back patched up, Dr. Coates?" [Pg 57]

The horrible strain was broken. With stifled, hysterical sobs, the family hurriedly withdrew, and the nurse bent over the bed with her finger on her lips as she gently commanded, "Hush, childie, you mustn't talk now. We want you to get some sleep so the little back will have a chance to heal."

"Can I talk when I wake up?" Peace demanded weakly.

"Yes, if you are very good."

"All right. You can go now. I don't like folks to stare at me when I'm asleep. It d'sturb's my slumber." Closing her eyes once more, she fell into a dreamless sleep, and the doctors departed, much pleased with the result of their operation.

The days of convalescence were busy ones in the Campbell household, for it required the combined efforts of family, nurse, doctor and friends to keep the restless patient's attention occupied. St. John and Elizabeth came often to the big house, bringing Glen or Guisepe or Lottie to amuse the prisoner; Miss Edith laughingly declared that she was more frequently found in the Flag Room than in her own home; Ted and Evelyn vied with each other to see which could run the most errands, read the most stories, or propose the most new plays during the long vacation hours; and even busy Aunt Pen found opportunity occasionally to steal away for a brief visit with the brown-haired sprite who had brought so much joy into her own heart and life. [Pg 58]

For a time the operation seemed a decided success, the back appeared to be stronger, the pain almost disappeared, and the nurse was no longer needed in the sick room. One day a wheel-chair was substituted for the bed where Peace had lain so many weeks; and for the first time since the accident, she was carried out under her beloved trees, where she could watch the flowers bud and blossom, smell their perfume on each passing breeze, and listen to the nesting birds in the branches overhead. But the crutches she had so fondly dreamed of, which were to teach her to walk again, were not forthcoming, and with alarm she saw the summer slip rapidly by while she lay among the pillows in the garden.

When she spoke of it to the older sisters, they answered cheerily, "Be patient, girlie, it takes a long time for such a hurt to heal," and turned their heads away lest she should read the growing conviction in their eyes.

"It's *so* hard to be patient," she protested mournfully. "You bet I'll never climb another roof."

"No," they sighed sadly to themselves, "I am afraid you never will."

But the cruel truth of the matter was broken to poor Peace at a most unexpected moment. She was resting under her favorite oak, close to the library window, one warm afternoon, planning as usual for the day when she could walk again; and lulled by the drowsy hum of the bees and the soft swish of the leaves above her, she drifted off to slumberland. A slanting beam of the setting sun waked her as it fell across her face, and she sat up abruptly, hardly realizing what had roused her. Then she became aware of voices issuing from the library beyond, and Allee's agonized voice cried out, "O, Grandpa, you don't mean that she will *never, never* walk again? Must she lie there all the rest of her life like the Lilac Lady and Sadie Wenzell until the angels come and get her? Grandpa, must she *die* like they did?"

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With a startled gasp, Peace leaned forward in her chair, then sank back among the pillows with a dreadful, sickening sensation gripping at her heart. They were talking about her! She strained her ears to catch the President's reply, but could hear only an indistinct rumble of voices mingled with Allee's sharp sobs. So the angels had carried Sadie Wenzell to her home beyond the Gates! Idly she wondered when it had happened and why she had not been told. It had been one of her dearest plans to visit Sadie some day and see for herself how she enjoyed the scrapbooks which had cost Peace so much labor and lament. Now Sadie was gone.

"Grandpa, Grandpa, why couldn't *I* have been the one to fall and hurt my back?" wailed the shrill voice from the open window. "'Twouldn't have made so much difference then, but Peace!—O, Grandpa, I can't *bear* to think of her lying there all the long years—"

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Again the voice trailed away into silence, and Peace lay stunned by the significance of the words. All her life chained to a chair! All her life a helpless invalid like the Lilac Lady! The black night of despair descended about her and swallowed her up.

They thought her asleep when they came to wheel her into the house before the dew should fall; and as she did not stir when they laid her in the white swan bed, they stole softly away and left her in the grip of the demon Despair.

So this was what the Lilac Lady had meant when she had said so bitterly, "You will turn your face to the wall, say good-bye to those who you thought were your friends, build a high fence around you and hide—*hide* from the world and everything!" The words came back to her with a startling distinctness and a great sob rose in her throat.

"What is it, darling?" asked a gentle voice from the darkness, and Peace, clutching wildly for some human support in her hour of anguish, threw her arms about the figure kneeling at her bedside, and cried in terror, "O, Grandma, I *can't*, I *can't*!"

"Can't what?" asked the sweet voice, thinking the child was a victim of some bad dream, for she never suspected that Peace could know the dreadful truth.

"I *can't* stay here all the rest of my life! I wasn't made for the bed. My feet *won't* keep still. I *must* run and shout. O, Grandma, tell me it isn't true!"

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But the gentle voice was silent, and the woman's tears mingling with those of the grief-stricken child told the story. Claspng the quivering little body more tightly in her arms, the silvery-haired grandmother sobbed without restraint until the child's grief was spent, and from sheer exhaustion Peace fell asleep.

Then, loosing the grip of the slender hands, now grown so thin and white, she laid her burden back on the bed, and as she kissed the wet cheeks and left the weary slumberer to her troubled dreams, she whispered sadly, "Good-night, little Peace,—and good-bye. We have lost our merry little sprite. It will be a different Peace who wakens with the morrow."

CHAPTER V

[Pg 63]

THE LILAC LADY'S MESSAGE

Mercifully, Peace slept long the next morning, and it was not until the sun was high in the sky that she opened her eyes to her surroundings. Then it was with a heavy sense of something wrong, and she stared uneasily about her, trying to remember what was the trouble.

"I feel as if I'd done something bad," she said half aloud, "but I can't think of a thing."

The sound of Allee's footsteps creeping softly along the hall and a glimpse of an awed, tear-stained face peering at her from the doorway suddenly recalled to her mind the scene of yesterday, and the bitter truth rushed over her with agonizing keenness. She could never walk again! All her days must be spent in a wheel-chair, a helpless prisoner! The Lilac Lady was right,—she wanted to turn her face to the wall, to say good-bye to her friends and hide,—hide from the world and everything!

"Peace," whispered a timid voice from the doorway, where Allee had paused, uncertain whether

to stay or to depart.

The invalid stiffened.

"Peace, are you awake?" persisted the pleading voice, for the brown eyes stared unblinkingly straight ahead of her, and not a muscle of her tense body moved. "May I come in and sit beside you?" [Pg 64]

"No!" screamed Peace in sudden frenzy, almost paralyzing the little petitioner on the threshold. "*Go away!* You can walk and run and jump, and I never can again. You've got two whole legs to amuse yourself with and mine are no good. Get out of here! I don't want to see anyone with legs today—or tomorrow—or ever again!" Jerking the pillow slip over her eyes she sobbed convulsively, and Allee, with one terrified look at the quivering heap under the bed-clothes, rushed pellmell from the room, blinded by scalding tears.

Peace had sent her away! Peace did not want her,—would not have her any more! It was the greatest catastrophe of her short life to be banished by Peace; and stumbling with unseeing eyes down the hall, she ran headlong into the arms of someone just coming up the stairs.

"Why—" began a husky, rumbling voice, and Allee, thinking it was the President on his way to the sick-room, sobbed out, "O, Grandpa, she sent me away! She says she never wants to see a pair of good legs again. You better—"

"It's not Grandpa, little one," interrupted the other voice. "It's I,—St. John. Do you think she will let me in? Because I have come especially to see her."

But a sharp, imperative voice from the Flag Room answered them. "Come back, Allee, I'm sorry I don't like the looks of legs today, but I want you just the same,—legs and all." [Pg 65]

For an instant Allee looked unbelievably up into Mr. Strong's eyes, as if doubtful that she had heard aright; then as the minister gave her a gentle push toward the door, she bounded lightly away, and when the Hill Street pastor reached the threshold the two sisters were locked fast in each other's arms.

All at once, through the tangle of Allee's curls, the brown eyes spied the form of her beloved friend hesitating in the doorway; but instead of looking surprised at his presence, Peace pushed the little sister from her and demanded fiercely, as if his being there were the most natural thing in the world, "Make faces at me, St. John,—the very worst you know how."

"Why, my dear—" stammered the young minister, as much amazed at his reception as he could have been had she dashed a cup of water in his face. "Why, Peace, I don't believe—"

"Of course you know how to make faces!" she interrupted scornfully. "Do you s'pose I've forgotten that day in Parker down by the barn? Make some now,—the most *hijious* ones you can think of."

There was nothing to do but to comply with her strange whim; so, rumpling up his thick, shining black hair, he proceeded to distort his comely features into the most surprising contortions imaginable. But with the heavy ache in his heart and a growing lump in his throat at the pitifulness of her plight, he was not real successful in diverting her unhappy thoughts, and with a mournful wail of woe she burst into tears. [Pg 66]

"My child!" he cried contritely, and in an instant his strong arms closed about the huddled figure, and he held her fast, crooning softly in her ear as a mother might over her babe, until at length the convulsive gasps eased, grew less frequent, and finally ceased.

There was a long-drawn, quivering sigh, a last gulp or two and Peace hiccupped, "It's no use, St. John. I can't coax up a ghost of a smile from anywhere. I've *thunk* of all the funniest things that ever happened to me or anyone else; I've scratched my brains to 'member the funny stories I s'lected for Sadie Wenzell's bunch of scrapbooks; I've even pretended the funniest things I could imagine, but it won't work. I knew if there was a sign of a laugh left inside of me, your horrible faces would bring it out. It did in Parker, when I thought I never could smile again. But this time—get your legs out of sight,—under the bed,—anywhere so's I can't see them. I don't like their looks!"

Had the situation been less tragic, he could not have refrained from laughing at the ludicrous way she bristled up and snapped out her command; but mindful only of the great trouble which had suddenly overshadowed the young life, he hastily tucked his long limbs out of sight under the edge of the bed, slumped as far down in his chair as he possibly could, and fell to energetically stroking the brown curls tumbled about the hot, flushed face, as he vainly tried to think of some comforting words with which to soothe the rebellious, sorrowful child. [Pg 67]

From below came the sound of a voice singing softly, and though the words were indistinguishable, the three occupants of the Flag Room caught snatches of the tune Peace loved so well, the Gleaners' Motto Song. Recalling the days when the brown-eyed child had made the little Hill Street parsonage ring with this very melody, the preacher unconsciously began to chant,

"When the days are gloomy,
Sing some happy song,
Meet the world's repining

With a courage strong;
Go with faith undaunted
Through the ills of life,
Scatter smiles and sunshine
O'er its toil and strife."

"Well, don't it beat all?" exclaimed Peace wearily.

"Doesn't what beat all?" mildly inquired the pastor, as she made no effort to explain her words.

"How some folks will wear a tune to a frazzle," was the disconcerting reply. "There's Faith, now, she hasn't played anything for days 'xcept '*Carve-a-leery-rusty-canner!*' And when it ain't that it's '*Nose-arts Snorter,*' or those wretched *archipelagoes*. I'm so sick of 'em all that I could shout when she touches the piano. As for that song you were just droning,—why, everyone in this house seems to think it's the only thing going. There is nothing left of it now but tatters."

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The preacher had abruptly ceased his humming, and as Allee crept quietly from the room to hush the singer below, he suddenly remembered a commission given him by his wife; and fumbling in his pocket, he drew out a small book, daintily bound in white and gold. "Elspeth sent you this booklet, dear," he ventured, somewhat timidly, for after two such rebuffs as he had received in his endeavor to cheer the sufferer, he was at a loss to know what to say or do next. "She could not come today herself, but she thought this little story might please you."

"Thanks," replied Peace, dropping the volume on the pillow without a spark of interest in face or voice. "I'd rather have seen her. She has got some sense. Books haven't. I've been stuffed so full of stories, I am ready to bu'st." Then, as if fearing that she had been rude to this dearest of friends, she added hastily, "But I s'pose there is room for one more. It must be good or Elspeth wouldn't have sent it. What is it about?"

"It's the story of a little girl named Gwen, who fell from—"

Peace stopped him with a peremptory wave of her hand. "That will do for the present," she said coldly, in such exact imitation of Miss Phelps that no one who had ever met the teacher could possibly mistake her tone. "I don't like the name. It sounds like 'grin'."

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The minister rubbed his head in perplexity. Never in all his acquaintance with Peace had he seen her in such a mood. Was this child among the pillows really Peace, the sunbeam of this home, the sunbeam of every home she chanced to enter? Poor little girl! What a pity such a terrible misfortune should have befallen her! She stirred uneasily, and he hurriedly asked, "Would you rather I should go away and leave you alone?"

"No! O, no!" She clutched one big hand closer with both of hers, and a look of alarm leaped into her eyes, so heavy with weeping. "It's easier—the pain here," laying one thin hand over her heart, "it's easier with you here. I wish you had brought Elspeth."

"She will come some other day," he answered gently, glad to see a more natural expression creep over the white face, though his heart ached at the sorrowful tone of her voice. "What would you like to have me do? Talk?"

"Yes, if you've anything int'resting to say," she murmured drowsily.

"And if not?" For he saw that it would be only a matter of minutes before she would be in the Land of Nod again.

"Then just hold me. I'm tired," she answered wearily.

So he sat and held her on her pillows until her regular breathing told him that she was fast asleep, when, laying her back upon the bed, he left her with a heavy heart.

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"I never dreamed that a child so young could take it so hard," he confided to his wife in troubled tones when he had told her the whole sad story. "She seems to have grown old in a night."

"Poor little birdie," Elizabeth tenderly murmured, stroking the dark hair from her sleeping son's forehead as she laid him in his crib for his nap. "Why did they tell her so soon? The family themselves haven't grown accustomed to the meaning of it yet."

"No one knows how she learned it, Elspeth. She was asleep under the trees when the President came home with the sad news. He had been to consult that famous specialist about the child's condition when the surgeon told him that the case was hopeless, so far as her walking again is concerned. He was so unmanned by the verdict that he blurted it out to Mrs. Campbell immediately upon his return home, and the girls overheard it. But Peace was out-of-doors all the while. She didn't waken for dinner; but when everyone was in bed, Mrs. Campbell heard her crying, and went to discover what was the matter. They are terribly broken up about the whole affair. It seems wicked to say so, but had the accident happened to any other of the sisters, it would not have seemed so dreadful. What is *Peace* ever going to do without those nimble, dancing feet?"

"Our Peace will surprise us yet," prophesied the little wife hopefully. "This experience won't down her, hard as it seems now, if she is made of the stuff I think she is."

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But as the days rolled by in that afflicted household, it really seemed as if they had lost their

engaging, winsome little Peace for all time, so changed did the invalid grow. Nothing suited her, everything annoyed. The girls talked too much or were too silent; the servants were too noisy or too obviously quiet; the President's shoes clumped and his slippers squeaked; Mrs. Campbell always pulled the curtains too low or not low enough. The dogs' barking fretted her, the singing of the canary made her peevish, even the cat's purring brought forth a protest; but as soon as the unreasonable patient discovered that all the pets had been banished on her account, she demanded them back. However, the long-suffering members of the family could not find it in their hearts to chide, and they redoubled their efforts to make their little favorite forget. Those were gloomy days in the Campbell household, for they sadly missed the merry laughter, the gay whistle, the unexpected pranks and frank speeches of this child of the sunshine and out-of-doors. At first they had tried to be cheerful and full of fun in the sick-room, hoping to win back the merry smile to the white lips; but Peace resented this attitude, and straightway they ceased their songs and laughter, only to have her demand them again. Unhappy, capricious Peace!

"Why don't you play on the piano any more?" she inquired of Faith one afternoon, when it was that sister's turn to amuse the invalid for an hour or two. [Pg 72]

"Do you want me to?" cried Faith eagerly, for her fingers were just itching to glide over the ivory keys.

"Of course,—s'posing you play something pretty."

So Faith took her place at her beloved instrument and dashed into a brilliant, rattling jig which had always been a favorite of the brown-haired sister.

But she had played scarcely a dozen measures when a shrill, imperious voice from above shrieked, "Don't play that! O, stop, stop! Can't you see it's got *legs*?"

"Legs?" wondered Faith, her hands poised in mid air, so abruptly had she ceased her playing.

"There's a million pair of legs to that tune and every one of 'em can dance. Play something without legs."

The utter ridiculousness of the complaint did not occur to Faith, but with an unusual display of patience, she tried air after air, hoping to find something which might satisfy the childish whim of the lame sister, only to be rewarded at last by a peevish call, "You may as well give it up, Faith. They've *all* got legs."

The entire family was at their wits' end. No one had a sane suggestion to offer, and their hosts of friends were in the same predicament. When it seemed as if something must surely give way under the strain, Peace suddenly subsided into a state of utter indifference to her surroundings, more alarming to her loved ones than had been her peevish, unreasonable demands. Nothing interested her, books she loathed, conversation bored her, neighborly calls from her dearest friends wearied her, she no longer yearned for the sunshine and flowers of the garden; indeed, she showed no desire to be out-of-doors at all, but lay day after day in the wheel-chair by the balcony window, staring with somber, unseeing eyes out over the river. Nothing family or friends could do roused her from her apathy, and despair descended upon the household. Must this little life which they loved so dearly fade away before their eyes, and they helpless to prevent? [Pg 73]

"O, Donald," sobbed Mrs. Campbell, clinging desperately to her husband's strong arm, "I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it! She takes it so hard! It is torture to watch her suffer so. Our precious Peace!"

"If only her St. Elizabeth could come to her!" sighed the baffled President.

But it was not her beloved saint of the parsonage who saved the day. It was her Lilac Lady, now sleeping under the sod of the wind-kissed hillside, and Aunt Pen was her messenger.

It was a breathless, sultry afternoon in late summer when the sweet-faced matron of Oak Knoll turned in at the President's gate and sought out the invalid lying motionless under the oak trees where the fierce heat had driven her. The little face among the pillows was no longer rosy and round; blue veins showed at the temples, the lips were colorless, the eyes hollow; the hands, once so brown and strong, were thin and waxy-white; the whole body lay inert,—lifeless, it seemed; and a pang of fear gripped the gentle heart brooding so tenderly over the poor wrecked life. [Pg 74]

"Are you asleep, darling?" she whispered softly, touching with light fingers the clustering rings of dark brown which covered the shapely head.

The mournful eyes opened dully, and Peace murmured parrot fashion, "Good afternoon, Aunt Pen. I hope you keep well these hot days. You must take care of yourself, you know."

Secretly amazed, the woman merely stooped and kissed the white face, as she settled herself comfortably in a nearby chair and cheerily answered, "Yes, I am well, dear, and all the little birdlings are, too. I intended to bring Giuseppe and his violin this afternoon, but—"

"It's just as well you didn't," interrupted the other voice in lifeless tones. "Prob'ly *his* music has legs, too, and I haven't any use for such things these days."

"But he had promised to play for a dear old lady at the Home," continued Aunt Pen, as if she had not noticed the interruption. "So I brought you—"

"Some more magazines," again broke in Peace, perceiving the gay covers in the woman's hand.

"That was very kind of you I'm sure, but I have a whole libr'y at my—at my *de-mand*. So you put yourself to a lot of trouble all for nothing." [Pg 75]

"This is a different kind of magazine from any you have," replied the woman soberly, though sorely tempted to smile at the stilted, unnatural tones of her little favorite.

"Is it?" Just a spark of interest flickered in the somber eyes. "Why, I thought I had the whole c'lection already. Folks seem to think I don't want to do anything but read, and they keep the house pretty well filled up with magazines, old and new. Last week I had Allee telephone to the Salvation Army to come and get them. But it didn't do any good,—we've had as many more brought in since."

"This is the one your Lilac Lady was reading when she—fell asleep," said Aunt Pen gently, a little catch in her voice as she thought of Peace, doomed to spend the rest of her days in a wheel-chair, just as that other girl, the Lilac Lady, had done.

"Oh! And you brought it to me! I sh'd think you would want to keep it yourself."

"I did, dearie. I laid it away among my treasures, but today I chanced upon it, and in turning the pages, I caught a glimpse of a slip of paper written on, in her handwriting. I had not examined the book since the day I picked it up from the floor beside her chair; but this morning I drew out the scrap she had written and found a little message for you—"

"For me?" Incredulous surprise animated the white face. [Pg 76]

"Yes, dear. Some verses she had written that last hour,—not even complete. I know she intended them for you. Perhaps she felt that she would be—*asleep*—before you came, so she wrote a little message for you, Peace, but I never found it until today. Would you care to have me read it to you?"

"Let me read it, please." Peace snatched the paper eagerly and with jealous eyes scanned the simple stanzas penned so many months ago for just that very moment.

Up the garden pathway,
Light as the morning air,
Singing and laughing gayly,
A child with face so fair
Dances with arms outreaching,
Her eyes ashine with glee,
Nor pauses until she reaches
The chair 'neath the old oak tree,
Where, chained by mortal weaknesses,
I lie from day to day
Waiting my darling's coming.—
Ah! could I keep her away!—

Child of flowers and sunshine,
Child of laughter and love,
Peace,—a God-given blessing,
Straight from the heavens above,
Bringing the breath of the woodland,
The perfume of sun-kissed flowers,
The freshness of vagrant breezes,
The sweetness of cooling showers;
Bringing the thrilling music
Of skylarks and forest birds,
Heart-healing, soul-cheering measures,
Wondrous songs without words.

Peace,—oh, how can I tell it?—
The marvelous peace you have brought,
The wonderful lessons of living
Your generous spirit has taught,
Easing the burden of sorrow,
Soothing the sharp sting of pain,
Bringing fresh aspirations,—
My Peace gives me *hope* again!" [Pg 77]

Once, twice, three times she read the lines. Then turning puzzled, wondering eyes upon Aunt Pen, she whispered eagerly, "What does it all mean, please? Did she really feel that way, Aunt Pen? Did I scatter sunshine after all? Was she happier when I was with her? O, did I—make her—forget?"

"More than you will ever know," answered the woman warmly, squeezing the thin fingers lying across her knee. "You brought back the sunshine she thought had gone out of her life forever. You gave her something to live for, something to do, made life seem worth while. O, my little Peace, it is just as the poem tells you,—you gave her *hope*!" [Pg 78]

For a long time the child lay lost in thought, and only the faint rustling of the leaves overhead

broke the stillness. Then she said sadly, glancing down at the useless feet in their gay slippers, "But I had my legs *then*."

"You have your smile now. A happy heart is worth more than a dozen pair of legs, dear. It was your merry voice, your gay laughter, your joyous nature that cheered your Lilac Lady. Surely you didn't lose all those when you lost the use of your feet!"

Peace smiled ruefully. "You'd have thought so if you had lived with me since I got hurt," she confessed.

"I don't believe it," Aunt Pen vigorously contradicted. "Our real Peace, our little sunbeam has just been hiding under a dark cloud all this while. She is coming back to us her own gay self some day,—soon, we hope."

"Do you b'lieve that?" Peace eagerly demanded.

"I know it," the woman answered with conviction.

"But s'posing I have really forgotten how to laugh and—and whistle, and be nice?"

"Pshaw! As if you could have forgotten all that, dear! But even then, it is never too late to learn, you know."

"That's so. And maybe after a bit it would be easier. I—guess I'll—try to learn—again, Aunt Pen. May I keep this little poem so's I won't forget any more? It's really mine, for she wrote it for me, didn't she?"

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"Yes, indeed, darling. That's your message. You helped your Lilac Lady, and now she is going to help you."

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 81]

THE PARSONAGE TWINS

"Peace, Peace, guess what's happened!"

Allee tore across the smooth, green lawn as if racing for her life; and Cherry, following hard upon her heels, panted protestingly, "I'm going to tell her. It's my right. I heard what he said first."

"I don't care if you did," retorted Allee. "I reached her chair first. So now!"

It was just a week since Aunt Pen's visit to the President's house, but already a remarkable change had come over the little invalid in her wheel-chair prison. The dull indifference had disappeared from the thin face, the hopeless look from the somber eyes; and though there was still a sadly pathetic droop to the once merry mouth, she seemed to have shaken off the deadly apathy which had gripped her for so long, and to have taken a fresh hold upon life again. True, it was hard work to smile and look happy with the dreadful knowledge tugging at one's heart that one must be a helpless cripple for the rest of her days, but the first smile had made it easier for the second to come, and gradually the old merry disposition came creeping back. Aunt Pen was right,—her real self had only been in hiding, and with the lifting of the cloud the sunshine of that gay spirit burst forth again.

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She was tired of being idle, and with characteristic energy that very morning had surprised and delighted the whole household by demanding something to do,—some real work with which to fill the long hours. And Miss Smiley had promptly suggested Indian baskets, spending many precious minutes of a busy forenoon teaching the weak fingers how to weave. Peace was a-tingle with pride over her accomplishment, especially when she was told of its possibilities and scope; and straightway began planning to send her first finished product to the State Fair which was to open its gates soon.

So as she wrestled with the damp raffia sad willow sticks after Miss Edith had left her, she so far forgot her trouble that the old, familiar laugh bubbled up to her lips, and once she paused in her work to answer a trilling bird in the branches overhead. She was all alone on the wide, shady lawn, and so engrossed in her own thoughts that she never heard the chug-chug of a motor-car gliding up the river road, nor saw the black-frocked figure leap nimbly from the machine and scurry up the walk to the kitchen door, as if in too big a hurry to enter the house in the proper manner. But she did hear the boisterous shouts of Cherry and Allee a few moments later, as they burst through the screen door and raced through the short, sweet clover toward her, each clamoring to tell her the news which stuck out all over them.

"I reached her first!" Allee repeated, waving the older sister off.

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"Pig!" returned Cherry. "You always—"

"Tut, tut," interrupted a voice from behind, in tones of mock severity. "Are you girls *quarreling*? I'm ashamed of you. Peace, what is it all about?"

Mr. Strong, light of step and radiant of face, appeared on the scene by another path; and Peace,

flinging down the raffia basket which her busy fingers were weaving, stretched out eager arms in welcome. "It's something they both wanted to tell me, St. John, but they stopped to scrap about it, and I hain't heard what it is yet."

"Bet you meant to steal my thunder, didn't you?" He turned merry, accusing eyes upon the pair of culprits, and they flushed guiltily. "But you just aren't going to do it this time. *I* shall tell her myself. It is my news, you know."

Both heads bobbed solemnly, and Peace, excited and not understanding, cried imperiously, "Tell me quick. I'm half dead with curiosity. Has old Tortoise-shell got some more kittens or—Say, you haven't put Glen in *pants* yet?"

"No," he laughed delightedly and the two sisters giggled in glee. "Guess again. It happened last night."

"Somebody sent you a present?"

"The most wonderful gift!"

"Two of 'em," put in impatient Allee, but the minister held up a warning finger, and she quickly subsided.

"Two!" repeated Peace, much mystified. "What *can* they be? Oh, I know—monkeys!" For ever since the day that Peace had brought the sick, half-dead monkey home to the parsonage, it had been Glen's fondest dream to own one himself.

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"No!" Mr. Strong and the other two girls exploded in a gale of laughter.

"Give it up then," Peace promptly retorted. "I mightn't guess in a hundred years and I'm fairly bu'sting to know."

"Well, girlie, the angels brought us two little babies last night for our very own. Two! Think of it!"

"Twins!" gurgled Allee, ecstatically hopping from one foot to the other.

"Both girls!" added Cherry, hugging herself from sheer joy at being part bearer of the glad tidings.

"Truly, St. John?" asked Peace, almost too amazed for words.

"Truly, my lady."

"Well, what do you think of that! I bet you were s'prised. Now weren't you? What do they look like? Are they pretty?"

"I can't say they are very beautiful to look at yet," admitted the fond father. "They resemble scraps of wrinkled red flannel more than anything else just now. But they will improve. Glen did, and he was a caution to look at when he was a day old."

"Are they big or little?"

"Neither is very large, but one is tinier than the other,—weighs only four pounds. She isn't such a brilliant scarlet as her sister, and we *think* she will have dark eyes and black hair. The reddest one has blue eyes now, is bald-headed, and possesses a most excellent pair of lungs. The Tiniest One has cried only once so far, but its twin makes up for it."

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"What are their names?" The three girls hung breathlessly on his answer.

"That's one reason I am here now," the minister replied gravely. "Elsbeth and I couldn't discover any suitable names for the twinnies, so she sent me down here to consult with Peace—"

"O—ee!" squealed the girls.

"Mercy!" whispered Peace in awed amazement. "Does she really want *me* to name her babies?"

"Shouldn't you like to?"

"O, so much! But most mothers would thank other folks to let them do their own naming. Or, if the mothers didn't mind, prob'ly the children themselves would kick when they grew up. There was our family, for one. Grandpa Greenfield named the most of us, and see what a job he made of it. He went to the Bible for us, too."

The minister's lips twitched, but Peace was so very serious that he dared not laugh; so, after an apologetic cough behind his hand, he suggested politely, "Then suppose we arrange it this way,—if the first names you select don't suit, we will tell you so, and you can pick out some others."

"O, don't I have to think them up today? I s'posed you would want 'em right away. Grandpa named us the first time he looked at us, Gail says."

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"Well, we needn't be in such a big hurry as that, girlie. It took us a month to decide what we should call our boy, and if you want that long a time, take it."

"I don't think I shall," she replied, viewing her unusual and unexpected privilege with serious eyes. "Not being a mother or a father, I don't expect it will take me more'n a few days to find very pretty names." Then, as if struck by an important thought, she asked, "But how will you *Christian*

them, s'posing I don't hit on some likely names before a month is up?"

"Christian them!"

"Yes. Like they did Tommy Finnegan's baby brother. He was only seven days old, but he had to have a name before the priest could Christian him."

"Oh!" Mr. Strong was enlightened. "There is no set time in our church for christening babies, dear. We call it baptizing in our church, and sometimes parents don't have their children baptized until they are old enough to understand for themselves what it means."

"Then you won't be having the twins chris—baptizzened for some time yet!"

"No, probably not until Children's Day—"

"Why, that's already gone by! There won't be another until next summer!"

"Next June. But that is usually the time we perform that ceremony in our church, although any other time is just as good." [Pg 87]

"Well, I'll have your children named by that time,—don't you fret. Allee, won't you bring me 'Hill's Evangel' from the Library? I 'member that has strings of names in it."

"'Hill's Manual,'" corrected the preacher, picking up his hat and preparing to depart.

"Is it? St. John says it is 'Hill's Emanuel,'" she called after the fleeing sister. "It's a big dirty-red book and you will find it in the furthest corner of the bookcase on the next to the lowest shelf. Why, St. John, must you hustle away so soon? You've hardly got here yet. Perhaps I could have some names ready for you to take home with you if you'd wait a while longer."

"Thanks, Peace," he bowed courteously. "But I must hurry home and mind the kiddies. There is no one there to look after them and Elspeth except the nurse and Aunt Pen. I told them I shouldn't be gone but a few minutes, and here it is almost an hour. Good-bye, Peace. Good-bye, Cherry. I'll come again soon."

"Good-bye, St. John, and next time bring the twins with you."

"O, Peace," gasped Allee, who was just returning with the heavy book in her short arms, and overheard the sister's parting admonition; "they're too fresh yet. Grandma says it will prob'ly be several weeks 'fore they get taken anywhere."

The preacher, convulsed with laughter, glanced back over his shoulder and seeing the look of disappointment in the brown eyes, rashly promised, "This shall be the first place they visit, girlies, and we'll bring them just as soon as they are old enough." [Pg 88]

So he swung out of sight down the driveway, and Peace turned to her delightful task of finding suitable names for the little strangers at the parsonage.

"They ought to begin with the same letter," suggested Cherry, wishing it had fallen to her lot to name a pair of twins, "like Hazel and Helen Bean."

"Or else rhyme with each other," put in excited Allee, thinking it a most wonderful privilege which had been granted Peace, "like Pearl and Beryl Whittaker."

"Or they might suggest the same thing," ventured Hope, who had heard the good news and had come out to see what progress the favored sister was making. "For instance, Opal and Garnet Ordway. The opal and the garnet are precious stones, you know."

"*These* twins are precious babies," interrupted Peace in decided accents, "and we shan't call them such heathenish names as stones. This book, now, has a long line of names,—here it is,—and there ought to be some pretty ones amongst them, though I can't say the *a's* sound very nice. There is only one decent one in the bunch and that's Abigail."

Hope, leaning over the back of her chair, scanned the list beginning with *a's* and thoughtfully read aloud, "Abigail, Achsa, Ada, Adaline, Addie, Adela, Adelaide, Adora, Agatha, Agnes, Alethea, Alexandra, Alice, Almeda, Amanda, Amarilla, Amy, Angeline, Anna, Annabel, Antoinette, Augusta, Aurelia, Aurora, Avis,—that last one isn't so bad—" [Pg 89]

"It isn't so good, either," Peace retorted. "It sounds like the thing you fall into when you tumble off a steep mountain. I wouldn't want a baby of mine called that."

"Abyss, you mean," suggested Hope, when the other sisters looked mystified. "No one else would ever think of such a thing."

"No one else needs to. I'd do thinking enough for all if I tacked such a name on a little baby that couldn't help itself."

It was very evident that Peace had taken a deep dislike to the name, so Hope said no more, and they turned their attention to the next letter with no better success. Peace was too critical to be easily satisfied, and when the whole list had been thoroughly considered several times, she sighed, "There is only one nice name on the page."

"And that is—?" Hope ventured.

"Elizabeth."

"But that is Mrs. Strong's name!" all three chorused.

"Don't I know it? And can't a baby be named for its mother? Gail was. The only trouble is there is no other pretty name to go with it. Nothing rhymes with it, and none of the other *e's* are nice enough."

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"Hasn't Mrs. Strong a sister named Esther?" asked Cherry, consulting the list again.

"Ye—s, but since I knew Esther Kern, I've lost my liking for that name. I can't bear to think of one of those lovely twins growing up into such a pug-nosed, freckle-faced sauce-box."

"Well, here is 'Evelyn,'—that is pretty enough, I'm sure."

"And Evelyn Smiley would say the baby was named for her. I'd sooner call it Peace, and be done with it."

"Then how about Edith, for Miss Smiley?"

"It's too short. Elizabeth has four pieces to it, and it wouldn't be fair to give less than four to the other one."

So the search for a name went on, and each succeeding day found Peace no nearer her goal. Whenever the busy pastor appeared for a brief chat, she had to own defeat, and beg for a little more time. One day a brilliant thought occurred to her, and the next time the preacher's shining black head appeared at the gate he was greeted with the excited yell, "What is Elspeth's middle name? It isn't right to call one baby after its mother and the other after nobody."

"Elspeth has no middle name—"

"Neither have I," sighed Peace. "When I marry, my middle name will be Greenfield, but until then I haven't got any."

"That's the way with Elizabeth."

"I was afraid it would be, but I hoped she would be more fortunate than me."

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Another idea buzzed through her brain.

"What's *your* middle name? Maybe we could make something out of that."

"I am afraid not," he smiled. "I was named John Solomon, after my two dotting grandfathers."

"Solomon!" she echoed in great disappointment. "Mercy! I wouldn't name a cat that!"

"Neither would I," he agreed quite cheerfully, and Peace returned to the much thumbed 'Hill's Manual' once more to consider the list of *e's*.

"I've a notion to call the Tiniest One Evangeline," she mused. "It's exactly as long and almost as pretty. Only it sounds so much like these preachers that get up and rage and dance all over the pulpit while they are trying to think of what they meant to say. I should hate to think of either twin growing up to be a woman preacher, 'specially the Tiniest One. I always wanted to call *her* Elizabeth, 'cause she is so much gooder than the Tiny One, but St. John says she has dark eyes. Elspeth's are blue, so it ought to be the blue-eyed baby that's named for her, I s'pose, even if it does cry more. Mercy, in another two days the month will be up, and I *must* have those names by then. It's hard work always to say the Tiny One and the Tiniest One."

Again she fell into a brown study, but two days later found her as undecided as ever, and she concluded to ask for just one more week in which to make up her mind. However, when Mr. Strong appeared for his brief visit that morning, his face looked so sadly grave as he bent over the crippled child to give her his usual kiss of greeting that she cried apprehensively, "What's the matter, St. John! Has anything happened to the twins?"

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"One of them—the Tiniest One—flew away with the angels last night," he answered simply, turning his face away that she might not witness his grief.

For a moment his reply dazed her; then she threw both arms about his neck, and burst into tears, sobbing as if her heart would break, while he dumbly sought to soothe her sorrow, by cuddling her head on his shoulder and rubbing his quivering cheek against hers, for he could not trust his voice to speak.

The first outburst of grief over, Peace shook the tears from her eyes, loosened her strangling grasp about his neck and gulped, "Well, that makes the naming of them easier, doesn't it, St. John! I was so fussed up to find something nice enough to go with Elizabeth, but now we'll just call the Tiniest One 'Angel Baby' and be glad that God didn't lug off both twins. But oh, I do wish He had waited a little while longer until I could have seen the two live twins."

So they comforted each other, and when the grave-eyed minister left her a few moments later, she was smiling ever so faintly, while the heaviness of his heart had lifted a bit, and he felt better for the child's sympathy.

Sitting alone in her chair under the trees after the tall, black-frosted figure had disappeared down the avenue, Peace suddenly heard the voice of Mrs. Campbell through the library window

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saying in troubled tones, "I really ought to go up to the parsonage myself and see Mrs. Strong in person. She would appreciate it more than anything else, but it is utterly impossible to go today, with that Board Meeting to attend to. I suppose I might write a little note of condolence now and make my call tomorrow, but such things are so stiff at best—"

Abruptly Peace remembered that she had sent no message by St. John to her sorrowing Elspeth, and with feverish eagerness she caught at her grandmother's suggestion of a note, turning to the table beside her chair where lay the dirty-red book which she had consulted so often during the past few weeks.

"I'll write her, too," she decided. "There are some lovely *condolences* in this 'Manual,' and I wouldn't for the world have her think I didn't care terribly bad because one of her babies has died."

With impatient fingers she turned the worn and ragged pages until she found the section she was seeking. Then pulling out pen and paper, she laboriously copied one of the stilted, old-fashioned epistles printed under the title of "Letters of Sympathy," and despatched it, hidden under a beautiful spray of white daisies and fern, to the little parsonage on the hill.

Elizabeth herself received the badly blotted missive, and with startled, mystified eyes, read the incongruous words penned by that childish hand. [Pg 94]

"My dear Friend,—I realize that this letter will find you berried in the deepest sorrow at the loss of your darling little Angle Baby, and that words of mine will be intirely inacqueduct to assawsage your overwhelming grief; yet I feel that I must write a few words to insure you that I am thinking of you and praying for you. If there can be a coppersating thought, it is that your darling returned to the God who gave it pure and unspotted by the world's temptations. The white rose and bud I send (Jud says there haint any in blossom, so I'll have to take daisies) I trust you will permit to rest upon your darling's pillow.

With feelings of deepest symparthy, I remain, dear friend,

Yours very sincerely,
PEACE GREENFIELD."

On the other side of the inky sheet were scrawled a few almost illegible lines, "My darlingest St. Elspeth, I have neerly squalled my heyes out because St. John says your Angle Baby has flewn back to Heaven and I wanted it to stay. But I am glad you have got another twin so the little crib St. John told us about won't be all empty and you will still have one reel live baby to rock to sleep besides Glen. This note of corndolence on the other page is the best I could find. All the others were too old. This one fits pretty well, but I had to change it a little, and even now it is stiff like Grandma says all notes of corndolence are. But I guess you will know I am as sorry as can be, for I love you and want you to be happy.

YOUR PEACE."

And Elizabeth, looking with tear-dimmed eyes from the bungling little note to the lovely, snow-white daisies in the box, was strangely comforted.

CHAPTER VII

AN ENDLESS CHAIN OF LETTERS

Peace closed the magazine with a reluctant sigh. "That," she said with decided emphasis on the pronoun, "is a good story. If all *orthers* wrote like that, 'twould make int'resting reading."

"What was it about?" asked Allee, looking up from a gorgeous splash of water-colors which she was pleased to call a painting.

"About a girl named Angelica Regina, who started an endless chain of letters to help the Ladies' Aid of her uncle's church c'lect scraps for silk quilts."

"Did the ladies ask her to?"

"Mercy, no! They didn't have an idea that she'd done such a thing, and they kept wondering where in the world all those scraps were coming from. Fin'ly it got so bad that the Post Office man was real mad and the husbands of the Ladies' Aid got mad, and the ladies themselves got mad and wouldn't take any more bundles that came through the mail. 'Twasn't till then that anyone knew 'bout the endless chain of letters. But at last one lady s'spected Angelica Regina had done the whole thing, and she made her own up to it."

"What is an endless chain of letters? I can't see how she worked it."

"Why, don't you 'member the letter Hope got last Christmas asking her to write five more just like it and send them to friends of hers?" [Pg 98]

"Well, but that's only five letters."

"Yes, 'twould be if it stopped there, but each of those five people had to write five letters more and give them to *their* friends. Five times five is twenty-five, and then those twenty-five would write five letters. Don't you see how it would keep growing till there would be hundreds and hundreds of letters written?"

Allee nodded solemnly, and Peace fell into a brown study. Presently she announced decidedly, "I b'lieve I'll do it. I like the scheme."

"Do what? What scheme?" inquired Allee, somewhat absently, as she critically surveyed her brilliant splotch of color, and wondered if she had added enough red to her sunset.

"I'll start an endless chain myself."

"What do *you* want silk scraps for?" Allee's brush fell unheeded from her hand, and the blue eyes shot an amazed glance up at the figure in the wheel-chair.

"I don't want any silk scraps, but I can ask for something else, can't I?"

"What shall you choose?" Allee was now alive with curiosity.

"Well,—I don't really know—just yet," Peace was obliged to confess. "It wouldn't be right to ask 'em each for a dime, like Hope's letter did, to *endower* a hospital bed, 'cause I haven't got the bed, and anyway I don't need money. Grandpa's got enough for us all. Now if we'd just known of this plan in Parker, p'raps we could have paid off our mortgage without any trouble." [Pg 99]

"But then Grandpa wouldn't have found us, and we prob'ly would still be living in the little brown house on that farm," responded Allee, with a frown.

"That's so. I hadn't thought of that. Well, it can't be money that I'll ask for, and I don't want silk scraps. Just now I can't think of a thing I want real bad which Grandpa can't get for me,—'nless it is buttons."

"Buttons!" repeated Allee, wondering if Peace had lost her senses altogether. "What do you want buttons for? What kind of buttons? Ain't your clothes got enough buttons on 'em now? Grandma —"

"Sh!" Peace cautioned, for in her surprise Allee had unconsciously raised her voice almost to a yell. "I don't mean that kind of buttons. I mean fancy ones just for a c'lection."

"But what good will a c'lection of *buttons* be?" demanded Allee, more puzzled than before. "What can you use 'em for?"

"What can you use any c'lection for?" sarcastically retorted Peace, exasperated at the little sister's stupidity. "What does Henderson Meadows use his c'lection of stamps for? Just to brag about and see how many more kinds he can get than the other boys."

"But—I never heard of such a thing as a c'lection of *buttons*," persisted Allee, privately worried for fear Peace was going crazy. "No one that I know has got one." [Pg 100]

"They will have as soon as I get mine started," the other girl stoutly maintained. "You wait and see."

Allee shook her head doubtfully and slowly reached out her hand for her gorgeous sunset which strongly resembled a rainbow in convulsions.

"You don't seem to like the plan," suggested Peace, more than ever determined to make the venture, just to prove to this skeptical creature that she knew what she was talking about.

"I—don't think—it will work," replied truthful Allee.

"Well, I'll show you. Miss Edith said when she was a girl it was a fad one winter to see who could get the biggest and prettiest string of buttons, and when I was telling Grandma she laughed and said they had the same thing a-going when she was a girl."

"But I don't see any sense to it," protested the younger sister, still unconvinced.

"I never saw a c'lection yet that had any *sense* to it, when it comes to that," Peace reluctantly admitted. "What *sense* is there in saving up a lot of dead bugs like Cherry's been doing all summer, or a bunch of horrid, nasty, dirty old pipes, like Len Abbott was so proud of; or even all those *queeriosities* that Judge Abbott kept in his library and said was worth so much money! I ain't a-going to do it for the *sense* there is in it, but it'll be awful lonesome for me when you girls go back to school this fall, 'specially as the doctor says I mustn't have a teacher of my own yet, and I can't do any real studying all by myself." Privately, Peace was much pleased with this verdict, but she thought it unnecessary to say so. "That's why I thought it would be a good plan to get something like this started which would help fill up the time while you and Cherry were shut up in school, and Grandma was too busy to pay attention to me." [Pg 101]

Allee's antagonism and skepticism vanished as if by magic. She had opposed this beautiful plan which would mean so much to her crippled sister! In deepest contrition she enthusiastically proposed, "Let's write the letter now and send it off so's your answers will begin coming in as soon as they can. I guess I didn't 'xactly see what you meant at first. I think it'll be a nice plan."

"All right," Peace replied, quick to take advantage of favorable circumstances. "You get the paper and ink. I've used mine all up out here. And say, s'posing we keep this endless chain plan a secret among our two selves. You can have half the buttons that come in; but if Cherry should know, she would prob'ly want a share, too."

"Maybe 'twould be better," Allee agreed, as she ran away to the house for writing materials.

Then began the task of composing a letter which should cover their wants; but so many obstacles presented themselves to the inexperienced writers, that the afternoon had waned before a satisfactory epistle had resulted.

"There," sighed Peace at length, "I guess that will do. It is short enough so's it won't take anyone long to make five copies, and it's long enough so's no one can be mistaken about what we mean. I wish I knew whether Hope kept the one she got. Maybe we could have gone by that and made a better letter of ours. This one in the magazine didn't help very much 'cause it talks about the Ladies' Aid, and we couldn't use that, for everybody would know a Ladies' Aid would want something besides buttons in their work. Do you think ours will do?"

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"Yes, it's perfectly elegant," the younger child replied, lovingly fingering the inky page of tipsy letters which she had just finished. "Now who are you going to send them to?"

"I've been thinking of that all the while we were writing, and I've already got a list of more'n five."

"Who?"

"Well, there's Lorene Meadows for a starter. She lives in Chicago and is acquainted with slews of kids which we don't know. Then there's Mrs. Grinnell in Parker, and Hec Abbott and Tessie and Effie and Jessie and Miss Dunbar and Annette Fisher and Mrs. Bainbridge and Mrs. Hartman and oh—all the Parker folks."

"Then s'posing we write more'n five to begin with."

"I hadn't thought of that. There's no reason why we shouldn't. Let's make it ten,—that's all the stamps I've got."

"All right."

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Both girls set to work laboriously scribbling the ten copies of their chain letter, then sealed and addressed them, and Allee dropped them into the mail box on the corner just as the dinner bell pealed out its summons to the dining-room.

School began the next Monday. The following day the first link in the endless chain was received from Lorene, who enclosed twelve handsome buttons and asked full particulars about the button collection, as she desired to start one for herself, and could Peace send her twelve buttons in exchange for hers? This was an unforeseen development, but Peace was so delighted with this first dozen that she set Allee to hunting up stray buttons about the house with which to satisfy the demands of any other youthful collectors. On Wednesday two more answers were received, one from Mrs. Grinnell, containing forty of the oddest looking buttons the girls had ever seen; and one from a stranger in Chicago, probably a friend of Lorene's, for she, too, asked for buttons in return.

Peace sighed, divided the contents of the two packages with an impartial hand, and remarked, "It's lucky Mrs. Grinnell don't want forty in exchange. We had only thirty-six to begin with, and Lorene's twelve and this girl's eight leaves us only sixteen, s'posing we get many more answers asking for some."

Fortunately for her peace of mind, however, only one other letter made such a request, but a new dilemma arose. Packages began to arrive with insufficient postage, and the crippled girl's pocket money vanished with alarming rapidity. The letter carrier always delivered the daily budget of mail to the little maid under the trees when the weather permitted of her being at her post, and it chanced that for a fortnight after the answers to her endless chain began pouring in, she received her own mail, so no one but Allee knew her secret, and there was no one but Allee to help her out with her heavy postage bills.

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"I never s'posed anyone would send out packages without enough stamps on 'em," she complained to her loyal supporter one night, after an unusually heavy mail and a correspondingly heavy drain on her pocketbook. "And the trouble is, the letters that have the most money to pay on them hold the ugliest buttons. I spent twelve cents for stamps today. That's the worst yet. Yesterday it was ten, and seven the day before. There won't be much of my monthly dollar left if it keeps on this way. The postman got sassy this morning and asked me if I'd started a— a correspondence school, or if I was having a birthday shower every day. I'm tired of the sight of buttons!"

"Already?" cried Allee. "Why, I think they are fine. If your dollar is all spent before the month is up, you can use mine. I ought to pay half the stampage anyway, as long as I get half the buttons."

All the girls at school are wild to know where we get so many, but I won't tell. There's eight hundred on your string and seven hundred and fifty on mine." [Pg 105]

"But I divided 'em even—"

"I know you did, but you see, I traded some, and Dolly Thomas cried 'cause she had only twenty buttons on her string, so I gave her a few of mine."

"Well, I wish we had some way to make the chain end," sighed Peace disconsolately. "I've got as big a c'lection as I want now and still they keep a-coming. That's just the way those silk scraps did to the Ladies' Aid in the story. O, dear, don't I get into the worst messes! I wouldn't mind if they'd pay their own stamps, but I want my money for Christmas, and if this keeps up I'll have to break into my bank. I thought it would be such fun to get mail every day, but the very sight of the postman now makes me sick."

"We might tell Grandpa. He'd know what to do," suggested Allee, seeing that Peace was really heartily tired of this deluge of buttons.

"I—I hate to do that. He'd think we were little sillies and I guess we are."

"'Twas your plan," Allee briefly informed her, for she did not care to be called a "silly" by anyone.

"Of course it was," Peace hastily acknowledged. "And I'm tired of it. Maybe—don't you think Miss Edith could tell us what to do?"

"I b'lieve she could. Ask her tomorrow. She'll be sure to pass, even if she doesn't have time to stop awhile. O, see who's coming!"

"Elspeth!" cried Peace, almost bouncing out of her chair in her eagerness to greet the dear friend whose face she had not seen for many weeks. [Pg 106]

"My little girlies!" The woman's sweet face bent over the eager one among the pillows and lingered there. It was the first time she had seen the crippled child since the doctors had pronounced her case hopeless, and she had feared that her presence might recall to Peace's mind the great misfortune, and bring on a deluge of tears. But Peace was thinking of other things than wheel-chairs. This was the first time she had seen her Elspeth since the Angel Baby had slipped away to its Maker, and she glanced apprehensively into the tender blue eyes above her, expecting to find them dim with tears of grief for the little one she had lost. Instead, they were smiling serenely. She had locked her sorrow deep down in her heart, and only God and her good St. John knew what a heavy ache throbbed in her breast.

So the brown eyes smiled bravely back, and after a moment the eager voice asked reproachfully, "Didn't you bring the b—the children? I haven't seen Baby Elspeth yet, and she is—"

"Two months old tomorrow," proudly answered the mother. "Yes, we brought her. We call her Bessie to avoid confusion of names. St. John has her now, but he happened to meet our postman on the street back there and stopped to tell him about some mail that he doesn't want delivered any longer." [Pg 107]

"What kind of mail?" Peace breathlessly demanded, suddenly remembering her endless chain of letters.

"O, some cheap magazines that keep coming. He wrote the publishers two or three times to discontinue them, but it didn't do any good, so now he is telling the postman not to bring them any more."

"Is that all you have to do?" The brown eyes were glowing with eagerness.

"Yes. Refuse to accept them when the postman brings them and they will soon stop coming."

"Will it work with packages?"

"With anything, I guess."

"What happens to the things you refuse?"

"O, some of them are returned to the sender, some go to the dead-letter office, and others are just destroyed, I guess."

"Oh!" Peace had received all the information she needed, and as St. John now appeared at the gate with Glen in tow and Baby Bessie in his arms, she turned her attention to her guests, who, as a special surprise for the invalid, had been invited to stay for dinner.

The next day, however, when the postman made his appearance with his arms bulging with packages, and a grin of amusement stretching his mouth from ear to ear, he was astounded to hear the little lady in the wheel-chair say crisply, "Take 'em all back. I won't receive another one you bring me. I s'pose there is postage to pay on most of 'em, too, ain't there?" [Pg 108]

"Fifteen cents," he acknowledged.

"Well, this is the time you don't get your fifteen cents," she announced calmly but with decision.

"But I can't deliver these packages until that is paid."

"Goody! I'm tired of the sight of them. The very looks of you coming up the walk gives me a pain. Don't bring me another single package. Take them back to the—the letter undertaker—"

"The what?" His eyes were twinkling, and he had hard work to keep his twitching lips from breaking into an audible chuckle.

"The place you send mail when it ain't wanted by the person it's supposed to go to. I've had all I care to do with chain letters. I really didn't think they were *endless* or I never would have started mine. We've got buttons enough to start a department store already."

The light of understanding broke over the postman's rugged features. "So it was a chain letter, was it?"

"Yes."

"And you don't want any more packages?"

"I won't *accept* any more." She bobbed her head emphatically and set all the short curls to dancing.

"All right, Miss Peace. I'll see that you aren't bothered with any more packages."

Peace heaved a great sigh of relief, and turned energetically back to her basket weaving, which had been sadly neglected of late. The parcels actually did cease coming, and the two conspirators hugged themselves with delight that it had not been necessary to tell their secret so no one knew what sillies they were. By common consent they barred chain letters as a topic of conversation, and had almost forgotten the hateful packages when one morning Peace received a letter from Miss Truman, still a teacher in the Parker School, saying that she had just mailed a large box addressed to the little invalid, and hoped that Peace would enjoy its contents. The girl was wild with anticipation, but the parcel did not put in appearance that afternoon, nor the next day, nor the next.

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"I am afraid it has gone astray," said Grandpa Campbell when the third morning passed without it coming.

"And won't I ever get it?" asked Peace disconsolately.

"Such things sometimes happen, though Parker is such a short distance from here that it seems almost impossible for it to have been lost. I will call at the Post Office and inquire. Perhaps for some reason it is stalled there."

That afternoon he appeared with the coveted parcel in his hand and a mystified look in his eyes.

"You got it?" shrieked Peace in ecstasy.

"Yes, I got it, but if the Postmaster had not been a very good friend of mine, you would never have seen it."

"Why not?" Peace was genuinely amazed. "What right had the Postmaster to my package? Did he want to keep it?"

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"He tells me that you issued orders two weeks or more ago not to deliver any more packages to your address."

"He—oh, that was buttons! I didn't mean this kind of packages."

"Buttons!" the President looked even more puzzled.

"O, dear," sighed Peace unhappily. "Now I've got to tell what a silly-pate I've been." So she poured out the tale of the endless chain to the astonished man, ending with the characteristic remark, "And I told the letter-carrier to send all the rest of the button packages to the letter graveyard at Washington, but I s'posed of course he'd bring me packages like this."

"He has no way of distinguishing between them, my dear," the President gravely informed her, trying hard to keep his face straight. "You ordered *all* parcels addressed to you stopped. You refused to accept them, and there will be no more delivered to you."

"*Never?*" gasped Peace.

"Well,—not for months and months and months. I don't know exactly how we can get the matter fixed up now."

"And will they keep all my *Christmas* packages, too?"

"If they come addressed to you."

"Where's my pencil and postcards?" She began a wild, scrambling search, through the drawers of the table which always stood beside her chair.

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"What do you want of them?" the man inquired with considerable curiosity.

"Why, I've got to write everyone I know and tell 'em if they want to send me anything for Christmas or my birthday, or any other time, to address it on the outside to Allee," she retorted, scribbling away energetically.

ALLEE'S ALBUM

"You are late, Allee." Peace had watched the little figure ever since it had turned the corner a block further down the street, and noted with increasing anxiety that the usually swift feet tonight were lagging and slow. Indeed, so abstracted was the belated scholar that she almost forgot to turn in at her own gate, and in Peace's mind this could mean only one thing,—Allee had fallen below grade in her arithmetic that afternoon and had been kept after school to make it up. As a further indication that this was the case, she was intently studying the front page of a scratch-tablet, and when Peace called to her, she hastily hid the paper under her apron, while her rosy cheeks grew rosier still, and a look of guilty alarm flew into her blue eyes.

"Am I?" She tried to speak naturally, but suspicious Peace detected the strained note in her voice, and demanded, "Were you kept after school?"

"Yes,—no,—not really school."

"What do you mean by that? Cherry's been home for more'n half an hour."

"That long?" Allee's amazement was too genuine to doubt.

"Yes, and you said you'd come home the minute school was out so's we could finish that puzzle and send it off." [Pg 114]

"I didn't mean to stay so long. It seemed only a minute, Peace, truly." Allee was deeply penitent.

"Where have you been? To see Miss Edith?"

"No—o—"

"And what's that you are hiding under your apron? Allee Greenfield, you've got a secret from me!" cried Peace, much aggrieved.

Poor Allee's face flushed crimson, the frank eyes wavered and fell, and a meek voice stammered, "I—I—'tisn't really a secret, Peace."

"What is it then?"

"I was afraid you would laugh at me—"

"Why? What is there to laugh at?"

"My—my rhymes."

"Rhymes?"

"Yes. You know Hope has to write 'em in High School, and even Cherry's teacher took a notion to make her scholars try thinking up poetry."

"Has your teacher?"

"O, no, but at recess we play school and one of our games is making up rhymes. The leader says anything she wants to, and we have to answer so it will make a jingle. It's like spelling down. If we miss we have to go to the foot of the class."

"Mercy me! the whole house will be talking poetry next," ejaculated Peace. "Gail's just written one that the—the—what is the name of that paper?—has printed with her name at the bottom of it, and Cherry came home tonight with her head so big that she can hardly lug it, 'cause her verses were the best in her room. But I didn't think it would hit *you*. Why, there's getting to be a reg'lar *emetie* of poetry 'round here." [Pg 115]

Allee looked crestfallen. "It's fun when you know how," she ventured, apologetically. "Gussie showed me, and helps me get the feet straight."

"Feet! Gussie! Is she at it, too?"

"Gussie writes perfectly elegant rhymes," Allee defended. "You haven't forgotten those dishes she cooked for you and rhymed over, have you?"

"I guess not! They were so funny. I pasted 'em into my 'Glimmers of Gladness.'"

"And I stuck mine into my album," confessed Allee.

"Your album? What album?"

"A little book Gussie gave me to write my jingles in. The name on the cover is 'Album,' so that's what I call it."

"Would—would you let me see it?"

Allee hesitated. "You won't laugh?"

"Not a single snicker."

"Well, then,—I don't mind."

She darted away to the house, returning almost immediately with a small, thick note-book in her hand, partly filled with round, even writing, which Peace instantly recognized as Gussie's. "That ain't—" she began, but Allee forestalled her.

"Gussie copies 'em all for me, 'cause my letters are so dreadfully big the pages won't hold all I want to write," she explained. [Pg 116]

"Why don't you get a bigger book and write your own poems in it? The pages are too small in this. I'll tell you,—Grandma gave me a big, fat book a long time ago to keep a *dairy* in."—Peace never could remember the proper place for the words 'dairy' and 'diary.'—"But I wrote only one day. It wasn't at all int'resting to scribble all by myself, but if you'll use my book we'll both write. How'd you like that?"

Allee's eyes were shining happily. "I think it would be fine. I—I really wanted your book, 'cause it is so nice and wide, but I thought likely you would find some use for it yourself some day."

"Well, I have. We'll use it for a scrap album."

"A scrap album?"

"Yes. I mean, we can each of us write in it whenever we feel poetry, but we needn't *have* to do it at any time."

"And I can paste my 'lustrations in it between leaves, can't I?"

"What kind of 'lustrations?"

"Why, like Hope's note-book. She *has* to draw pictures of plants and flowers in her botany, and just for fun she makes *sketches* to picture out the stories they study in some of her other classes."

"But her *sketches* are nice," Peace remarked skeptically. "Why, Grandpa thinks some day she will make a good 'lustrator for magazines and books."

"My pictures are nice, too," Allee contended. "Here is a sunset I painted a long time ago—" [Pg 117]

"It looks like a prairie fire," murmured the older sister, gravely eyeing the highly-colored sheet upside down.

"It just matches a lullaby I made up yesterday," continued Allee, unmindful of Peace's criticism. Rapidly her fingers turned the pages until she had found the lines she wanted, and with a heart filled with pride, she passed the book to her companion, who read,

"The sun is sinking in the west,
'Tis time my baby dear should rest,—
Sleep, baby, sleep."

"You haven't got any baby," the reader interrupted.

"It don't need babies to write lullabies," Allee scornfully retorted. "A real poet can write about *anything*."

"Well, anyway, I like this one better." Peace's eyes had travelled rapidly through the lines, and lingered over some stanzas on the opposite page:

"I wonder why the fairies hide?
I'm sure I'd like to see them dance,
But though my very best I've tried,
I never yet have had a chance.
I wonder why, don't you?"

I wonder why the birdies fly,
While I alone can cry and talk;
But though I often try and try,
I cannot do a thing but walk.
I wonder why, don't you?"

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"Yes, Gussie liked that, too," said Allee, much pleased.

"Did you write it all yourself?" Peace was incredulous.

"Well, Gussie showed me how to fix it up so it didn't limp, but it's almost like I wrote it."

"I don't see how you can think of the things to say."

"They think themselves, I guess," replied Allee after a moment's study. "Teacher last year used to read us stories and make us tell them ourselves, just as pretty as we could; and you and I 'magine so many things about the moon lady and the mountain elves and water sprites. It's easy to *tell* them like stories, so I just tried writing them out. That ain't so easy, 'cause I can't always spell the words, but it's fun now that I'm used to it. Then Gussie showed me how rhymes were made

into real poetry, so I tried that, too. It's just fitting words into a tune like you used to do, only you don't need a tune either. The poems in our Readers are what I go by."

Peace was very much interested. In her "Glimmers of Gladness" she had essayed a poem or two, as she was pleased to call them; but Allee's were far superior to any of her attempts, and Allee was two years younger. "Bring me all the old Readers in the library," she abruptly commanded, "and while you are copying your poems in my book, I'll write a few of my own."

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Allee ran to do her bidding, and soon the two embryo poets were so busy with pen and pencil that they were amazed when Jud appeared to carry the invalid into the house.

"It's surely not dinner time yet!" Allee protested. "Why, I've got only one poem and half of a story copied."

"That's better'n me," Peace dolefully sighed, closing the First Reader with reluctant hands and laying it aside. "I haven't done a line yet. I haven't even found a poem to pattern after, though I guess I'll take 'Long Time Ago' for my first one. That's easy, and when I get onto the hang of it, I'll try something harder. If it's dinner time already the days must be getting lots shorter again."

"You are right, they are," Jud agreed. "Soon it will be too cold out here for you—"

"I shan't mind," Peace interrupted. "I'm going to write a good deal this winter. Gussie'll teach me to be a poet, and I always could write better inside the house. There's too much to look at out-of-doors."

Jud heaved a gusty sigh. "You all think a heap of Gussie, don't you?" he asked with a jealous pang, for he found it almost impossible to get a quiet word with that busy and important member of the household, and now that winter was coming on, it would be harder than ever, for even the little after-dinner chats in the garden would have to be discontinued.

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"I sh'd say we do!" both girls chorused. "She is worth thinking a lot of—"

"That's where you are right again," the man agreed heartily.

"She can do *anything*" said Peace, who was never tired of singing Gussie's praises.

"Even to making poets," he teased.

"Yes, sir, even to making poets, and some day you will see for yourself."

"I hope I may," he sighed again, and the little group slowly trundled up the walk into the house.

Jud's prophecy of cold weather came true sooner than he had expected, and as if to make up for the long, lovely autumn of the year before, wintry winds descended early upon Martindale. Heavy frosts wrought havoc in the gardens, the yellow and crimson leaves fell in showers, September died in a blaze of glory, and October found the trees naked and vines shivering in the keen, sharp air. It was too cold to spend the hours out-of-doors any longer, and the Campbells dreaded the long days of confinement that stretched out in such an appalling array before the crippled child. So they were amazed and agreeably surprised to hear no word of lament from the small maid herself, who was suddenly seized with such a studious fit that she found hardly time to eat her meals.

"I'm learning to be a poet," she told them by way of explanation. "Gussie's teaching me, and some day maybe you can read our poems,—Allee's and mine."

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"God bless Gussie," they smiled tenderly, and went their way content, leaving the young student to toil with inky fingers over pages of impossible rhymes, for they knew that when this new play should have lost its attraction, they must have something else to hold the patient's interest.

Perhaps it was Gussie's teaching, perhaps Allee's unflagging enthusiasm which kept restless Peace pouring over the ancient Readers unearthed from obscure corners of the President's great library; but however that may be, more ink was used in the big house during those early Fall days than had ever been used before, and the fat notebook was filled at an alarming rate with contributions from its two owners, and an occasional skit, by way of encouragement, from Gussie, the cook.

As neither Peace nor Allee ever offered to share their secrets with their elders, the sisters soon lost interest in the new amusement; but one night when both scribes were fast asleep in their beds, Hope chanced to find the precious volume on the couch by the fireplace where Allee had carelessly dropped it when the dinner hour had been announced. Picking it up, she opened it idly, before she recognized what book she had in her hand. Then, just as she was about to lay it aside, one of Allee's contributions caught her eye, and with amazement she read the little story, retouched and polished up by Gussie, but breathing the small sister's winsomeness in every word.

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"Why, the little mouse!" she exclaimed in her astonishment. "If that isn't just like her!"

"Where's the mouse?" demanded Cherry, curling her feet up under her and searching wildly about the floor with eyes full of fear and loathing.

"In bed," promptly answered Hope. "I've got her stories here in my hand. Grandma, do you know what the youngsters have been doing all this while?"

Mrs. Campbell glanced at the book on Hope's knee, and smilingly answered, "Learning to be poets under Gussie's instruction."

"But Allee really does write splendidly," Hope insisted very seriously. "I can hardly believe she wrote all this; yet it sounds just like her. She always did have such a beautiful way of saying things." Then she burst out laughing.

"What is it?" demanded the sisters, scenting something unusual, and laying aside their lessons to listen.

"A poem by Peace," gasped Hope. "O, it's too funny!" Wiping her eyes, she dramatically read:

"In the yard the little chicklets
Ran to and fro,
Digging up the worms and buglets
Squirring down below.

Came a hawk and grabbed a chicklet,
Right by the toe,
And the little chicklet hollered,
"O, let me go."

But the hawklet hugged him tighter,
Wouldn't turn him loose,
Cause he thought he'd make good dinner
When there was no goose.

So the hawklet went a-flying
Up in the sky,
With the chicklet still a-crying,
"I don't want to die.""

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By the time she had finished reading the queer stanzas, five heads were clustered about hers, for even the President cast aside his paper to listen; and five pair of eager eyes were striving to read the uneven scrawls with which the pages were filled.

"Well, I declare!" ejaculated the learned Doctor of Laws, rubbing his spectacles vigorously, and bending over the ink-blotted book again. "I had no idea that Allee was far enough advanced in school to write compositions and—and—rhymes."

"She is nearly up with Peace," said Gail proudly. "I predict that she will be a poet yet."

"Wouldn't be at all surprised," replied the doctor. "Her grandfather might have shone in literature if he had chosen that field instead of the ministry." [Pg 124]

"I like Peace's contributions almost the best," murmured the grandmother apologetically, brushing a tear from her cheek as she finished reading some incomplete lines penned by the brown-eyed maid:—

"Shut up here with no trees nor plants,
I can't tear my close on a barb wire fence.
With my feet on a pillow where I can't use 'em
There's nothing on earth can ever bruise 'em.
But oh, how I hate to lie here all day,
When I want to be out in the garden at play.
I want to get up and run and shout,
I want to see what's happening about.
There'll be no more climbing up roofs so high,
I must live in a wheel-chair until I die."

Hope's eyes, too, had seen the pathetic lines, and closing the book, she softly said, "Let's all write something in it as a surprise,—something of our own, I mean."

"And you make little margin pictures like Mrs. Strong did in Peace's Brownie Book," suggested Cherry.

"You mean her 'Glimmers of Gladness,'" Faith corrected, smiling a little in remembrance of the brown and gold volume which had helped while away the rainy days at the parsonage more than a year before.

"And paint the name in fancy letters on the front cover," Gail added.

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"What shall you call it?" asked the grandmother, already searching for pen and paper that she might make a first draft of some lines running through her mind.

"The same title they have given it," Gail answered. "'Allee's Album.'"

"And God bless 'Allee's Album,'" reverently whispered the deeply-touched President, blowing his nose like a trumpet to relieve his feelings.

PEACE INTERVIEWS THE BISHOP

"Well," sighed the President, laying down the evening paper and leaning wearily back among the cushions of his great Morris chair, "it really looks as if South Avenue Church is to have Dr. Henry Shumway for its pastor this year."

Mrs. Campbell glanced up hastily from her sewing with consternation in her eyes and asked, "Has the bishop really confirmed the report?"

"No, but he won't deny it, either. According to an article in this paper, our beloved Dr. Graves is to be transferred to the Iowa Conference, and Dr. Shumway takes his place."

"I sh'd think you'd be glad enough to see Dr. Graves go," remarked an abstracted voice from the corner of the room where Peace and Allee were absorbed in the task of sorting and stringing bright-colored beads. "He reminds me of tombstones and *seminaries*,—not only his name, but the *pomperous* way he has of crawling up the aisle. He walks like a stone *yimage*."

"Porpoise, you mean," gently suggested Allee.

"Pompous," corrected the President, smiling a little at their blunders. "I can't say I am exactly sorry to see the Reverend Philander N. Graves transferred,"—his tone was mildly sarcastic,—"for he was a misfit in South Avenue Church. We didn't want him in the first place, but we tried to be decent to him during his year's sojourn with us. However, that's neither here nor there. When three times in succession we are given a man we don't want, I think it is time to kick. We have quietly accepted the other two men when we wanted Dr. Atkinson, but now—"

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"You oughtn't to kick the preacher," mused Peace, studying the effect of some green and purple beads together. "He has to go where he is sent, doesn't he?"

"Ye—s," reluctantly conceded the President.

"Then 'tisn't his fault if he gets stuck in a good-for-nothing church which he doesn't want—"

"South Avenue Church is considered one of the choicest pastorates our Conference affords," hastily interrupted Dr. Campbell, while his wife quickly buried her face in her sewing again, to hide the smile dancing in her eyes.

"Is it?" Peace looked genuinely surprised. "It's always scrapping. *I'd* hate to be its preacher. Papa had a *nawful* time in his last church 'cause they picked on him to scrap about. He got sent where he didn't want to go, and in the end he had to quit,—just plumb worn out by being jumped on. He was a good man, too."

The President looked uncomfortable. "But Peace," he argued, "you are too young to understand such matters. I haven't the slightest doubt that Dr. Shumway is a good man and an excellent preacher. In fact, he comes most highly recommended. We aren't objecting to him personally. It's the principle of the thing—"

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"Well, if the Pendennis Church people had kicked the principle instead of Papa, maybe he'd be a live preacher yet and not an angel."

Dr. Campbell lapsed into silence. What was the use of arguing with a child? He was tired from a strenuous day's work at the University and disgusted with the bishop's pig-headed perversity. It was early in the evening yet, but perhaps bed was the best place for him in his state of mind; so excusing himself and bidding the trio good-night, he stalked off upstairs.

Peace had forgotten all about the bishop and Dr. Shumway when she awoke the next morning, and might have paid no more attention to the South Avenue Church discussions, had she not chanced to overhear a conversation not intended for her ears. It was after luncheon, Cherry and Allee had returned to school, the older sisters were not expected for hours yet, and Peace was just composing herself for a nap, having nothing else to fill in the long afternoon until school should close for the day, when the telephone bell rang, and Mrs. Campbell herself answered it.

Thinking it might be a message from her St. Elspeth or Aunt Pen, who never were too busy to remember the little prisoner at the other end of the city, Peace popped her head up to listen, and heard her grandmother say slowly and with evident regret, "I'm so sorry, Mrs. York, but I don't see how I can.—O, yes, indeed, I had planned on it, but circumstances, you know.—She's doing nicely, but I can't very well leave her alone all the afternoon.—No, but the two smaller girls are in school until half-past three, Gail and Faith have recitations up through the sixth hour at the University, and Hope went with her class to view that collection of antiquities at the Public Library.—Well, you see, this is Gussie's afternoon out, and—No, never with Marie.—I had counted upon Hope's being here to keep her company.—I am sorry to disappoint you, but I assure you I am very much more disappointed on my own account—"

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"Grandma!"

"Good-bye. I suppose I shall see you Sunday!"

"Grandma!"

"All right. Good-bye."

"Grandma! Can't you hear me?"

"Yes, dearie, but I was at the telephone."

"I know it, and I wanted you to tell Mrs. York that you'd come."

"But, childie, I can't leave you here all alone. You and Marie—"

"Fight. Yes, I know. But you might take me along. Couldn't you?"

Mrs. Campbell was startled. This was the first time since the accident that Peace had showed any desire to go beyond the boundaries of the garden; and the woman glanced suspiciously at the eager face, thinking that the suggestion meant a sacrifice of the child's own wishes. But the eyes were shining with their old-time enthusiasm, and Mrs. Campbell said hesitatingly, "It's a Missionary Conference, dear."

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"I always did like missionary meetings," Peace reminded her.

"But this will be different,—mostly statistics, reports and discussions. I am afraid you would find it very dull."

"Women can be awfully dull sometimes," Peace admitted cheerfully. "But you want to go, I haven't anything to do, and I might just as well be watching the crowds there as taking a nap here at home. Then both of us would be amused, while here, you would be thinking of what you'd missed, and I'd be just itching for something to do."

"But supposing the proceedings don't amuse you?" smiled the woman.

"Then I'll go to sleep like Deacon Skinner always did in Parker. Or I might take along something to read, s'posing things get too awfully dry."

"Would you really like to go?" Mrs. Campbell was still a little doubtful, though from her manner of glancing at the clock, and then down the street, it was evident that she herself very much desired to attend that afternoon's session of the Conference.

"Sure," Peace answered promptly, and Mrs. Campbell allowed herself to be persuaded. So half an hour later the brown-eyed maid found herself trundling down the familiar streets in her wheel-chair.

It was a clear, cold day, and the crisp air smelled of fallen leaves and bonfires; and both woman and child sniffed hungrily at the delicious odors of Autumn. Peace was almost reluctant to enter the big church when they reached it, for the lure of the open air was great, the blue sky charming, and even the leafless trees and frost-blackened shrubs were enticing.

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Once inside the building, however, she forgot all else in watching the crowd of enthusiastic ladies trotting to and fro and mingling with the throng of black-frocked ministers gathered for the closing sessions of the Annual Conference. Even when the meeting was called to order and the afternoon's business begun, Peace did not lose her interest, though she understood very little of what was going on, and wondered how her grandmother or any other sensible soul could be interested in the long lists of stupid figures that were read from time to time.

"Sounds 's if they were learning their multiplication tables," she giggled, "and when they all get to gabbling at once,—that's the Chinese of it."

"What's the Chinese of it, if I may ask?" inquired a deep voice in her ear; and thinking it was her beloved St. John, she whirled about to find a friendly-eyed stranger just sitting down in the pew behind her chair.

She had forgotten her surroundings, and had spoken her thoughts aloud. "Mercy!" she gasped. "I thought I had this corner all to myself. I never s'pected anyone was near enough to hear what I said. Once before I did that same thing, and a minister caught me at it that time, too. Your voice sounds like his,—deep and bull-froggy. I 'most called you St. John before I saw it was someone else. Are you a missionary?"

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"O, no. Just a—"

"Plain preacher?" finished Peace, as he hesitated a moment with his sentence incomplete.

"Yes, just a plain preacher," he laughed.

"Well, I thought you had a missionaryish look about you. That's why I asked. I've been trying all the afternoon to sort out the gang—"

"Do what?" He was frankly amazed.

"Now I s'pose I've shocked you," she cried penitently. "Grandma doesn't like me to use such words, but I keep forgetting. I meant I'd been trying to pick out the missionaries and ministers, and the bishop. I 'specially wanted a look at the bishop, but I haven't seen a wink of him yet."

"And why are you so anxious to see the bishop, my girl?" asked her newly found acquaintance, smiling in amusement. "He surely ought to be flattered—"

"I want to see if he looks beery."

"Beery!" The broad face of her companion looked like an enlarged exclamation point.

"Yes,—he's got such a beery name. Fancy a man called Malthouse being a minister, and a bishop at that! I couldn't help wondering if his face fitted his job any better than his name."

"Well—as to that—I'm not—prepared to say," stammered the big man beside her.

"Don't you know him?"

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"O, yes, quite well."

"Is he good-looking?"

"Well, you know folks differ in their ideas of what good-looking means," he hedged, seeming somewhat embarrassed.

"I took that *extinguished* looking man over there in the corner for the bishop—"

"Extinguished?"

"Yes, the one with the extra long tails on his coat and bushy white hair; but he's been opening and shutting windows all day long, and I expect they'd give the bishop something better than that to do."

The puzzled divine glanced curiously in the direction the child's thin forefinger was pointing, and chuckled outright as he beheld the aged figure of the new janitor moving slowly down the aisle with the long window-stick in his hand. "So you think he looks like a bishop?" he managed to articulate soberly.

"Yes, I do. He's the best-looking man in the bunch. He's so tall and straight, too, and so—so bishop-y in the set of his clothes. They fit him. But he doesn't jabber as much as the rest. I s'pose 'twould be just like the things that happen to me to find out that that giant bean-pole which keeps teetering around the room is the bishop." She indicated a very tall, very slender man, who at that moment chanced to pass their retreat.

"No," her companion answered promptly, "that is not the bishop. His name is Shumway,—Dr. Shumway—"

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"Dr. Shumway!" echoed the child. "The man the bishop is going to send to our church? Well, I don't wonder the people mean to kick! Ain't he the homeliest ever?"

"Who told you that?" gravely asked the stranger preacher, all the smile gone from his kindly eyes.

"That he's homely? No one. I can see it for myself."

"I mean who told you that the people intend to kick?"

"Oh! Grandpa was talking to Grandma last evening. The paper said Dr. Shumway was to take the place of Dr. Graves. It's a pity they can't divide up, ain't it? Dr. Graves would look less like an elephant if he didn't have so much meat on him and Dr. Shumway needs a lot more'n he's got."

"Who is your grandfather?" interrupted the man beside her, ignoring the candid criticisms of his entertainer.

"Dr. Campbell, President of the State University," she answered proudly.

"Oh!" He was silent a moment; then as if musing aloud, he murmured, "So they mean to kick, do they?"

"Well, wouldn't you? This is the third time South Avenue Church has asked for one partic'lar man and got a different fellow. It's time they kicked, seems to me. I guess the bishop likes to lord it over the churches and have his own way in things."

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"Perhaps he thinks he knows best what kind of a man is needed in his different charges."

"P'r'aps he does, but he made an awful bungle when he sent Dr. Graves down here,—that's sure."

"Possibly that was a mistake," replied her companion in a queer, strained voice. "But no one is sorrier than the bishop himself when he blunders."

"Then I sh'd think he would be more careful about giving us another misfit. We are tired of 'em."

"Dr. Shumway is a man whom everyone loves," said the ministerial-looking gentleman warmly.

"I'm glad of that, then; but I am sorry he is coming to South Avenue Church just the same. He doesn't look as if he could stand being kicked any more'n Papa could. Has he got any children?"

"Yes, five, I believe."

"Any my size?"

"I think his family is pretty well grown up, my girl."

"That's lucky, for if the church *should* happen to wear him out like they did Papa, why, his

children could take care of themselves when he died and not have to dig like we did, and fin'ly be adopted or else sent to the poor farm."

The big man fidgeted in his pew and looked quite uncomfortable as the relentless voice continued, "I sh'd hate to be a bishop and have such things blamed onto me; but if the bishop hadn't *insisted* on sending Papa to that Pendennis Church when they had asked for someone else, maybe he might be living with his family yet, instead of with the angels."

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"Who was your Papa?" the gruff voice gently asked.

"Peter Greenfield."

"Oh!"

"Did you know him?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed. He was one of my—I am the—I knew him well. He was a good preacher and a splendid man. The Church suffered a great loss in his death."

"His family suffered a worsen one, 'cause Mamma got sick and then we had two angels behind the Gates, and no one here to tell us what to do, and Gail not eighteen."

"Tell me about it."

The missionary meeting had long since dissolved into several committee meetings, and the hum of voices in the great auditorium drowned the conversation in the dim recess at the rear of the room; but Peace had entirely forgotten her surroundings, and without restraint she poured out the simple story of her father's sacrifices in her concise, forceful way, laying bare family secrets and relating with telling effect the pathetic struggle of the six sisters left alone to face the battle with the world.

"And then we came to live with Grandpa and Grandma Campbell," she finished. "They are just like truly relations to us, but they can never make up for our own father and mother, any more than we can really take the place of their own little girls which died. Why, has the Conference quit? Everybody's bustling all around the room now. I wonder where Grandma went? Is it time to go home?"

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"In a moment or two," replied the man, thoughtfully stroking his smoothly-shaven chin. "Some of the committees are evidently still in session."

"And I never looked at Allee's Album all the while I was here! I had to come, else Grandma couldn't, 'cause the girls are all in school 'xcept Hope, and she has gone to see the *iniquities* at the Library. So I brought this along to keep myself awake with, 'cause I thought it would likely be a stupid, sleepy meeting today. They always are when a lot of fat old ladies get to talking *ecstatics*,"—she meant statistics—"but I've had a very nice time listening and watching those funny preachers; and I'm glad you came along to talk to me—"

"Bishop Malthouse!" someone from the rostrum shouted.

The dignified gentleman rose hastily, stooped and kissed the white cheek of the child, and departed after a hurried, "Sounds as if I was wanted."

At that moment Mrs. Campbell rustled up to the little recess where the wheel-chair stood, glanced apprehensively at the figure reclining among the cushions, and briskly asked, "Tired, dearie?"

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"No, Grandma. I've had a lovely time. But who is that minister just going up the aisle?"

Mrs. Campbell glanced over her shoulder. "Bishop Malthouse, dear."

"Bishop—!" Words failed her.

"Yes, the man who appoints the ministers of this Conference."

"O, Grandma! And I told him some dreadful things about himself. We've been talking most of the afternoon."

Mrs. Campbell's heart smote her. "What did you say to him, girlie?"

Peace briefly recounted their conversation as she remembered it, and sighed tragically, "I talk too much. Faith says I tell all I know to everyone I meet."

"That little tongue of yours does run away with itself sometimes," replied the woman, dismayed at Peace's revelations; but perceiving how distressed the child felt over her blunder, she forbore to chide her; and in silence they wound their way homeward.

The President was late for dinner that night, but when he did arrive, the whole family knew from his very step that he was the bearer of good news.

"Grandpa's glad," sang Peace, as he hurried into the room and took his place at the table.

"Did—have you been—?" began Mrs. Campbell, hesitatingly.

"To the Official Board Meeting?" he finished. "Yes, that is why I am so late."

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"The meeting was in regard to the new preacher?"

"Yes, and the bishop was there in person."

"Oh!" Seven pair of eyes regarded him expectantly.

"He very frankly stated his reasons for not wishing to send us Dr. Atkinson, and why he thought Dr. Shumway was the man for the place. Then he left us to decide which minister we would have."

"And you chose—?"

"Dr. Shumway—unanimously."

Involuntarily Mrs. Campbell glanced across the table toward Peace; and that young lady, busy buttering a hot roll, paused long enough to remark complacently, "I guess the bishop ain't as lordy as he looks, after all, is he?"

CHAPTER X

[Pg 141]

THE NEW PASTOR OF SOUTH AVENUE CHURCH

"Marie, if that is anyone to see Grandma, show them in here, and tell 'em she will be back in a few minutes. Well, that's what she said to do when she went out." For Marie had paused uncertainly on her way to answer the doorbell, and eyed Peace skeptically.

"O, very well," retorted the maid crossly. "But mind your manners and be a lady."

Before Peace could think of a suitable reply to that studied insult, the girl had flung open the door and ushered in a very tall, angular person, who at first sight seemed all arms and legs. But when one caught a glimpse of his face, one straightway forgot all other characteristics, for in rugged homeliness it would have been hard to surpass him, and yet there was a striking kindness of feature, a certain gentleness of eye that instantly drew people to him, so that instinctively they knew him to be their friend. Up into this face sulky Peace found herself staring, as the tall figure crossed the parlor threshold, and came to meet her with hand outstretched in greeting.

"How do you do?" a rich voice rumbled. "Are you the mistress of the house today?"

"You're as homely as Abraham Lincoln," she gasped, scarcely aware that she had spoken aloud. "In fact, you look very much like his pictures,—as much as a gray, bald-headed, whiskerless man could look like a black-bearded one."

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"Thanks," he laughed genially. "That is the greatest compliment anyone could pay me. I only wish I were as noble a man."

"We grow to be like our highest ideas," Peace answered primly, recalling a little lecture she had received that morning. "You are Dr. Shumway, ain't you? Pastor of South Avenue Church?"

"Yes, mademoiselle; and you are one of Dr. Campbell's granddaughters?"

"By adoption. My name is Peace Greenfield, and my father and real grandfather were ministers in their time. That's why I am so much interested in preachers. Have you any children?" she asked.

"Five," he answered, amused at the grown-up air she had assumed. "How many are there of you?"

"Six. Four older'n me and just Allee younger. The bishop said he thought all of yours were grown up. Are they?"

"We—ll, none of them are very small now. Pansy is the youngest, and she is nearly fourteen."

"Pansy! Of all names! I s'pose she is as big as an elephant, ain't she?"

"She *is* rather large for her age," acknowledged the surprised minister, hardly knowing how to receive these candid remarks of his youthful hostess.

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"All the Pansies I ever knew were," sighed Peace. "I don't see why people will name their biggest children Pansy."

"But how is one to tell how fat a child will be when it grows up?" argued the puzzled man.

"It's never safe to name a baby Pansy. It's sure to be a whale. Besides, Pansy isn't a pretty name for a *person*. It is all right for a flower, but for a real live thing—well, ministers do have awfully queer notions about pretty names, anyway. Are all your children girls?"

"No, only four. Keturah, Caroline, Penelope and Pansy."

"Mercy! What outrageous names! It is very plain that *you* didn't go to the Bible for your children, but you couldn't have done any worse if you had."

"Why, child, what do you mean?" gasped the thoroughly uncomfortable pastor, mentally deciding

that this was the rudest specimen of humanity that he had ever met in his life.

"Well, you see after my sister Gail was born and named after Mamma, Grandpa came to stay with us and while he lived he took the job of naming the rest of us,—all but Allee. He died before she came. But he hunted out words from the Bible to call us, and they are all misfits but Hope."

"Hope is a very pretty name," murmured the minister, somewhat hesitatingly.

"Yes, and Hope is a very pretty girl, too. The name and the girl go together all right in that case. But look at Faith and Cherry—her real name is Charity—and me. Look at my name. There ain't a thing peaceful about me. I seem bound to make a stir wherever I go, no matter how hard I try to be good. It just ain't *in* me to be quiet and keep my mouth shut. Now, if Grandpa had waited till I grew up, he never would have called me 'Peace.' Still, I'm glad he didn't call me 'Catarrh.' That's outlandish. I thought that was something which ailed folks." [Pg 144]

"Catarrh is," agreed Dr. Shumway, amusement supplanting the indignation which he had felt welling up within him. "My girl's name is Keturah. We call her Kitty—"

"Yes, I s'pose so. The girls named Kitty are always big and homely, too."

"Well, our Kitty is neither big nor homely—"

"O, doesn't she look like you?"

He smiled grimly. "No," he answered. "She resembles her angel mother."

"Have you got an angel in your family, too?" Peace's brown eyes were softly tender, and the busy minister suddenly loved the talkative little sprite who was so very frank in her observations.

"Yes, two. The mother of my five children, and my only grandson, Keturah's child."

"A baby?"

"Yes." His eyes sought the live embers in the great fireplace, and he sat apparently lost in thought.

Peace sighed and was thoughtfully silent a moment; then as the pause grew oppressive to her, she observed, "So Keturah's married." [Pg 145]

The minister looked up startled, then smiled in amusement. "Yes, and Caroline also, but Carrie has no children."

"Who keeps house for you if your wife is an angel and your biggest children are married? Do they live with you still?"

"O, no. Both girls have homes of their own in other towns. My sister Anne stays with us, and with the help of Penelope and Pansy manages the house very well."

"What did you do with your boy? You haven't said a word about him yet."

"Dickson? O, he doesn't live at home any more, either. He is a doctor at Danbury Hospital in Fairview. He is getting to be quite a remarkable surgeon and we are all proud of him, I can tell you."

"How nice!" exclaimed Peace, glancing involuntarily at the slippered feet resting on the cushioned stool of Dr. Campbell's great Morris chair. "I wish we had a good doctor in our family. Then p'raps *he* could make me walk again."

"Walk again!" Amazement, consternation showed in the minister's face, and his eyes also sought the useless little feet on their cushion. "Why, child," he whispered, all the pity and sympathy of his great heart throbbing in his voice, "are *you* lame?"

It seemed incredible, and yet he recalled now that all the while he had sat there listening to her chatter, those gay slippers had not once moved. [Pg 146]

"Yes," Peace answered simply, surprised at his question. "Didn't you know that before?"

He shook his head.

"I'll have to live in chairs all my life," she explained. "They *said* maybe after a time I could have crutches, but it's my back that's hurt and crutches won't be much good to me, I guess. I *clum* a roof and fell—oh, months and months ago."

Briefly she recounted the unlucky adventure and the sad, weary days that had followed, while the preacher listened spell-bound,—shocked at the sorrowful tale.

When she had finished, his quivering lips whispered tenderly, "Poor little girl!" and two great tears stole down his rugged cheeks.

Peace was deeply touched at this unusual display of sympathy, and laying her thin little hand on his knee, she said softly, "I love you." There was a pause. Then before Dr. Shumway could think of any appropriate words in which to voice his turbulent thoughts, the crippled girl abruptly exclaimed, "Why, do you know, you've got eyes like my cat!"

The reverend gentleman fairly bounced from his chair in his astonishment. "Eyes like your c—"

cat!" he stuttered.

"Yes," Peace calmly answered. "One brown and one blue. I've been watching you ever since you came in, trying to make out why you looked so queer, and now I know,—it's your eyes. Does it feel any different having two colors instead of one?" [Pg 147]

"N—o," he managed to reply, still staring with fascinated eyes at the child in the chair opposite.

"Well, I should think it would," she began, but at that moment there was a brisk step on the wide veranda, the front door opened and Mrs. Campbell entered.

Dr. Shumway rose to meet her, and Peace's interview with the new pastor of South Avenue Church was at an end.

But the face of the small cripple haunted the minister, her pathetic story lingered in his mind, and he found himself constantly thinking of the long, weary years of helpless waiting stretching out before her.

"O, it can't be," he protested over and over again. "She was never meant for a life like that! Activity is written all over her. She is right when she says she can't keep quiet. What wonderful good such energy could accomplish if trained in the right direction! I wonder if Dickson—I believe I will write him. No, it would be better for him to see her first without having heard anything about the case. How can we bring it to pass?"

Straightway he began to plan how he might carry out a certain scheme which was gradually taking shape in his brain, until at length a practicable idea at last presented itself and he broached the subject to the other members of his household.

They were seated at the dinner table one night when he casually observed to his two youngest daughters, "Girls, what do you think of a Christmas party at the parsonage this year? Can we manage one?" [Pg 148]

"A Christmas party!" gasped both girls in dismay.

Even his sister Anne stared at him aghast.

"Well, why not?" he inquired, when no one ventured an explanation of the family's evident consternation.

"I don't know how to entertain," wailed Pansy. "I'm too clumsy."

"We are hardly settled here," ventured sister Anne deprecatingly.

"Keturah is coming home for Christmas," whispered Penelope.

"So are Dick and Carrie," said the preacher briskly. "We all will be together once again and I want my whole family to meet the young folks of my new flock. What if we aren't in apple-pie order? We'll be less so by the time the party is over, I'll wager. As for Kitty,—I think we better plan for our Christmas party."

"That settles it," whispered Pansy to the youngest sister, as her father began to discuss some household problem with his sister. "But I'll bet he's got some pet scheme up his sleeve. His party isn't just to introduce us,—you see."

Penelope was shrewd in her observations and knew her father like a book, but she did not guess his secret, nor was she particularly curious this time. She did not want a Christmas party at the parsonage. It meant so much work and clutter. Besides, it was so much nicer to have just a little family gathering, such as they were accustomed to each year. There would be Kitty and Ed, Carrie and Phil, and Dick.—Dickson was still unmarried.—That would make five extra in the little family, and five people were a plenty to plan for, without having a party. But then, what was the use of objecting? Her father had said party, and a party there would be. The only thing to do was to make the best of it and plan the most unique program the brains of the whole household could devise. So Aunt Anne, Penelope and Pansy set to work. [Pg 149]

True to his convictions, Dr. Shumway wrote nothing of his plans to his son, nor did he once mention his hopes to the distracted Campbell family, although he had skilfully managed that his son's professional reputation should reach the ears of them all. To be doubly sure that his pet scheme should not fail, he gave Peace a personal invitation to attend his Christmas party, and made several visits to the Campbell home apparently to discuss his plans with members of that household, while in reality his object was to rouse the invalid's curiosity and interest so she would be sure to join the merry-makers at the parsonage on that night of nights. Then Dickson could not fail to meet her and their acquaintance would come about naturally. He could not feel that Dr. Coates and the specialists had really found the seat of the trouble yet, but Dickson would know if there was any hope for the little sufferer. Dickson,—stalwart, genial, gentle Dickson,—his boy,—his boy would know. [Pg 150]

So it was with great eagerness that he looked forward to the Christmas party, for Peace had solemnly promised to be there in her wheel-chair, and it was hard to refrain from telling the whole story to his boy before the time was ripe.

But when at last the night arrived, Peace was not among the guests who thronged the gayly decorated parsonage. The old-time pain had come back, and she lay white and spent upon her

bed in the Flag Room, watching with anguish in her heart while the other sisters made ready for the festivities. They had demurred at leaving her. It seemed so selfish to go and enjoy themselves when she must stay behind and suffer, but she had insisted.

"Because I can't go to the *pastorage* myself isn't any reason why you should stick at home, too," she told them. "Besides, I want to know all about it, and it takes the whole family to see *everything*."

"What in the world do you mean?" they chorused.

And she explained, "Well, Gail remembers the speeches and what folks say just to each other. Faith hears only the music. Hope sees the pretty things folks wear. Cherry tells what they had to eat, and Allee fills up the chinks."

They laughed merrily at the small invalid's powers of discernment, and were finally persuaded to attend the party which was barred to her. So they donned their daintiest dresses, robbed the greenhouse for their adornment, kissed the little sister fondly and hurried away into the night. Peace listened to the sound of their footsteps crunching through the hard-packed snow, until the last echo died away. Then turning her face to the wall, she gave way to a flood of bitter tears.

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"Why, darling," cried the watchful Mrs. Campbell, kneeling beside the sobbing child and striving to soothe and comfort her, "what is the matter? Did you want to go so badly?"

"No, no, it ain't that," poor Peace hiccoughed, burying her head on the grandmotherly shoulder. "But I thought I was 'most well, and now the hurt has begun again. I ain't crying 'cause the girls have gone, truly. It's just that dreadful ache in my back. O, Grandma, am I going to be like my Lilac Lady after all? She had well days when she could read and sew; and then there were times when the pain was so bad that she couldn't bear to see folks at all. I don't want to die, but oh, Grandma, how can I stand that awful ache?"

"O God," prayed the woman's heart, torn with agony at the sight of her darling's suffering, "help us to make it easier for her."

And as if in answer to her petition, there was a step on the stair, and a big, stalwart, fur-coated figure stood unannounced in the doorway. Mrs. Campbell rose hurriedly to her feet and confronted the stranger. What right had he in her house? How came he there?

He smiled reassuringly at her look of alarm, and something in his boyish face made Peace exclaim, "You look like Pansy Shumway, though you're not so fat and homely."

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At that, he laughed outright. "It's because I am her brother, I expect," he answered simply.

"O, are you Dr. Dick?" she cried eagerly.

"Yes," he replied. "They told me you could not come to our party, so I have brought the party to you,—a bit of it, at least."

Fishing into the depths of his great pockets, he brought forth a marvelous array of cakes, candies, nuts and pop-corn, finally producing what looked to be a scarlet carnation in a tiny plantpot of rich loam, but upon investigation Peace found that her little nosegay was merely a flower thrust into a mound of chocolate ice-cream; and her delight made her forget her pain for a moment.

"You're a reg'lar Santy Claus," she giggled. "Did you come down the chimbley? I never heard the door bell."

"O, I met Prexy on the steps and he told me where to find you, so I came right up without further invitation." He did not add that for more than an hour he had been closeted with Dr. Campbell in the parsonage study, where the anxious President had sought him to learn if there could be any hope for their little Peace.

"I s'pose the door is a safer way of getting into houses than falling down chimbleys would be," said the girl, pleased with her own fancies. "But it would have seemed a little realer if you had tumbled out of the fireplace. Where is your pack, and what have you brought for me?"

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"What would you like best?" he parried, studying the drawn face among the pillows.

"O, let me see—A new back, I guess," she sighed ruefully, as a sharp twinge of pain recalled her to her surroundings and caused her to writhe in agony, "and a pair of legs to match. You are a sure-enough doctor, ain't you? Can't you mend me up again? The other doctors' job didn't last very long."

"Perhaps if you will let me rub the little back—"

"O, I can't bear to have a doctor touch it!" she shuddered. "They always make it hurt worse."

"I'll be very careful," he promised, "and if it hurts, I'll stop right away."

Still she hesitated.

"F I could just go to sleep," she sighed. "I'm so tired."

"You will go to sleep if you will let me rub the back a little."

She looked incredulous, but another stinging pain brought the tears to her eyes, and she cried pitifully, "Yes, oh, yes,—just rub me now. It does hurt so bad I can't help crying, and you don't look as if you liked to poke people to pieces."

"It is my business to put people together again," he said gravely, turning the pain-racked little body with deft hands, all the while keeping up a lively chatter to amuse the small sufferer. So light was his touch, so sympathetic his personality, that very soon the tense muscles began to relax, the drawn lines in the childish face gradually smoothed themselves away, and the brown eyes grew heavy with sleep.

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Realizing that the Santa Claus stranger had kept his promise, Peace murmured drowsily, as she felt herself drifting away to slumberland, "You are a good doctor, Dr. Dick. I'll hire you the next time I fall off a roof. I b'lieve you could have mended me up if you'd had first chance."

"Please God, it may not be too late now," he muttered under his breath, and stole softly from the room to report his convictions to Dr. Campbell, who was waiting in the hall below.

CHAPTER XI

[Pg 155]

DOCTOR DICK

It was Christmas Day, but the Campbell house was very still. All sounds of revelry and mirth were hushed, for Peace, worn out by her long struggle with pain, had wakened only long enough to view the many gifts heaped about her cot, and then sleep had claimed her again. So the two younger girls had been despatched to the Hill Street parsonage, where St. John and Elspeth were having a Christmas tree for Glen and tiny Bessie; and the three older sisters settled down to a quiet day at home, refusing all invitations from their many friends, because of a nameless fear that tugged at each breast, a feeling that perhaps they might be needed before the day was done.

It had been such a strange day, so un-Christmas-like, so uncanny. All the long hours through, they had scarcely caught a glimpse of Dr. or Mrs. Campbell. Dr. Coates had made repeated trips to the house, the minister's son had spent several hours in the President's study, the minister himself had been there a time or two, but through it all no one had come to tell them what it was about, and Peace had slept wearily on.

Then as the winter twilight gathered over the city, Gussie appeared to summon them to the library below, but she could not answer their eager questions, for she knew no more than they; and each girl looked at the others with apprehensive eyes, as each heart whispered, "It can't be that we have lost her,—that she is dead instead of sleeping." So with quaking limbs they hurried to the dimly-lighted study where the haggard President and his wife awaited them.

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"What do you think about another operation for Peace?" Dr. Campbell began, with distraught abruptness.

Three hearts beat wildly with relief. She was still alive!

"Is there no other hope?" Gail implored.

He shook his head.

"Will a second operation give her a chance?" Hope eagerly questioned.

"A fighting chance, we think."

"And without the operation—will she die?" asked Faith.

"She will suffer as her Lilac Lady suffered and go as she went. Perhaps in five years, perhaps in ten. Perhaps—one will tell the story."

A deep silence fell upon them. Mrs. Campbell sat with her head buried in her arms, and from the occasional convulsive shiver of her shoulders, they knew that she was crying. Was the situation then so desperate?

"Who will operate?" Hope's low-voiced question sounded like the notes of a trumpet through the stillness of the room.

"Dr. Shumway—"

"The minister's son?"

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"Yes."

"But he is so young!"

"He has made a marvelous name for himself already as a children's surgeon. He seldom loses a case."

"But—but he is a physician in Fairview, is he not?" asked Gail in worried tones.

"Yes, that is where the rub comes. I thought perhaps if we offered him enough money he might operate here in Martindale and be with her through the worst of it at least, before returning to his work in Fairview, but he can't see his way clear. He wants to take her back with him—"

"O, that would be dreadful," the girls broke in. "Supposing she should—*die*—there all alone!"

"She wouldn't be alone," the President explained. "Mother and I would go, too."

"But the University—doesn't it take *months* for a patient to get well after such an operation?" protested Faith.

"Yes, but we would not stay until she had entirely recovered; only long enough to be sure all was well, and then—"

"I would go," said Gail simply.

"Wouldn't I do?" asked Hope. "This is Gail's last year at the University, and she can't graduate if she loses a whole term."

"Peace is worth dozens of terms," Gail answered softly. "Besides, I am the oldest, and Mother left her in my care. It is my place to go."

"But we haven't decided yet whether or not Peace herself is going to Fairview," Faith reminded them. [Pg 158]

"That's so," agreed Dr. Campbell. "What is your wish in the matter?"

"It seems to me we *have* decided," suggested Gail. "We want to do everything we can for her, and if you think there is a—a chance—"

"Does she know?" interrupted Faith.

"Not yet."

"Then why not leave the decision with her?"

The President shook his head. "She is too young to know what is best for her, and we cannot raise false hopes in her heart. She has suffered too much already to be disappointed again—should the operation fail to accomplish the desired results."

"But how are you going to get her to Fairview without her knowing?" Hope frowned in bewilderment.

"O, she will have to know about the operation, but not what we hope will result. Hark! Don't I hear her calling?"

Just then the library door opened behind them, and Marie announced young Dr. Shumway.

"Right on time," said the President, consulting his watch, "and your patient is just now awake. Will you tell her, doctor? We have decided to take the chance, but think you will make a better job of breaking the news to her."

"Very well," replied the doctor promptly, not pausing to meet the other members of the family. "I'll go right on up."

So he mounted the stairs to the Flag Room, wondering how he should broach the subject to the small maid soon to become his patient, but she gave him no chance for speech, for the instant she saw him bending over her, she exclaimed, "I dreamed about you last night,—the queerest dream!" [Pg 159]

"You did! Well now, isn't that strange! I dreamed about you, too."

"O, tell me your dream," she commanded, delighted at his words.

"You first, my girl. Then you shall hear mine."

"Well, I thought I was on a hard, hard bed in the middle of a great, big room, and all around the room were rows and rows of shelves, just like the pickle closet in our Parker cellar. They were empty at first, but just as I was beginning to wonder what they were all for, I noticed a funny little hump-backed man sitting in one corner, dangling his legs over the edge of the shelf, and when I asked him who he was, he said he was one of my naughties. I didn't know what he meant, so he 'xplained that he was the bad spirit inside of me, which painted Mr. Hardman's barn once when I got mad at him. Then all of a sudden, I saw that the shelves were full,—just plumb full of people. Some were little and ugly, like the hump-back, and some were big and beautiful. The big ones were the goodies I had done. There was the time I sang for the hand-organ man, and the time I gave my circus money to the miss'nary, and the time I took the sick monkey home, and the time I carried pansies to my Lilac Lady, and—oh, crowds of 'em. But I 'most believe there were more naughties than goodies like Faith's State Fair cake which I spoiled, and the faces I made at old Skinflint when he wouldn't let us pick raspberries and all the times I bothered Grandpa by giving away my own and other folks's junk. O, I could see them all piled up on those shelves, and I began to cry about it, when who should come into the room but you and what do you s'pose you did, Dr. Dick?" [Pg 160]

"I haven't the faintest idea," he confessed. "Tell me quickly."

"You fished a pair of wooden legs out of your pocket and laid them on the bed, and when I asked you what they were for, you said you had brought them for me, so I could get up and chase the naughties away, to leave more room for the goodies."

"And did you do it?" the doctor gravely inquired as the story-teller ceased abruptly.

"I don't know," she answered wistfully. "I woke up just then. That's always the way,—you never find out anything from a dream."

"Well, I think I must have finished up your dream for you," said the doctor musingly, "for in my dream I was back at my old job in the hospital and I found the head nurse making up a bed in one of the little rooms one day. The *head* nurse, mind you, who has altogether too many things to attend to without making up beds. So I asked her what she thought she was doing, and she said there was a little girl in the office downstairs, who wanted a new pair of legs, and she was getting the room ready so we could mend this child right away. So I went off to see if I could find some nice, strong legs for the little girl, and when I came back she was lying in the bed, and I was surprised to discover that I knew her. Who do you suppose it was?"

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"I s'pose you *dreamed* it was me," said Peace, not much impressed by the narrative, which sounded quite flat and tame to her.

"Yes," said the doctor, somewhat disconcerted by her lack of interest. "I dreamed it was you. How do you think you would like to make the dream come true?"

"How?" she asked, a little startled at the suggestion.

"By going to the hospital and having another operation—"

"O, I'm tired of being cut up," she interrupted wearily. "I had one operation already, and the pain came back just the same, even if we did hire some old doctors which had been in the business for ages and ages."

"Well, I am not a graybeard," Dr. Shumway assented, "but I think I could help the little back some, anyway."

"Would *you* do the operating?" The big brown eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Yon don't look as if you knew enough."

The doctor gasped.

"Well, I mean you haven't got any white hair and wrinkles," Peace explained, perceiving that she had said something amiss. "You look as if you hadn't been a man for a very long time. But p'r'aps you know more than folks would think. Have you talked to Grandpa about it?"

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"Yes, and he is willing to take the chance if you are."

"Well, that's something,—from him. It was ever so long before he would let Dr. Coates operate. You must know your business or he'd never have said yes. When will it happen?" she asked.

"In a couple of days or so—"

"*That* soon?"

"The sooner the better. Well leave here tomorrow for Fairview—"

"O, do I have to go away for it?" The great eyes looked startled and half fearful.

"Yes, to Danbury Hospital in Fairview, and—"

"O, then I'll go, sure!" She clapped her thin hands gleefully. "I always did want to see the insides of a hospital. I've often visited one, but never had to live there a day, for they operated on me at home before. Mercy, I'm having a lot of 'periences, ain't I? Here comes Grandpa now, and the rest of the bunch. Hello, folkses! Guess what's going to happen! I'm going to Fairview Hospital tomorrow in Danbury, and be cut to pieces again. Dr. Dick is to do the operation. I b'lieve he knows enough, even if he ain't a *gray-back*; and *he* thinks he can stop the hurting, so it won't come back any more. That's worth trying for, ain't it?"

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"But tomorrow—" gasped the girls. "Is it to be that soon?"

"We ought to leave here tomorrow," explained Dr. Shumway. "The operation will take place as soon after that as we can get her rested up for it."

"Then it is all settled!" sighed the President in relief, and a great burden seemed lifted from his shoulders. Somehow, the strong, earnest face of the young doctor inspired confidence and courage in the hearts of others, and they could not but feel that all would go well with their little invalid.

So they departed the next day for Fairview,—the President and his wife, Dr. Shumway and his patient,—and a few days later Peace found herself lying on the operating table in a great, white room of the hospital, with white-capped nurses flitting noiselessly about, and white-gowned doctors passing to and fro.

"It's like my dream," she whispered. "Only there aren't any shelves filled with goods and bads.— Well, Dr. Dick, if you aren't a fright! I never should have known you if you hadn't spoken. You look like the pictures in our Sunday School lessons of how they used to bury folks in the Bible, with that nightgown on and all that white stuff over your head. It's rather 'propriate, though, for this room looks like a *car-slop-egus*. Isn't that what you call the graves they used to put people in?"

"Sarcophagus," suggested the doctor, only the twinkle of his deep blue eyes betraying his amusement. "That is a casket of stone. Is that what you mean?" [Pg 164]

"Yes, I guess so, though I thought it was a room hacked out of the side of a hill where they stuck folks when they died, instead of putting them in graves like we do. Where is the man which is going to give me the *antiseptic*?"

"Right here, my girl," chuckled a deep voice on the other side of her, and she looked up into the eyes of a second white-swathed figure, already beginning to adjust the anaesthetizer over her head. "Now don't be afraid. Just take a deep, deep breath—"

"I know all about it," she interrupted. "I've been through this same performance once before. That stuff hasn't changed its smell a bit, either. Are you all ready? Well, then, good-night. If Dr. Dick don't know his business, I 'xpect I'm a goner."

The bright eyes drooped shut, the childish voice trailed off into silence, and the little patient slept while the skillful surgeons mended the bruised back and useless limbs.

CHAPTER XII

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MISS WAYNE

Peace awoke to find herself lying in a narrow iron bed, drawn close beside a window, through which she could see clouds of great, feathery snow-flakes swirling lazily, softly downwards; and not remembering where she was or how she came to be there, she murmured half aloud, "The angels seem to be shedding their feathers pretty lively today, don't they?"

"What did you say?" asked a strange voice from somewhere in the background, and a sweet face framed in glossy black hair bent over her.

"Maybe it's heaven after all," mused Peace to herself, "though I should think they would have dec'rations on the walls of heaven, 'nstead of leaving 'em naked." Then she spoke aloud, surprised at the effort it cost her, "Are you a dead nurse?"

"Do I look very dead?" questioned the strange voice again, and the face above her broke into a rare smile.

"Well, then, how did you get to heaven?"

"This isn't heaven, dear. You are in Danbury Hospital. Have you forgotten?"

"O, that's so. I remember now. It's nice to know you ain't an angel."

The nurse laughed outright. "Yes, I'm glad, too, for I want to live a long time. The world is full of so many things I want to see." [Pg 166]

"That's me, too, but I thought I was dead sure this time."

"No, dear, you are very much alive and are going to get well."

"That's good, but what's the matter? I can't get my breath."

"It's the ether, childie. You will be all right soon, but you must not talk now. Just rest. Sleep if you can, so you can visit with Grandfather and Grandmother Campbell. They are anxious to see you."

Meanwhile, downstairs in the office of the great hospital, the President and his wife had sat like statues through all those interminable minutes which were to tell the story of whether the little life was to be spared or sacrificed. Vaguely they heard the bustle of busy nurses, vaguely they saw the doctors hurrying in and out about their duties; but not once did either man or woman move from the great chairs in which they sat. Sometimes it seemed to the matron and head-nurse, who occasionally passed that way, as if both had been turned to stone, so fixed was their gaze, so rigid their bodies. But in reality neither had ever been more keenly alive. Each heart was reviewing with painful accuracy the two short years that had gone since the little band of orphans had come to live with them. How much had happened in that time, and how dearly they had come to love each one of the sisters! [Pg 167]

"I could not care more for them if they were my own," whispered Mrs. Campbell to herself.

"They are like my own flesh and blood," thought the President.

"I know a mother is not supposed to have favorites among her children," mused Mrs. Campbell, half guiltily, "but there is something about Peace which makes her seem just a little the dearest

to me."

"They are all such lovable girls," the President told himself, "but somehow I can't help liking Peace a little the best. Everyone does. I wonder why."

So they sat there side by side in the great hospital and pondered, waiting for the verdict from the white room above them.

Suddenly Dr. Shumway stood before them. "It is all over," he began, smiling cheerfully. "She will —"

"All over," whispered Mrs. Campbell, and fainted quite away.

When she opened her eyes again, the young doctor was bending over her, chafing her hands, and she heard his remorseful voice saying, "My dear Mrs. Campbell, you misunderstood me. The operation was successful. The little one will live."

"Ah, yes, I know," sighed the woman. "But it was such a relief to know the ordeal was ended that I couldn't bear the joy of the news. I am all right now. When can we see our girl?"

Quickly the good news was flashed over the wires to the anxious hearts in Martindale, "Operation successful. Peace will walk again." And great was the rejoicing everywhere. [Pg 168]

Only Peace herself seemed undisturbed, taking everything as a matter of course, obeying the nurse's orders, and asking no questions concerning her own welfare, though she asked enough about other people's affairs to make up, and soon became a source of unending amusement to the hospital attendants, who made every excuse imaginable to talk with this dear little, queer little patient in her room.

Peace was in her element. Nothing suited her quite so well as to make new friends, and she was delighted at the interest the busy nurses and doctors displayed in her case. "Why, Miss Wayne," she sighed ecstatically one day when she had been in the hospital for a month, "I know the name of every nurse and doctor in this building, and pretty near all the patients. The only trouble with them is they change so often I really can't get much acquainted before they go home. I'm just wild to get into that wheel-chair which Dr. Dick has promised me as soon as I get strong enough; for then I can go visiting the other sick folks, can't I? Dr. Dick says I can, and I'm crazy to see what they look like. I can't tell very well from what the nurses say about their patients just what they look like. I try to 'magine while I'm lying here all day, but you know how 'tis,—the ones who have the prettiest names are as homely as sin usually; and the pretty ones have the homely names." [Pg 169]

"There's the little lady down the hall who keeps sending me jelly and things she can't eat. The head nurse, Miss Gee,—ain't that an awful funny name? I call her Skew Gee, because her first name is Sue. Well, she told me that this lady has been in the hospital four years. *Four years!* Think of it! And that she never says a cross word to anyone, but when the pain gets bad she sings until it's better. No wonder that man loved her and wanted to marry her even if she will always be an invalid."

"What do you know about love and marriage?" teased the nurse, laying out fresh linen and testing the water in a huge bowl by the bed.

"I know I'd have married her, too, if I'd been in his shoes. She must be a darling. I'm very anxious to see if she is pretty. Miss Gee says she is. She says that typhoid girl is pretty, too. The one who has been here ten weeks now and is still so sick. I don't s'pose they'd let me see her yet. She calls one of her legs Isaiah and the other Jeremiah, 'cause one of 'em doesn't bother her and the other does. Isaiah in the Bible told about the good things that were going to happen, and Jeremiah was always growling about the bad things that had happened. She must be a funny girl to figure all that out, don't you think? Then there are those two little girls in the Children's Ward,—the one with the hip disease that's been here two whole years, and the other that's got *pugnacious* aenemia. I'd like awful well to see them, 'cause neither one has a mother. And there's the weenty, weenty woman with nervous *prospertation*, but I'm most p'ticularly interested in Billy Bolee." [Pg 170]

"Nurse Redfern brought him in to see me a few minutes ago, while you were eating your breakfast. Isn't he the prettiest little fellow you ever saw, and hasn't he got the worst name? I don't see what his mother could be thinking about to call him that."

"But that isn't his real name, dear," answered the nurse, busy at making her talkative little patient comfortable for the day.

"Then why do they call him that?"

"Because we don't know his real name. His mother died here in the hospital weeks ago without telling us who she was or anything about her history. The baby talked nothing but Dutch, and though Dr. Kruger, of the hospital staff, is Dutch, he could not make out from the child's baby-talk what his name is."

"And so they picked out that horrid Billy-Bolee name," exclaimed Peace disgustedly.

"That was because he kept saying something which sounded like Billy Bolee. We didn't know what he meant, but began to refer to him in that manner, and the name stuck."

"Does he talk American now?"

"A little, but of course it is like learning to talk again, and we often have to get Dr. Kruger to interpret his wants even yet. I'll never forget one of the first nights he was here. He cried and cried until the whole staff of nurses was nearly frantic, because we could find nothing to soothe him. He kept repeating some strange words, as if he was trying to tell us what he wanted, but none of us understood. At that time we didn't even know his nationality, but while he was still howling lustily, Dr. Kruger came upstairs on his evening round of calls, and he stopped to see what was the trouble with Miss Redfern's charge. Then how he laughed! Poor Billy Bolee was begging to be put in bed, and here we'd been trying for an hour to find out what was the matter."

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Peace laughed heartily. "That was a good joke on the nurses, wasn't it?" she remarked, when her merriment had subsided. "But why do you keep him here now if his mother is dead?"

"The doctors are endeavoring to cure his little foot so he can walk all right again. He was hurt in the same railroad accident which killed his mother, and the injury has made one leg shorter than the other."

"O," cried Peace in horror. "And he hasn't any relations to take care of him after he gets well?"

"Not that we know of."

"Then what will you do with him? He can't live here always, can he?"

"No. Some day he will have to be sent to a Children's Home or some such institution where homeless waifs are cared for, until some kind heart adopts him."

"But no one wants *lame* children to adopt," Peace protested. "Do you s'pose Billy Bolee will ever get adopted?"

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"We *hope* so."

Peace was silent a moment, then thoughtfully remarked, "There was a fat old hen in our church—there! I didn't mean to say fat, 'cause I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world,—but Mrs. Burns was fat, and she used to come over to our house after I got hurt and tell me how thankful I ought to be. It made me awful mad at first, but I b'lieve I know now what she meant. Now there's my Lilac Lady,—she had heaps of money, and a great, splendid house to live in, and Aunt Pen to take care of her; so even if she never could walk again, 'twasn't as bad as it would have been s'posing she was poor and didn't have anything of her own. Then there's me. If I had fallen off a roof in Parker and cracked my back, 'twould have been perfectly awful, 'cause there would have been no money for doctors and such like, and I guess it costs heaps to get operated on. But as it is now, I've got Grandpa and Grandma Campbell to take care of me, and there ain't any danger of my being sent to a Children's Home or the poor farm. There are a pile of thankfuls in this world, ain't there?"

"Yes indeed," answered the nurse warmly. "This world is a pretty good old world, and no matter what happens, there is always something left for every one to be thankful about. Isn't that so?"

"Uh-huh. That's what Papa used to tell us, and before every Thanksgiving dinner we had to think up some p'tic'lar big thankful that had happened to us that year. Even after he and Mamma had gone to Heaven, Gail made us do the same thing, and you'd be s'prised to see the things we dug up to be thankful about even if we were *orphants*, and poorer than mice. One year I managed to kill a turkey that b'longed to another man; so we had some meat for dinner when we hadn't really expected any. 'Twasn't often we got *turkey*, either,—not even when Papa was alive. But we always have it at Grandpa's on Thanksgiving and Christmas. I'm very fond of turkey, ain't you?"

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"Yes, I am quite partial to Mr. Gobbler, too," smiled Miss Wayne reminiscently, "but we nurses don't always get a taste of it on Thanksgiving Day, either."

"Can't the hospital afford turkeys *once* a year?" asked Peace in shocked surprise.

"But a nurse doesn't live at the hospital always, you know. After she graduates, most of her cases are in private homes, and it all depends upon where she is on the holidays as to what she gets to eat or how she amuses herself. Now, Christmas Day this year I spent with my married brother on his farm near St. Cloud, but it is the first time I have been with any of my own people for a holiday during the last four years. On Thanksgiving I was taking care of a little girl who had diphtheria, and we were shut off upstairs all by ourselves, seeing no one but the doctor from one day's end to the next. Poor Zella was too sick to know what day it was, and I was too anxious about her to care, so neither of us got any turkey."

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"One year I was miles out in the country, nursing a worn-out mother, who had seven children, all younger than you. She was a farmer's wife, and they were huddled in the dirtiest bit of a hovel that I ever saw. The hogs and chickens used to come into the kitchen whenever the door was opened, and no one ever thought of driving them out. They didn't know what it meant to be clean, and were shocked almost to death when I tried to give the latest baby a bath. There wasn't a broom in the house and no one knew what I wanted when I asked for a mop. We had literally to *shovel* the dirt off those floors."

"The children had never been taught to pray, they knew absolutely nothing about the Bible, had never even heard the name of Jesus except in swearing. Christmas Day was unheard of, and Thanksgiving a riddle; and when I asked the father if we might not have a hen for dinner on that occasion, he said there were none to spare for such nonsensical purposes."

"But you got one anyway, didn't you?" Peace eagerly asked, for she had learned to love Miss Wayne dearly, and seemed to think that the earnest, whole-hearted, sympathizing woman was capable of anything.

"No, not from him," the nurse replied, knitting her brows as if the thought still made her angry. "But his answer got my dander up, and the children were so disappointed, for I had told them all about our Thanksgiving Day, that I determined to cook them a sure-enough Thanksgiving dinner if I could manage it. There was one girl in the family,—little five-year-old Essie,—and I gave her a half dollar and sent her over to their nearest neighbor to see if he would sell us a small turkey. He had already disposed of his turkeys, however, and had no hens for sale either; but he gave Essie a big duck and a handful of silver in exchange for the money she had given him, and she came back as proud as a peacock to display her wares. I saw at once when she passed me the change that he had not charged her a cent for the duck, so I put the money back into her little hand and told her that she was to keep it. At first she was reluctant, though her big, eager eyes showed how much she really wanted it; and after a while I made her understand that I actually meant to give it to her for her very own. But when she took it to her mother, the little woman called me to the bed and explained that it would do the child no good in that form, because the lazy, shiftless, good-for-nothing father would take it to buy tobacco. 'The children can't save a penny,' she said sadly. 'When once he gets his hands on it, they never see it again. But if you really want Essie to have the money, won't you take it and buy her a doll? She has never had one of her own, and it would please her more than anything you could do.'

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"So I put the money back into my purse and promised Essie a doll instead, which should open and shut its eyes and have real hair. Christmas was near at hand, and I made up my mind that I would dress the doll as daintily as possible and send it to her in time for Christmas Eve, so the mother could put it in her little stocking, for all the children had expressed a determination to hang up their stockings that year like the children in the stories I had told them. So, when about a week before Christmas, I was able to leave the dirty little hovel, I searched the stores through for the kind of a doll Essie wanted, and made it a beautiful set of lace-trimmed clothes which really buttoned up. My mother and sisters were greatly interested in the story of this neglected family, and they decided that we must pack a box for all the children, so none of the little stockings would be empty on Christmas morn. Accordingly, we picked up some old clothing, whole and serviceable—"

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"Just like the ladies do each year for the missionaries on the frontier," Peace interrupted with breathless interest.

"Very much, only on a smaller scale. We didn't try to outfit the whole family, but included something for each member,—except the father,—and filled up the corners with candy and nuts. Poor Mrs. Martin had been so interested in the Bible stories which she had heard me telling the children that I got her a nicely bound Bible, marking the passages which she had liked the best; and she really seemed delighted to get it. She could write a little, and she sent me a very grateful little letter of thanks when the box arrived, telling me how much the children had enjoyed their share of the good things, and particularly how pleased Essie was with her doll.

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"When I first went to care for Mrs. Martin on the worthless little farm, there was only one stove in the ramshackle house and that was in the kitchen. It was positively necessary to have her bedroom warm and comfortable, so I made Mr. Martin get another stove for that purpose. There was no chimney in that part of the house, however, and he cut a hole through the ceiling and stuck the stove-pipe through that into a big chamber above, where, by some means or other, he connected it up with the kitchen chimney. It was very unsafe, of course, and I protested against it, but he would not listen to me; so all the while I was under that roof, I watched the stove every minute, for fear it would set the house afire. But it didn't, and he laughed at my worry, but not long after I had left there while it was still very cold weather, the old place did burn down one night. The family was rescued by their neighbors, but they lost everything they had. Mrs. Martin wrote me about the disaster, telling how sorry she was to lose her Bible, and how terribly grieved Essie was over the loss of her treasure. Naturally I was sorry, too, and when Christmas came again, I dressed another doll for Essie, bought another Bible for Mrs. Martin, and packed another box for the whole family. Again the mother wrote me a letter of thanks, but it didn't sound sincere to me this time, and when in closing she said that Jerry, her husband, thought I might at least have included a plug of tobacco for him, I made up my mind that all they wanted was what they could get out of me."

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"So you didn't send them any more dolls and Bibles," Peace soliloquized, when the nurse paused in her narrative.

"They didn't appreciate them," Miss Wayne answered wistfully. "One doesn't enjoy being liked for one's money. I want folks to like *me*."

The little invalid lay with intent eyes fixed upon the ceiling while she reviewed the story she had just heard; then she said gravely, "I think it was Jerry who wrote for the plug of tobacco."

"Jerry!"

"Well, Mr. Martin, I mean."

"But Mrs. Martin wrote the letter."

"I'll bet he was peeking over her shoulder and made her put in about that plug of tobacco, just

the same," Peace persisted. "I b'lieve Essie and her mother really cared. 'Twas him that wanted just your money. Some women get married to some awful mean men."

"Yes," sighed the nurse, more to herself than for Peace's benefit. "That is very true, and Jerry was one of them."

"There are lots of nice men, though," Peace hastened to add, for Miss Wayne's face looked so unusually grave and sad. "There's Grandpa and St. John, and—and Dr. Dick. *He* isn't married yet, either. Neither is Dr. Race, is he? When I was in the sun parlor yesterday afternoon, I heard one of the nurses tell that new special that Miss Swift had set her *trap* for Dr. Race. What did she mean? It sounded like they thought he was a mouse—"

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"Hush! O, Peace! You misunderstood. You mustn't repeat such things. It—I—oh, dear, what can I say?"

"Well, I 'xpect they meant that Miss Swift is trying to marry Dr. Race, and I s'pose the rest are jealous. Frances Sherrar is going to be married to one of the professors at the University, and I heard Gail telling Grandma how jealous some of the girls are. I s'pose it's the same with the nurses. Only I sh'd hate to see Dr. Race marry Miss Swift 'cause I don't like her. She's too snippy. Why didn't you ever get married? You're so nice and—and—"

Miss Wayne's face had flushed a brilliant crimson, and hastily gathering up soap and towels, she made ready for a hurried flight, but found her way blocked by a stalwart figure in the doorway, whose twinkling eyes and smiling lips betrayed the fact that he had overheard at least part of their conversation.

Embarrassed, the nurse set down the bowl of water poised perilously on one arm, and stammered, "I—I beg your pardon, Dr. Shumway. You are rather late this morning, or am I early? I mean, you—I—we—"

"There, there. Miss Wayne, don't get excited," a laughing voice said teasingly. "Take heart. Remember, 'the Race is not always to the Swift.'"

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"O, Dr. Dick!" Peace interrupted from the little cot by the window. "Is that you at last? I've been watching *hours* for you to come. I've got the splendidest news to tell. *Gail* is here,—my sister Gail. I know you will like her." Then, as her eyes fell upon the great wicker chair which the doctor was dragging behind him, she straightway forgot all else, and shrieked ecstatically, "*Dr. Dick*, what have you got there? Is it for me? A wheel-chair? Oh, oh, oh! Put me in it right away. *Now* I can go and see some of the other sick folks, can't I?"

CHAPTER XIII

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THE LITTLE AUTHOR LADY

"Well, Peace, my dear little Peace, I am afraid the time has come for me to leave you."

Miss Wayne had entered the sick room noiselessly, and, pausing beside the wheel-chair, stood looking with tenderly wistful eyes down at the face of her small charge, who, propped up among her pillows, was animatedly watching the traffic in the street below.

"O, Miss Wayne," Peace, so engrossed with what she had seen that she did not catch the significance of the nurse's remark, lifted her bright shining eyes to the face above her and giggled, "why didn't you come sooner? You missed the biggest sight of your life. It was *so* funny! There was a runaway, and the horse chased across our lawn just as Dr. Canfield came up the walk. He had his med'cine case in one hand and an umbrella in the other, and he let out a big yell and began to wave them both around his head while he danced up and down in front of the horse. I guess he was trying to keep it out of a garden in the middle of the yard, but the old beast didn't shoo worth a cent, and the doctor had to do some lively dodging to get out of its way. He is so short and fat and pudgy that he did look too funny for anything, hopping around like a rubber ball and squealing like a pig. He kept a-hollering, 'O, my cannons, oh, my cannons!' But the horse went straight through the garden just the same, and now the doctor's down on his knees in the mud digging up some onions and looking 'em all over carefully."

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Miss Wayne's merry laugh joined in with that of her patient, and following Peace's example, she pressed her face against the window pane and looked down at the panting, puffing figure on the muddy, trampled turf below. "It's his cannas," she explained. "He always has an immense bed of red canna lilies in the center of the lawn every summer. They are the pride of his heart, and I can imagine what he felt like to have a team plough through his precious garden. Fortunately, it is so early in the Spring that the bulbs have not yet sprouted, so I guess there is not much damage done. 'Canfield's Cannas' is a hospital joke. I wish I could have seen his encounter with that runaway."

Wiping the mirthful tears from her eyes, she turned to the tiny closet in the corner of the room, dragged forth a suitcase, and began to take down some garments from the hooks, preparatory to packing.

"Why, Miss Wayne," cried Peace, her attention attracted by the sound of the valise on the floor. "Whatever are you doing?"

"Gathering up my scattered belongings ready for departure—"

"Departure!" echoed the child in great dismay. "Why, where are you going?"

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"I have another case, my dear, which needs my attention."

"But you can't go now! You've got me to look after."

"My dear child!" cried the woman in shocked surprise. "Do you mean to say that no one has told you that I must go?"

"I hain't heard a word about it before," declared the distressed Peace. "*Why* do you have to go?"

"You don't need me any longer—"

"But I *want* you. *Please* don't go!"

"I must, childie. It is no longer necessary for you to have a special nurse. Your sister is here almost all the daytime, and you are getting around splendidly in your wheel-chair."

"But can't folks have special nurses when they don't *need* them, but just *want* them?"

"O, yes, if they have plenty of money so they can afford it, but it is a needless expense, and as you will have to stay here for many weeks yet, you surely don't want to make your grandfather pay extra for a special nurse whose work is done, do you?"

"N—o," Peace reluctantly replied. "But I like you. I—I don't want you to go—yet."

"I am very glad you feel that way, girlie, but you see how it is, don't you? Of course, Dr. Campbell won't listen to my going if you insist upon my staying, but you don't mean to be selfish, I know."

"I don't b'lieve you care," pouted Peace.

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"Ah, my child, you can never know how much!" answered the woman with unexpected warmth; and Peace, convinced, cried contritely, "I didn't mean that, Miss Wayne, truly. But, oh, how I hate to have you go! It'll be so lonesome!"

"O, no. You are progressing famously in the handling of your chair, and now you can carry a little sunshine into the other sick rooms. Lots of patients will be delighted to see our little canary,—you know that is what the little lady down the hall has called you ever since she heard you whistling so merrily the other day."

The thin face brightened. "Yes, it will be lovely to get acquainted with all these sick folks," she acknowledged, "but that won't make up for losing you."

Miss Wayne smiled her appreciation of the compliment, as she replied, "You won't lose me entirely yet. My new case is to be here in the hospital, too. The ambulance will bring him in this afternoon; so perhaps you will see quite a little of me for some weeks—days to come."

"O, goody! That will be nice, if I *must* give you up, to have you still in the hospital. Who is your new patient?"

"An old, old gentleman who fell on the pavement yesterday and fractured his hip."

"Does Dr. Dick take care of him?"

"No, he is Dr. Race's patient."

"O, dear! S'posing Dr. Race won't let you come and see me sometimes?"

"Then you come and see me."

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"That's so. I can go in my chair, can't I? How nice it is to be able to get about by yourself again, when it's been so you couldn't for such a long time!" And Peace rolled the light chair across the floor to watch the brief process of packing, while she laid eager plans for seeing her beloved nurse each day.

But she did miss the dear woman very much at first. Being cared for by general nurses, who must be summoned by bell every time they are needed, is vastly different from having one special nurse constantly within call; and Peace felt this difference keenly in spite of Gail's daily presence. But as Miss Wayne had predicted, she found her wheel-chair a great diversion and a source of much amusement. It was such fun to be able to propel one's self along the wide corridors and Peace's natural curiosity and investigative habit were never so well satisfied as when she was poking about to see for herself what was happening around her.

Her reputation had preceded her all over the great building, and as soon as the other invalids learned that she had graduated to a wheel-chair, they were one and all eager to make her acquaintance; so Peace spent many happy hours forming friendships among the inmates of Danbury Hospital. Her sunny disposition seemed contagious, and the nurses welcomed the sight of her bright face, knowing that she would bring cheer into their domains if anyone could; for, in spite of her amazing frankness, there was something quaintly attractive in her speech and manner that was irresistible, and every heart felt better for having known her.

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One day, as she was gliding noiselessly down the deserted corridor, the elevator stopped at that floor and another wheel-chair patient rolled out into view.

"Now why didn't I think of that before," exclaimed Peace to herself. "The wards are on the third floor and I've never seen them yet. I'm going up."

To think was to act, and when next the lift stood still at the second floor, Peace rolled her chair into the iron cage and said in matter-of-fact tones, "Three."

The operator glared at her suspiciously, but she seemed so cheerfully unconcerned that he decided she must have permission to visit the wards; so he closed the iron gate with a clang, and the elevator rose slowly to the floor above.

As the wheel-chair glided out into the upper corridor, Peace glanced curiously about her, marvelling to see so many doors closed. Then, as her sharp eyes spied one door standing open far down the hall, she started in that direction, but halted at the sound of a stifled sob, seemingly almost beside her.

Peering into a dim recess by the elevator shaft, which had at one time evidently been used for a store-room, Peace discovered a figure huddled forlornly in the corner, weeping disconsolately.

"Why, what's the matter?" cried the brown-eyed girl, her mind flying back to school days and punishments. "Have you been bad and got stood in a corner?" [Pg 187]

The weeper started violently, dropped her bandaged hands and stared in frightened wonder at the child before her, but she made no reply, and again Peace demanded, "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Sh!" hissed the stranger. "Don't yell like that. Come inside if you are bound to stop. I've run away from my nurse."

"Can *you* run?"

"Well, walked, then. She left me in the sun-parlor, b—but I can't s—stay there with everyone staring and asking q—questions." And again the tears began to fall.

"Shall I call your nurse?" Peace inquired, uneasy and alarmed at the vehemence of the older girl's grief.

"No! No! For goodness' sake, no! She won't let me cry, and I've *got* to, or—or—"

"Bu'st," suggested Peace, nodding her head sympathetically. "Yes, I know how 'tis. The nurse I had the first time after I was hurt wouldn't let me cry, either. But this time Miss Wayne never said 'boo,' when I couldn't hold in any longer. She'd let me have it all out by myself and then she'd come and tell me a funny story. *She* had sense."

"I wish Miss Pierson had some. She's always preaching sunshine and smiles. It's no wonder that girl downstairs can whistle and laugh. *She's* got folks to look after her all her life, and money to buy anything she wants." [Pg 188]

"What girl?" asked Peace, with a curious sinking of heart.

"They call her Peace—"

"That's me, I thought 'twas. The d'scription seemed to fit so well."

The stranger drew back aghast, then said bitterly, "I might have known it."

"Don't you like me?" pleaded the child, feeling that her companion had grown suddenly antagonistic.

"I—I hate you!"

"But—but—why?" stammered Peace, thunder-struck by this uncompromising declaration.

"Because you have everything I need, and I can't have anything."

"You have good legs," Peace wistfully whispered.

"And you have good hands," her companion shot forth.

"Hands!" Peace all at once became aware of the bandages which hid that other pair of hands from sight. "Wh—hat's the matter with yours? Did you hurt them? Have you got *any*?"

"Apologies!" Her voice was harsh with intense bitterness, her eyes were dull with despair.

"Apologies?" Peace failed to understand.

"They are useless. I burned them," explained the other hopelessly.

"But won't they *ever* be any good?" Peace persisted, her eyes wide with horror.

"No, I can never write again."

"Write?"

"I write stories for a living. It's all I can do when I have to stay at home with Mother and Benny. And now—God! what is there left for me to do?"

"You swore."

"I did not."

"Then maybe you prayed. Was it a prayer?"

"I can't pray. It's useless to pray. Those two hands brought in my bread and butter,—the bread and butter for us three. And now they are hopelessly crippled. What can I pray for?"

"Your bread and butter."

"Pshaw!" The girl laughed derisively, then broke off abruptly. "You don't understand," she said in lifeless tones.

"No," Peace agreed, "p'r'aps I don't. 'Twas *my* feet. How did you come to burn your hands?"

"Benny upset a lamp, and—I had to put out the fire. He can't run, either. He is a cripple."

"Oh!" the voice was sharp with distress, and in spite of herself, the older girl's face softened. "You—you care?" she whispered.

"Of course I care," cried Peace warmly. "Poor little Benny! He is little, ain't he? He sounds little. Can't you have him cured?"

"Perhaps, if there was any money to pay the bills. But so far, it has taken every cent I could earn to keep us in food and clothes. I had hoped my book would be successful and that the royalties would be enough to take care of us, so the short story money could pay for an operation. But now I can never finish the book."

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"Can't you get a typewriter? You could use one of those, couldn't you? Grandpa has one for his work at home, and he thumps it with only one finger on each hand."

"Do you know how much a typewriter costs?" she asked.

"No. Very much?"

"More than I could ever spend for one."

"And there's no one else to help?"

"No one. My father is dead. Benny's mother,—my sister,—is dead. Her husband is a drunken sot. We turned him out long ago. It was he who crippled Benny. Poor little Benny! He's only three, and he will never have a chance with the other boys and girls."

"I've got five dollars," Peace shyly confided. "It's all my own to do as I please with. I want you to take it. Will it buy a typewriter?"

"O, my, no! They cost heaps of money,—a hundred dollars for a brand new one of the kind I want. But—but it's real dear of you to offer me your money. I can't take it, child. I'm not a beggar."

"We weren't beggars in Parker, either; but it came in mighty handy sometimes to have folks give us things. Course we always tried to *earn* them if we could, and if you want to *earn* this money, you might write me five dollars' worth of stories. Oh, I forgot!" She glanced hastily at the crippled hands, then averted her eyes. "Truly I did. But you needn't be snippy about my money. I know what 'tis to be poor."

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"You! Why, your grandfather is President of the State University, Miss Pierson says."

"That's my make-believe grandfather. My truly real one has been dead for ages. Then papa died, and fin'ly mother, which left us to dig for ourselves. We were worse off than you, 'cause there were six of us and not one knew how to write stories for money. I guess we'd all have starved to death or gone to the poor farm if Grandpa hadn't come along just about that time." Before Peace was aware of it, she had poured out the whole history of the little brown house in Parker, while the other crippled girl listened spellbound.

"What a plot for a book!" she sighed ecstatically when the narrator had finished. "And what a picture for one of the characters!" She fell to studying Peace with a new interest in her heart.

"O, do you mean to write us up in a book?" cried Peace, fascinated with the idea. "That's what Gail has always threatened to do, but I don't expect she ever really will. Wouldn't it be splendid to have a story written all about ourselves? What shall you call it? Will you let me know when it is done so I can read it and see what kind of stuff you write?"

But a shadow had fallen across her companion's face, so bright and animated a moment before, and again she glanced involuntarily at the bandaged hands which both in their eagerness had forgotten. But before either could speak, there was a rustling sound of stiffly starched skirts behind them, and Miss Keith, from the floor below, stepped around the corner.

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"Why, Peace Greenfield!" she exclaimed at sight of them. "What a start you gave us! Don't you know you must never leave your own floor without permission? If the elevator boy hadn't put us wise, we probably would be phoning to the police by this time. Come downstairs now. Your sister

is waiting for you in your room."

So Peace departed, but not until she trundled through the doorway of her room did she remember that the stranger had not told her name.

"O, dear," she greeted Gail. "I do show the least sense of anyone I know."

"What seems to be the matter?" asked the big sister, amused at the look of disgust on the small, thin face.

"I've just been gabbing with a real author lady, who has burned her hands 'most off, so she can't write any more, and I forgot to ask her name."

"Why, what are you talking about?" inquired Gail, amazed at the unexpected answer.

"The author lady I just found crying in a corner upstairs because she can't write stories any more. That's the way she's been earning the bread and butter for her family, and she don't know what will happen to them now. I thought maybe a typewriter would do the work, but she says it costs a hundred dollars to buy the kind she wants, and she wouldn't take my five. There's a baby boy, too, who can never walk unless there is an operation and of course it takes slathers of money for that."

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"Whose baby boy are you interested in now?" asked a deep bass voice from the doorway, and Peace whirled about to confront young Dr. Shumway just entering the room.

"His name is Benny, and he b'longs to the little author lady upstairs who got burned 'most to death trying to put out the lamp which he tipped over. His mother is dead, and the little author lady has to take care of him and her own mother. I plumb forgot to ask what her name is, but I 'member now that she called her nurse Miss Piercing."

"Oh!" Dr. Shumway seemed more enlightened with that scrap of information than with all the rest of the story, and he stood stroking his chin thoughtfully, as he gazed absently at Gail seated by the window.

"Do you know her?" asked the small patient when he made no further comment.

"I know whom you mean," he answered slowly. "But she is not my patient. Dr. Rosencrans has that case. Where did *you* find out about her?"

Peace again recounted the history of her recent adventure, and the story lost nothing in its telling, for the child was profoundly impressed, and she had the knack of making her listeners feel with her.

"I recall now," he said, turning to Gail when the tale was ended, "there was some talk of amputating the hands at first,—they were so dreadfully burned,—but the little lady would not permit it. She has suffered tortures with them, but I understand that they are healing nicely now, though they will probably always be crippled, and many months must elapse before she can use them again. She is a game little woman, but very close-mouthed,—almost morose. She seemed simply overwhelmed by her catastrophe and none of the staff could get anything out of her." He glanced significantly down at Peace, but she was apparently unconscious of what she had accomplished, and the conversation turned to other channels.

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There was a very homesick little girl in one of the rooms across the hallway, who had done nothing but cry since the ambulance had brought her to the hospital, and the doctor wanted Peace to make her a little visit. So for the next few days the brown-haired elf was so absorbed in this new task of cheering unhappy Gertrude that she had little time to think of the author lady on the floor above; and Gail was not prepared for the tragic face that greeted her when she made her usual call at Peace's room one day about a week later.

"Why, what has happened?" demanded the older sister, glancing about her in alarm.

"Miss Wayne's gone away without ever saying good-bye to me," gulped the child in grieved accents. "Her patient with the *fractious* hip died and she had a case somewhere in the country which she had to go to, but she never told me a word about it. I didn't think she was that kind. I liked her so much, and now—"

"But, Peace," interrupted Gail tenderly, "she came to say good-bye last evening and you were asleep. I had gone home and there was no time to write a note as she had planned to do, so she told Dick—er, I mean Dr. Shumway. But he forgot to deliver the message this morning when he came in to see you, and just now met me with the request that I tell you, with his apologies. Miss Wayne will be back here at the hospital before you go home undoubtedly, for she is a very popular nurse, not only with her patients, but with the doctors who send their cases here for treatment. So you mustn't fret. She did not forget,—she never can,—for I am sure she loves you dearly, and if you had been awake she would have said good-bye in person."

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"Well, I'm glad of that," said Peace, much mollified at the explanation. "But anyway, my author lady is gone, and I don't even know her name."

"Yes," answered Gail brightly, "the little author lady has gone home, but Benny is here."

"Benny?"

"The crippled baby she told you about. Surely you remember."

"Course I remember. But how did he get here when there wasn't any money?"

"Dic—Dr. Shumway investigated the case, and found it was even more pitiful than the little author lady had pictured it; so he persuaded them to let him operate on the baby for nothing, and he *thinks* Benny's little crooked back can be made entirely well. He left some medicine for the poor, patient invalid mother, and she is going to get better, too. Isn't it all lovely?"

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Peace's brown eyes were shining like stars, but all she said was, "What did he do with the author lady?"

"O, that came out beautifully, too. Dick—er, Dr. Shumway told Dr. Rosencrans her story in the office downstairs, and it happened there was a real rich author lady there waiting for her automobile to come and take her home. Her name is Mrs. Selwyn, and she has been very sick, too, and must not try to write any more for a long time yet. But she became so interested in this poor little Miss Garland, that she insisted upon having her taken to her big, beautiful house for a few weeks. Mrs. Selwyn employs a secretary to do much of her typewriting, and this secretary is now to help Miss Garland get her book finished, so it can go to the publishers as soon as possible."

"Is Miss Garland *my* author lady?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then she won't need a typewriter herself now."

"O, yes, for this arrangement is only for a little while,—until Mrs. Selwyn is well again. So some of us,—Dr. Rosencrans, Dr. Race, Dr. Shumway, Dr. Crandall, Miss Pierson, Miss Wayne, and oh, a whole bunch of nurses and friends, got up a collection and bought her a splendid new machine like she wanted, and when she goes home she will find it waiting for her."

"Doesn't she know?"

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"Not a whisper. It's always to be a secret who gave it to her. We feared that she might feel as if we thought she had been begging, if she knew the names of the senders,—she is so extremely sensitive. So we just tied a card to the case, and wrote on it, 'From your loving friends.'"

"That's reg'lar splendid, and I want my five dollars to help pay for it, too."

"But, Peace,—" Gail began.

"There ain't any 'but' to it," declared the small sister with determination. "I was the one who found her, and I mean to help."

"Very well," sighed Gail, studying the stubborn little chin and knowing that Peace would gain her point in some way, even if denied the privilege of contributing her one gold piece. "You surely did set the ball rolling, for Mrs. Selwyn says your little author lady will make her mark in the world before many years."

"Yes, I guess she will make a mark on the world, too," Peace agreed complacently, "for now Benny's going to be like other children, and the mother won't be so sick any more. Doesn't *everything* end just splendid?"

"Yes, my darling," whispered Gail to herself, "when you are around."

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CHAPTER XIV

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KETURAH AND BILLY BOLEE

"Well, Kitty, I am awful sorry, but it can't be helped now. It won't take me more than half an hour or so in all probability, but will you care to wait for me?"

Peace, dozing in her wheel-chair in a little, sheltered niche at the end of the corridor, awoke with a start. Was that Dr. Dick speaking, or had those words been part of a dream?

Another voice, unfamiliar to her, and sounding weary, indifferent and pathetically mournful, answered, "Tomorrow will be the same."

"Yes," Dr. Shumway laughed apologetically, "I suppose it will. Physicians can hardly claim a minute of their time for themselves."

"Then I might as well wait for you now."

"Very well. Shall I send you down to the Library in the auto,—or to one of the stores? Or will you stay here? I'm afraid you won't find much to amuse yourself with in this place."

"Nevertheless I'll stay," answered the world-weary voice again. "But please hurry. I don't like the smell of lysol and ether."

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Kit. You'll find a pretty view from that bay window if you care to look at our scenery." The busy doctor was gone, and the black-clad figure, left to her own devices for the next thirty minutes, turned with a heavy sigh toward the window her companion had indicated, but paused at sight of a bright, alert little face, peeping around the back of an invalid's chair which she had not noticed before.

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The rosy lips parted in a smile, and before the startled woman could regain her composure, the child spoke. "So this is *Catarrhar*, is it?"

"My name is Mrs. Wood," answered the woman, dumbfounded by her salutation.

"But your first name?" persisted the brown-eyed sprite.

"What does it matter?" The woman's voice was cold and crisp.

"Aren't you Dr. Dick's sister?"

"Dr. Dickson Shumway is my brother, if that is what you mean."

"I thought so. Well, he's got better manners than you have."

The woman gasped. Who in the world was this frank, friendly creature? No one had ever dared to speak like that to her before. Flushed with anger, she turned to seek another retreat, but Peace forestalled her. "Your father said you weren't as homely as he is, and that's so. You'd be real *pretty* if you just looked a little more human."

"Human!" The exclamation burst from her involuntarily, as the woman sank limply into the nearest chair and stared in utter surprise at her tormentor.

"Yes. You look so scowly and—and—oh, so frosty. I like warm faces that smile and look happy, like Dr. Dick's, you know. Your sister Penelope has the smile but not the good looks. Pansy has neither, but I don't blame her. Having such a name and being so fat is enough to make anyone cross. Her waist tapers in the wrong direction. I've never seen Carrie, so I don't know what she is like. But you—"

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"Who—who are you?" the black-clad figure found voice to stammer.

"Me? I'm Peace—"

"Seems to me that name doesn't fit very well, either," said the other sarcastically, for Peace's candid criticisms had wounded her pride.

"It's perfectly awful, ain't it?" Peace serenely admitted. "But though I can't help my name, I I can help being ugly about it. There's nothing at all peaceful about me, I know. Grandma says she thinks I must be strung on wires, for I *can't* keep still. There's always a commotion when I'm around. I've tried and tried to be sweet and quiet like Gail and Hope and Allee, but it's no use. So now I just try to be happy and cheerful. That doesn't *always* work, either. Sometimes I get in an awful stew about having to sit in a chair day after day, but then I 'member what my Lilac Lady wrote, and I try to be good again."

"Your Lilac Lady?"

"She was lame like me," the child explained, and promptly regaled her visitor with the history of the dear friend who had slipped out from her prison house of pain not two years before, while the icy Mrs. Wood sat listening with real interest in her heart.

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When the tale was ended, the woman whispered, "And now you—"

"Yes," interrupted the child calmly. "I thought for a while I'd be like her, but Dr. Dick says before many more weeks he thinks I may be strong enough to try crutches. You see, my legs didn't use to have any life in 'em. I could stick 'em with pins and never feel it, but I can't do that now. They feel just like they did before I was hurt, but they are too weak yet to hold me up. I tried it one day just after Miss Wayne left, and I slumped right flat on the floor. I was scared for fear I'd have to call Miss Keith to help me onto the couch, and then she would scold; but after I rested a bit, I lifted myself *easy*."

"What would the doctor say if he knew you did that?"

"O, he knows. I told him. *He* never scolds. He just said that I mustn't do it again until he let me himself, and I haven't. He's an awful nice doctor. He's always playing jokes, ain't he? When I first woke up from the *antiseptic*, I wanted a drink awfully bad, but Miss Wayne wouldn't let me have a drop of cold water; so when he came in to see me, I asked him for just a swallow, and what do you s'pose he did?"

"I don't know," murmured her companion, still interested in the small patient's prattle in spite of herself.

"Well, he wrote in big letters on a card, 'When you want a drink, remember there is a spring in your bed.' And then he hitched it to the foot-rail where I couldn't help seeing it every time I looked that way. Wasn't that hateful? Of course it made me laugh, and it *did* help me think of something else when I was so thirsty that it seemed as if I'd dry up if they didn't give me a teenty drink. *He* knows how to make sick folks well."

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"He couldn't make my baby well," the woman blurted out with such bitterness that Peace recoiled, shocked.

"I'll bet he could have, if anyone could," she declared staunchly after her first start of surprise.

"Yes, I suppose so. That is what Ed said," answered the bereft mother more quietly.

"Is Ed your husband?"

"Yes."

"I thought he was dead!"

"Ed? Why, no! What put that idea into your head?"

"You are all rigged out in black—"

"My baby is dead."

"So is Elspeth's, but she never wears black. St. John likes to see her in blue, so she wears that color lots. It just matches her eyes. St. John is a perfectly good husband—"

"So is Ed," interrupted Mrs. Wood, with a passion that surprised her. "No one can say one word against Ed. He is as good as gold."

"Does he like black on you?"

"Why—er—I don't know."

"I never saw a man yet that did," Peace commented sagely. "Grandpa has fits when Grandma gets into an all-black rig. He says it looks too gloomy. That's what St. John and Elspeth think, too, so she never wears it." [Pg 204]

"Who are they?" asked Mrs. Wood, for want of anything else to say, because the child's criticism of her attire had sharply reminded her of her own husband's frank disapproval.

"St. John was our minister in Parker, but now he has the Hill Street Church in Martindale, where I live. Elspeth is his wife. They let me name their twins, but the Tiniest One died before I could find a pretty enough name for it."

"Ah! She still has something to live for. No wonder she can dress in blue. She didn't lose her only child."

"'Twouldn't have made any difference if she had lost her whole family," Peace replied, unconsciously pushing the sharp arrow deeper and deeper into her unwilling visitor's heart. "She'd have gone to work and adopted some to raise. That's what Grandpa and Grandma did."

"I thought you said your grandfather was President of the State University."

"I did. But he ain't our real grandfather. His only two children died when they were little, and 'cause my own Grandpa had adopted him when they were boys, Grandpa Campbell adopted the whole kit of us when he found out who we were and that we were *orphants*. There are six of us, but he said he'd have taken the whole bunch if there'd been a dozen. That's the kind of a fellow he is, and Elspeth is just like him. Why don't you adopt a baby?" [Pg 205]

"Why—why—why—"

"Would Ed kick?"

"No, Ed never kicks. He lets me do anything I please."

Mrs. Wood, with a curious, baffled feeling in her heart, wondered why she sat there listening to a spoiled child's silly chatter when every word stung her to the quick, and yet she made no effort to change her position.

"Well, if my husband would let me adopt a baby, I tell you it wouldn't take me long to find one."

"Your husband?"

"Yes, s'posing I had one."

"You are but a child. You don't know what you are talking about. You cannot understand. An adopted baby never can fill the place of one's own lost one."

"How do you know? You never did it, either. Babies are such cunning things. No one can help loving them if they've got any kind of a heart. There is poor little Billy Bolee. He is just as pretty as he can be, but he's lame. Dr. Dick says one leg will always be shorter than the other, and he hasn't anyone to take care of him now, nor any home to go to. His mother was killed in a railroad accident. They are going to ship him off to the *orphant* asylum next week, Miss Keith says. If he was only a girl, Aunt Pen would take him to raise, but they've decided not to have any boys at Oak Knoll. Guiseppe and Rivers were the only ones ever there, and now Rivers' mother can take him again, and Aunt Pen has sent Guiseppe across the ocean to study music. 'F I was bigger I'd adopt Billy myself. I just love babies. When I grow up I'm going to be mother of forty girls, like Aunt Pen is." [Pg 206]

Amused, shocked, scandalized, the young woman in black listened to the strange prattle of the child, who spoke as she thought; but when the busy tongue momentarily ceased its chatter, and Peace sat gazing thoughtfully out across the green fields where already the grain grew thick and tall, Mrs. Wood timidly ventured the question, "How old is Billy Bolee?"

"O, he's a little fellow. Dr. Dick says he prob'ly wasn't more'n two years old when he first came to the hospital, but he has been here as much as six months now. He couldn't talk American at first, and Dr. Kruger had to tell the nurses what he said. But even Dr. Kruger couldn't understand what his name was, so they took to calling him Billy Bolee. He's Dutch, you know. They let him run all around the place now, and he is the dearest little fellow!"

"Where is he now?"

"O, I expect he's in the office. Miss Murch tries to keep him there as much as she can, so's they will know where he is, I guess. Sometimes he gets pretty noisy and the sick folks don't like to have him running up and down the halls."

"By the way, I meant to have spoken to Miss Murch about some supplies our Aid Society wants to purchase for the hospital. I think I'll just slip downstairs now and attend to it while I am waiting for Dickson. If he comes before I get back, tell him that I am in the office." Almost before Peace realized it, she was gone, and the invalid was left to her own devices once more.

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When the busy doctor, detained longer than he had expected to be, returned for his sister, she was nowhere in sight, and Peace lay fast asleep in her wheel-chair by the window.

"Guess Kit got tired of waiting for me and went home," he mused. So he hurried down the stairway and was about to step out of the great front doors, when a familiar, ringing laugh from the office close by made him pause and open his eyes in wonder, as he ejaculated under his breath, "If that isn't Kit, I'll eat my hat!"

Before he could retrace his steps, however, a flushed, radiant figure flashed into the hallway, and Keturah—a rejuvenated Kit with a crimson carnation in her belt and another tucked in the coils of her glossy hair—exclaimed, "O, Dick, come see what this little rogue has done!"

Then he noticed what had escaped his attention before,—she was leading little lame Billy Bolee by the hand. Puzzled, yet strangely relieved at the vision, the doctor followed her into the office, where she pointed at scores of little red and green patches plastered hit or miss on the smooth walls.

"Why, what—?" he began.

"See what they are?" asked the amused sister.

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He looked more closely at the haphazard decorations, then exclaimed, "Postage stamps, I'll be bound!"

"Yes. Five dollars' worth," laughed Keturah infectiously. "And the worst of it is, most of them will have to be soaked off with water. Billy Bolee did his job well. Do you suppose the mucilage will make him sick? By the way, Dickson, I am going to take Billy home with me. It won't be too cool in the auto for him without any wraps, will it? He has nothing but a heavy winter coat, and he will *roast* in that."

Slowly the doctor turned and looked searchingly at his sister. She flushed under his gaze, but did not flinch.

"I have been talking to Dr. Kruger," she said, as if in answer to his unspoken question, "and he thinks there will be no difficulty about our securing adoption papers,—if we decide to keep him."

"But, Kit," stammered the mystified man, "how—why—what?"

"O," she laughed a little sheepishly, "that rude, out-spoken creature in the wheel-chair by the window where you left me told me that I ought to adopt him, and I'm not sure but that she is right."

"She is not rude," the doctor suddenly contradicted, a vision of the brown-eyed idol of the hospital flashing up before him. "She merely believes in voicing her thoughts; but she is the essence of compassion and love. She would not want to wound another's feelings for anything in the world."

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"Well, anyway, she certainly can wake folks up," the woman insisted.

"Thank God for that," said the man under his breath, and leaving the nurses to rescue what of the luckless postage stamps they could, he conducted Keturah and happy little Billy Bolee to his car, waiting at the curb.

CHAPTER XV

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THE RING THAT BUILT A HOSPITAL

It was a hot June night. Not a breath of air was stirring, and in the great Danbury Hospital every window was opened its widest. Yet the patients lay panting and sweltering on their cots. Peace, in her room, tossed and turned restlessly, dozed a few minutes, then wakened, changed her position, trying to find a cooler spot, and finally in desperation, raised her hand and jerked the bell-cord dangling at the head of her bed. She could hear the answering whir in the hall outside, but no one came to minister to her wants, and after an impatient wait of a few seconds, she repeated the summons.

Still no one came.

"What in creation can be the matter with Miss Hays, I wonder," she muttered, and savagely pulled the cord for the third time.

There was a faint patter of rapid steps through the corridor, and the night nurse, flushed and perspiring, flew into the room. "What is it?" she asked crisply, mopping her warm face after a hasty survey of the small patient.

"O," exclaimed Peace in relief. "It's you at last! I thought you were never coming. Is it hot outside tonight, or is it just me that's hot?"

Poor, hurried, steaming Miss Hays glared down at the tumbled figure on the bed, and snapped, "It's *me* that's hot! Did you chase me clear down two flights of stairs just to ask that question?" [Pg 212]

"You *do* look warm," said Peace in conciliatory tones, not quite understanding the cause of Miss Hays' evident wrath.

"I *am* warm,—decidedly warm under the collar!" Suddenly the funny side of the situation burst upon her, and she laughed hysterically. It was utterly ridiculous to think of the haste she had made to answer the frantic summons of that bell!

Then, with an effort she controlled her merriment, and asked soberly, "Was there anything you wanted?"

"No—that is—Hark! What is that noise? It sounds like a little baby crying. That's the third time tonight I've heard it squall."

Miss Hays obediently strained her ears to listen. "It does sound like a child, doesn't it?" she admitted, as the plaintive wail was repeated. "Who can it be?"

"Seems as if it came from the other part of the building," said Peace, peering across the moonlit court toward the windows of the opposite wing.

"But there are no babies over there," the nurse objected. "Nearly all the patients in that section are old men, and the nurses' rooms are on the top floor."

"Well, that's where the crying comes from anyway," Peace insisted, as another low, persistent wail rose on the midnight air. "Are you *sure* there ain't *any* babies over there?" [Pg 213]

"None that I know of. I'll go investigate. It's queer that Miss Gee did not mention it to me if any new patients were brought in there today."

Puzzled Miss Hays turned to go when Peace stopped her with an imperative, "Wait! There's a nightcap sticking out of a topfloor window. I guess it's going to holler."

"Nightcap? Where?" demanded the nurse, again staring out over the court toward the other wing of the hospital.

"It looked like one, but it's gone in out of sight. O, I know I saw it. There! What did I tell you!"

Peace was right. From an open window in the nurses' quarters a white-capped head slowly protruded, followed by a huge pitcher. There was a sound of splashing water, a startled caterwaul from the lawn below, some excited spitting and scratching, and two black shapes streaked across the court to the street. The wailing ceased. Silence reigned.

"Cats!" exclaimed Miss Hays in disgust.

"Making that crying noise?" demanded incredulous Peace.

"Yes."

"Not babies at all?"

"No."

"Well, I'll—Say, that water splashed in through the window of the room below. Listen to that man—swear! He's saying dreadful things! Can't you hear him?"

"I must go," the nurse ejaculated, when a swift survey of the windows opposite had proved that the child's observations were correct; but even as she darted through the doorway, the buzzer in the hall whirred viciously, and Peace heard her mutter, "My sakes! but the old gentleman is mad!" [Pg 214]

Once more quiet descended over the great building, and for a long time Peace lay chuckling over the night's unusual adventure. Then in spite of the heat she at length fell asleep. Nor did she

waken until the sun was high in the sky and the bustle of the busy city floated up through the open window.

The first thing she was conscious of was the sound of Dr. Shumway's voice sharp with bitter disappointment, and by craning her neck almost to breaking point, she could catch a glimpse of his coat-tails through the open door, as he said to some invisible audience, "No, we can hope for absolutely nothing from that source now, and we do need that addition so badly. Why, man alive it would mean a chance for hundreds of helpless babies. We simply haven't the room to accept charity cases now. Every bed in the institution filled this morning! What a record! But we have had to turn away ten cases this past month because we were too crowded to take charity patients."

"What did the old codger have to say to the committee?" asked another voice, which Peace recognized as that of Dr. Race, though she could not see him.

"He wasn't even *decent* about it. Said if his father had seen fit to spend half his fortune erecting this hospital, it was no sign that he intended to follow his example. What is more, he declared that we never would see another red cent of Danbury money if he could help it. Called his father an old fool and every other uncomplimentary name he could think of."

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"Did you remind him that his father had intended to build this addition that we are so anxious for?"

"Yes, and got laughed at for my pains. If only old John Danbury could have lived to see his building completed! He used to say he cared for no other monument than Danbury Hospital."

"Do you know," said a new voice thoughtfully, "I think he recognized the worthlessness of his profligate son, and planned to sink his whole fortune in this institution? Money has been the curse of Robson Danbury's life, and his father knew that the only hope of making anything like a man out of him was the cutting him off without a cent, but the Death Angel claimed him before he had finished his plans."

"Well, that doesn't help us out of our predicament," said Dr. Race in his crisp, curt tones. "How are we to get our addition built?"

"Go to the Church for it,—that's our only course now," suggested Dr. Shumway resignedly.

"The Church! Good gracious, man! The church is bled to death now with its collections for this and subscriptions for that," declared Dr. Rosencrans impatiently. "They won't listen to our cry for help. I'm sorry this hospital is a denominational institution. It is a serious handicap."

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"It ought not to be," said Dr. Shumway stoutly. "Our people should be proud of the chance to give to such a cause."

"But the fact still remains that they raise a howl or have a fit every time they are asked for a copper," returned Dr. Rosencrans pessimistically.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" demanded Dr. Race briskly. "Got anything tangible to work upon?"

"I happen to know that the bishop will give us his heartiest co-operation," Dr. Shumway answered. "We must confer with him and plan a state-wide campaign. We've simply *got* to have that addition."

"Then it's to be the same old song and dance?" inquired Dr. Rosencrans in deep disgust. "We'll send out a professional beggar to the different churches of the state, and then sit back and wait for the money to roll in?"

"What is your plan?" quietly asked Dr. Shumway, but in such a tone that Peace, straining to catch every word, fairly jumped from her cot, and wondered whether there was to be a fight.

"I have none," was the sulky reply, "but I'm tired of this lemon-squeezing farce. We can never raise a thousand dollars, let alone seventy-five thousand."

"I suggest that we take twenty-four hours to think on this thing before we make any decisions," suggested Dr. Race in soothing tones. "It is too important a question to settle without considerable thought."

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"Good idea," seconded another voice, and after a brief parley as to their next meeting, the group of physicians just outside Peace's door dispersed about their various duties.

But they had left the brown-eyed maid much food for thought. Some of their conversation had puzzled her, but she gathered from their remarks that an addition to the hospital had become necessary, and for some reason seemed unobtainable, except by appealing to the churches for the money to build, which the doctors seemed loath to do.

"I'll ask Gail, she'll know," Peace promised herself, when she found that she could not untangle the puzzling questions without further explanation.

So when Gail entered the white room that afternoon, the small sister was ready with an avalanche of queries. "Why ain't the hospital big enough as 'tis? What do they need an *edition* for? Why won't Robinson Danbury give them any money, and why do they think he ought to?"

What's the matter with the churches and how do they bleed to death?"

Gail stopped short in her tracks. "Why, girlie!" she cried apprehensively, noting the scarlet flush on the thin cheeks, "what do you mean? What is the matter? Have you been dreaming? What are you talking about?"

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So Peace told her of the conference held that morning just outside her door, and Gail listened attentively, surprised that the small maid should display such interest in a question supposed to concern only her elders.

"What's all the fuss about?" Peace asked a second time before Gail could decide whether or not it would be advisable to try to explain.

"Well," she said at length, "it happens that this is the only hospital in the state which belongs to our church,—that is, to our denomination, you understand. A man by the name of John Danbury planned and built it with his own money, and gave it to the church with the understanding that it was to be supported by our people. His plan was to have the hospital take only poor patients, but even with the church's help they couldn't anywhere nearly pay their way when they did that, and they have had to accept pay patients almost entirely. So rather than give up this pet idea of his, Mr. Danbury decided to build an addition just for charity cases. But he died without a will,—that is, without anything to show how he wanted his money spent, and his son, Robson, got it all. The son was hurt in a railroad accident about a month ago, and was brought here to be treated. Up to that time, he had absolutely refused to give the Hospital Board a dollar toward carrying out his father's wishes, although he himself knew what the plans had been. But while he was here, he sort of changed his mind. I suppose he had never before realized how many people a hospital reaches; and he hinted that perhaps after all he might do a *little* to help the Board build its addition. The committee was to visit him this morning and get his definite answer, but last night some cats got to squalling in the court under his window, and—"

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"I know," Peace interrupted. "It sounded, like a baby. I started Miss Hays off to find out who it was."

"Well, it bothered the nurses who were off duty, too, and finally Miss Gee could stand it no longer, so she deluged the cats with a pitcher of water,—"

"Yes, and some of it landed on the sill just under her window, and spattered a sick man inside. Mercy! how he swore!"

"And that sick man was Robson Danbury."

"Goodness gracious!" gasped Peace. "No wonder he won't build any more hospital."

"It is such a pity to act so childish about it."

"I s'pose it does seem so to everyone else, but just s'posing *you* had got settled comfortable on a *boiling* hot night, and someone spilled water all over you. How would you like it?"

"But it was purely an accident, Peace."

"Accidents don't always make a fellow feel nice," the child asserted. "And the committee oughtn't to have visited him just after he got half drowned. They might have known he'd be ugly."

"They knew nothing whatever of the accident until he told them. It seems that even Miss Gee herself did not realize that anything but the cats had been soaked. He was so angry that he refused to stay here any longer, and as soon as he could get his clothes on, the ambulance took him home. It is such a shame, for the hospital does need more room so badly, and now—"

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"'F I was the hospital, I'd just show him that I could build all the rooms I wanted to without any of his old money."

"O, they intend to try to raise seventy-five thousand dollars by subscriptions from the churches. That was decided today. But it will be a hard job."

"Who's going to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Why, the work, of course. You said it would be a hard job."

"O, they mean to open the campaign next Sunday in Martindale, and the bishop is to preach the first sermon. After that, Rev. Mr. Murdock will do most of the preaching. He is secretary of the Hospital Association, you know."

"Is the bishop to preach in *our* church?"

"Yes."

"And take up a collection?"

"A subscription one."

"And I won't be there! Why couldn't they wait till I got home?"

"They must begin at once, dear, if they hope to raise such a great sum before Conference."

"What's the difference between a collection and a *perscription*?"

"*Subscription*, child. Well—er—we take up collections every Sunday in our regular services, but a subscription gives the people a longer time to pay what they have promised." [Pg 221]

The conversation turned to other subjects, but had Gail only known it, the busy brain under the curly brown thatch was puzzling over ways and means of taking part in that important subscription when she was miles away and absolutely bankrupt. She had given her last mite to help purchase a typewriter for her little author lady.

But while the nurse was making her ready for the night, a sudden thought came to her, and holding up the slender finger on which gleamed her birthday ring, one of her most prized possessions, she asked, "How much do rings cost, Miss Keith?"

"Rings like yours?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not much of a judge of jewelry, but I should say that was worth maybe ten or fifteen dollars. That stone looks like a real ruby."

"'Tis a real ruby, though 'tain't very big."

"I never owned but one ring in my life, and that was a plain band. I don't know anything about precious stones, but no doubt your ring cost a pretty penny."

When she had gone on to her next charge, Peace sat warily up in bed, snatched paper and pencil from the stand close by and scribbled a brief and hurried note, which read:

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"Deer Bishop,—I can't be at church Sunday when you take up a subscription to build some more Danbury Hospittle, cause I am in the hospittle myself, and I have spent all my money. Nurse says my ruby ring which Grandpa gave me on my last birthday cost as much as 10 or 15 dolars; so I am sending my ring for your collection. You can sell it to some honest jueler and give the Money to the hospittle. It has been worn only a little while for my birthday was New Years, and I've been in the hospittle ever since, so the ring is reely as good as new. I would sell it myself if I could get out but I can't.

Yours truly,
PEACE GREENFIELD."

When the bishop rose to face the select and fashionable audience in the South Avenue Church the following Sabbath Day, his heart misgave him. What message could he bring to this people which would open their hearts and pocketbooks to help in the Lord's great work? He had prepared a most careful and elaborate sermon for the occasion, but as he stood looking down into that sea of critical faces before him, he realized that here was a people who needed a soul's awakening, and with a sudden determination he cast aside his scholarly efforts, and drawing from his pocket a hastily scrawled letter and a small, ruby ring, he told their simple story so beautifully and so well that purse-strings, as well as heart-strings, responded instantly, and the following day a telegram reached Danbury Hospital which read, "Fifteen thousand dollars subscribed at South Avenue Church. Thank God for our 'Peace which passeth understanding.'" [Pg 223]

The hospital staff was at a loss to explain these strange words until a visit from the bishop himself made everything clear. Then great was the rejoicing, for instinctively each heart knew that the simple little ring had won the fight. The story of its giving was an "open Sesame" wherever it was told, and the much needed addition to Danbury Hospital was made possible through the sacrifice of one childish heart's dearest treasure.

Verily, "A little child shall lead them."

CHAPTER XVI

[Pg 225]

PEACE DISCOVERS SOME SECRETS

Peace was on crutches! And her delight knew no bounds.

"Why, I didn't s'pose I'd ever really come to use them!" she exclaimed in breathless wonder while the doctor was adjusting the pads to her arms and showing her how to manage them.

"Didn't I tell you that some fine day you would be walking again?" he demanded.

"O, yes, but I thought that was just so I'd keep on hoping for something which never could

happen."

The doctor glanced in surprise over the brown head at the big sister Gail, who was watching proceedings with interest, and his lips formed the question, "Doesn't she know the whole truth?"

"No, I think not," Gail whispered back.

"Then let's not tell her. She will enjoy it more if she finds it out herself."

Gail nodded brightly; and as the little sister hopped nimbly out into the hallway, anxious to display her new accomplishment to other patients and nurses, the two grown-ups fell into a confidential chat, and Peace was for the moment forgotten. That just suited the small maid, eager to try her wings by herself, and finding that neither doctor nor sister followed her, she tapped her way down the corridor to the broad stairway leading to the first floor, and began a laborious descent, fearful every moment lest someone should hear and prevent her from carrying out her daring plan. But no one came to stop her, and with much resting and readjusting of the awkward crutches, Peace managed to reach the bottom of the flight without serious mishap.

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"Mercy! but that's hard work!" she panted, pausing to get her breath before resuming her journey. "Now where, I wonder? O, there's the office. I'll go call on Miss Murch first. She hasn't been up to see me for days. I guess she must be sick herself."

Softly, slowly, she tapped across the hallway to the office door, but stopped on the threshold. The room was empty. That is, Miss Murch was not there; but at the sound of her crutches, a coarsely clad, uncouth giant rose from the dimmest corner and shuffled toward her, twirling a greasy felt hat in his ham-like hands, and looking decidedly ill at ease. For once Peace was at a loss for a word of greeting, but stood with mouth open surveying him much as if he had been an ogre, until finally he growled out, "Well, d'you b'long to this shebang?"

"Y—yes."

"Well, where the deuce is the head mogul? I've been waiting here 'most an hour and not a soul has hove in sight. I came to see about Essie Martin."

"Essie Martin!" Peace was awake at once. That was the name of the little girl whom Miss Wayne had told her about long ago. "Where is Essie Martin?"

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"Here."

"In this building?"

"Yep."

"When did she come?"

"A fortnight ago."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Darned nonsense. The doctor calls it appendiceetis."

"Are you her father?"

"Yep."

He had turned so the light from a nearby window fell full upon his face, and Peace deliberately surveyed him from head to heels; then calmly, as if speaking to herself, she remarked, "Well, Miss Wayne was right. You *do* look like a hog, don't you? Only the hogs I know are some cleaner."

The man glared angrily at her, but being too thick-skinned to take in the full meaning of the child's words, he caught only the familiar name she had spoken. "Miss Wayne?" he bellowed. "A nurse? Is she here?"

"No, but she was once. She took care of me. Has Essie still got her doll?"

"Doll!" snarled the father savagely. "She can't think of nothing else. The lazy jade!"

"I knew it, I knew it!" cried Peace, clapping her hands triumphantly. "I told Miss Wayne that Essie and her mother were all right. 'Twas just you that wanted that plug of tobacco. Why didn't Essie's mother come, too?"

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"She's dead."

"O!" Peace was staggered by his blunt, indifferent reply, but before she could frame another question, Miss Murch appeared from an inner office, at the same moment that Miss Keith stepped through the doorway from behind them in search of her truant patient; and Peace suffered herself to be led docilely away. So absorbed was she in her new discovery that even her pleasure in her ability to walk again was forgotten.

Dr. Shumway and Gail had disappeared when she reached her room, and the nurse reported that they had gone motoring; but the fact that they had neglected to invite her to accompany them failed to bother her much. Her busy brain was seething with new schemes. She must find Essie Martin and talk with her. Where was the head nurse? *She* would know all about the case. There, Miss Keith had gone to answer someone's bell. Peace clapped her hands in silent glee, and

making sure that the eagle-eyed nurse was actually out of range, she hurriedly set out to find Miss Gee, knowing full well that that kindly woman would be able to tell her what she wanted most to learn.

The next day when Gail appeared, prepared for a storm of passionate reproaches, Peace pounced upon her with the exclamation, "O, sister, I've got the most questions to ask and the most things to tell! It's been ages since I've seen you. I hardly know where to begin,—whether to tell about Essie first, or—" [Pg 229]

"Who is Essie?" laughed Gail, settling herself composedly for the torrent of prattle that was sure to follow.

"Why, Essie Martin, the little girl which Miss Wayne told me about,—the one she sent two dolls to. One got burned up, you 'member."

"O, yes. Well, what is the news about her?"

"She is here in the hospital. I met her father yesterday. Her mother died three months ago, and Essie has been dreadful sick with *appendage-itis*. It's cut out now, and she is going to get well, but her father don't want her any more. She is only a girl and it will be years before she's big enough to keep house. So he means to put her in an *orphant* asylum,—*just give her away*, Gail, for someone to adopt! Isn't it perfectly heathenish?"

"But maybe she will be better off, dear, than she is now," Gail answered gravely, recalling some of the sad incidents connected with unfortunate Essie's brief history.

"That's what Miss Keith said when I was telling her about it, but it seems dreadful for an own father to give away his only little girl. I couldn't bear to think of her in a 'sylum, Gail, for she is an awful sweet little thing. I've been in to see her, and she looks lots like our Allee. So I asked Miss Gee if she didn't s'pose Aunt Pen could make room for her at Oak Knoll, and we've written to find out. How I'd like to see Miss Wayne again and tell her that Essie does love her doll and that her mother didn't want that tobacco. Essie don't want to go there—to the 'sylum, I mean,—but she doesn't want to go home, either. Don't you think Oak Knoll would be a nice place for her?" [Pg 230]

"Yes, indeed, and I am sure she would like it there, too. If Aunt Pen can possibly find room for her, she will certainly do so. I am glad Miss Gee has written already."

"So'm I. It will be nice to have Essie in Martindale where I can go to see her sometimes. She is so nice. I know Allee will like her, too. She brought her Christmas doll along when she came to the hospital, and is wild to see Miss Wayne. The doll is dressed ever so cute, and is just as clean as when she got it, in spite of her father being such a hoggy-looking man. She must have had hard work to keep it like that if the rest of the family are as dirty as he is. Miss Wayne thought all the Martins wanted of her was what presents they could get, but you see Essie really loves her doll. She has named it Helen, after Miss Wayne. Why, there she is, now. I've a good notion to holler to her." Peace, having glanced casually down into the street below, suddenly started up from her chair with a gleeful shout.

"Who?" demanded Gail, startled at the exclamation.

"Miss Wayne, of course. She is sitting in Dr. Race's auto, and isn't in her uniform today, either. I wonder why. That is the third time I have seen her riding with the doctor when she didn't have on her white clothes. She can't have very many cases these days, I guess. Aren't there any sick folks to take care of?" [Pg 231]

"Why—er—I think she is going to take care of the doctor after this," laughed Gail, a conscious blush flooding her pretty face.

"What doctor?"

"Dr. Race."

"Is *he* sick?"

"No. O, no. But Miss Wayne is soon to become his wife, my dear."

"His wife! Mercy sakes! Ain't that just my luck? O, dear!" wailed the small sister in distress.

"Why, what in the world is the matter?" cried Gail in great surprise. "I am sure that is a delightful sequel to a beautiful romance. Dr. Race is such a good man as well as a wonderfully successful physician, and Miss Wayne will make an ideal wife for him. Think how happy they will be in a little home of their very own."

"That may all be so," Peace reluctantly admitted, "but what am I going to do now for a pattern? She was an old maid—she said so herself—and I'd made up my mind to be just like her; and here she's going to be married after all. That's the way it happens every time with me. I thought Miss Swift wanted Dr. Race for a husband. The nurses used to joke about it all the time, and if Miss Wayne was going to get married at all, I don't see why she didn't pick out Dr. Dick. I like him best of all. O, I forgot to tell you,—he broke his leg last night." [Pg 232]

"Who?" Gail flew out of her chair like a ball from a cannon's mouth.

"Dr. Dick."

"Peace Greenfield, what do you mean?" shrieked the older girl, seizing the small sister by the shoulder with a grip that hurt.

"Ouch! Leggo! Don't you ever pinch me like that again! His automobile ran into a telegraph pole when he tried to turn out so's he wouldn't hit a baby playing in the street, and he fell out and broke his leg. It's a wonder that he wasn't hurt *eternally*. They brought him here and Dr. Kruger set it. My, but he's ugly! I've been in to see him already this morning. I just *had* to get even with him for the trick he played on me when I first came here, so I told him that when he wanted to walk to remember he would find four legs under his bed. But he never thought it a bit funny. Doctors and nurses do make the meanest patients when they are sick of anyone I know," concluded Peace sagely.

Gail had stood like one petrified as Peace chattered volubly on, but now she found her voice and excitedly interrupted, "But Dick—Dr. Shumway—where is he now? Why didn't anyone tell me before?"

"He's in Room 10, down the hall,—though I don't see why *you* should be told any sooner than—"

But Gail had vanished; and Peace, after one long, amazed look after the fleeing form, grabbed her crutches and started in pursuit, muttering as she hobbled along, "*I'm* going to see what's the matter." [Pg 233]

At the threshold of the doctor's room, however, she paused, transfixed at the sight of Gail bending over the prostrate figure on the narrow bed, kissing—yes, actually kissing—a pair of mustached lips.

"Mercy!" she gasped, backing out precipitately.

But the lovers neither heard nor heeded.

"I thought you would *never* come!" the doctor was saying fervently, while he held Gail fast in his arms. "Kruger promised that he would 'phone you last night."

"I never knew a word about it until Peace told me a minute ago," Gail protested.

"What would we do without our Peace?" he murmured. Then discovering the shocked face in the doorway, he exclaimed, "Why, here she is herself! Hello, chicken!"

"You—you kissed her," Peace exploded. "*I saw you!*"

"Yes," he answered brazenly, "and I am going to do it again."

"Are you—have you gone and got married,—you two?"

"Not yet," he laughed boyishly. "But we are going to do just that very thing as soon as I can coax her to set the day. You don't mean to say that you object?" [Pg 234]

"No—O, no. If she's got to have a husband, I don't know of a better one than you, except St. John, and he is already married once. But—I—am—surprised! Isn't she—er—rather young?"

And she could not understand why they laughed.

CHAPTER XVII

[Pg 235]

A HOSPITAL WEDDING

Peace, with writing pad and pencil in hand, climbed laboriously up into the deep window recess overlooking the wide lawns of Danbury Hospital, and propped her crutches against the sash, so that by no chance they could fall to the floor out of her reach while she was composing her weekly letter to St. Elspeth.

"I've got *so* much to write her," she sighed, chewing her pencil abstractedly. "I wish I could work a typewriter. 'Twould be so much easier to 'tend to all my letters then. It's tiresome writing things by hand. If it wasn't Elspeth, I wouldn't try today. It's so lovely and cool just to sit here and watch folks pass along the street. I 'most wish now that I had gone with Gail and Dr. Dick in their auto.—There, that's the first thing I must tell Elspeth. She'll be awful glad to know Gail is going to have such a nice husband. And the ring he gave her is too pretty for anything. Everyone has diamonds for their 'gagement rings, but it takes someone with brains to think up a ring out of sapphires and topazes, 'cause his birthday is in September and hers in November. When I get married, that's the kind of a ring I want, only I hope my husband's birthday stone is a ruby, 'cause I like them best of all." [Pg 236]

Peace paused in her soliloquy long enough to write the date at the top of the page; then again thrust the pencil point into her mouth as she gazed reflectively out of the open window.

"Well," said a voice with startling abruptness almost at her elbow, "I shouldn't want to be in her shoes. No matter which place she chooses someone is going to feel hurt."

"That's what she gets for being so popular," laughed another voice, which Peace recognized as

that of Miss Keith.

"You should say 'they,' instead of 'she,' for Dr. Race is as popular as Miss Wayne," interposed a third speaker; and the pair of startled brown eyes peering around the corner of the window seat beheld a quartette of white-capped nurses seated at a long table in the hallway, busy with heaps of snowy cotton and great squares of surgeon's gauze.

"I wonder what Miss Wayne has done now?" thought Peace, when, as if in echo of her thoughts, the fourth member of the little group asked hesitatingly, "What is all the fuss about? You see, I am so new here that I don't understand."

"Well, Miss Kellogg, neither do some of us older ones," retorted Miss Swift with an unpleasant laugh. "It seems to me that it is 'much ado about nothing.' Whose business is it if a doctor and a nurse decide to get married? Why don't they go to the justice of the peace or some parsonage and have it over with, instead of making such a stew—" [Pg 237]

"You see, Miss Kellogg," interrupted Miss Keith mischievously, "our friend Swift had her eye on the doctor—"

"Now, girls," suggested the quiet voice of the first speaker, gentle Miss Gerald, "don't enter into personalities, please. They always breed ill feeling. You have met Helen Wayne, have you not, Miss Kellogg?"

"Yes, indeed. I think she is lovely."

"So does Dr. Race and all the rest of us," put in Miss Keith, unable to resist another wicked glance at her neighbor.

"Well, they are to be married very soon, and neither of them has any relatives living here in Fairview, so—"

"All their friends began to interfere," said Miss Swift.

"O!" But Miss Kellogg still looked mystified.

"Now don't pretend that it was as bad as all that," protested Miss Gerald. "It seems that Dr. Shumway was a classmate of Dr. Race, and they have always been great friends; so Mrs. Wood, Dr. Shumway's sister, asked them to be married at her house. But Dr. Kruger's wife and Helen graduated from the same school, and the Krugers urged them to have the ceremony performed at their place."

"And then Dr. Canfield bobs up with the assurance that he will feel most dreadfully hurt if they don't honor him by coming there," interrupted Miss Keith. "Miss Wayne nursed her first case under him, and he thinks her popularity is due solely to the recommendation he gave her,—the dear old fogy!" [Pg 238]

"Also the Fairview Club, to which Dr. Race belongs, wants them to be married at the Club-house. O, it's great to be popular!"

"Why don't they simplify matters by having a church wedding?" asked Miss Kellogg, much interested.

"Ha—ha—ha!" laughed her three companions. "That's where the joke comes. They belong to different churches, and are both intimate friends of their pastors' families."

"Well, that does complicate matters, doesn't it?" said the newcomer musingly. "She is surely in a dilemma, isn't she?"

"Don't you agree with me that she would better patronize a justice of the peace?" asked Miss Swift.

"I don't," replied a decided voice just behind them, and the quartette jumped nervously at the unexpected sound, for not one of them was aware of the hidden listener.

"You don't what?" they gasped, as the curly brown head came into view from the deep recess.

"I don't think she ought to patternize the justice of the p'lice," replied Peace, limping over to the long table where they were all at work, "I'd just be married here at the hospital and fool 'em all."

"At the hospital!" echoed Miss Keith.

"What utter nonsense!" flashed Miss Swift. [Pg 239]

"I think it is a novel idea," put in the new nurse decidedly.

"And why not?" asked Miss Gerald, after her first gasp of surprise. "Who would have a better right? Helen Wayne graduated from this institution, and Harvey Race was house doctor for a long time."

"But whoever heard of a *wedding* in a *hospital*?" exclaimed Miss Swift sarcastically. "It is utterly ridiculous."

"The ceremony could take place in that bay window at the end of the hall," planned Miss Kellogg, ignoring the attitude of her sister nurse. "It would make a lovely archway."

"And the roses are just at their best now," added Miss Gerald. "That is her favorite flower."

"Miss Foster is a musician, isn't she?" asked Miss Keith, entering into their plans with spirit. "We could get her to play the wedding march."

"On what?" inquired the dissenting member of the party. "Our lovely little baby organ which has an incurable case of asthma? Or the grand piano which we don't possess?"

"The grand piano, by all means," replied Miss Keith, nettled by her companion's words.

"Perhaps the hospital's fairy godmother will turn up with a piano for the occasion," suggested the gentle little peacemaker nurse. "We certainly need a decent instrument badly enough."

"Maybe we could hire one for just that night," Peace excitedly proposed. "We did that in Parker. Our school didn't own a piano, so we hired one when we needed it." [Pg 240]

"You make me laugh," jeered Miss Swift. "You talk as if it were all settled. Do you suppose for one moment that the Hospital Board would listen to such a thing?"

"They meet today,—we'll ask them," quietly answered Miss Gerald.

"And supposing they *should* consent to such a preposterous scheme, do you think the doctors would allow their patients to be excited and disturbed over having such an event in this building?"

"It would be the best kind of a tonic for every soul under this roof. 'All the world loves a lover,' you know."

An audible sniff was the only reply their disgruntled comrade made; but at that moment Dr. Race himself entered the corridor and beckoned to Miss Gerald. So the quartette dispersed to take up other duties.

Peace, her desire for letter writing forgotten, wandered forlornly away to her room to await Gail's return, mentally chiding herself that she had allowed the big sister to go motoring without her. "I could have gone as well as not; but they prob'ly wouldn't have driven very far if I had; while as 'tis, they'll likely stay till dark."

She curled up in a comfortable bunch on the couch, propped her head against the window sash and fell to daydreaming, until the big eyes grew heavy with sleep, and she drifted away to the Land of Nod, where she dreamed that her beloved Miss Wayne was married to the man of her choice by a blue-coated policeman, on the flat roof of the Martindale fire-house, while all the doctors and nurses and sick folks from Danbury Hospital marched around and around in procession, vainly seeking some means of mounting to the room also. [Pg 241]

Then suddenly the small sleeper was aroused by feeling a pair of strong arms encircling her and lifting her into somebody's capacious lap.

"You precious child!" she heard a familiar voice saying, and a warm kiss was pressed upon her forehead.

Her eyes flew quickly open, as she cried, "O, I know who you are—Miss Wayne! Are—are you married yet?"

"No, goosie. Did you suppose I could get married without having *you* there, too? You're *almost* as important as the bridegroom."

"Well, I dreamed you were, but I'm glad to hear it isn't so. Have you decided who you're going to hurt yet?"

"Whom I am going to hurt?" echoed Miss Wayne in surprise. "I *hope* I'm not going to hurt anyone. That isn't my business."

"Miss Gerald said so many folks wanted you to be married at their house that you were bound to hurt someone's feelings no matter what you did."

"O, but you fixed that for me beautifully, Peace Greenfield!" and she kissed the white forehead again.

"Me! How?"

"I'm going to be married here at the hospital. The Board invited me to! What do you think of that? Surely everyone ought to be satisfied with that arrangement." [Pg 242]

"O, goody!" Peace clapped her hands gleefully. "I was afraid the doctors wouldn't let you. Miss Swift said they wouldn't."

"Miss Swift—oh, you mustn't remember anything she says,—poor girl."

"Well, I won't, but I guess she wanted your doctor herself—"

"Hush, childie. Don't say such things. I couldn't help it. I didn't *try* to make him love me."

"I'm glad he had some sense. *I* had picked out Dr. Dick for you, but my own sister Gail got him; so it's all right. I like Dr. Race next best. When are you going to be married?"

"Next week Wednesday."

"So soon? Why, I thought it took heaps of time to get ready for a marriage,—making clothes, and baking the cake and—and all such things as that."

"I have taken heaps of time," smiled the woman whimsically.

"Why, I didn't know that. When did you get time? You have always been busy nursing since I knew you."

"Years and years ago, when I was a little child, my father made me a beautiful cedar chest, and on every birthday mother laid away some pillow slips or linen sheets, or a piece of silverware. When I grew older, I made some quilts and hemmed towels and napkins by the dozen, embroidered sofa-cushions and doilies, and even fashioned some window draperies for the 'den' of my house to be. Only my own clothes remained undone when we decided to go hand in hand the rest of the way through life; and much of that work a dressmaker has done, because I have had neither time nor talent."

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"Did she make your wedding dress?" asked Peace eagerly. "What is it like? And are you going to have a veil?"

Miss Wayne hesitated. "Well, I had thought some of being married in my uniform—"

"Uniform!" Peace interrupted in keen disappointment. "Just your old white dress and cap and apron? Why?"

"Because I am to be married here at the hospital."

"But—but—that won't be pretty. What will the doctor do for a uniform,—so's folks will know he is a doctor, I mean? Will he wear his automobile gloves and lug his medicine v'lise?" Peace inquired.

Miss Wayne drew her breath in sharply, unable to decide whether the child in her lap was sarcastic or in earnest. But before she could make reply, Peace continued, "Everyone knows what you look like in your nurse's uniform, but we've none of us seen you in a sure-enough wedding dress. You'd look lovely in one, I know, even if you are fat—I mean plump. I don't see why you are so stuck on being married in a white cap and apron."

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"Well, as to that, I only thought it might be more appropriate. Some of the nurses hinted—"

"O, yes, that sounds like that Swift person's plan; but *I* don't think it is at all nice. How does Dr. Race like it?"

"O, I haven't told him yet. In fact, I really haven't fully decided. I have mother's wedding dress. Sister Lucy and my cousin Dell were married in it, and perhaps I—"

"O, do!" shrieked Peace enraptured. "Those long-ago wedding dresses are always so homely and cute. I just love 'em. Grandma still has hers, and she said she hoped some of us would want to wear it when we marry, but I guess she didn't 'xpect any of us would be ready for it quite so soon. She was awfully 'stonished when Dr. Dick wrote that he wanted Gail. I wish she was going to be married when you are. Then we could have a double wedding. I've always wanted to see one of those things."

Miss Wayne smiled at the child's ingenious plans, but said seriously, "Well, if I am to be married in a satin gown and lace veil, we must do things up properly all around. I'll have Gail for one of my bridesmaids, and you must be my flower girl."

"O," gasped Peace, breathless with delight. "Wouldn't that be grand! But I can't, Miss Wayne. A limpy flower girl would be dreadful. Let Essie Martin be flower girl, and I'll whistle for you to march up by. How will that do?" She looked up eagerly at the face above her, but Miss Wayne had not heard her question.

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"Essie Martin!" said the woman in grave wonder. "What do you know about Essie Martin?"

"She is here—"

"Where?"

"Upstairs in Miss Blake's ward."

"Since when? How did she get here? Is she very sick? How did you know her and why didn't you tell me before?"

"I hain't seen you myself since I found out that Essie was here." Peace suddenly remembered her grievance against her beloved friend. "You haven't been up once for *weeks*. I've seen you only from my window when you were riding with Dr. Race. Essie has got appendicitis, but it's cut out now and she is almost well enough to go home,—that is, to Aunt Pen, for her father is going to give her away. She still has her doll, and it is named 'Helen' after you, and her mother is dead, and she would be awfully pleased to be flower girl at your wedding, 'cause she likes you. *She* didn't want that plug of tobacco, nor neither did her mother. And her father looks like the hog you said he did, only he is dirtier."

With quick intuition, Miss Wayne listened to this amazing jumble; then gently slid Peace back onto her couch as she said with abrupt decision, "I must see Essie. Anyway, here comes Gail. You

will want to talk to her for a while, and it will soon be time for tea. Good-bye, little Heart o' Gold." [Pg 246]

She was gone, and Peace was left alone with the big sister to tell all the marvelous things that had happened that one afternoon.

So it was decided that Gail was to be bridesmaid with Miss Keith, Miss Gerald, and Miss Crane; Essie Martin was to be flower girl, and Billy Bolee the little page. Miss Foster was to play the piano, borrowed for the occasion, with Peace to whistle the accompaniment.

O, it took hours of the most delightful planning! Then nurses and doctors got busy. Miss Wayne was banished from the building entirely, and Dr. Race was bidden to go his rounds with his eyes shut. There was much rustling and bustling as the host of eager friends decorated the wide, white corridor for the occasion. No sound of hammer must disturb the patients housed within those walls, but it was marvelous what miracles a few thumb tacks and bits of string accomplished. Long ropes of smilax and syringa, intertwined with pink tulle, swung from the high ceiling. The great chandelier and lesser lights were festooned with the same delicate greenery. The elevator shaft was completely hidden by woodland vines which Gail and Keturah Wood had gathered, and huge jardinières filled with waxy snowballs occupied every available corner. The big window where the bride and groom were to stand was hung with fishnet, twined and intertwined with ferns from the forest and sweet wild roses with the dew sparkling on their rosy petals, for the wedding was to take place in early morning. [Pg 247]

At last everything was in readiness, everyone was dressed in his best, the nurses and convalescent patients were assembled in one end of the corridor, the outside guests in the other end, and it lacked only the presence of the bridal party to make the beautiful scene complete.

Peace, resplendent in filmy white, had stolen from her place behind the piano for one last glimpse of the festive decorations, while she waited impatiently for the chimes of the distant court-house to strike the hour. "O, but it's lovely," she breathed in ecstasy, as her eyes wandered from floor to ceiling. "How everyone loves Miss Wayne!"

"Do you know why?" asked a voice at her elbow, and she looked up into the grave face of the kindly matron.

"No," she managed to stammer. "Why?"

"Because she has a heart of gold."

Miss Wayne's parting words of yesterday flashed through the active brain, and Peace asked with breathless eagerness, "O, tell me how to get a heart of gold, then."

"The good Lord gives us each one when we come into the world," answered the gray-haired woman earnestly. "But many of us are content enough with the glitter of the fool's gold which is found a-plenty in every life; and we don't delve for the real gold. We slip along in a don't-care way, neglecting the opportunities that come to us to better humanity; seeking the easiest tasks, satisfied with that kind of existence. The miner who digs in the bowels of the earth for his gold has to work and struggle and strive. So we, too, if we make the most of God's gifts to us, must work and struggle and strive." [Pg 248]

A little perplexed, for poor Peace could not understand many of the long words which the matron had used, she seemed to grasp the "tiny text" of the little sermon, and said thoughtfully as she turned away, "Then I'll work and stumble and thrive, for I want a heart of gold like Miss Wayne's."

Then slowly the silvery toned chimes began to ring, there was a rustling sound on the stairway, and Peace had just time to slip into her place again when the strains of the piano began the measured notes of stately Lohengrin. From somewhere Dr. Race and the minister appeared and took their places beneath the canopy of wild roses, but Peace paid scant attention to them. Her eyes were glued upon the other end of the corridor where the bridal procession was already approaching, with Essie Martin in the lead, and—could it be?—yes, it was golden-haired, radiant Allee marching beside her, both scattering rose petals from dainty baskets hung from their arms. How had Allee gotten there? Peace almost forgot her part when her amazed eyes fell upon that familiar form. But close behind the little flower girls came the four bridesmaids, gowned in delicate and garlanded with wild roses; and the sight of the older sister's sweet face restored the young musician's composure, so that after only one or two quavering notes, she whistled more blithely than ever. This certainly was a day of delightful happenings! [Pg 249]

Following the pretty bridesmaids toddled wee Billy Bolee, clad in white from head to toe, and bearing in his chubby little hands a tiny white velvet pillow upon which rested the simple gold wedding ring. The bride was almost too lovely to describe, dressed as she was in the heavy brocaded satin gown which had been her mother's forty years before, and half hidden by the clinging, filmy veil, which floated like a fleecy cloud about her.

Peace never could remember what happened after that. She saw the bride take her place beside Dr. Race, and she saw the black-froked minister stand up in front of them. Then someone gave a signal and a shower of rose petals fell from the bell above their heads and covered doctor and nurse with sweet fragrance. Immediately the guests began to file past to greet the happy couple, and a subdued murmur of voices filled the long corridor.

"But when is the wedding to be?" demanded Peace in surprise. "Seems to me folks are in an

awful hurry. Why don't they wait till the wedding is over?"

"The wedding is already over," answered Miss Foster, laughing at the child's dismay.

"They aren't married *yet?*" protested Peace in great astonishment.

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"Yes, they are, and the wedding breakfast will be served directly at Dr. Kruger's house."

"But—but—doesn't it take longer to get married than that?"

"No."

"I—I thought it would."

"Why, childie?"

"Well, it took so long to put the decorations up, and for everyone to dress, it seems 's if the minister might have talked a little longer. They'd hardly stood up together before it was all over."

Again Miss Foster laughed merrily. "Just you wait, little girl, till it comes *your* turn to stand up while the minister talks, and you will think it is plenty long enough," she warned, rising to join the bridal party moving slowly down the corridor toward the waiting autos in the street below.

At last the wonderful event was over, the happy doctor and his smiling bride had departed on their honeymoon amid a shower of fragrant rose petals; and Peace, clinging fast to Allee, was again in her room with Gail.

"O, but it was beau-ti-ful!" she sighed blissfully. "I hope my wedding will be as nice. Didn't the music sound lovely? I 'most forgot to whistle when I saw Allee coming along with Essie Martin,—I was so 'stonished! Nobody had hinted a word that she was going to be here. I didn't even 'spect Miss Wayne knew her. My! but the day has been full of s'prises! There was the wedding first,—I'd no idea it *could* be so pretty,—and then there was Allee's coming when I thought she was at home in Martindale. And then Dr. Dick told me while we were at breakfast that I could go home in two weeks more, and right after that along came Mrs. Wood and said you and Allee and me were to be her guests for the last week we were here. And now Essie Martin has just been in to tell the best news of all,—Miss Wayne, I mean Mrs. Race—is going to adopt her, and she won't have to go to Oak Knoll after all. O, Gail I do feel 's if I could flap my wings and crow,—I'm so happy!"

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Tenderly Gail drew the small sisters closely to her side, and smiled radiantly down at the two up-turned faces, as she said simply, "And I, too."

CHAPTER XVIII

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THE SEVEN MCGEES

The last week at Danbury Hospital rolled by almost too quickly to suit even Peace, busy saying good-bye to the hosts of friends which that great roof sheltered; for now that the time had come for her to go, she found herself strangely loath to leave the little white room where she had spent so many months.

"I knew, of course, that I loved all the doctors and nurses," she explained in apologetic, troubled tones to the sympathizing sister, Gail, "but I never s'posed I'd *hate* to go home so bad when it came time. I—I really *want* to go home, too, but somehow—I'm going to miss the hospital dreadfully, Gail."

"Certainly you will, dear," the older girl answered with an understanding heart. "You have been here such a long time and had such a delightful experience for the most part,—"

"And made so many really, truly friends," Peace chimed in eagerly.

"Yes, and made so many friends, that it is no wonder you rather hate to leave it all, even if you are going home. But you wouldn't want to stay here always—"

"O, mercy, no!" Peace shivered. "There are too many sick folks here. They ache and yell and cry, because they can't help themselves. Now I didn't hurt real much this time, though it's taken a long time to finish the job, but I could have 'most anything to eat and could get around in my wheel-chair or with my crutches for weeks and weeks; while most folks are so awfully sick that they have to live on *mottled* milk and beef juice, and they get so skinny and white and weak that they don't know what to do with themselves. That must be dreadful hard and I'll really be glad to get away where I can't see so many sick people. Yes, it is awfully nice to have such a lovely home to go to, and it'll be so much fun to get around again, even if 'tis on crutches. There are lots of games I can play no matter if I can't run, and Allee and me are going to plan out lots more while we are visiting Mrs. Wood. I 'xpect maybe she will be able to help us some, too, 'cause Billy Bolee won't ever be able to run about like other boys, and he'll want to know some nice, int'resting games that can be played sitting still."

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"Yes, I think that will be a good scheme," Gail agreed, wondering why Peace never seemed to suspect the secret of those awkward crutches. "But now you better rest awhile, for Dick—er Dr.

Shumway will soon be here with his auto ready to take us out to his sister's house, and you want to be bright and fresh for dinner tonight."

So with much laughter and many regrets, the hospital staff and all the patients watched Peace depart from its portals,—laughter, because she was to be strong and well once more; regrets because of the void she left behind her. And Peace, surprised that they cared so much, went her way almost content. It was such a joy to be out-of-doors again; so wonderful to get close to the heart of nature once more; and she improved every moment of the week that followed in getting acquainted with every being, beast and bird on the place, from grave-eyed Mr. Wood who was at home only in the evenings, down to Twitter, the yellow-coated, golden-throated canary, which sang all day in his cage. She romped with Billy Bolee, made pies with Kate, the cook, played checkers with their kindly host, and tried to master the art of embroidery under Mrs. Wood's instruction; but her favorite occupation was stumping about the grassy yard with her crutches, and it surprised and delighted her to find how little they really hampered her. When she tired of her explorations, there was a great elm by the fence where she loved to rest, and it was here that she sat playing with Billy Bolee one hot afternoon when she was startled to hear a strange voice demand, "Are you truly lame?"

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Glancing up in surprise, she beheld a fat, dirty face, crowned by a shock of tumbled red hair, pressed against the lattice-work, while a pair of alert, gray eyes peered at her through the narrow opening. So unexpected was the query,—for Peace had not been aware of another's presence,—that she could think of nothing to say, and merely grunted, "Huh?"

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The stranger outside the gate obediently repeated, "Are you truly lame?"

"Yes. Why?"

"'Cause Ma says she guesses this must be a lame house," piped up another voice close by, and Peace discovered a second dirty-faced, red-headed youngster peering between the slats.

"A lame *house*?" echoed Peace in bewilderment. "How can a *house* be lame?"

"Aw, Antonio don't mean the house, nor neither does Ma. They just mean that every one what lives in it is lame."

"I don't see how you make that out," Peace began, still puzzled.

"Well, you're lame, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"And that little baby is lame."

"Y—e—s."

"And the doctor man is lame—"

"But not for keeps," Peace eagerly interrupted. "He just broke his leg and some day it will be all well again, and he won't even limp or need a cane."

"Oh!" The first speaker seemed relieved.

"And will the baby some day walk all right?" asked the second tousled figure.

"No—o, I don't s'pose his short leg will ever catch up with the other one now," Peace reluctantly admitted. "But he's not very lame anyway. He don't limp *much*."

"Neither do you," persisted the boy called Antonio, "but you use crutches. You're worser off than the rest of the bunch."

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"But I don't live here," she flashed triumphantly, bound to uphold the honor of that household at any cost. "I'm just visiting for this week."

"Oh!" This time the exclamation expressed such regret that Peace asked solicitously, "What's the matter? Did you like to think of a whole bunch of lame folks living in one house?"

"No," the older boy declared, "but we was in hopes you lived here, for then we could come over sometimes and play with you maybe."

Peace surveyed her two uninvited guests dubiously and then glanced at her own spotless frock and at Billy's spandy new rompers. "Who—who—are you?" she finally stammered, unable to keep her pert little nose from showing some of the disgust she felt.

"My name is Tobias McGee," he answered pompously, as if proud of the fact. "I'm ten years old. Tony—he's one of the twins—he's eight."

"I am Antonio," the second boy interrupted, bristling belligerently. "How many times has Ma told you to quit calling me Tony?"

"She's told you to leave off calling me Toby, too," retorted Tobias scathingly, "but you hain't did it. Gus is the other twin—"

"Augustus," corrected the offended Antonio.

"See here," blustered Tobias threateningly, "are you telling this, or me?"

Peace, watching with fascinated eyes the pending scrap, became suddenly aware that her guests had increased in number, and, glancing over her shoulder, she found five other dirty, ragged, red-headed, unattractive looking children lined up outside the fence, peeping at her through the slats. "Are—are there any more of you?" she demanded, taking a rapid inventory of the new arrivals.

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The largest of the visitors, a girl of perhaps twelve years, swept her eyes down the line and answered briefly, "Nope."

"Well, how'd you get here, Feely?" asked Tobias, forgetting his battle with the twin in his surprise at his sister's presence. "'Twas your turn to go with the milk today."

"The Carters and Moodys quit taking," she answered indifferently. "There was only the Bowmans to d'liver."

"The Carters and Moodys quit?" echoed Tobias and Antonio in dismay.

"That's what I said," she answered sharply.

"But what for?"

"I dunno." She gathered up the smallest of her kin, a fretful, whining child of about two years, and set it upon the fence-rail so its dirty, bare legs dangled on the inside of the enclosure.

"Does Ma know?"

"She ain't to home yet."

"Y' know she said it would mean another washing if any more of the milk customers quit us."

The oldest girl nodded her head dully.

"Who do you s'pose she will get?" persisted Tobias.

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"How d' you s'pose I know?" snapped the girl.

"P'r'aps Mrs. Wood might let her do her clothes again," suggested Antonio, in wheedling tones.

"Mrs. Wood?" asked Peace, rousing suddenly to speech. "My Mrs. Wood?"

Seven dirty, frowsy heads nodded solemnly.

"Is your mother her washwoman?"

"She used to be," the whole line chorused.

"Why ain't she now?"

"'Cause Mrs. Wood quit her."

"But what for?"

There was an embarrassing pause while the tribe of McGee glanced inquiringly from one to the other. At last Antonio timidly ventured the explanation, "She said Ma's tubs got iron rust all over her clo'es."

"Ain't that reason enough for Mrs. Wood to quit?" demanded Peace, cocking her head judiciously.

"Ma was awful careful," the girl called Feely defended.

"But her tubs are awful old," half whispered a smaller girl, who up to this moment had stood silently sucking her thumb.

"Shut up, Vinie, she ain't talking to you," commanded Tobias, raising a threatening hand.

Vinie stuffed her thumb hastily into her mouth again and shrank back against the fence, the picture of fear; but Peace forestalled the blow by crying, "Let her be, Tobias McGee. She can talk if she wants to."

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The boy flushed angrily and muttered, "She's always butting in. She's a reg'lar tattle-tale."

"Well, you're a reg'lar coward," Peace sputtered. "She's lots littler than you."

"I wouldn't have hit her."

"You would, too," Vinie removed her thumb long enough to say.

"If you're going to fight, you can go straight home," Peace interposed. "Mrs. Wood wants Billy to grow up a gentleman."

"We ain't fighting," they chorused indignantly.

"You looked like it all right. You're always jawing each other, and I don't like scrappers."

"We won't jaw any more," they meekly promised, "if you will let us come over and play."

"I—I'll have to ask Mrs. Wood," she stammered, for, while the newcomers interested her, their

slovenly appearance made her recoil from any closer contact.

"Then we can't come," wailed Antonio despairingly.

"Why not?"

"Cause Mrs. Wood don't like us."

"How do you know?"

"She won't let us play with Billy."

"P'r'aps you are too rough."

"We wouldn't hurt him the least speck."

"Maybe it's 'cause you are so dirty."

A chorus of indignant denial arose, but at that moment Mrs. Wood herself appeared at an open window and called for Billy Bolee. Immediately the McGees scattered like startled pheasants, and Peace wonderingly turned her steps toward the house, surprising her hostess as she entered the cool room by the blunt question, "Don't you like the McGee family?"

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"Why—er—I can get along nicely without their company," Mrs. Wood answered evasively.

"But what's the matter with them?" Peace insisted.

"Nothing, I guess, except they are never clean," laughed the woman, and Gail looked up from a letter she was writing long enough to ask, "Who are the McGees, Peace? Your latest acquaintances?"

"Mrs. McGee is a widow who takes in washing," explained their hostess, without giving Peace a chance to make reply. "She and her seven children live in that three-room shack across the field. When her husband died she took plain sewing to do for a time, but couldn't earn enough at it to keep her family from want, so she turned to the washtubs. She does her work well or did at first, but of late she has attempted more than she can handle satisfactorily, and has grown so careless that several of us have had to take our washings elsewhere."

"'Twasn't careless," Peace interrupted earnestly. "It's her tubs. They are so old and rusty now."

"Then she should get new ones if she expects people to hire her. I can't afford to send my clothes to the wash and have them come back all spotted up with iron-rust. It is almost impossible to get it out."

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"I guess maybe she hasn't money enough to buy more tubs," Peace hazarded. "All her milk customers are quitting her."

"I can't say that I blame them," Keturah Wood shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Did *you* quit her?"

"No, I never took milk from there."

"Ain't it good milk?"

"It ought to be. Their cow is a Holstein and gives lots of milk. But someway I can't stomach the children."

"Can't stomach the children?" echoed Peace wonderingly.

"They are so dirty," Mrs. Wood explained in apologetic tones. "Mrs. McGee used to keep them as neat as pins when I first came here to live, and her kitchen was simply spotless. But she has too much to attend to now, and the children run wild."

"Would you get your milk there if they were clean?"

"Possibly. My milkman isn't real dependable. Sometimes there will be three or four days in a month when I can't get all I need, and if I ever want any extra, I always have to tell him two or three days before. The McGees seem to be able to supply a body at any time with any amount. But no one enjoys having such inexcusably dirty children bring their milk even if they *know* the milk itself is absolutely clean. Somehow it takes away one's appetite."

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"Why don't that big girl keep the others clean? She's old enough, ain't she?"

"She's too lazy. They all are. They fight all day sometimes over whose turn it is to carry the milk or bring in the wood. Mrs. McGee never has trained them to help her a bit, and though Ophelia is past twelve years old, she is as useless as the baby when it comes to doing the housework."

"Ophelia—ain't that a funny name!"

"Ridiculous!" laughed Mrs. Wood. "But so are all the rest. Having no fortune to endow his children with, old Pat McGee gave his offspring as 'high-toned and iligent names as iver belonged to rich folks.' They are Ophelia and Tobias, Antonio and Augustus, Lavinia and Humphrey, and the poor little babe Nadene. Commonly they are known as Feely, Toby, Tony, Gus, Vinie, Humpy and Deanie. Their real names are just for dress-up occasions."

"It takes me back to Parker days," said Gail nostalgically. "Only the McGees are worse off than the Greenfields were, for there are seven of them and all so small. What would happen if the mother should slip away as our mother did?"

"O, the orphan asylum would open its doors, of course. But even at that they might stand a better chance than they do now. They never will amount to anything, growing up as they are, like weeds. She can't give them the attention they ought to have, and she is not teaching them to be independent or helpful in any way. Toby and the twins are almost beyond her control now. Some of us neighbors have tried to get her to send part of the tribe at least to a Children's Home. Such an institution would certainly give them the training that she can't—"

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"O, but think of having to eat oatmeal every morning without milk or sugar," interrupted Peace in horrified accents, "and your bread and potatoes without any butter, and never having any pie or cake, and meat only once a week, and hardly any fruit, and—ugh! I'd starve!"

"Peace, oh, Peace," called Allee's voice from outside the window, "come see what I've found." And the crippled sister, hastily adjusting her crutches, went to discover what was wanted.

The next day while she was sitting alone under the great tree in the back yard, she heard a stealthy rustling in the grass beyond the fence, and glancing up from the book she had been trying to interest herself in, she again saw the dirty face of Tobias McGee peering at her through the lattice work. Then Antonio appeared, followed one by one by the rest of the tousled McGees. She surveyed them critically from head to heels and then scathingly remarked, "I sh'd think you would be ashamed to go so dirty."

"We—we ain't none of us got such pretty clo'es as you," stammered Tobias, much confused by this unlooked-for reception, and he thrust both grimy hands behind his back as if that would hide all his filth.

"You don't have to have pretty clothes to have 'em clean," Peace retorted.

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"Ma ain't got time to keep us washed up," explained Tobias, apologetically.

"Why don't you do it yourselves then?"

"But—we—can't," they gasped in chorus.

"I don't see why."

"We ain't big enough."

"You are, too. Feely's as old as Hope was when we were in Parker, and Hope kept after us till we were glad to wash our faces and hands and brush our hair. Of course she helped, but there were Cherry and Allee and me all younger'n her. And we helped Gail, too. I churned the butter once, and we helped houseclean and—and pick chickens, and run errands and bring in the wood—"

"Huh, us boys do that," broke in Gus scornfully. "Girls ain't s'posed to fetch wood and water."

"All our boys were girls," replied Peace loftily, "and some of us *had* to bring in the wood or else how would it have got there?"

"Did you wash dishes?" asked Ophelia, with a slight display of curiosity.

"Cherry washed and I wiped."

"How old was Cherry?" demanded Antonio.

"O, about ten, when we lived in Parker, I guess."

"Feely's twelve and she don't wash the dishes yet," tattled Vinie, and was promptly rewarded with a smart slap from the older sister.

"Shame on you!" cried Peace indignantly. "You are the meanest family I ever knew. Mrs. Wood said you are always fighting, and that's all you've done every time you've been over here."

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"I don't care, Vinie had no business to say that," muttered Ophelia, scowling sullenly. "She can't never keep her mouth shut. I just *hate* to wash dishes."

"So do I," Peace cheerfully agreed. "But I don't go around slapping folks' faces 'cause of it. Besides, Gail had all she could 'tend to without bothering about the dishes. We *had* to do them or go hungry. Who does them at your house?"

"Ma," volunteered Vinie once more, edging warily out of range of the big sister's hand.

"After she's washed all day?" asked Peace in horrified accents.

Ophelia was scowling threateningly; Vinie drew a little further away and nodded silently.

"Don't *any* of you do *anything* to help her?"

"I mind the kids," said Ophelia defiantly.

"I should think you would keep 'em scrubbed up a little cleaner, then," observed Peace critically. "They—you are all so dirty you—you—smell. I don't wonder folks won't buy milk from you."

"Ma takes care of the milk herself and washes the buckets and covers 'em all up careful before she gives 'em to us to tote," cried Tobias, much insulted by Peace's frank words.

"I don't care," retorted that young lady with dignity. "Mrs. Wood herself says she can't swallow you children, you are so dirty; and she would take milk from you if you were clean, 'cause I asked her." [Pg 267]

Silence reigned while each young McGee dug his bare toes into the soft earth and chewed his finger or thumb. Then Tobias growled, "Mrs. Wood is too p'tic'lar. Ma says so."

"I'll bet Mrs. Moody and Mrs. Carter are just as p'tic'lar," Peace declared hotly. "If you'd ask them why they quit taking milk of you, and just *made* 'em tell you the truth, I'll bet they would say that you kids were always so dirty it made 'em sick to look at you."

Vinie withdrew her thumb from her mouth, stopped shuffling her dirty little feet in the grass, stared thoughtfully at the candid young hostess on the other side of the fence, and quietly disappeared, followed by solemn-eyed Humphrey. No one noticed her going, no one missed her from her place in the rank, but while belligerent Tobias was still arguing the question with stubborn Peace, Vinie returned with Humpy still at her heels. She had hurried, and her breath came quick and fast, but before she had reached her place in the line-up again, she called excitedly, "That pretty girl is right. We're all too dirty to suit Mrs. Moody and Mrs. Carter."

"Wh—at?" shrieked the brothers and sisters, wheeling about in consternation to face their new accuser,—one of their own kin.

"Well, I asked 'em honest true, just like she said to do, and after a bit they owned up that it wasn't the milk they didn't like, but the looks of us was too much." [Pg 268]

Ophelia stared dully at the small sister for a long moment, then suddenly slumped down in the tall grass and wept. Tobias, Antonio and Augustus all followed suit, and even baby Nadene lifted her voice in lament, though she did not know what she was crying about.

Surprised, awed and troubled, Peace drew near to the fence and pressed her face against the lattice work to watch this unusual performance; but Vinie, after one contemptuous glance at the snivelling group, turned energetically away toward the little green shack across the field, still holding fast to Humpy's grimy fist.

"Where you going?" demanded Antonio, peeping at her from under his arm as he lay sprawled in the clover.

"I ain't got time to bawl," she flung back over her shoulder. "I promised to go home and clean up Humpy and me. Then Mrs. Carter's going to give me two cents to go to the store for her."

Peace watched the two little figures trudging off across the meadow, and then she said thoughtfully, "She's right, and I b'lieve you could get back all your milk customers if you'd everyone clean up once and *stay* clean. Why don't you try?"

Antonio lifted his head, looked at his twin and began slowly to struggle to his feet. Augustus joined him, then Tobias, and finally Ophelia. She looked timidly toward Peace, and asked meekly, "Don't you s'pose Ma would scold?" [Pg 269]

"What for? Washing your faces? No, I don't. She's a funny mother if she does. It's easier work to sell milk than to do washings, and I should think you'd try to help her all you can so she won't get sick and die and all of you have to go to an *orphant* asylum."

The round-eyed children gazed at her in affright, then swiftly made off through the tall grass in Vinie's wake.

They did not return that day or the next; and Peace had concluded that they were angry with her; but the third morning bright and early they appeared at the gate, unlatched it, and marched in solemn file up the path to the house. Mrs. Wood herself, with Peace close behind, answered their timid knock, and Ophelia, clad in a clean, neatly patched gingham dress, with her hair hanging in two smooth plaits down her back, faltered, "Ma wants to know would you like to get milk of us? The little heifer has just come in fresh and we've got plenty to sell."

"Ma'd 'a' come herself," piped up Vinie from the rear, "but she's sick today."

"It's just a headache," hastily explained Tobias, beginning to scowl at the family chatterbox, and then heroically smiling instead.

"She's lost another customer," confided Vinie, "a wash customer, 'cause her tubs are so rusty, and it made her cry."

"But we're going to get her some new tubs," interrupted Antonio excitedly, "and then we can come for your clo'es if you want us to." [Pg 270]

"We've got seventy cents in our banks," said Augustus shyly.

"And if you need any wood chopped or piled, or carpets beat up, or errands run, we'll be glad to do it for you—cheap," recited Tobias, in a curious singsong voice, as if he had learned the words by rote.

"But what about the milk?" reminded Vinie, when the sudden pause which followed had grown

too oppressive.

"O!" Mrs. Wood roused to a realization that seven eager bodies were listening for her answer. What should she say? Once more her eyes travelled the length of the line. What a transformation had taken place! Each face was polished till it fairly glistened in the sun, each pair of bare, brown legs was clean and spotless, each fiery red head had been brushed till not a hair was out of place, and each small figure was clad in stiffly starched garments which looked as if they had just come from the ironing board.

As if reading the unspoken question which burned on Mrs. Wood's lips, Tobias informed her, "We've cleaned up for keeps."

"Ma's going to give us each a penny every week that we stay clean so's not to need more'n one waist or dress in that time," eagerly explained Antonio.

"'Cause, you see," tattled Vinie, "we ain't none of us got more'n two, and we've got to stay clean so folks will buy our milk." [Pg 271]

"That girl," lisped Humpy, pointing a stubby forefinger at Peace in the doorway, "thaid we wuth too dirty."

"Oh!" Mrs. Wood was enlightened, and her memory flew back to a certain day a few weeks before when Peace had told her some unpleasant truths which had nevertheless changed the course of events in her life. She had called the child "rude" at that time, but perhaps it was not rudeness after all. It was certainly effective anyway, and she smiled amusedly at the neat line of McGees.

Encouraged by the smile, Vinie said coaxingly, "She said you'd take milk of us if we wuz clean all the time."

"And you will, won't you?" asked Peace, finding her tongue for the first time since the queer little procession had marched up to the door.

Recalling the usual appearance of the young McGees, Mrs. Wood could not help shivering, but she must be game. It shamed her to think that already this brown-eyed child on crutches had more of the true missionary spirit within her than she, a woman grown, had ever possessed; so she forced a smile to her lips and a sound of heartiness to her voice, as she answered, "Yes, I will take a quart every morning."

"And about the wash," Vinie reminded her, when the elated brothers and sisters were about to retreat.

"Come for it Mondays as usual," answered Mrs. Wood meekly, wondering all the while what had taken possession of her that she should give in so easily. [Pg 272]

"Thank you." Vinie bowed profoundly, and to the amazement of the woman on the steps, the whole line of McGees stopped abruptly, touched their hands to their heads in a truly military style, and thundered as one man, "Thank you!"

Mrs. Wood beat a hasty retreat with her hand over her mouth, but Peace stood thoughtfully leaning on her crutches in the doorway as she watched their morning callers scatter through the wet grass when the gate had clicked behind the last one of them.

So absorbed was she that Gail, who had been a silent spectator from behind a curtained window, gently asked, "What is the matter, girlie? Is anything troubling you?"

"No—o," she slowly answered. "I was only wishing that the McGees lived in Martindale, so's our Gleaners could make 'em some clothes, like we did for Fern and Rivers Dillon. Think of having only two dresses apiece! Mercy! I don't see how folks can expect 'em to keep clean."

"Why, our Ladies' Aid does work of that kind," gasped Mrs. Wood, her laughter forgotten. "Why didn't I think of that before? We have lots of good material on hand now to make over, and I know the ladies will be glad to do it for Mrs. McGee. I will call up Mrs. Jules right away. She is our President, and the society meets next week Thursday." [Pg 273]

"O, dear," sighed Peace. "We go home in two days more. I wish I could stay and help. But then I'm glad the kids are going to have some decent clothes anyway."

CHAPTER XIX

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WONDERFUL TIDINGS

"Well," sighed Peace blissfully, while Mrs. Campbell was helping her dress for Sunday School the first Sunday after her return from Fairview, "this has been a busy week. There hasn't been a minute to spare, yet it doesn't seem like this could be Sunday already. Where has the time gone to?"

"I sh'd think you would know," grunted Allee from her seat on the rug where she was laboriously lacing her shoes. "You have walked your legs off, pretty near,—haven't you?"

"Mercy, no! I haven't done half the tramping I could have done if these old crutches didn't make walking so slow."

Behind her back, the white-haired grandmother smiled her amusement, for since Peace's homecoming five days before, the child had not been still a minute. From garret to cellar, from garden to river, and from one end of the street to the other she had hopped, renewing old acquaintanceships, relating her experiences, and thoroughly enjoying herself. After her long absence from Martindale and the weary months of imprisonment, it was such a wonderful privilege to be able to get about again, even if it must be with the aid of those two awkward crutches. There were so many things to tell and so many people to tell them to. So the grandmother smiled behind Peace's back, for it seemed to her that no one person in perfect trim could have accomplished more in those five days than had the brown-eyed maid on crutches.

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"I can't see as they make much difference," Allee persisted. "You have gone everywhere you wanted to, haven't you?"

"O, yes, except to St. John's and of course his whole family's been away on their vacation, so I couldn't see them. I 'xpect they are home now, though, 'cause he is to preach at his own church today. Grandpa said we'd take the horses this afternoon if it doesn't rain and drive up there. It don't look much like rain now, does it, though it did when we first got up. I do hope it won't,—not until we've got started too far to turn back anyway. I want to see Aunt Pen, too. My! I can hardly wait for afternoon to get here. It has been such a long time since I've seen them all. Bessie is 'most a year old now, ain't she? She won't know me, and I s'pose likely even Glen has forgotten. I telephoned three times yesterday in hopes they would be home, but no one answered, so I guess they didn't get back till night."

"Have you 'phoned them yet this morning?" asked Allee, whisking into the counterpart of Peace's freshly starched dress, and backing up to Mrs. Campbell to be buttoned.

"No, I haven't had time. We didn't get up real early, and breakfast was so late, and Gussie had such a heap of dishes to wash, 'cause Marie didn't do 'em last night, like she said she would, and Jud was fairly purple 'cause his necktie would not tie right, and Grandpa couldn't find some papers he needed for Sunday School, and Dr. Dick came to take Gail to church, and then I had to get ready myself."

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"And it is time we were going now if we get there before the morning service is out," suggested Mrs. Campbell, settling a white, rose-wreathed hat on Allee's golden curls, and reaching for her own turban, which lay on the dresser close by.

"Then come on. I'm ready," responded Peace, hopping nimbly down the stairway. "Doesn't it seem funny to see *me* going to Sunday School again? What do you s'pose folks will say when I hobble in all by myself? Won't it be great to see the s'prise on Miss Gordon's face when I go into my old class with the rest of the girls? I made Gail and Faith and everyone else promise not to tell her I would be there today. I want to s'prise her. Just smell the roses! They ain't all gone yet. And someone's been mowing grass! Isn't it perfectly lovely out-of-doors today? Why, there's the church! I'd no idea we were so near. It hasn't changed a bit, has it? But it seems as if it was *years* since I was there last."

So Peace chattered blithely on, and Mrs. Campbell, watching her, felt a great lump rise in her throat. Peace, their own laughing, sunshiny, irrepressible Peace had come back to them once more. It was a song of thanksgiving that her heart was singing, yet her eyes were filled with tears.

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"There is Myrtie Musgrove!" Mrs. Campbell's meditations were interrupted by the girl's enthusiastic exclamation, and with a start of surprise she saw the great stone edifice looming up directly in front of them, with scores of spick and spandy boys and girls assembled on the lawn, waiting for the church service to come to a close.

"And there's Gertrude Miller and Dorothy Bartow," said Allee. "Everyone is out today."

"No wonder," returned Peace. "It's such a lovely day. I don't see how anyone could stay at home. Hello, Myrtie and Nina and Fannie and Julia and Rosalie, and oh, *everyone!*"

A chorus of delighted cries greeted her, and immediately the two sisters were swallowed up by a group of excited, clamoring schoolmates, while Mrs. Campbell, from the background, watched the pretty tableau.

Suddenly the strains of the Doxology rolled out on the summer air through the open church windows, followed by a brief silence, and then the great doors swung open and the motley congregation thronged out into the sunshine.

"Church is over," said Peace, as she saw the people hurrying past. "Let's go inside."

"O, Peace," cried an eager voice at her elbow, as she climbed the stone steps to the vestibule, "Miss Gordon told me to give this to you—"

"How'd she know I would be here?" demanded Peace aggressively.

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"Why, Dr. Shumway told us—"

"I might have known someone would squeal," was the irritated reply. "Men folks are worse than

women about gabbling. They *never* can keep their mouths shut. I wanted to s'prise the people myself."

Miss Gordon's message-bearer drew back somewhat disconcerted by her reception. But the cloud on the small face, growing rosy and round once more, abruptly lifted, and Peace, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes, inquired, "Did he tell you *his* secret, too?"

"What secret? No, you tell us about it," they clamored.

The aisle was almost blocked at that point by the tall form of Dickson Shumway, leaning on his cane, for his injured limb was none too strong yet, and Peace purposely waited till she was directly behind him, when she said in a shrill, high voice, which made everyone look and listen, "Why, Dr. Shumway is going to marry my sister Gail as soon as ever he can get her to settle the day. *Now* will you give away any more of my secrets, Dr. Dick?" For at the sound of her voice the young giant had turned a startled face toward the delighted crowd at the door, but a burst of tempestuous applause drowned whatever he might have replied; and Peace, triumphant, slipped past him to her seat, while the congregation showered him with congratulations.

Not until she had taken her place among her classmates did Peace find time to glance at the scrap of paper which Miss Gordon's messenger had thrust into her hand, and this is what she read:

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"'The Handwriting on the Wall.' Dan. 5:25-27. Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin. Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting."

Turning to the girl who had given her the bit of writing, she snarled, "You're trying to April Fool me. Miss Gordon never gave you that."

"She did, too. It was our Golden Text a few weeks ago. Today is Review Sunday, and when the superintendent calls on our class you are to read what is on that piece of paper."

"But I can't read it," Peace protested.

"Why not? It's perfectly plain writing."

"Well, what does it mean, Agnes? I never saw such words before. How do you pronounce them?"

Agnes rattled off the text without a glance at the paper, and Peace lapsed into indignant silence. As if anyone would suppose that she could believe such an outrageous thing as that!

Agnes saw the look of unbelief in the brown eyes, and said haughtily, "If you think I'm lying, ask someone else."

"I'm going to," was the frank retort. "Where is Miss Gordon? Ain't she going to be here today?"

"Yes, but she will be late. She had to go back home for something she forgot, and she thought maybe our class might be called on 'fore she got here again. Ours is the third lesson."

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Peace glanced about her. Already the orchestra had begun to play, and she would attract too much attention if she left her seat, but she *must* ask someone else what those queer words meant. O, there was Faith coming down the aisle. She probably would be cross about it, but she would know. Peace leaned over the arm of the pew and seized her sister's dress as she passed. Faith raised her eyebrows questioningly, but halted long enough to say, "Well?"

"How do you p'onounce these words?" asked the smaller girl, holding out the wrinkled slip; and Faith glibly read under her breath, "'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin. Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting.'"

Peace glared at her witheringly, and snatched the paper from her hand. Did everyone take her for a fool just because she had been in the hospital six months?

Her glance fell upon the stately figure of President Campbell, just settling himself comfortably in the Bible Class, a few seats in the rear. "He won't lie to me," she whispered confidently. "Nor he won't joke me, either."

Frantically she beckoned to him, but he did not see her, and as the music had ceased by this time, she caught up her crutches and hobbled back to consult him. It seemed as if every eye in the house was focused upon her, and her face burned hotly as she stumbled down the aisle; but she *must* know what those words meant before it came her turn to speak, else the whole congregation would laugh at her.

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The President took the crumpled slip, and, after a hasty survey, whispered slowly, "'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin. Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting.'"

Poor, bewildered Peace crept back to her seat. "I don't see any sense to it," she pondered, studying the cryptic message with puzzled eyes. "It must be right, or Grandpa wouldn't have said so. Sounds like 'pickle,' but it's spelled with a 't.' It must be 'tickle,' I guess."

A sharp nudge from her nearest neighbor's elbow brought her out of her reverie with a start. The superintendent was calling for the Golden Text of Lesson III.

Peace leaped to her feet, her crutches forgotten, and her voice rang clearly through the big room. "Minnie, Minnie, tickle the parson. Thou are wanted for the balance that is found waiting."

There was a moment of intense hush, then a ripple of amusement swept over the congregation, but before it could break into the threatened roar of laughter, the superintendent with rare tact announced, "Let us sing Hymn Number 63, 'Sweet Peace, the Gift of God's Love'."

As the notes of the organ swelled through the house, Peace sank into her place, apparently overcome with confusion and mortification. Immediately an arm stole gently about her shoulders, and a familiar voice whispered comfortingly in her ear, "Never mind, little girl, there is no harm done." Miss Gordon, flushed and breathless, had slipped into the pew behind her class just in time to hear poor Peace's blunder; and knowing how sensitive a child's heart is, she sought to make light of the matter.

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But Peace, scarcely heeding, vaguely asked, "Never mind what? O, their laughing? I'm used to that. I don't care."

But she looked disturbed, distraught, and it was very evident to her that she neither saw nor heard the rest of the service. Even when the benediction had been pronounced and hosts of friends gathered about her to express their delight at her presence with them once more, she seemed abstracted and made her escape as soon as she could get away.

This was so unlike harum-scarum Peace that her sisters wondered, although they attributed it to chagrin over her blunder, and considerately refrained from asking questions. But when they had reached home once more, and were gathered in the cool library waiting for Gussie's summons to dinner, Peace abruptly burst forth, "I b'lieve I could walk without those old crutches. I stood up without 'em this morning when I forgot about using them."

She glanced defiantly from one face to another, as if expecting a storm of protest; but to her great surprise, Mrs. Campbell smiled encouragingly as she mildly inquired, "Why don't you try it, dear?"

The crutches fell to the floor with a crash. Peace took several halting steps across the room, as if afraid to trust herself. The blood flew to her pale cheeks, dyeing them crimson, a look of wonder, almost alarm, shone in her eyes, her breath came in startled gasps, and clasping her hands together in rapture, she half whispered, "I can walk, I can WALK! I CAN WALK! My legs are all right again!"

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Suddenly she let out a scream of wildest exultation, seized her hat from the library table where she had thrown it, and rushed pell-mell from the door.

"Peace!" cried Mrs. Campbell, starting up in alarm.

"O, Peace!" echoed the sisters, giving chase.

"Stop, Peace!" thundered the President, hurrying after them all.

"Where are you going?" the whole family demanded.

"To tell St. John and—"

"But we haven't had dinner yet" protested Gail.

"It doesn't matter!" Peace was out of the house and down the steps by this time. "I must tell St. John!"

"But childie, Jud hasn't harnessed the horses."

"O, Grandpa, I *can't* wait. It will be so long. My feet won't keep still! I can walk! I must tell St. John!" Shaking her hat at them as she ran, as if to ward them off, she fled down the quiet Sunday street, leaving the family hanging in open-mouthed amazement over the picket fence, staring after her. And the last glimpse they caught of their transported Peace as she whisked around the corner was a pair of lithe, brown-clad legs climbing aboard a northbound car. She was on her way to tell St. John and Elspeth the wonderful tidings.

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Peace could walk again!

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