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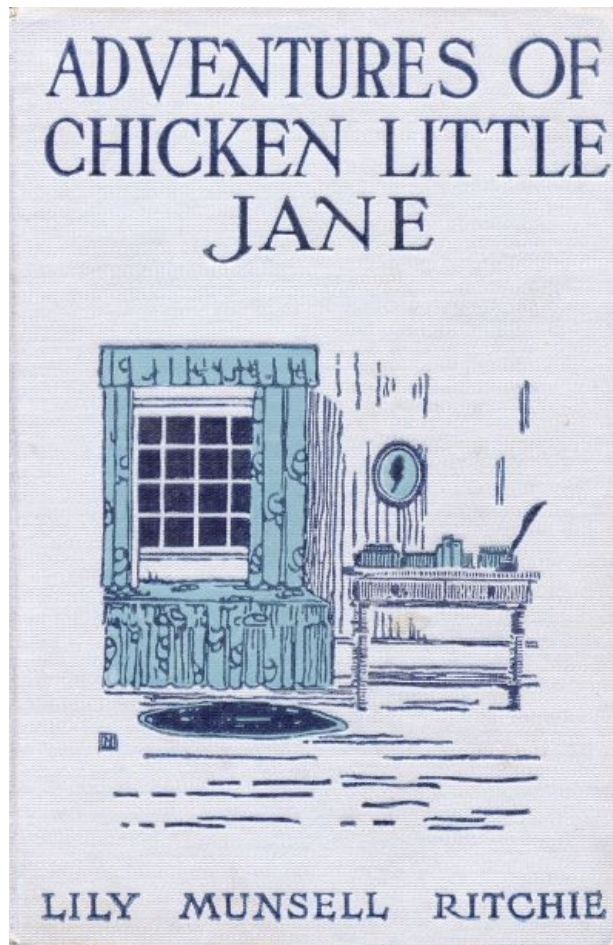
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHICKEN LITTLE JANE ***



CHICKEN LITTLE JANE





Until the water was dripping from noses and chins.

Chicken Little Jane

BY
LILY MUNSELL RITCHIE



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ADVENTURES OF CHICKEN LITTLE JANE

"To Olive F. Y. Dart, the kind friend who first encouraged me to write, I gratefully dedicate my first book."



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CHICKEN · LITTLE · JANE



CHAPTER · I ALICE · AND · THE · SIEGE OF · ACRE

"Chicken Little! Chick-en Lit-tle!"

The three little girls in the fence corner looked up but no one responded.

"Chicken Little *Jane!*" The voice was a trifle more insistent.

The little girl in the blue gingham dress and white frilled pinafore looked at her small hostess reproachfully.

"Why don't you answer, Jane?"

"Cause I'll have to go in. She'll think I don't hear if I keep still."

"Ja-ane!—I want you!" The voice was several notes higher and betrayed irritation.

"She's getting mad," said the little girl in the pink dress and white frilled pinafore—sister to the blue dress. "You'd better go—she's leaning out the window and she'll see us in a minute." Katy Halford was facing the house and her facts agreed with what Jane Morton knew of her mother's ways.

She got to her feet reluctantly.

"Yes-m, I'm coming!" she yelled in a shrill treble. "You come, too, girls," she added in a lower tone. "Maybe she won't make me stay if I have company."

"All right—let's tell her about Alice." Katy jumped up quickly.

Gertie Halford followed suit.

The two small sisters were as like as possible in dress and as unlike in disposition. They were always immaculately starched and neat with their thick brown hair parted in front and braided into smooth tight braids ending in bows the exact shade of their dresses. These bows were a constant source of envy to Jane Morton, because they never seemed to drop off or hang by three hairs as her own invariably did.

Gertie Halford was a gentle little mouse of a girl with soft hazel eyes, who loved pretty things and hated anything rough or boisterous. Her sister Katy's gray eyes, on the contrary, were shrewd and keen, as was their small owner, who could be relied upon to take care of herself and have her own way on all occasions. The sisters were nine and eleven respectively, and Chicken Little not quite ten.

Jane Morton or Chicken Little Jane, as she had been nicknamed while a toddler, because she was always teasing for the story of "Chicken Little," was usually described as all eyes. Her slim, active legs, however, were also a very important part of her anatomy. But her eyes easily held the center of the stage—big and brown and wondering, they had a way of looking at you as if you were the only person about. Her straight brown hair was swept back from her face by a round rubber comb and tied atop her head with a ribbon for further security. Despite these precautions, it usually looked as if it needed brushing. Her clothes, too, were prone to accidents because of her habit of roosting on picket fences or tree branches. Today, however, she was

almost as spick and span as Katy and Gertie. She had just been through the painful process of cleaning up after dinner.

The children burst into Mrs. Morton's bedroom without the ceremony of knocking, too intent upon the news they had to tell, to inquire what Mrs. Morton wanted.

"Say, Mother," Chicken Little began jerkily with what breath was left from running upstairs, "Alice says she used to live in this house when she was a little girl!"

Mrs. Morton paused in adjusting the folds of black lace around her plump shoulders and stared at her small daughter in astonishment.

"Alice—in this house—a servant-girl—nonsense! Dear me, I hope she isn't untruthful; she seemed so promising." 14

"But she says her father used to own this house—she says they weren't always poor, and she never 'spected to have to be a hired girl. Yes, and Katy says she remembers when the Fletchers lived here and they used to have a lot of company—didn't you, Katy?" Katy nodded importantly.

"Yes, Ma-am, my mother says it's a shame Alice has to go out to work. She says it would break her mother's heart, only she's dead and doesn't know it."

"And her father's dead, too," broke in Gertie, anxious to add her quota, "but she's got an uncle and aunt that ain't dead—they live a long way off in Cincinnati, but they're so stuck up they won't do anything for Alice."

"Well, never mind now, I'll investigate this some other time," Mrs. Morton replied absently, still fussing with her lace. Tiny beads of perspiration were standing out on her flushed face—she kept dabbing them away with her handkerchief.

It was a hot day for late September and Mrs. Morton found tight corsets and a close-fitting silk dress trials to Christian fortitude. But she was a resolute, dignified lady who knew her duty to her church and to society and did it, regardless of her own comfort or her family's.

"But, Mother, aren't you sorry for Alice?" 15

"My dear, I didn't call you in to talk about Alice. I want you to play quietly with your dolls this afternoon like little ladies. Remember to keep your dress clean, Chicken Little, you have to wear it again tomorrow afternoon. I don't want to come home and find it all stained and torn off the belt as I did yesterday. And don't forget to be polite to your guests. Kiss me good-by now, and run along."

The children, a little disappointed over the meager effect of their sensation, obediently filed out.

They collected the dolls and ensconced themselves under a spreading maple in the fence corner to play house, but dolls somehow seemed tame.

"I thought she'd be more s'prised," ventured Katy after a few moments, as the trio watched Mrs. Morton sweep down the front walk to the gate, the shimmering folds of her gray silk dragging behind her.

"My, I wish I had such a grand dress," said Gertie, changing the subject.

"Your mother's got a lot of dresses, hasn't she?"

"Yes, heaps, but I don't want any old silk dresses. I hate to be dressed up, you can't climb trees or nothing, and your mother always tells you to be a little lady. Bet I won't be a little lady when I grow up."

"Why, Chicken Little *Jane*, you'll have to be!"

"Sha'n't either—Mother says I'm the worst tomboy she ever saw and I'll disgrace my family if I don't look out. I don't care if I do—I think it's fun to be something different. Maybe I'll be a circus-rider." Jane swung her unfortunate doll about by one arm to emphasize her decision, and smiled defiantly. 16

Katy refused to be impressed.

"Pooh, you never saw a circus-rider—you said yesterday your mother'd never let you go to a circus. I've been to six, counting the one Uncle Sim took us to in the evening."

"I don't care, I've been to see the animals—and I just guess I did see circus-riders, too, in the parade!"

"Well, you'd have to dress up if you were a circus-rider 'cause they have lots of fussy skirts and spangles and things—only they aren't very clean most always. I saw one close to once. I'd rather have a lace shawl and a beautiful watch like your mother's," put in Gertie.

"I don't care, I like horses and I just hate dolls they're so pokey," retorted Jane recklessly, rather floored by so much wisdom. "Let's play our children are all taking a nap and go and get Ernest and do something lively."

Katy pricked up her ears at the mention of Ernest's name, having no brothers herself, she considered boys extremely interesting. She promptly threw her cherished Rowena under a heap of doll clothes, and was on her feet in an instant calling, "Come on." 17

Gentle little Gertie eyed her half undressed doll child ruefully.

"'Tisn't nice to leave them this way. You girls go on and I'll put Minnie's nighty on and tuck her in."

Chicken Little shoved both doll and doll clothes unceremoniously into the fence corner and was after Katy in a flash. Gertie lingered not only to tuck away her own doll but to rescue the neglected playthings of the others, and to put each doll child carefully to bed, with sundry croonings and caresses. Then she followed slowly to the house.

Katy and Jane were already having troubles of their own. Ernest, who was four years older than Jane, was deep in a book and deaf to all coaxing and persuasion on the part of his gypsy-sister and her friend. He was stretched on the floor in the embrasure of the dormer window, nursing his face in his hands, his near-sighted eyes fairly boring into the pages. He was a lanky, sober-faced boy with a trick of twisting a lock of hair as he read that resulted in its perpetually hanging down in his eyes to his great annoyance. The boy liked to be ship-shape and he made manful attempts to let it alone. He plastered it down with bay-rum till the family begged for mercy from the smell. It was even on record that he once went so far as to dab it with glue with painful consequences.

18

Today he was so absorbed that he had almost twisted the offending lock into a double bowknot and he heeded the children no more than flies. Finally Katy audaciously grabbed his book away, and he came to life with a growl.

"Here, drop that, infant, give me that book!"

He raised up on his elbow threateningly, but Katy, shaking her head saucily, flew out the door and down the staircase in a flutter of delicious fear.

Ernest got to his feet blusteringly.

"Mother said you kids were to keep out of my room and you can just go get that book for me or I'll tell her when she comes home."

He made a grab for his sister's arm, but she eluded him skilfully and darted after Katy, chanting maliciously: "Get it yourself—get it yourself—old cross patch!"

An exciting chase followed. Ernest tearing out the front door almost knocked over Gertie who was just coming in. He quickly righted her with a smile—he was fond of little Gertie who never bothered. The momentary delay gave the girls a start and Ernest saw Katy's flying skirts disappearing round the kitchen ell, with Chicken Little close behind her, as he turned the corner of the house.

Once at the back he found Chicken Little had sought sanctuary with Alice, the maid, who was sitting under a tree peeling peaches, but Katy had vanished.

19

"Which way'd she go, Alice?" Alice shook her head teasingly, at the same time glancing toward the kitchen door.

Ernest bolted in, but a swift search of the house revealed no Katy. Jane still clung to Alice clapping her hands derisively.

"Has she gone home?" he demanded.

Chicken Little shook her head.

"Am I hot or cold?"

"Hot! My, you're just burning!"

Gertie, who had followed, stared up into the branches overhead, but Ernest, gazing after, caught no glimpse of Katy's pink gingham or mischievous face.

"Bet you can't find her," jeered Jane; "boys aren't smart as girls if they are so stuck on themselves."

"Bet Alice hid her."

"Bet she didn't."

At this moment a whistle at the side gate interrupted them. Ernest trilled in answer and a moment later Carol Brown and Sherman Dart, Ernest's two sworn cronies, came round the corner with a whoop.

"You smarties can have the old book. Mother'll make you give it back tonight, anyway."

A chuckle overhead punctuated his sentence, and some fifteen feet above him, seated gracefully astride the comb of the low roof, Katy waved the book at him tantalizingly.

20

"Gee, how'd you get up there?"

By way of reply Katy opened the book at random and began to read:

"The third crusade which had opened so disastrously, was at last to be prosecuted with vigor. The eight days' truce was over and Philip of France again led the assault upon the walls of Acre. King Richard slowly convalescing was borne to the scene of conflict where——"

Here the boys interrupted with cat calls, and Ernest shied a green apple which Katy successfully dodged.

"How'd you get up?"

"For me to know and you to find out."

"Say, Alice, how'd she get up?"

"Climbed."

"Oh, say, honest how did she?"

"The same way that Philip and Richard got into Acre."

"Ladder?"

"Yes, the man who fixed the eave troughs this morning left a ladder here. It's on the other side."



By way of reply Katy opened the book and began.

The three boys made a bolt to investigate and soon swarmed up on the roof with Jane close behind. 21

The old white house with its big front porch and green blinds was a notable one. Built upon a terrace, it stood several feet above the tree-shaded lawns about it. A group of old apple trees crowded close up to the windows at the side and rear. Both the western and southern gables were overhung with great wistaria vines, so old the stems were like huge cables and could easily bear a man's weight, as the children's grown brother Frank had already discovered. He had been locked out one night, and wishing to get in without disturbing the family, had quietly gone up the vines, hand-over-hand, to his own window.

The old house boasted many gables and more dormer windows, each bedroom having one or more. The children found these little nooks cosy places to play and read, indeed only a little less fascinating than the great rambling closets which were only partly enclosed and seemed to end, no one knew where, off under the roof. They had never been able to fully explore these—indeed their mother had not encouraged such voyages of discovery, because there were sundry narrow places, dark and dusty, where wriggling through in snake-fashion wrought havoc with their clothes.

The children were on the roof of the low kitchen, a kitchen that had apparently been an afterthought, for the roof sloped both ways like an inverted V and had no connection with the main roof. 22

"I tell you what, boys," said Ernest after they had explored it to their satisfaction, "let's play the 'Siege of Acre.' We could use this roof for the tower."

"Aren't enough of us!" objected Carol, a big, handsome boy with tight blond curls who was inclined to be lazy.

"Can't we play, too?" put in Chicken Little.

"Shucks, girls don't know how to fight."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Alice. "We girls used to play all sorts of games when I was a child."

"We'll have to divide up some way," said Sherm. "Ernest, let's you and me be Richard and Philip, and Carol can be the sultan and defend the place. And we could have the girls up here for the sultan's wives—he had a lot—they'd be out of the way."

"Not on your life," grunted Carol, disgusted at having all the girls put in his charge.

"It won't be bad, Carol, the garrison'll have to have a lot of provisions, and I'll give you some apples and cookies if you'll let the little girls play," Alice interposed tactfully.

"Cricky, Alice, you're a brick!"

"Gee, Alice, wish you lived at our house!" Carol and Sherm exclaimed in unison.

Alice Fletcher, a sturdy, intelligent-looking girl of twenty, was pleased at the boy's praise. "Thanks, my lords!" she replied, waving a peeling at them.

"Oh, well, I don't care if the girls'll keep out of the way," conceded Carol.

"Gertie can be the wives and me and Jane will be the soldiers. Carol will need somebody to help him," said ambitious Katy.

The preliminaries were soon arranged. Timid Gertie was safely stowed away where she could hold to the chimney if a sudden panic seized her, and the boys graciously posted Jane and Katy on the battlements, otherwise known as the comb of the roof, to man the engines and spy out the landscape. They kicked off their shoes, the better to cling, and pranced around stocking-footed regardless of possible parental displeasure.

Ernest and Sherman were just preparing to rush up the ladder armed with villainous-looking battle-axes made out of old lath, when Alice halted them.

"But you'll have to decide how to take the tower. If Carol tries to keep you off and knocks over the ladder you'll get hurt. Suppose you give him a switch and if he can touch you before you can get within two rounds of the top, you're dead, but if you can touch him, he'll have to surrender."

The opposing forces parleyed. The scaling party was rather dubious about tackling the sultan with only one scaling ladder, but they finally compromised on very short switches, so short in fact that Alice was worried lest the sultan should promptly take a header off the roof in his efforts to repel the invaders.

The attack began merrily. The boys swarmed up the ladder with blood-curdling yells of "Richard for England!" from Ernest and shriller cries of "France! France!" from Sherm, whose voice always trailed off into high C when he got excited.

The "sultan's wives" hugged the chimney in her excitement and Captain Jane promptly deserted the battlements and slid down to reinforce the sultan who certainly looked lonesome. There was much ducking and dodging and great flourishing of switches to the imminent risk of all concerned, for Chicken Little came down full force against the sultan in her frantic efforts to help, and Ernest, alias Richard, stepped on the King of France's royal fingers when forced to retreat from the sultan's spear.

It soon became apparent that the advantage lay with the defenders of Acre. The besieging monarchs withdrew down the ladder to hold a council of war, while the sultan's wives and troops—it was difficult to distinguish them—crowed triumphantly. They even did a little undignified taunting of the discomfited enemy.

Alice had been cheering the besiegers and now joined their counsels. After some whispering they divided forces, and King Richard climbed up the old apple tree at the corner of the house while King Philip led his forces up the scaling ladder again.

The sultan was at his wit's end, but finally left Captain Jane in command at the head of the ladder while he tried to repulse this flank movement. Captain Jane fought valiantly, and once more France was driven back. The sultan was equally successful. The cause of the Crusaders began to look dark, when suddenly the sultan detecting Captain Katy in the act of munching the cherished provisions, proposed a ten-minute truce, but the invaders with their weather eye on the self-same goodies, haughtily declined.

Again they whispered. Suddenly Alice clapped her hands and hurriedly explained. Immediately King Philip once more planted his scaling ladder, but his ally disappeared around the house.

The sultan sent his aide over to the other side of the roof to scout, but King Richard continued his march around the house and was soon hidden from the observers on the kitchen roof, by the angle of the main house.

Presently queer rasping noises were heard. The besieged craned their necks to see what was going on. The sultan became so curious and apprehensive about his rear that he almost let the King of France get up the ladder. The ominous sounds continued, bumping, scraping, tapping, punctuated by sundry exclamations and advice to "Be careful!" from Alice, who had followed the English forces.

Philip of France, so interested in the efforts of his British allies, forgot to attack and had several narrow escapes from being captured himself.

Finally, after one prolonged scrape accompanied by several grunts, the sturdy figure of Richard towered an instant on the roof of the main house six feet above, then with a whoop of triumph, cautiously dropped down among them amid the shrieks of the defenders.

Acre had fallen.

The vanquished garrison pressed round him, not to demand mercy, but to ask questions.

"How'd you get up there?" Chicken Little demanded.

"Bet Alice put you up to that," this from Carol.

"Should think you'd been scared to death!" whispered Gertie, still breathless with surprise.

"Pshaw, 'twas easy—just shinned up that wistaria vine on the gable, it's awful old and strong.

I've climbed heaps of times before, but I wouldn't of thought of it, if Alice hadn't told me."

"My, wisht I could climb it!" said Katy fairly awestruck with admiration at such daring.

"Oh, you couldn't—you're just a girl, but I'll show you where I got up," said Ernest condescendingly. "Say, where's all the apples and cookies?"

The hint was sufficient and both besieged and besiegers, perched in various attitudes along the low roof like a flock of variegated chickens, were soon merrily celebrating the downfall of Acre.

It was thus that Mrs. Morton found them, coming around the house a few moments later in search of her offspring.

"Children! What are you doing?" she gasped in horrified tones. "Jane Morton, I thought I told you to play quietly. The idea of little girls climbing up on a roof. Put on your shoes this instant—all of you—and come down! Ernest, didn't you know better than to let your little sister go into such a dangerous place?"

Neither the valorous sultan, nor the doughty Crusaders were proof against this onslaught, and the visitors speedily retreated homewards while their crestfallen host and hostess went to bed to think over their sins. Chicken Little indeed started to say something about Alice having let them, but stopped suddenly, warned by a dig in the ribs from Ernest's elbow.

28

While the more favored members of the family were at supper that night, and Ernest was tossing restlessly and wondering if they were having apple dumplings, a small, warm hand reached up beside the bed and touched him.

"Hush, here's your book, Ern, and here's two slices of bread and jam, and some cheese and apple pie."

"Where in the Dickens did you——"

"Somebody poked a plate with it on inside my door a minute ago. We'd better eat it quick."

Ernest needed no urging.

"Do you suppose Frank brought it?"

"No," replied Chicken Little between mouthfuls, "I s'pose Alice."





CHAPTER · II THE · MILLINERY · STORE

Chicken Little was seated on the end of the kitchen table swinging her legs and watching Alice make pies.

"Look out—you'll get your stockings black off the stove," warned Alice lifting a pie from the oven.

"I wisht I didn't always have to wear white stockings—they're such a nuisance."

"They are hard to keep clean. But the nice families always make their children wear white, I notice. I don't see why black wouldn't look just as well with black shoes—especially for school."

"Grace Dart has two clean pairs every day. Did you wear white stockings when you were a little girl, Alice?"

"In summer—in winter we had heavy knitted ones, red and white or blue and white striped. Mother used to knit them."

30

"Did your mother die when you were a weenty girl?"

"No, I was fifteen when she went. Father died five years before. It was grieving about him, and the hard work and going hungry that killed Mother before her time. She'd be living now if we'd had our rights."

Chicken Little puckered her brow for a moment trying to think this out.

"What was the matter with the rights? Did somebody take them?"

Alice laughed till she showed her dimples.

"You funny dear! Yes, took them away from us. I am afraid I can't make you understand, Jane. It was our property—money and this house and some bank stock that we lost. My father went to the war and left all his business in the hands of his partner, a man named Gassett. Father fought in the war two years till he was badly wounded and had to come home. Some day I'll show you a piece of a Confederate flag he helped capture. He was never himself again and Mr. Gassett ran everything. Father said just before he died that he was thankful he at least had the home and some bank stock to leave us—but he didn't have even that it seems. We couldn't find any bank stock certificates and Mr. Gassett had a big mortgage on the house—so he got it, too. Mother said she was sure Father had paid off that mortgage two years after he went into partnership with Gassett—but, pshaw, you can't understand all this!"

31

"I can, too, I'm very quick. I heard Mother tell Mrs. Halford so and she said I had the strongest will she ever saw in a child!" Chicken Little was indignant.

Alice smiled but went on fluting the edge of an apple pie with a fork.

"Please tell me some more, Alice. Did your mother get awful hungry? Was that why you brought us some supper?"

"How do you know I brought you any supper?"

"Cause. It was you—wasn't it, Alice?"

"Yes, Jane, and I expect your mother would be very angry with me if she knew. But I can't bear to have anybody go hungry since Mother—and I know how it feels myself—there's Katy whistling, you'd better run along."

Katy's smooth brown head appeared above the high board fence on her side of the alley that divided the Morton and Halford places. Chicken Little promptly mounted the top of their fence by the aid of a convenient wood pile.

Few days passed in which the children did not visit across the alley. They were not permitted to go outside their own yards without leave, but no embargo had been placed upon the fences. So they sweetened the days when permission to visit was denied by consoling each other across the alley. The result of this conference sent Chicken Little scurrying in to her mother.

32

Mrs. Morton sat by one of the long French windows with a small writing desk on her lap, busily writing a letter.

"Um—n—yes—what did you say?"

"May I have ten cents, Mother? We're going to start a millinery store and you can get a lot of the loveliest little roses and forget-me-nots down to Mrs. Smith's for ten cents. They fall off the wreaths you know. Grace Dart has promised to buy a hat and Katy's Cousin Mary said maybe she would, and it's Saturday and we can work all day—say, will you, Mother?"

"Dear, dear, what's all this? A millinery store? You and Katy and Gertie, I suppose. Well, I don't know but that would be a nice way to help teach you to sew. You must comb your hair again and put on a clean white apron before you go downtown—and don't go anywhere but Mrs. Smith's. By the way, have you finished your practicing?"

Chicken Little wriggled painfully before she reluctantly shook her head.

"Well, do your hour first, then you may have the money."

33

"Oh, Mother, couldn't I practice after dinner—the girls are waiting for me?"

"Duty before pleasure, little daughter, go finish your hour and I'll hunt up some bits of tulle and ribbon for you myself."

"Oh, will you, Mother? Goody, goody! May I go tell the girls? I'll come straight back."

"Yes, but don't get so excited. Little ladies should learn to be more composed—and don't stand on one foot. Come here—the top button of your dress is unfastened." Jane submitted to the buttoning process then flew off to tell the others, who were already setting up shop in the fence corner.

"Oh, Jane," they chorused the moment she came in sight, "Mother gave us the loveliest yellow satin and some pink flowers and lace, too!"

"Yes, and I found six chicken feathers that'll be grand for turbans," broke in Gertie.

Chicken Little flung herself breathless upon the grass and explained between gasps.

"If it wasn't for that horrid practicing!" she finished.

"Never mind," said Katy, "Gertie can be fixing the store and I'll start right in on a hat. It'll take a lot of work I tell you—we're going to charge ten cents a hat."

Chicken Little started reluctantly back to the house and still more reluctantly settled down on the old green-velvet piano stool to practice. There was not much music in her soul, and sitting still at anything was torture. She squirmed even when she read, and her brother Frank said she got into sixty-nine different positions by actual count during the sermon one Sunday. He had made her a standing offer of ten cents whenever she could sit perfectly still for five minutes, but so far his money was safe.

34

The moon-faced clock on the opposite wall ticked monotonously and Chicken Little's small fingers thumped stiffly at the five-finger exercises while she painfully counted aloud, partly to

get the time and partly for company.

At the end of ten minutes she looked up at the clock in despair—surely it must have stopped! But no, the big pendulum was swinging faithfully to and fro. She tried scales, then she went back to exercises. She squirmed and wriggled and counted the big white medallions in the crimson body-brussels carpet. These medallions were her especial admiration, for each was bordered with elaborate curlicues, and contained a gorgeous basket of woolen flowers, the like of which never bloomed in any garden, temperate or tropical. There were fifteen of these across the room and twenty-five lengthwise.

The lace curtains were floral, too. She occupied five minutes trying for the hundredth time to decide, whether a delicate lace bloom with the circumference of a holly-hock was intended for a lily or a rose. The old steel engraving of General Washington's household hanging over the piano helped on a few moments more. The colored servant back of the general's chair had a fascination for her even greater than Martha Washington's mob cap and lace mitts. But, alas, even with the aid of these diversions she had only worried through twenty-five minutes.

Then she had an inspiration. "Grimm's Fairy Tales" lay on the sofa open face downward where she had left it half an hour before. She propped the book on the music rack and started in once more on the exercises. The exercises, however, refused to combine with reading—the discords were painful even to Jane's ears so she tried scales which worked like a charm. Mechanically her hands rippled up and down the keys while her fancy fluttered off after "Snow White" and "Rose Red." And the big clock was so neglected that it was five minutes past the hour before she thought to look at it again.

"Finished your hour, Daughter? Did you practice faithfully?"

Chicken Little considered a moment before replying.

"I didn't play the exercises much," she said doubtfully.

"Well, you did the scales very nicely."

Again Chicken Little paused.

Her conscience was pricking. On the chair beside her mother was a glowing pile of odd ribbons and old artificial flowers and her mother's kindness suddenly made the child realize that the Grimm hadn't been quite fair—she did not like the feeling of not playing fair. She twisted the handle of the door trying to muster up courage to confess, but Mrs. Morton was in a hurry to finish her letters.

"Run along now. Here are some things for you and here's the dime. I am busy, dear."

And Chicken Little feeling that the Fates had excused her, flew off joyfully to join the girls.

The fence corner was swept and garnished. An old lumber pile and several soap boxes had been pressed into service for shelves and counters and were artistically covered with an old lace curtain. Gertie was just putting a vase of real flowers on a table as a finishing touch, when Jane came up.

"Um-m, isn't that too sweet for anything, and see what I've got!"

"Look at this! It's most done," Katy held up an adorable creation of white tulle and pink rosebuds which her nimble fingers had almost completed.

She dispatched Gertie and Chicken Little to Mrs. Smith's for more flowers while she trimmed away industriously. It was a very happy Saturday. The fame of it spread throughout the neighborhood and the three little girls were kept busy snipping and fussing with the tiny headgear. Katy had natural style and taste and some of the little hats were really charming.

The boys dropped over once or twice to see what was going on. Finally, they were so fired by this business enterprise that they started a lemonade stand just outside the front gate, having painfully secured a capital of five lemons by dint of much coaxing of mothers and maids.

Their venture could hardly be called a success. They sold one glass for five cents, then Carol, who was always awkward, upset the whole pitcherful. The ice melted out of the second, and no customers appearing, the boys were drinking it up themselves, when Sherman gallantly proposed to treat the little girls. The supply was getting low by this time, but they carried over one rather skimpy and distressingly seedy glass to be divided among the three.

The young ladies were too grateful for this unexpected attention to be critical. Besides their exchequer was filling up beautifully.

"How much did you make? We've got thirty cents already," said Katy.

"Gee, how'd you make such a lot?" Sherm looked impressed.

"Say, lend us a quarter, won't you?" urged Carol.

"Not much we won't, but I'll tell you. If you'll take this hat down to Cousin May's we'll give you five cents, 'cause Mother won't let us go so far by ourselves. And I'm afraid she'll change her mind about taking it if we wait till Monday at school."

The boys dickered a while and reckoned up the number of blocks their weary feet would have to travel. Carol insisted that seven cents was none too much for the effort, but Katy was a good business woman and was firm in sticking to her first offer.

The lads finally agreed to take it on their way to the ball game, but this small errand raised a

veritable tempest in the little company before it was finally settled.

The tiny package was carefully wrapped and the boys carried it with due respect and delivered it into May Allen's hands. They duly pocketed not only the ten cents in payment but another as well, for May was so delighted with the hat and the elegant manner in which it had been delivered, that she sent an order, with payment in advance, for another bonnet.

All would have been well but for the seductions of a certain ice-cream parlor where candy, apples and cigars were temptingly displayed in a window, draped genteely with a fly-specked lace lambrequin.

Sherman suggested they get a dime changed and expend their nickel for the sweets. Once inside, the sight of sundry acquaintances eating alluring pyramids of creamy coolness confronted them. The boys had been standing around at Brown's field watching the ball game. It was hot and dusty and their mouths watered. Carol had ten cents of his own. By using their nickel and the remaining fifteen cents they could each have a dish. Ernest hesitated about this borrowing, but the boys said they could pay it back. Ernest was sure he had that much in his toy bank at home, and the other boys were positive they could shake it through the slit if they tried hard enough.

So the tempter won and the trust money was speedily converted into ice-cream. The ice-cream once down the transaction began to take on a different phase. The boys plodded home rather silently.

Sherman voiced the first doubt.

"Say, Ern, are you sure you've got enough?"

Ern was wondering himself if he had.

"I guess we'd better go in the side gate and get it out before the girls see us," he replied.

The boys slipped in the side gate in a manner so noiseless that it might almost be called sneaking. On up to Ernest's room they filed and hastily secured the bank.

Alas, no rattle of coin repaid them. Absent-minded Ernest had entirely forgotten that his father had taken the contents to the savings bank for him the preceding month, and that he had not been able to save up anything since.

The boys looked at each other.

"Maybe Mother'll lend me fifteen cents," said Ernest after a pause.

A speedy search of the house revealed the sad fact that Mother was not at home.

The boys' faces fell. They somehow did not care to meet the little girls. Ernest twisted his scalp lock in deep thought.

"Say, I'll cut home and ask Sister Sue for it," volunteered Sherm, who didn't have red hair and freckles for nothing. "She'll almost always help a fellow out."

The boys watched impatiently. Fifteen minutes passed. They could see from the window that the little girls were all on the front fence watching for their return.

"How'll Sherm ever get in?" asked Carol gloomily.

"He won't! They've seen him now, I bet. Watch them all running. Sherm must be trying to make it in the back way. Gee, they've got him!"

Sherm shook off his pursuer's clinging fingers. His longer legs soon distanced them enough for him to dash up the stairs and shoot into the room ahead of them. Ernest promptly shut the door and bolted it.

Sherm dropped panting into a chair, shaking his head.

"Sue wasn't there, and Mother didn't have any small change and said I'd had more spending money than was good for me anyhow."

The little girls began to pound vigorously on the door.

"We might tell them we lost it," suggested Carol desperately.

"No, we won't!" retorted Ernest. "I'm not that kind, thank you, to spend the kids' money and then lie about it! Nope, we're up against it and we'll have to take our medicine," Ernest marched straight to the door and flung it open.

"What you boys up to?"

"Where's our money?"

"Did you get the hat to her all right?"

The little girls stood in an accusing half-circle and fired their questions in a broadside.

Ernest put the facts as diplomatically as possible. Sherman and Carol backed him up manfully, promising to pay back with the very first money they could get their hands on.

For an instant the children were stunned. Ernest remembered the look of sorrowful amazement on his little sister's face long after the whipping his father gave him for the offense had been forgotten. Chicken Little adored Ernest and he knew it.

She didn't say a word. She just looked. Gertie started to cry, but Katy flared up and turned red as a little turkey cock.

"I think that's the meanest thing I ever knew anybody to do—it's just plain stealing, so it is! I'm going right straight to tell your mother, Ernest Morton—I hear her coming!"

Chicken Little tried to stop her, but Katy was half way down the staircase before she reached the head. A moment later they heard her shrill little voice and the grieved tones of Mrs. Morton in response.

Presently Mrs. Morton came puffing up the stairs. The boys fidgetted uneasily. Ernest began twisting his scalp lock again and Carol hitched up his suspenders to keep up his courage. He alone was guiltless of taking the money, but it did not occur to him to desert his companions in distress. As for Sherm, his face got so red by the time Mrs. Morton's step sounded outside the door, that his freckles looked like the brown seeds on a strawberry.

Mrs. Morton entered majestic and angry; her black lace shawl slipping from her shoulders unnoticed in her haste.

"Boys, what is this I hear?" The inquiry that followed was long remembered by all concerned. Chicken Little did not utter one word till her mother declared it her painful duty to tell their father. Then she plucked her mother's dress and whispered: "Please don't, Mother, I'll pay it back for him out of my share from the store, he's awful 'shamed."

Mrs. Morton smiled at the troubled little face.

"No," she said firmly, "these boys have done very wrong, and Ernest, at least, must be punished."

The next morning at Sunday School Carol asked Sherman rather shame-facedly: "Get a licking?"

"Yep, did you?"

"Nope, but I can't play on the nine for a week."

They both fell upon Ernest as he slid soberly into his seat a moment later.

"Catch it?"

"You bet—good and plenty! Father made me cut three switches and he didn't waste any. But I could stand Father's lickings if Mother wouldn't pray over me."

Carol looked shocked at Ernest's irreverence but Sherm grinned sympathetically.

"Mother makes me read a chapter in the Bible—but she most always gives me a doughnut or something when I've finished."

There was no opportunity for further conversation. Miss Rice, their Sunday School teacher fluttered in at this moment and tactfully seated herself between Sherm and Ernest. After the teacher stood up to begin the lesson, Ernest nudged Sherm.

"Say, want to tell you something when we get out. S-h-h, teacher's looking now!"

On the way home Ernest unburdened himself.

"You know Chicken Little's crazy to go hazel-nutting. S'pose we take the kids Saturday—to kind of—oh, you know—make up!"

What Ernest said was not exactly clear but the boys understood.

"They couldn't walk to Duck Creek," objected Sherm.

"Maybe Frank would drive us. Perhaps you could get Sue to go too. Mother'd let Jane go sure if she went."

The boys agreed to think it over and to keep it for a surprise for the little girls.





CHAPTER III
THE DUCK CREEK
TREASURE

Sundays always dragged in the Morton household. Dr. and Mrs. Morton, like many other excellent people of their day, believed in the saving grace of "Thou shalt not!" The list of things the children couldn't do on Sunday was much longer than the list of coulds.

On this particular Sunday Ernest was specially aggrieved because his mother had sternly deprived him of "The Last of the Mohicans" as being unsuitable for Sabbath reading, offering him a painfully instructive volume from the Sunday School library in its place.

He relieved his feelings to Chicken Little.

"I bet if I ever grow up I'll do what I please on Sunday! I think when a fellow goes to their old church and Sunday School he might be let alone for the rest of the day. Think I'm going to read that dope?—all the chaps with any life in them get expelled or go to the penitentiary and the rest are old goody-goody tattle-tales you wouldn't be caught dead with! Guess they're 'fraid if they got a real live boy in a book he'd bust the covers off!"

Ernest's disgust was so real it was painful. Jane sympathized acutely.

"The 'Elsie Books' aren't so bad only I guess Mother'd spank me if I talked to her the way Elsie does to her father."

"Can't play with the boys—can't read—can't go for a tramp—can't even get my lessons for tomorrow."

Ernest flung himself on the old haircloth sofa and groaned.

Chicken Little looked out of the window wistfully. It was a glorious September day. The fragrance of ripening grapes from the long arbor outside floated in temptingly; the maples were already showing gleams of red and yellow and the soft air was fairly calling to a frolic. Beyond the two high board fences that bounded the Alley separating their yard from the Halford place, she knew her two small playmates were happy out in the sunshine. Mrs. Halford's views on Sunday keeping were not so rigid.

Chicken Little sighed, then suddenly brightened. "Katy and Gertie haven't got a brother anyhow!" she said half aloud, balancing advantages.

"Who you talking to?" Ernest raised himself on his elbow to find out.

"Nobody—I was just a thinking."

"Must be hard work. Say, Sis, I know something you don't know. No, I'm not going to tell—it's a secret. Bet you'll be tickled to death when you find out—here, look out!"

Ernest flung his arm up in defense as Jane threw herself joyfully upon him.

"Ernest Morton, you mean thing—tell me this minute or I'll tickle you."

"Pooh, you couldn't tickle a fly. Think you're smart, don't you? I'm going to tell you next Saturday and not one second sooner so you don't need to tease."

"Next Saturday? Is it a picnic? Am I going?"

"Sha'n't tell you what it is, but you're going."

"Goody! Are Katy and Gertie going?"

Ernest saw that she was getting perilously near the facts and considered.

"Tell you next Saturday," he replied tantalizingly.

"Please, Ernest, just tell me that."

"Nope, little girls shouldn't be so curious."

"Say, Ernest, if I'll get you a cooky will you?"

"You can't. Mother said if we didn't leave that cooky jar alone she'd punish us—besides Alice hid them."

"I don't care. I've got six."

"Where in—how'd you get them?—hook them?"

"I did not, Ernest Morton. Mother says we can eat all we want when Alice bakes, and I didn't want very many 'cause my throat was sore so I just put some away."

"Cricky, wouldn't Mother be mad if she caught you? Where did you put them? Well, I'll tell you about Katy and Gertie for four cookies."

"Old Greedy, I'll give you three if you'll tell all about it."

"No you don't, you promised you'd bring me two if I told about the girls. Get them quick, I'm hungry."

"All right, if you'll promise to stay right there till I come back."

"All right."

"You're grinning. Promise honor bright."

"Honor bright."

"Hope to die?"

"Oh, yep, trot along."

Chicken Little, relenting, was back in three minutes with the entire cache of cookies, which she religiously divided and the children munched contentedly while Chicken Little speculated as to what the wonderful excursion could be. With feminine persistence she wormed a few more facts from Ernest.

"Carol and Sherm going?"

The cookies had limbered up Ernest's tongue.

"Yep," he answered, but suddenly remembered himself when his small sister began to giggle.

"Bet we're going hazel-nutting. Ernest, tell me."

"Sha'n't tell you another thing and you might as well let up."

"If I can get you off the sofa will you?"

The old haircloth sofa had been a famous battle ground between the children for the past two years, and many a frolic they had had on its slippery length. Ernest would entrench himself firmly in its depths and Chicken Little would tug at arms or legs or head indiscriminately in an effort to dislodge him. She not infrequently succeeded, for while he was much the stronger, the old sofa was so slippery it was difficult to cling to it.

Chicken Little did not wait for an answer now. She made a grab at his head which he defended vigorously. A sharp tussle ensued. She got his legs on the floor twice, but he still clung to the back with his hands.

"Huh, girls are no good!" he ejaculated breathlessly.

Chicken Little's only reply was a dash at the clinging hands.

"No you don't!"

But he spoke too soon. Chicken Little pried one hand loose and throwing her weight on the other arm before he could recover his hold, rolled him triumphantly off on the floor.

"Anyway, I didn't promise to tell," he crowed.

Saturday morning was a testimonial to the weather man's good nature. It was glorious with a little frosty tang to the air and a belt of blue haze over the distant woods.

Sister Sue couldn't go, but Mrs. Morton generously permitted Alice to supply her place, and Frank Morton was to take them out to Duck Creek some three miles away and call for them again after office hours in the afternoon. The children were wild with excitement. Alice had fried chicken before breakfast, and there had been such hunting for bags and baskets that Frank said if they filled half of them, the horses wouldn't be able to drag the crowd and their plunder home.

The old carriage fairly bristled with heads and waving arms as they drove off. Chicken Little sat squeezed in with Katy, Sherm and Carol on the back seat uncomfortable but happy. Even timid Gertie chattered in her excitement.

The youngsters had dressed up especially for the occasion. Sherm was resplendent in a scarlet and white baseball cap that set off his red hair to advantage. Ernest took his straw hat because he said it shaded his eyes, and much reading had made his eyes sensitive. Katy and Gertie, just alike, were trim in blue gingham with smart little blue bows on their flying pig-tails. And Jane was brown, hair, eyes, and tanned skin as well as her dress, with a red coat like a frosted sumach leaf on top. Carol felt quite grown up in an old hunting jacket of his father's. He had stuck two homemade arrows in his belt as a final touch.

Duck Creek was ablaze with autumn leaves and the hazel thickets were full of the tempting gray-brown clusters, though the nuts themselves when cracked seemed a trifle green.

"They don't taste like the hazel nuts you buy," said Katy.

"Cause they're not dry yet, Goosie." This from Sherman.

"Bet you never picked a hazel nut before!" put in Ernest.

"Well, I've been hickory-nutting three times, and I guess you've never seen Niagara Falls and I have!" boasted Katy by way of keeping her self-respect.

The children worked busily all morning only stopping now and then to chase the squirrels who came scolding the intruders for taking their winter stores. By noon Alice declared they had more nuts than they could stow away in the old carriage, if they hoped to get in themselves.

Sherm and Gertie found a tempting persimmon tree and there were some wry-looking faces till Alice showed them how to find the fruit the frost had sweetened. After that the persimmons became immensely popular, and dresses and jackets alike were liberally stained with the mushy orange pulp to which samples of the picnic dinner were added later. They spread their feast out in the sunshine, using the sacks of nuts for seats, and waging war on intrusive ants and whole colonies of welcoming flies.

"I don't see what the Lord made so many flies for," said Sherm disgustedly fishing one daintily out of the butter by the tips of its wings.

"My, they are thick!" said Alice. "Cover up the cake, Chicken Little."

"What shall we do now?" inquired Carol relaxing after the hard labor of eating three pieces of chicken, two hard-boiled eggs, a generous wedge of pie, and two chunks of cake.

"Do?—I should think you'd need a rest, Carol," Alice replied slyly. She had been mentally thanking her stars she didn't have to cook for Carol very often.

"I say we hunt that old cave," suggested Sherm.

"Huh, Frank says he used to hunt for that confounded old cave when he was a boy till he wore out enough shoe leather to have one dug."

"I don't care—my father says there used to be one somewhere along here, but he guesses the mouth must have got covered up when Duck Creek changed its course. You know the creek used to flow on the other side of the island there. But when they had that tarnation big freshet about twenty years ago, it cut through this side too and made the island."

"Yes, I remember hearing my father tell about that flood—it was before the war," said Alice with interest. "A lot of people got drowned and they say some of the Seventh Day Adventists thought the end of the world had come."

"Maybe the cave got washed out," hazarded Carol who was beginning to feel that Alice's advice to rest sounded good. He felt sleepy.

"Couldn't have—Father said it was quite a ways up the bank. Said he explored it once when he was a boy. He talks about coming out to hunt for it himself, but he won't," explained Sherm.

"There's a lot about a big cave in Kentucky in our Geography," put in Katy who hated to be left out of anything.

"Yep—the Mammoth," said Ernest. "Well, come on, Sherm, let's us have a try at it."

"Let us go, too, Ern," piped Chicken Little.

"No you don't—you'd get all tired out and want to come back."

Chicken Little opened her mouth to protest but Alice interposed.

"We will think up something nice to do here. We might hunt for it over on that wooded bank. Nobody seems to know where it was—it's just as likely to be one place as another."

"We might find some bitter-sweet berries. Mother said she wished we'd bring her some if we saw any." Gertie was getting to her feet stiffly, her legs cramped from being doubled under her.

"Yes," added Katy, "she wants some sumach leaves, too. You boys can just go off by yourselves. I bet we have the most fun."

Carol had pillowed his curly head on a bag of nuts and was deaf to the other boy's urging to "Come Along." He was fast asleep before they were fairly out of sight.

Alice said they'd leave him as a guard for the nuts and wraps. She set off with the little girls in the opposite direction from that taken by the boys.

"Wouldn't it be fun if we could find the cave?" exclaimed Chicken Little, who had been studying over the glorious possibility for several minutes.

"Why, yes, you might find an Aladdin's lamp there," replied Alice teasingly.

Jane was not to be discouraged. "We might find something. Let's play we do anyway. What'd you like to find, Katy?"

Katy considered.

"I'd like to find all those silver spoons and watches the burglars stole from the Jones' and Gassetts' last month. Then we'd get the twenty-five dollars reward and I could buy a lot of things."

Alice laughed.

"Those things are probably up in Chicago in some pawn shop long before this, Katy. It's only in stories that burglars hide things in caves."

"Well, they might," insisted Katy.

"Yes, the moon might be made of green cheese—but it isn't," returned Alice.

"Well, anyway, we can play we find the things," said Chicken Little.

Gertie surprised them all by saying: "I'd like to find a weenty teenty bear cub."

"Gertie Halford, whatever would you do with a bear cub? You'd be scared to death of it." Katy looked at her sister in scornful amazement.

"I'd like to find those stock certificates Father lost," said Alice. "Perhaps we'll find them tied round your bear's neck, Gertie."

This absurdity made the children laugh as they toiled through the underbrush, which was getting dense, planning merrily. They wandered and explored for about half an hour up and down the bank, finding nothing but a few haw-berries, some sumach leaves, and a pocket full of acorns which Gertie was taking back to Carol to carve into dishes, for her. Carol was an expert with his knife.

Chicken Little had a big scratch on her arm from a thorn bush, and Katy a long tear in her blue gingham dress, which greatly annoyed her.

"Let's go back to Carol—this isn't any fun," she complained.

But Alice had just spied something that interested her.

"I bet I know what we can find that you'll all like," she said. "Wild grapes! I see a big vine over on that tree by the rocks. It's in a perfect thicket and there may be some left."

It was difficult forcing their way through the bushes. They were almost tempted to give up but Alice was sure she smelled grapes and Chicken Little and Katy were eager to carry back some booty to make the boys curious.

So they plodded on getting so many scratches and slaps from overhanging branches and interlacing bushes that they made a joke of them.

"Mr. Bush, if you catch my hair again, I'll break a piece out of you," and Chicken Little gave the offending bush such a shove that it promptly rebounded, grazing her cheek.

"Never mind," said Alice. "I've got my thirteenth scratch and my hair's almost down. I won't have a hair-pin left by the time we get out of this."

"I guess Mother will feel bad about my dress, but maybe she won't mind so much if we take her some wild grapes. She hasn't had any this year. Oh, bother these burrs!" and Katy stooped down to pick a bunch from her shoe strings and several scattered ones from her white stockings already profusely streaked with green and brown stains.

Gertie bringing up the rear of the little procession was too busy defending her head and face against briars and brush to say anything.

Alice crashed through a particularly matted growth of bushes and gave a shout of triumph. "Here we are, children, and there are grapes—scads of them!"

They found themselves under a low spreading oak that was fairly canopied with huge wild grape vines that hung almost to the ground on three sides, forming a big tent. The grapes were plentiful and the fragrance delicious. But, alas, these were like the grapes the fox found sour, most of them hung high above their reach.

"What a shame—if only the boys were here they might climb!" said Alice disgusted.

"I can climb if you'll boost me, Alice," Chicken Little volunteered quickly.

Alice was surveying the tempting fruit thoughtfully.

"I don't believe you could reach them if you did, Chicken Little. See, you'd have to go clear out on the ends of the branches. Perhaps if we'd go up on the hill above—it's pretty steep here—we could reach some. It will be hard to get through—there's a perfect rat's nest of vines and bushes."

Chicken Little was already crawling under the overhanging vines. She soon shouted a discovery.

"Say, somebody's cut a little path here through the bushes. Come on—it's easy after you get through a little ways."

The others followed and sure enough there was a faintly worn path leading off up the hill side. Some of the densest undergrowth had been trimmed a little to permit a fairly easy passage.

"How queer!" Alice exclaimed. "Somebody's been here right lately. Funny they didn't take the grapes—they're dead ripe."

"Whoever came here last crawled right in under those vines." Katy's sharp eyes had noticed how the weeds had been crushed down by some heavy body and that some of the vines were broken.

"You're right—they have—dear me, I hope it isn't a tramp!" Alice replied, a little anxious. "Anyway he wasn't here today because—see those leaves he broke off are dead."

"What do you suppose he went in there for?" demanded Katy.

"I'm sure I can't imagine—to hide maybe," Alice looked puzzled.

"Oh, maybe he was the burglar—maybe he hid the things under there—I'm going to find out," and before Alice could stop her, Chicken Little was disappearing under the vines again.

"O-h—Oh! I'm 'fraid! Oh, Alice, don't let her!" Gertie flew to the protection of Alice's skirts in terror and Katy edged nearer to her side.

"Don't Chicken Little—don't—come back—there might be snakes under there." Alice was worried herself.

The mention of snakes brought Katy with a scream to cling to her arm, but Jane was not to be daunted. They could hear her puffing and breaking off twigs as she progressed. Suddenly there was a complete silence and Alice's heart jumped with fear lest something had happened to the child.

"Jane," she called anxiously.

"I'm here, Alice, but there's something funny—there's a great big hole in between some rocks—only I can't see much, 'cause there's so many vines and it's dark."

"Oh, do you s'pose it's a bear den? Oh, I want my mother!" Gertie began to whimper.

"Shut up, silly, there aren't any bears 'round here!" said Katy unfeelingly. "It's a woodchuck hole most likely."

"I wonder if it could be that cave," said Alice. "You wait here, girls, I'm going in there too."

Alice fought her way in to Chicken Little's side. Sure enough there was a dark hole about two

feet high.

Jane encouraged by Alice's presence was for exploring at once, but Alice caught her dress determinedly.

"Don't you dare, Jane Morton, it wouldn't be safe—there might be snakes—you can't tell what's in there. I believe whoever came in here went into that hole—see, here's two foot prints. I think we'd better get out of this."

Alice made Chicken Little precede her back to the spot where Katy and Gertie were waiting.

The Halford girls were thoroughly frightened and clamored to go home. Alice hesitated.

"I hate not to get some of those grapes after all our trouble. I don't believe there's anybody round here now and there hasn't been a wild animal seen on Duck Creek for years."

"I could reach those over there if you'd hold me up, Alice," said Chicken Little.

"Pooh, I can get some by myself," said Katy reassured by Alice's words.

"Well, let's fill this old apron anyhow, it won't hurt it." Alice had worn an old apron to protect herself against the muss of the lunch and had forgotten to take it off. 61

They all set to work, but the apron proved capacious and before it was half loaded, they heard a shrill whistle below them and Carol's voice calling:

"Hello there—where have you got to?"

An answering call soon brought him to the tree.

"Whew, aren't they beauties?" he gloated, surprised.

"How'd you find us?" inquired Katy.

"Trailed you by your tracks—woke up and found everybody vamoosed and I knew it was no good going after the boys and—" he was not allowed to finish.

"Oh, Carol, we've found the cave!" Chicken Little's voice was shrill with importance.

"Honest to goodness?" Carol looked incredulous.

"Cross my heart," affirmed Katy promptly though she hadn't so much as had a glimpse of the mysterious hole.

"Where?"

"Under there—I'll show you," Jane made a dive for the vines but Alice caught her arm.

"You are not going in there again."

"Show me—I'll go." Carol was eager with excitement.

"Got any matches, Carol?"

"No, but Ern has a pocket full." 62

"I tell you—the boys must be coming back by this time. You go meet them while we finish picking these grapes and when they come we'll explore the thing. Cut some big sticks and bring them along, Carol." Alice had hardly finished speaking before Carol was off.

Fifteen minutes later the boys were heard hallooing below them. They came swarming through the thicket excited and breathless.

"Bully for Chicken Little Jane!" cheered Sherm when they got the facts. "Here, Carol, give me your knife and I'll hack away some of these vines."

The boys cleared a way in a jiffy, letting in a stream of light at the same time so they could see more of the hole.

"I bet you 'tis!"

"Geewhillikens, I wonder how big it is!"

"Alice says somebody has been in there—they have too—see there!"

"Here boys, go slow. Light a match and throw it in and see how much you can see," Alice counselled.

The match illuminated only a little way and a lone chipmunk darted out. It was certainly a cave but apparently empty as they heard no further movement.

The boys tied a half dozen matches on the end of a stick and thrust it in. This improvised torch worked beautifully. The cave was only a small affair about three feet one way and five the other—not high enough for Carol to stand upright. It was so hung with cobwebs they could not see into the corners clearly. The floor was partly covered with dead leaves that had drifted in and were fast decaying into mold. 63

As their eyes penetrated the dimness, three of the children gave a yell in unison.

"There's something over in that corner!"

The something proved to be a market basket covered with an old gunny-sack.

Ernest insisted on going after it. Satisfied that the cave contained nothing else they rushed their trophy out to the light and examined its contents. It yielded a regular pirate treasure.

"What under the sun?" Alice opened eyes and mouth in blank amazement. "Children, sure as

you're born, we've found that stolen silver!"

The basket was speedily emptied. One silver sugar bowl, four dozen spoons, two silver goblets, a watch and some small pieces of jewelry were revealed, besides a package of official looking papers.

"There's Mrs. Jones' pin. I remember they advertised one big pearl set round with ten little ones. But what do you suppose these papers are?" Carol and Alice were busy untying them.

"Well, 'pon my soul!—do you suppose we are bewitched?—they've got my father's name on them. Pinch me and see if I'm dreaming." Alice looked at the papers in a daze, Ernest and Carol staring over her shoulder.

"They're some sort of legal papers 'cause they've got those big red seals on them."

"It is your father's name—Donald Fletcher. We'll take them home to Father—he'll know what they are," said Ernest.

"Yes, that would be best and we must be getting back. Frank will be waiting for us."



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Family prayers were hardly decently over the morning after the picnic before Jane Morton climbed into her father's lap armed with a fine tooth comb and a stiff hair brush.

"I'm going to comb your hair," she announced ingratiatingly.

Dr. Morton dearly loved to have his shaggy curly head brushed, and scratched with the fine comb, and it was Jane's office to be comber-in-chief—a duty she was prone to shirk if she could.

"What are you after, Humbug—a new doll?"

"No," she replied in an injured tone. "I just wanted to know what a cestificut is."

"A what?"

"A cestificut—those kind of papers we found in the cave."

"Oh, a certificate. Why Chicken Little a certificate—I don't know whether I can make you understand. There are several kind of certificates, but those were bank certificates."

Chicken Little looked decidedly puzzled.

"Those pieces of paper showed that Alice's father once owned part of the National Bank here."

"Doesn't he own it now?"

"Mr. Fletcher is dead, as you know, and the question is whether they belong to Alice as her father's heir. That is what we were talking about last night. But don't bother your small head about such things."

Jane combed away industriously for several minutes giving him sundry pats and smoothing his forehead deftly.

"Alice says if they was really hers she could sell them and go to school and be like other people. I think Alice is like other people now—don't you?"

"Alice—like other people?" Dr. Morton had been lost in the depths of his newspaper. "Alice is all right—a very worthy girl—but I doubt if she has any more chance of getting hold of that bank stock than the man in the moon. The papers were evidently stolen from Gasset's house along

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with the silver. It does look queer that they are still in Donald Fletcher's name, but people are mighty careless sometimes about business affairs—though it isn't like Gassett—he looks out for his own pretty carefully."

"Is there anything you could do about it, Father?" asked Mrs. Morton who had come in and overheard this last remark. "Alice seems very much wrought up and I promised her I would speak to you."

"Why, I told her last night if I were in her place I'd just hold on to the papers and see if Gassett inquires for them and if he does, make him prove his right to them. It's up to him to show they are his."

"Are they very valuable?"

"Yes, they are worth about five thousand dollars. It would be a windfall for Alice, all right."

Mrs. Morton considered.

"Well, I don't know what a girl in her position would do with that much money if she had it." Mrs. Morton was English and very firm in the belief that class distinctions were a part of the Divine plan.

"Chicken Little here says she'd go to school," Dr. Morton replied.

"Go to school! Why, Alice is twenty. Well, I think she'd better be content in the station to which the Lord has called her, myself," said Mrs. Morton dismissing the subject easily.

Chicken Little had been listening to her elders with the liveliest interest. She could not quite understand it all but she had done her best. Hurt by her mother's indifferent tone, she burst out indignantly:

"The Lord didn't put Alice in any station—she hasn't been on a train since her mother died. She told me so and she wants to go to school just awful."

"That will do, Jane; you don't know what you are talking about. I didn't mean a railroad station—I meant that if the Lord intended Alice to be a servant she should try to be contented." Mrs. Morton spoke severely, pursing her lips up tight in a little way she had when annoyed.

But Jane was not to be suppressed.

"Yes, but it wasn't the Lord—it was Mr. Gassett's stealing their money. Alice said it would make her mother cry right up in Heaven if she knew she was a hired girl. And I just know the Lord wouldn't do such a thing!"

"Steady, steady—don't get so excited, Chicken Little Jane," soothed her father, amused at the tempest. "Alice has one staunch friend evidently. Here are some peppermints—you can go and divide with Alice to even up for her hard luck. If we find anything can be done about that money, I'll promise to help her. Will that content you, little daughter?"

Jane gave her father a grateful hug and departed to give Alice a decidedly garbled account of what Dr. Morton was going to do.

"Bless the child's kind heart," said the doctor, looking after her tenderly.

"You do spoil that child dreadfully, Father, the idea of her mixing up in a business matter like this. I'm afraid I've let her see too much of Alice, but she is an excellent servant."

"Alice is a treasure, Mother, and she isn't hurting Jane any—that is plain to be seen. Let them alone—the friendship is good for both of them."

Chicken Little came home from school a few days later, bursting with news.

"Mrs. Gassett came out to the gate when I was going by this morning and said she heard we had found some papers along with the silver, and she said they'd lost some and maybe they was theirs. I just told her there was some papers with big red things on them but they belonged to Alice's father and Alice was awful glad to find them 'cause her—"

"Chicken Little Jane, you didn't go tell all that to Mrs. Gassett!" Ernest interrupted with the horrified surprise of one who is far removed from such childish blunders.

Chicken Little looked from Ernest to her father piteously.

"You didn't say I wasn't to tell, Papa."

"No dear, I knew with six children in possession of a secret, it was no use trying to keep it. There is no harm done, Chicken Little. What did Mrs. Gassett say?"

"She just said 'Humph' real mad and she turned her old fat back and waddled off to the house. My, I'm glad I am not fat like her."

"Didn't say thank you for finding her silver, eh?" asked Dr. Morton.

"Catch Sister Gassett saying thank you," put in Frank Morton. "They say she's a worse old skinflint than her husband. I've been told the Gassett girls don't get enough to eat let alone decent clothes."

"Come Frank," said his mother reprovingly. "You forget that the Gassetts are members of our church."

"Didn't I say Sister Gassett, Mother?" asked Frank with a twinkle in his eye.

Mrs. Morton was not blessed with a keen sense of humor and she reproved once more.

"Yes, but it isn't quite fitting for you to call an older person Sister, especially when you are not a church member yourself."

Frank subsided with a shy glance at his father.

Ernest seized the opportunity to impart his budget, though with a mouth rather too full of beefsteak and potatoes to make his words intelligible.

"Carol says—(swallow)—that old Gassett tackled him—(swallow)—"

"Ernest!"

Dr. and Mrs. Morton started in together, but Mrs. Morton finished.

"Don't try to talk with your mouth full."

Ernest hurriedly disposed of his food and resumed.

"Carol says old Gassett tackled him about those stock certificates and he just told him we didn't find any papers with his name on. If we had, we'd have returned them along with the silver."

"That was a mighty smart-Alecky speech," said his father. "Carol should learn to be more respectful to his elders."

"I don't see what this younger generation is coming to," said Mrs. Morton plaintively. "I can't see where children learn such bad manners."

"Probably corrupted by their elder brothers, Mother dear," retorted Frank. "But, changing the subject, I am curious to see what Gassett will do."

"Yes, I am curious about his first move myself. Perhaps, he'll come up here and demand the papers of Mother or maybe he'll send a lawyer."

"Well, for my part I think the sensible thing to do would be to send him the papers and stop all this fuss," Mrs. Morton replied.

"Why, Mother!" Ernest started up indignantly.

"You forget, Mother, that those papers happen to be worth five thousand dollars," said Frank, lifting his eyebrows.

Jane looked from the boys to her mother in horrified amazement.

"They are Alice's papers, Mother, so there!"

"We don't know whether they are Alice's or not, my dear, and little girls should be seen and not heard."

"But they've got Alice's father's name on them!" Jane's mental crater was seething and no snubbing could keep it from boiling over. "I just guess you wouldn't like it if somebody took something that belonged to your little girl."

"She's got you there, Mother," said Dr. Morton, laughing. "Come on, Frank, we must be getting downtown."

If Mrs. Morton was still English in her ideas, Chicken Little was intensely American, and while Mrs. Morton was a most loving and conscientious mother, she could never understand her rebellious small daughter. Many unpleasant scenes occurred in her effort to bring up the child in the ways of her forefathers.

Chicken Little was an athletic child before the days when it was proper for little girls to be athletic, and Mrs. Morton mourned greatly over her tomboy propensities. She did her best to overcome these by crowding the child's playtime full of all the little womanly arts possible. But her efforts, if praiseworthy, were hardly successful, especially her attempts to teach her to sew.

These lessons usually began Saturday morning.

"Chicken Little, when you finish your practicing, I want you to come to my room and do a square of your patchwork. You know I let you off last Saturday to go nutting."

"Oh, Mother, please, the boys are making a little furnace out in the back yard and they said we girls might help them roast apples and potatoes—and Alice is going to let us have some doughnuts. And please, Mother, don't make me do that nasty old patchwork."

"But, child, you must learn to sew. I should think you would enjoy that pretty patchwork—I got those bright silk scraps on purpose to please you. Why my mother made a shirt for her father when she was no older than you, and you can't take five stitches neatly. Besides, I don't think it is good for little girls to play with the boys so much. It teaches them to be rough—girls should be little ladies."

Mrs. Morton pursed her lips in the prim little expression that was Jane's despair.

The child's eyes flashed rebelliously.

"I don't want to be a little lady!" she said sullenly. "Mrs. Halford likes to have Katy and Gertie play with the boys 'cause they haven't got any brothers and she thinks it's good for them—so there!"

"Why Jane!"

"I don't care—I don't see why boys should have all the fun! You let Ernest do most everything he wants to—and you won't let me do hardly anything—and I don't think it's a bit fair—and I just

hate this old patchwork!" Chicken Little flung herself down on the floor in a tempest of wrath.

Mrs. Morton's usually placid face became severe.

"Get up this minute and come here!"

Chicken Little reluctantly obeyed.

"Child, do you want to be a perfect little know-nothing? I am grieved and pained that my only little daughter has such ideas. I can't see where you get them. Katy and Gertie both sew very nicely for their ages and—"

"Yes," interrupted the child between sobs, "but their mother lets them learn on rainy days and in the summer when it's too hot to play out doors. She doesn't keep them in all morning on Saturday!"

"You have all afternoon to play."

"But we can't roast apples—the boys are going to the ball game—and they're building the furnace right now and I want to see them. Katy and Gertie are up on the alley fence calling me. Oh! Mother, can't I go? Please, please, Mother!"

Mrs. Morton looked perplexed for a moment, then straightened herself resolutely.

"No, daughter, you have been a very rebellious little girl. I can't encourage such conduct. But if you will practice your hour faithfully, I'll let you put off the sewing till two o'clock this afternoon—on condition that you promise to sit down without making any fuss and finish that square today. Bring it here and let me see if you are doing it right."

Jane fidgeted and looked at her mother uneasily.

"I don't know 'zackly where it is," she objected.

"Go hunt it."

Chicken Little went slowly, evidently oppressed by thought.

She returned in about three minutes with three much mused pieces of silk sewn together, from which dangled a needle by a remarkably long and dirty silk thread.

Her mother examined it with disfavor.

"Where are your other pieces?" she inquired sternly.

Chicken Little answered in a most ladylike small voice.

"I—I used them."

"Used them?—what for?"

"For—silk ravellings."

"Silk ravellings?—what on earth do you mean?"

"We keep them in our Geographies and Grace Dart had the most colors—and you wouldn't give me any old ribbons—so I used them."

"Jane Morton, what are you talking about?"

"Jane Morton" looked out the window and squirmed uneasily. "I just told you," she said pettishly.

"Bring your Geography here!"

Chicken Little obeyed and Mrs. Morton hastily opened it. About every third page revealed cloud-like fluffs of silk ravellings in all the colors of the rainbow. The entire Geography was so occupied as an album for these delectable bits of color that it was difficult to see how it could be used for study purposes.

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Morton regarded all ejaculations as unladylike, but the occasion seemed to require emphasis.

"Where did you get all these?—and what do you want them for?"

"'Cause all the girls have them. I took some of the pieces left from the millinery store—"

"Yes?"

"And I cut some weenty bits of my hair ribbons and I traded for some of the mixy ones—and the quilt pieces."

Chicken Little shut her lips tight with an air of finality.

"Go get your hair-ribbons."

Chicken Little obeyed slowly.

The ribbons were shortened anywhere from one inch to a quarter of a yard. Some looked as if she had taken the ribbon and left the "weenty" piece.

Mrs. Morton's face was a study. For a moment she seemed to be struck speechless. It was only a moment.

"Your ribbons are ruined—I never saw such a child! You knew better than that and you shall be punished severely. Go right to your practising now and I'll think this matter over. But—you cannot help the boys with the furnace."

"But you promised, Mother."

"I don't care if I did; you've been a very naughty little girl and——"

"But you promised and you'll be telling a wrong story your ownself if you don't let me. And you never told me I couldn't cut pieces off my hair-ribbons—and I asked you for some old ones and you said: 'Run along and don't bother'." Chicken Little faced her mother flushed and defiant.

Mrs. Morton's face was equally red with exasperation. The child's logic was not easy to gainsay.

"Very well," she said with asperity, "you may go after your practicing, as I said, but you will be punished later. You understand—later!"



CHAPTER V
THE BACK-YARD FURNACE

It was in a more chastened frame of mind, that Chicken Little joined the others in the back yard after her practice hour was over. She had spent so much of the hour wondering what her mother was going to do to her, that the hour had really slipped away rather quickly.

The three boys had the brick part of the furnace all done when she appeared. They were carefully fitting into place the rusty piece of stove-pipe which was the crowning glory of the structure. Katy and Gertie were seated on an old barrel turned over on its side, watching the process. They made room for Chicken Little between them.

Ernest got to his feet after the stove-pipe was snugly set with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Frank said we'd better wait for half an hour before we started a fire to let the mortar dry. The sun's pretty hot. Maybe it won't take quite so long today."

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"Let's play tag while we wait," suggested Katy.

"Bet I can roll you girls off that barrel," said Sherm with mischief in his eye.

"Bet you can't."

"I'll help you, Sherm."

"No you don't, Ernest—Sherm said he could—he's got to do it alone."

Chicken Little perked up at the prospect of a tussle. "I'll sit the other way, Katy. You and Gertie brace your feet against the ground—just as hard. Move the barrel a little and I can put mine against the chopping logs; there that's fine."

Sherm was about fifteen feet away and he made a dash to stop these preparations. But the little girls were planted firmly before he could interfere.

He was a stout lad but he found the rolling process more difficult than he had imagined. The other boys hovered around eager to take a hand and offering unasked suggestions.

"Lift up one end—that'll heave them off."

"You said roll, Sherm Dart!" squealed Katy as she felt the barrel gently rising under her.

"That's right, Sherm, you did," put in Ernest who was usually fair.

Sherm disgustedly lowered the barrel, rubbing his hands together preparatory to another shove.

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The little girls gloated.

"H-m-m—wasn't so easy as you thought it would be—was it?" jeered Chicken Little.

"You can't do it, Smarty," Katy shied a chip at him.

Gertie kicked her heels against the barrel in glee and said nothing.

"Before I'd let the girls get ahead of me!" Carol and Ernest joined in the chorus of derision.

"Sherm Dart beaten by the girls!"

Sherm gritted his teeth and settled down to business. He pulled—he pushed—he jerked, but the little maids succeeded in maintaining some sort of balance. He couldn't get the barrel over. Finally he had a happy thought. He also braced both feet against the chopping log and giving a sudden shove with all his strength sent the barrel over and the little girls sprawling in all directions at the same time.

There was a chorus of protests from Chicken Little and Katy, but Ernest and Carol acting as umpires declared that Sherm had kept his contract. Furthermore, the boys were eager to light the furnace, dry or not.



Wiping his eyes ... as the puffs came thicker.

To Chicken Little was granted the proud privilege of touching the match to the heaped-up fuel. It took five matches to do the work and when the paper and kindling finally caught, the smoke showed a disposition to pour out the door into their faces instead of puffing decorously up the chimney.

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"I don't see what ails the old thing," said Sherman, wiping his eyes and backing off as the puffs came thicker.

"Bet there's a crack some place near the top that spoils the draught." Ernest was a student and strong on reasons.

"Holy smoke! I should say so," reported Sherman, investigating. "Look at the top where the pipe goes in, you could put both hands down through the hole. Carol Brown, I thought you undertook to plaster this darned thing!"

"Well, I daubed on two bucketsful of the stuff—maybe you think it was fun to fill in all those cracks. I can't help it if you fellows left half acre spaces between the bricks so it falls through!" complained Carol, who did not love work.

"Half acre nothing, your stuff was too thin and didn't stick! Here—gimme your bucket."

Sherm stalked off disgustedly and was soon back with a gloriously messy batch of clay which he dashed painstakingly into the crack and into sundry other cracks that his keen eyes discovered.

"When you're doing a job, you might as well learn to do it right—it saves time in the long run," he lectured with an absurd imitation of his father's manner.

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"Quit your preaching!" growled Carol.

"Alee samee, Sherm did the business, Carol," retorted Ernest. "Gee, it's going with a whoop!"

And the furnace certainly proved the force of Sherman's words, for the fire crackled merrily.

The children watched it, fascinated, waiting till the embers should be ready for the apples and potatoes.

Katy had a bright idea. "Say, Jane, get your dishes and I'll ask Mother if I can bring over our little table and we'll have a sure enough tea party."

"Oh, shucks, we don't want any doll parties!" said Ernest.

"'Twon't be a doll party—it'll be a people's party," protested Jane.

"Maybe Mother'd give me some spice cakes. She's making some," suggested Gertie tactfully.

Carol, who was a bit of a glutton, pricked up his ears.

"Let the kids have their duds if they want them. It won't spoil the goodies."

"Oh, well, I don't care what they have, but I'm not going to eat from their old doll things," said Sherm, who prided himself upon being above childish things.

"Nobody wants you to, you old cross patch, but you will, won't you, Carol? And I bet Ernest and Sherm'll want to when they see what we've got," and Katy bustled off with fire in her eye, resolved to produce a spread that should make the boys' mouths water.

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She dispatched Chicken Little for the dishes with instructions to beg Alice for something for the feast, while she and Gertie foraged at home.

Mrs. Halford was a jolly little woman who readily entered into the child's scheme.

The boys were set to tending the roasting apples and potatoes, and the little girls spread their tiny table daintily with a big towel for a tablecloth and rosebud china about as big as a minute.

One untoward accident occurred before the spread was ready and came near wrecking the whole plan. While the girls were off after more food a plate of tempting cookies disappeared bodily from the table, plate and all, and loud and wrathful were the laments.

"You mean things—you've got to put those cookies right back!"

"You sha'n't have a single bite if you don't!"

The boys grinned sheepishly. The cookies resting joyfully in their barbarian young stomachs could not very well be restored.

"I'll tell Mother on you," put in Chicken Little as a last threat.

"Tattle-tale, much good it'll do you. Here's your old plate, and we've eaten the cookies. Trot along for the rest of your stuff—we won't take any more," said Ernest.

"Well, you boys can't have but one doughnut apiece, now." Katy tossed her head indignantly.

However Katy herself was the first to suggest dividing her second doughnut with the boys when the time came.

Ernest and Sherm had begun to treat the doll's table idea with more respect as one after another tid-bit appeared. Quince preserves settled the matter for Sherm, and Ernest's last objection to doll parties vanished when Alice appeared with a custard pie.

Alice, who had heard Chicken Little's complaint about the way the boys were behaving, found time to linger till the little party was well started to the great improvement of the lads' manners.

"It is customary, Carol, to serve the ladies first," she admonished when Carol made a dive for a coveted dainty ahead of the others.

And when the sugar mysteriously disappeared into Ernest's pocket, she picked up the pie without comment and started for the house. The sugar was immediately restored and order reigned during the rest of the meal. The boys appreciated the girls' truck the more because their own cooking had hardly been a success. The potatoes were half done and the apples tasted alarmingly of ashes. The moment the last morsel had vanished the boys cleared out for the ball field and the little girls looked longingly after them, as they surveyed the messy dishes.

"Let's leave them and go swing," suggested Katy.

Chicken Little sighed.

"Mother'd never let me use them again if I didn't clean them up and put them away."

"Well," said Katy, "I'll take my things home, but I don't think I ought to help you wash yours."

"Why, Katy Halford, you asked me to use them!"

"Never mind, Jane, I'll help you. Katy can just go off if she wants to. 'Twon't take long and I love to wipe," said peacemaker Gertie avoiding a storm.

Katy thought better of deserting and the work was soon done in their very best manner, which, however, did not include washing the inside of the very sticky sugar bowl or gathering up the remains of the impossible potatoes. But Alice saved the day by attending to these small details and Chicken Little was free to worry over the hated patchwork.

"Wisht I could stay out here in the sun for always," she sighed.

"Huh, I don't. There wouldn't be any coasting or skating or candy pulls or——"

"Well, I wisht there wasn't any sewing."

"You don't either. Where'd you get any dresses or hats, Jane Morton?" retorted practical Katy.

"Feathers might be nice," put in Gertie, who loved birds.

"Well, I shouldn't want my clothes fastened on so I couldn't get them off at night," announced Katy decidedly. "And if you were a bird you couldn't read books or play dolls."

"Well," Chicken Little replied unwilling to concede the point entirely, "snakes can slip their skins right off—my father said so—and I don't see why birds couldn't—anyway, I wish little girls didn't have to learn to sew, so there!"

"I don't mind sewing but I hate arithmetic," said Gertie.

"Pshaw, 'rithmetic's easy."

"Bet you wouldn't say so if you saw our problems for Monday!"

"Let's see them."

"Say, Jane, I'll help you with your patchwork if you'll help me with my arithmetic."

"I don't know whether Mother'd let me."

"Ask her if you can't bring it over to our house."

Chicken Little had reasons of her own for being dubious about asking further favors. She did not, however, wish to confide these reasons to her friends.

"I know she won't let me."

"Well, ask her."

Chicken Little shook her head.

"Go on, Jane," Katy insisted.

But Chicken Little was obstinate.

"Why won't you?"

"'Cause she's mad," she confessed finally.

But the Fates favored her. When she went into the house in much fear of the promised punishment, she found her mother had gone out for the afternoon leaving some new patchwork cut out for her. Alice readily gave her permission to take it over to Halford's.

Chicken Little joyfully gathered up her pieces and needle and thread, but instead of running back to the girls, she went to the window looking out into the tree tops thoughtfully. She stood there thinking for several minutes, her brown eyes sober and her forehead puckered into a firm little line. Finally she shook her head and exclaimed regretfully:

"I guess it wouldn't be fair!"

Then she walked soberly back to the girls.

"Mother's gone and Alice says I can, but—but—I guess I oughtn't to, Gertie. I promised Mother I'd do it, you see. But I'll help you with your examples."

"You could do it over at our house yourself."

"Yes, but I think Mother 'spected me to stay at home and she let me off this morning. I guess I won't."

And she was deaf to further argument.

The child squared herself sturdily as the other children climbed the back fence, then walked straight into the house, carefully washed her hands—which would greatly have astonished her mother could she have seen her—and settled herself doggedly down to the patchwork.

The stitches were pretty straggly when her mother came to examine them that evening, but they had been faithfully and painstakingly set with much pricking of awkward little fingers. Her mother conceded somewhat grudgingly that she had worked pretty well.

"I trust you realize how very naughty you have been to destroy your pretty silk pieces and your beautiful hair ribbons," she added.

Chicken Little opened her mouth to retort, but thought better of it and closed it again. Many of the hair ribbons in question had been on the ragged edge and beautiful was a little strong—but discretion was sometimes the better part. She kept her big eyes intently on her mother's face. Her fingers were picking nervously at her apron strings. Mrs. Morton felt that she was making an impression on the child and tried to live up to it.

"I want you to ask your Heavenly Father tonight to forgive you for being so naughty. I have decided to punish you by keeping you at home and not letting you play with Katy and Gertie for a week."

Chicken Little had been perfectly willing to ask God to forgive her for she felt rather mean about spoiling the hair ribbons herself, but this awful sentence of separation from the girls decidedly lessened her penitence.... She didn't think the hair ribbons were worth it. Her brown eyes flashed for an instant but she didn't say anything. Presently, supposing her mother had finished, she started to walk away.

"Jane!"

"Yes ma-am."

"Are you going to ask God to forgive you?"

The child studied a moment then replied shortly.

"No."

"What—come here!"

Chicken Little turned and looked at her mother, then came slowly back.

"Did you understand my question?"

"Yes ma-am."

"What did you mean by saying no?"

Chicken Little swallowed hard to keep up her courage.

"'Cause I ain't."

"Ain't what?"

"Ain't sorry I spoiled the hair ribbons—I don't see any use in being sorry if I've got to stay away from Katy and Gertie a whole week. I guess you wouldn't be sorry if somebody shut you up for a

week—you'd be mad!" And Chicken Little, despite several valiant swallows, burst into a flood of tears.



Chicken Little scarcely saw her mother for the next three weeks. Mrs. Morton seemed to be always shopping or calling or doing something so important that she could not be interrupted. She held long conferences with Dr. Morton and Frank. On these occasions Chicken Little was sure to be sent out of the room, and the child began to wonder what was going on. She consoled herself by talking it over with Alice.

"What do you suppose they're all fussing about, Alice?"

Alice smiled.

"Secrets, of course."

"Do you know, Alice?"

"A little."

"Please tell me."

"I can't, but your mother will pretty soon. It's something very nice and exciting, and you're going to be in it."

"Oh, Alice, I just can't wait! Pretty please tell me."

"Promised your mother I wouldn't tell a soul. You won't have to wait long, dear, so be a good child and don't tease. Here's a cookie for you."

Alice patted the rough brown head lovingly.

During the next week excitement lurked around every corner in the Morton home. Mrs. Morton was having a wonderful ashes-of-roses silk dress made. Chicken Little found Alice concocting a huge fruit cake with a perfect marvel of white frosting, and this was promptly stowed away in the big tin cake box and labelled "Hands Off." Not so much as a bite was permitted to any member of the family.

Jane came into the room unnoticed one day in time to hear her mother say to Frank: "Of course, the house is from both of us, but I want to give you something all by myself, and I think I will make it a silver water set."

This was too much for Chicken Little. Why should her father be giving brother Frank a house? Wasn't he going to live with them any more? She decided to go and talk the mystery over with Katy, but her mother saw her and called her back.

"I've something very nice to tell you, little daughter, but we want to keep it a secret for a week or two yet, so you must promise Mother not to tell anybody till Mother gives you permission."

Chicken Little nodded eagerly.

"Your brother Frank is going to be married, dear, early in November, to lovely Marian Gates—they are going to live near us over on Front Street. Your father has given them that pretty cottage next to Darts'. You have always wanted a sister—now you will have one. Won't that be nice?"

Chicken Little was too astonished to answer and her mother continued: "I am going to take you over to see Marian tomorrow afternoon and you must be a little lady so brother Frank will be proud of his little sister."

Chicken Little was so absorbed with the main idea that she hated "little lady" passed unnoticed. When her mother had finished telling her some of the details about the wedding, which was to be a quiet one at Marian's home, she went off to school in a maze of wonderment. She had never seen a wedding. She knew vaguely that people always got new clothes for such occasions and that the minister always seemed to be present.

Her lessons suffered sadly from her excitement. She got wrong answers to four of her ten

examples. When her teacher asked her for the second time where New York was situated, she answered confusedly, "Over on Front Street," and was soundly, scolded for her lack of attention.

She relieved her mind of a few questions at noon.

Was the wedding going to be at night? Could she sit up till it was all over? Was Alice going? Were Katy and Gertie going?

General conversation at the dinner table had to be largely suspended till her curiosity was satisfied.

"Well, Miss Interrogation Point," laughed her father when she had finally subsided for a moment, "any other little matters you'd like to know about?"

Chicken Little was too intent on her own ideas to notice his pleasantry.

"Why isn't Alice going?"

"Because she won't be invited, my dear," responded Mrs. Morton shortly.

"Why won't you invite her, Mother?"

"My dear, I do not do the inviting. Marian and her mother will attend to that part. Besides, my child, it is hardly customary to send wedding cards to hired girls. I may offer Alice's services to Mrs. Gates to help in the kitchen."

Chicken Little finished her apple dumpling in silence and her mother supposed she was satisfied.

She took up the question with Alice when she came home from school that afternoon.

"I wisht you were going, Alice."

"I wish I were, Chicken Little. Your mother suggested that I might go and help, but I used to play with Marian Gates when I was a little girl and I couldn't bear to go there as a servant. I would like to see your brother married—and Marian, too."

After her talk with Alice, Chicken Little started over to Halford's feeling very important but vowed to silence. Alice cautioned her as she went out the back door, "Don't tell Katy and Gertie, Chicken Little."

She rather resented this. She was resolved to die rather than tell anyone—as if she couldn't keep a secret!

But her reception was certainly disconcerting. Katy and Gertie met her at the gate, bubbling with information and determined to get all the facts they didn't know.

"Say, Jane, your brother's going to be married isn't he?" questioned Katy, and Gertie added:

"The wedding's in November isn't it? And he's going to marry Marian Gates and she's to have a white silk dress. I heard your mother tell Mamma this afternoon when I came home from school."

How could a ten year old maiden already full to bursting with a secret withstand such an attack?

Jane hesitated, got red in the face and tried to pretend not to know anything about it, but sharp little Katy had it all out of her in no time, and the deed once done Jane joyfully volunteered a few facts on her own account.

"I'm going, and I'm going to have some white shoes and a pale blue silk poplin dress with lots of little ruffles all up and down in hills—you know," and Jane danced about on her tip-toes boastfully to be recalled promptly to earth by Katy.

"Your mother didn't want you to tell, did she? Gee, I bet she'll be mad!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Chicken Little conscience-stricken, "you mustn't ever tell!"

"Well, I just guess I knew it before you told me, Jane Morton, and I guess I didn't promise anybody I wouldn't tell. 'Sides, everybody that's got eyes knows it. I've seen your brother out riding with her heaps of times."

"She's got be-utiful clothes," said Gertie, "and her sister May says her hair reaches most down to her knees and it's just as thick as——"

"Yes," interrupted Katy, "and I guess you'll have to like Jennie Gates whether you want to or not 'cause she'll be a kind of a sister, too."

"She won't either!" denied Chicken Little hotly. "Mother said just Marian, and she's lovely—so there!"

"Isn't it funny her name will be Marian Morton now instead of Marian Gates," replied Katy, satisfied with the commotion she had caused and wishing to give a new turn to the conversation.

This was a new thought to Chicken Little and she paused to ponder over it. Of course her mother's name was Morton the same as her father's, but then she supposed it had always been Morton. That night when she went home she astounded her mother by asking why Frank's name wouldn't be Frank Gates if Marian was to be Marian Morton. She also made her big brother's face flush by asking if Marian's red hair really truly came below her knees.

"Why, little Sis, I don't know. It looks as if it did."

Jane looked forward to the call on the new sister with mingled dread and delight. She drove off

in state beside her mother proudly arrayed in her best red merino dress and little brown furs, and firmly resolved to put prejudice aside for once and be a little lady.

Her awe of this new sister was so great that she followed her mother into the Gates' parlor in such a condition of stage fright that she resembled a jointed doll more than an active child. She extended her small hand stiffly to the tall girl in blue who bent to greet her. But the new sister had heard too much of Chicken Little to stand on ceremony, and putting both arms around her, kissed her twice, once between the wondering eyes and once on her prim little mouth.

98

The child's heart was captured immediately and she joyfully cuddled up close to this new relative, who drew her with her to a big chair relieving her own nervousness, at this interview with dignified Mrs. Morton, by petting Chicken Little.

Marian Gates soon noticed that Jane seemed specially interested in her hair. She detected small fingers feeling it cautiously and saw Mrs. Morton shake her head. Finally, Chicken Little reached up and whispered something. Marian laughed and nodded, then turning to Mrs. Morton explained: "She wants me to take my hair down."

Mrs. Morton protested but Marian bent her head and told Jane to pull out the pins. The child's fingers trembled and she touched the soft dark masses almost reverently.

When the last pin was out and the hair tumbled a shimmering cloud over Marian's shoulders, over the chair arms, and on down to the floor, Mrs. Morton exclaimed in admiration and Chicken Little stood spellbound. Marian, blushing, got to her feet.

"There's really too much," she apologized. "It's hard to do anything with."

Chicken Little stepped forward fascinated, slipping her fingers among the shining strands.

"It is"—she gasped finally, "it is—clear below your knees—and it's real!"

99

She could hardly wait to get home and assure brother Frank of the miraculous fact. He seemed deeply interested. When he went to see Marian that evening he remarked:

"Why this *unfair discrimination*? Don't you love me as well as you do Jane?"

And blushing Marian displayed her wealth of hair to a second audience no less admiring than the first.

It seemed to Chicken Little that the day of the wedding would never come. She bubbled about it till each individual member of the Morton family, including the sympathetic Alice, wished she hadn't been told. Ernest, who was secretly almost as excited as Jane, though he considered it the manly thing to pretend that he wasn't, listened eagerly to all her facts, but got tired of her questions.

"Girls and women are always fussing about clothes. Mother says I've got to wear a stiff collar," he complained. "Anyway, I hope they'll have a lot to eat."

"Oh, I know they will," said Chicken Little. "Jennie Gates said they were cooking and packing all the time at her house this week. She says Frank gave her a quarter. I wish he'd give me a quarter."

"Ah, he's just makin' up with Marian's family. You don't have to be paid to like Marian—you think she's the only person on the earth now."

100

As the wedding day approached, Chicken Little became more and more concerned about Alice's being left at home. She broached the subject to her mother again but was dismissed with a curt:

"It is impossible, my dear. I gave Alice the opportunity to be present and she refused. I fear she is getting notions very much above her position."

The child was not content. She decided to tackle her brother Frank. She met him at the front gate one evening about three days before the wedding, and poured out her tale of woe. Frank considered, then patted her on the head and promised to talk it over with Marian.

The next day Miss Alice Fletcher received an engraved card requesting the pleasure of her company at the Gates-Morton nuptials. The tears stood in Alice's eyes as she read it. "How dear of Marian!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Morton had felt distinctly displeased at the arrival of the card, but the sight of the girl's tears disarmed her. Instead of discouraging Alice from attending the wedding as she at first intended, she turned in and helped her arrange a dress for the occasion. She did, however, ask Chicken Little somewhat sternly if she had teased Marian to invite Alice.

The long parlors of the Gates home were fragrant with evergreen and hot-house flowers that wedding night when the Morton family arrived. Chicken Little had seen her brother's trunk start for the station, and had admired his silk hat and white gloves as the hack called for him before the rest of the family were ready. She had promised Katy and Gertie to bring them a lot of wedding cake and to remember every single thing to tell them, but especially to find out whether Marian was dressed properly as a bride should be in "something old and something new, something borrowed and something blue." Katy had discovered that this was absolutely necessary to a bride's future happiness.

101

The something new was very apparent as Marian and Frank walked slowly down the long room between the lines of friends and relatives to the little bower where the minister stood waiting for them. Marian was all in shimmering silken white, but she wore no veil, and her glorious hair crowned a very sweet and earnest face. She carried a quaint little bouquet of pale tea roses and

heliotrope framed formally in lacy white paper, and an exquisite lace handkerchief, whose slightly yellowed border betrayed that it was something old, even to Chicken Little's childish eyes.

Frank held his head high and clasped Marian's arm close as if he were a little afraid she might vanish at the last moment. Jane noticed that there were tears in her mother's eyes and in Marian's father's and she felt worried lest it was because Marian had forgotten the "something borrowed" and "something blue." She inspected her carefully the whole length of the parlors, but no hint of anything blue could she detect unless it was the heliotrope in the bouquet, and that she thought was surely lavender. Her mother wore a great deal of lavender. Perhaps, though, the handkerchief had been borrowed.

102

She forgot her anxiety for a few moments during the hush that attended the solemn rendering of the marriage service. She slipped clear out in front of everybody to see better, but Ernest pulled her back impatiently. When the last words were uttered and the minister extended his hand in congratulation, she slipped quietly around behind the bridal pair, to look Marian over at close range. Her brother caught sight of her.

"Come on, Chicken Little, and kiss your new sister. Why, what a solemn face!"

Marian hugged her up tight and Jane found courage to whisper, "You haven't got anything blue on."

Marian looked puzzled for an instant, then laughed heartily.

"Yes, I have, little sister, but don't you tell—it's a blue garter. And my handkerchief is old and borrowed from my mother. It was her wedding handkerchief—so you see it's all right. I'm glad you wished me to be just right."

103

"Katy said brides wouldn't be happy if they didn't," explained the child.

"And you wanted me to be happy—bless your heart! I'm going to be the happiest girl in the world and I'm going to love my little new sister very dearly."

The child's heart was rather divided for the remainder of the evening between the desire to stay close to the new sister, and her allegiance to Alice. A glimpse of the latter standing off by herself near a window, decided her. With her usual impetuous movement she made a dash in her direction, bumping smartly into a tall young man who chanced to be in the way.

Mr. Richard Harding looked down at her with a smile.

"Hello, small craft, where are you heading for at such speed?"

Chicken Little returned the smile, rubbing her cheek where it had grazed against his coat button.

"I was just a going to Alice."

"Alice, eh?—You are Frank Morton's little sister aren't you?"

Jane nodded.

"I'm Chicken Little."

104

"I see, well, Chicken Little, you'll have hard work getting through this crowd—let me help you. Where is Alice?"

Chicken Little pointed.

Alice's simple white swiss dress was outlined very distinctly against a dark red curtain. She looked very lovely as Mr. Harding immediately observed. Her dark hair was coiled low on her neck with two long curls hanging down over one shoulder. Her gray eyes were sweet and wistful as she watched the gay company in which she had so little part. She had tucked a spray of red berries in her hair and another was fastened at her throat with a handsome old cameo brooch.

"So that is Alice. Well, I think I should like to go to Alice myself. Suppose you take me over and introduce me. I'm Dick Harding."

The introduction was adequate if not conventional. One of Chicken Little's hands was slipped confidingly into Dick Harding's by this time, and she promptly tucked the other into Alice's when she reached her. This brought the two very close together indeed and made them laugh.

"Here, Chicken Little, what about that introduction?"

Jane glanced from one face to the other with shy embarrassment.

"This is Alice," she said, looking up at Dick Harding, "and this is Dick Harding, Alice."

105

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Alice," Dick said, smiling again.

"Alice Fletcher, Mr. Harding."

Mr. Harding suggested that he should find them seats and bring them some supper. He found an empty sofa and Chicken Little settled down cozily between them. Here she rejoiced in unlimited sandwiches and cake and ice-cream until she suddenly remembered her promise to take Katy some wedding cake and started off on a foraging expedition.

Apparently Dick Harding and Alice did not miss her. They seemed to be having a very jolly half hour together. When Alice rose on the plea of helping Mrs. Morton, Dick Harding detained her to ask if he might come to see her. He was astonished at the confusion his simple request caused. Alice's face flushed, then turned pale, and her hands trembled as she toyed with her

handkerchief. It was a full minute before she replied.

"I—I am afraid you don't understand, Mr. Harding. I am Mrs. Morton's hired girl."

Dick Harding had not understood and he was very much surprised, but he was too entirely a gentleman to hurt her by revealing it.

"I should like to come, Miss Fletcher,—if it would not embarrass you," he said warmly.

Alice seemed troubled. She looked up at him, as he stood there regarding her with friendly eyes.

"I'm afraid it would," she answered. "I should love to have you—but—it wouldn't be best—you understand."

"Yes, Miss Fletcher, I do understand, and I honor you for your frankness, but I warn you I don't intend to let our acquaintance drop. Good-night."

Chicken Little's foraging was most successful. She secured enough wedding cake to furnish indigestion and dreams for a family of twelve, not to mention samples of other edibles, but she was horribly afraid her mother would see the bulging package in her coat pocket. It relieved her mind to catch Ernest filling his pockets, too.

"I am just taking a little something to the boys," he apologized rather shame-facedly.

Ernest freed his mind on the subject of weddings the following morning at the breakfast table.

"I shouldn't mind the wedding," he said thoughtfully between mouthfuls of buckwheat cakes and syrup, "but what a man wants a girl tagging round all the time for, I can't see."

Mrs. Morton looked horrified, and the doctor looked up from his paper long enough to ejaculate "What?" Chicken Little took up the cudgels: "I'd like to have Marian round every single minute. I wish she was going to live with us."

"Oh, Marian's all right, but I don't want any girl dearyin' me!" And Ernest relapsed into the buckwheats again.





CHAPTER · VII
CHICKEN · LITTLE · JANE · AND ·
DICK · HARDING · PLAY · PROVIDENCE

"Jane," called Mrs. Morton as the child was starting back to school one noon a few days after the wedding, "go by the postoffice on your way home and ask for the mail. There will probably be a letter from Frank or Marian on the afternoon train."

"I will, Mother." Chicken Little called back, but she came near forgetting it because she had something else on her mind. She never could keep two things on her mind at the same time successfully.

Alice had been very sober ever since the wedding. The night before Chicken Little had found her crying.

"It's nothing, dear. I'm just silly enough to be worrying because I can't be somebody," she told Chicken Little. "If I could only find a way to go to school two years so I could teach! I have been thinking of trying to work for my board, but Mary Miller did that and she had to work so hard she didn't have time to study and she got sick. I don't see how I could pay for my books and clothes either. Perhaps Uncle Joseph would lend me the money if I'd write to him—I could pay it back when I got to teaching. But I can't bear to, after the way he treated Mother. She wrote to him when Father died asking him to help settle up Father's affairs. He sent her \$500 and said

that was all he could do for her—that he couldn't spare the time to come here—she could hire a lawyer. Mother never wrote to him again and we never heard from him afterwards. I've been told he still lives in Cincinnati and is very rich. Oh, dear, if I only could get that bank stock money—I wish Mr. Gasset would hurry up and do something."

Alice poured out her troubles to the child for want of an older listener and Chicken Little sympathized acutely.

She wanted to talk it over with her father but Dr. Morton had been called away some distance into the country to see a patient and had not returned. She relieved her mind to Katy and Gertie on the way to school that morning and they were satisfyingly indignant over Alice's troubles, but had no suggestions to offer.

"Her uncle's an old skinflint—that's what he is. He's awful rich and owns a big stove factory all by himself. Father orders stoves from there. He and Mamma say it's a shame he doesn't do something for Alice when she's his only brother's child."

110

The matter troubled Jane all day and she was still thinking about it when she started home from school. She was half way home before she remembered about going to the postoffice.

There was a letter from Frank and she was just starting homeward again with it clasped tight in her hand, when someone hailed her.

"Hello, Chicken Little Jane, are you postman today?"

It was Dick Harding.

"Going straight home? I'm going your way then. Here, let me carry your books."

They passed a greenhouse en route and Dick asked Jane if she thought her mother would mind her going in with him a moment.

Chicken Little adored going through the greenhouse. She often stopped outside on her way to school to look at the flowers, but children were not encouraged inside. She wondered what Mr. Harding was going to do with the heliotrope and verbena he was selecting so lavishly. He was having the flowers made into two bouquets, one big and one little. Her curiosity was soon satisfied.

"Will you do something for me, Chicken Little?" he asked, after the stems had been securely wrapped in tinfoil and the bouquets adorned with their circlets of lace paper. "Will you give this to Miss Fletcher with Dick Harding's compliments?" handing her the big one. "And will you please beg Miss Jane Morton to accept this with my best love?" Dick grinned as he presented the tiny cluster with an elaborate bow.

111

Chicken Little was in raptures but the commission to Alice recalled the latter's troubles. Childlike she unburdened herself to Dick Harding.

She found him a most sympathetic listener.

"Come over here and sit down and tell me all about Alice. I heard something the other day about Gasset and the stock certificates, but I didn't know Miss Fletcher was the heroine."

Chicken Little's account was a trifle disconnected and liberally interspersed with "Alice says" and "Father says," but Dick Harding being a lawyer had no difficulty in arriving at the facts. He was vastly interested and asked many questions.

"This uncle's name is Joseph Fletcher and he owns a factory in Cincinnati? That must be the Fletcher Iron Works."

Dick Harding pondered awhile, whistling softly to himself.

"You say Alice is too proud to write to her uncle because he didn't treat her mother right?"

112

"Yes, but she wants to go to school awfully—so she can be like other folks." This phrase of Alice's had made a deep impression upon Jane.

"Poor little girl—she's certainly had a rough row to hoe—and all alone in the world, too." Dick was talking to himself rather than to Chicken Little.

He turned to her again presently after another period of meditation.

"Alice certainly deserves better things of the Fates, Jane, and I've been wondering if you and I couldn't find a way to help her out. How would it do for you to write a letter to this Uncle Joseph and tell him about Alice just as you have told me. I expect it would be pretty hard work for a ten year old, but I could help you. What do you say?"

Chicken Little was overawed at the prospect of writing to a strange man, but she was very eager to help Alice.

"Could I write it with a pencil? Mother doesn't like me to use ink 'cause I most always spill it."

"A pencil is just the thing—it will be easier to erase if you get something wrong. But, Chicken Little, I guess this would better be a little secret just between you and me for the present. I'll tell your mother all about it myself some of these days. Do you think you could write the letter and have it ready by tomorrow afternoon? I'll see you after school and take it and mail it—if it's all right."

113

Chicken Little thought she could. Dick Harding gave her as explicit directions as he dared as to what she should say and what she should not say.

"Remember," he added, "not a word of this to anybody—especially to Alice."

"I've probably got the youngster all mixed up with my fool directions, but I believe she might make an impression on the uncle, if she can only write as she talks. Bless her tender heart. Alice has one loyal friend if she is small," he said to himself, unconsciously echoing Dr. Morton's words.

Jane left Alice's flowers in the entry while she delivered the letter to her mother, but she displayed her own tiny bouquet proudly.

"See what Mr. Harding gave me!"

"Mr. Harding is very kind. Was that what made you so late?"

"Yes, we stopped at the greenhouse to get them only I didn't know he was going to get them—he just asked me did I think you would mind if I went in there with him?"

"Well, that was very nice—run along—I want to read my letter."

Chicken Little hurried away to take Alice her flowers.

"For me—really?" demanded Alice: "Who sent them?"

"He asked me would I give them to you with Dick Harding's compliments."

The telltale "he" brought a flush to Alice's face and the "Dick Harding" deepened it. Alice buried her face in the fragrant posy to hide her embarrassment.

"Did he say anything else, Jane?"

"Yes, he said a lot. He asked me how you were and how Mamma was and if we'd heard from Frank and Marian. He asked a lot about you—" Chicken Little caught herself just in time. "I think he's just beautiful—don't you, Alice? He walked most home with me and carried my books just like I was grown up."

Alice hugged her by way of reply.

"I told him how you always saved the cookies for us and how Ernest said you were a brick and he said Ernest evidently had good taste."

Alice's face took on several expressions during this recital. When the child had finished, she said gravely:

"Jane, will you do me a favor?"

Chicken Little was all attention.

"Please don't say anything to the other children about what Mr. Harding said or about his sending me the flowers—will you?"

Chicken Little readily promised though she looked disappointed. Secrets certainly had their drawbacks.

She put her own flowers in water in one of her mother's best vases, a white hand holding a snowy tulip, and stood off to admire the effect. Then she soberly hunted up a box of tiny, vivid pink note paper, a much treasured possession, and set to work on the fateful letter. She selected the front parlor as the most secluded spot she could find, the front parlor being reserved for visitors and holidays exclusively.

Its quiet this evening was almost oppressive. Jane stared about the room seeking inspiration in vain. The old mahogany chairs upholstered in hair cloth were shinily forbidding. The globes of wax flowers and fruit that adorned two small marble-topped tables, were equally cold. The silver water set suggested ice water, and the "Death of Wesley" which monopolized one wall could hardly be considered cheering. Chicken Little shivered, and taking an ottoman, ensconced herself between the lace curtains at a west window where the late autumn sunshine was still streaming in.

She sucked the end of the lead pencil meditatively.

"Dear Mister Fletcher," she wrote, then paused for ideas. Writing to Uncle Joseph she found was a very different matter from talking to Dick Harding. She was picturing Mr. Fletcher in her mind as a cross between a minister and a tame bear. But Jane had a bulldog grit that carried her over hard places, and she finally achieved a letter.

"I guess you'll be surprised to hear from me but I want you to know bout Alice. Katy says your too stuck up is why you wont do anything for Alice. But I thought mebbe you didn't know how bad she wants to go to school. Alice says if she could go to school for two years she could teach and pay you back. She wants to go to school so she can be like other people stead of being a hired girl. Shes an awful nice hired girl. Mother says so and shes prittiern anybody cept Marian. I love her heaps. Alice says mebbe you would lend her the money only she wont ask you cause you weren't nice to her mother and she got awful hungry sometimes. Please Mister Fletcher let Alice go to school cause she cries when she thinks nobody's looking. She thought mebbe she could get some money for the cestificuts but Mr. Gassett wont do anything.

"Respeckfully,
"JANE MORTON.

"P. S. Most everybody calls me Chicken Little. P'r'aps you'd better put it on the letter.

"J. M."

It took two entire sheets of the pink note paper to hold this communication. Chicken Little opened and shut her cramped hand regarding it with mingled satisfaction and distrust. She had never written so long a letter before. She went back to the beginning and painstakingly dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's, a detail she had omitted in the first writing. She deliberated for some time over the spelling. The lines, too, ran up and down hill in an undignified manner. But Chicken Little with a regretful sigh over these deficiencies, folded the sheets and put them into the tiny envelope, copying carefully the address Dick Harding had written out for her. Then she consigned the precious missive to the depths of her Geography so she wouldn't forget it on the morrow.

It was duly delivered into Dick Harding's hands, inspected and approved.

"Bravo, Chicken Little, I couldn't have done better myself."

Jane's brown eyes had been fixed wistfully on his face while he read and she wriggled painfully when he smiled once or twice during the perusal.

"I'm 'fraid it's pretty crooked—p'raps I could change the spelling if you'd tell me. I didn't like to ask anybody 'cause they'd want to know what for."

"We won't change a single thing, Chicken Little. See, we are going to seal it right up—and pop—here goes the stamp. This letter shall be on board that seven-thirty train for Cincinnati or my name isn't Dick Harding. And if it doesn't make Mr. Joseph Fletcher do some thinking, why he is a little meaner than most men—that's all."

Affairs in the Morton family went on uneventfully for the next ten days. Chicken Little was busy in school and Mrs. Morton much occupied with preparations for Christmas.

Ernest was full of certain Christmas schemes of his own to the decided detriment of his lessons. He had purchased a scroll saw and patterns, and was firmly resolved to present each individual member of the family with his handiwork. Some of the designs he had selected were exceedingly intricate and hard on the eyes, but he was not to be dissuaded from using them and he toiled away all his spare moments at the fancy brackets and towel rack. He had great difficulty in concealing the various pieces from the persons for whom they were intended. He got so cross about it that it soon became a family habit to cough loudly, before approaching his room on any errand whatsoever.

The little girls soon caught the Christmas fever also. Alice helped Jane with her mother's present, a book-mark on perforated cardboard done in shades of green silk, which Chicken Little regarded as a great work of art. She fussed away happily over it, tormenting Alice all the while with guesses as to what her mother was to give her. She had exploded the Santa Claus fiction two years before.

"Alice, do you s'pose she will get me that wax doll? There's a perfect dear down at Wolf's. It has blue eyes that shut—and real hair—oh, it's just as yellow. I never saw such yellow hair, but Mr. Wolf said it was really hair. Oh, do you think she'll get that for me? Alice, I wish you'd just tell her that's what I want."

A few days later she rushed in pink with excitement.

"Alice, it's gone! Do you s'pose Mother got it? Katy says she thinks Grace Dart's mother bought it for her. I'm going to ask Sherm. Maybe he'd know. Oh, I do hope Mother got it!"

Another source of excitement was the Sunday School cantata to be given Christmas eve, in which Jane and Gertie were both to have the parts of fairies and Sherm a small role. The little girls trotted obediently back and forth to rehearsals, proud to be in it, but Sherm was in open rebellion, the said rehearsals taking away most of his time with the boys. Katy scoffed openly at the fairies, not having been asked to be one herself.

"Pooh, you won't look like fairies if you do have a lot of spangled tarlatan. Fairies are just as tiny and they have weenty mites of feet!" and Katy pointed this last remark by a withering glance at Chicken Little's feet which were beginning to be much too big for the rest of her, and were encased in stout boots with tiny copper rims on the toes which she heartily loathed. Dr. Morton had insisted upon these as being the only proper foot-gear for children in winter, and many were the jibes Jane suffered from her schoolmates because of them. Katy and Gertie wore lovely button boots, shapely if not sensible.

"You don't need to talk, Katy Halford, my feet aren't much bigger than yours, and I'm going to wear my white shoes and Miss Gray said I'd look lovely, so there!"

Katy, who was swinging on the gate looking down on her small sister and Chicken Little on the sidewalk outside, took three entrancing swings before replying:

"Well, maybe, but Miss Gray don't look so awful nice herself and your hair isn't a speck curly and I never did see a fairy with straight hair."

Jane was sure she had, and Gertie said pretend fairies didn't have to be exactly like really fairies, but Jane was troubled and resolved to consult Alice immediately.

Alice guessed Katy had been up to mischief purposely.

"Nonsense, Katy's just talking about the little flower fairies. Get your Grimm and I'll show you all sorts. Of course, fairies are not all alike any more than little girls. I'm sure you and Gertie will make darling fairies, so don't you worry."

But Alice decided to give Katy a lesson, that young lady boasting a year and a half's advantage

over Chicken Little and Gertie was rather too fond of lording it over them. She bided her time and did not have long to wait. Katy came over a few days later proud as a peacock over a minute pair of kid gloves, the first she had owned. Jane and Gertie followed, admiring and not a little envious.

"See, Alice," Katy struck an attitude with both hands spread out ostentatiously.

Alice saw and hardened her heart.

"What's the matter with your hands, Katy?"

Katy's face lost its satisfied smirk, but she held her hands for a closer inspection.

"Kid gloves, aren't they scrumptious? Don't you wish you had some, girls? I'd a lot rather have kid gloves than be in your old cantata."

Chicken Little started to protest, but Alice anticipated her.

"They make your hands look awfully big, Katy!"

Katy's face fell. She had lovely tiny hands and was proud of them. She looked anxiously at the gloves then took one off and put the bare hand beside the gloved one, surveying them critically.

"I don't think so," she said pluckily after a moment gulping down her disappointment.

Alice couldn't bear that hurt look in the child's face even in a good cause and speedily relented.

"Neither do I, Katy, those gloves are fine! I was only teasing. But, Katy, that's the way you talked to Jane and Gertie about being fairies. 'Twasn't real kind was it, Katy? You know how it feels yourself now."

Katy didn't say anything but she understood and she remembered. She was a shrewd child and a generous one when her sympathies were aroused.

One morning, a few days later, Alice was dusting the sitting room and talking with Mrs. Morton who was seated by the window sewing. Suddenly Mrs. Morton, glancing up, saw a man entering the front gate.

"Why, I do believe it's Mr. Gassett."

Alice came to the window to verify the fact.

There was no room for doubt. It was Mr. Gassett ponderously climbing the steps of the terrace.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Morton, "I suppose he has come about those papers. I do wish Dr. Morton were here. I never could understand business matters. Go to the door, Alice; he is ringing."

Alice felt a little shaky as she opened the door to confront the family enemy. She was a trifle reassured to discover that Mr. Gassett also looked embarrassed.

"Ah, Alice, how fortunate—you are the very person I wished to see."

"Will you step into the sitting room, Mr. Gassett?"

"Ah—umm, it is hardly worth while. I can explain my errand here."

Mr. Gassett was not eager to encounter any member of the Morton family. But Alice was shrewd enough to realize that it would be just as well to have someone else present at this interview so she politely insisted.

At sight of Mrs. Morton, Mr. Gassett removed his hat, which he seemed previously to have forgotten.

"How do you do, Madam, a beautiful winter day. I am sorry to disturb you—I just had a little matter of business with your servant."

Alice's eyes flashed at the word servant and Mrs. Morton looked annoyed. Despite her firm belief in class distinctions, she had grown fond of Alice and "servant" seemed unnecessarily offensive. She drew herself up coldly.

"Yes, Mr. Gassett?"

Mr. Gassett opened his errand rather haltingly. Mrs. Morton's dignity oppressed him.

He had been told, he said, that some stolen stock certificates had been found with the silver, which he understood Alice was keeping under the mistaken idea that she had some claim to them because her father had not endorsed them over to Mr. Gassett personally. The bank had waited some weeks hoping she would find out her mistake and return them to their rightful owner, himself. She had not done so and it was his painful duty to come and demand his property.

Mr. Gassett shifted his weight from one foot to the other and looked at Mrs. Morton.

Alice also looked as Mrs. Morton, who motioned her to answer for herself.

"Mr. Gassett, I shall not give up those certificates till you have proved your right to them."

"But, my girl, don't you understand those certificates were stolen from my house? I should think my word would be sufficient," said Mr. Gassett pompously.

"I am not denying they were stolen from your house, Mr. Gassett, but I wish you to explain how my father's certificates came to be in your possession."

"Explain nothing!" Mr. Gassett's temper was rising. "If you knew anything about business you

could see that your father had signed away his claim to them by putting his name on the back."

"There is nothing to show that he signed them over to you, Mr. Gassett. My father died believing he owned that stock—he told my mother so. After his death we hunted high and low for it, but it could not be found. My mother asked you if the certificates were in the store safe, but you denied all knowledge of them—yet you had them all the time and they did not appear in the settlement of Father's estate. It looks very queer if they were yours that you did not say so to my mother at the time. No, I shall not give them up until you prove your right to them."

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Mr. Gassett's face was a very expressive one. It was red with wrath by the time Alice had finished her little speech.

"Hoighty-toighty, my girl, you'd better think twice before you go to insulting your betters. Your mother's dead and what you remember as a half-grown girl won't go very far in a court of law. Your father made over those certificates to me as security for a debt. It was none of your mother's business whether I had them or not. They were endorsed in blank because he hoped to pay the debt and get them back, I suppose."

"You mean he had paid the debt, but carelessly left those valuable papers in the store safe supposing you were an honest man!"

Alice spoke hastily, scarcely daring to hope herself that she had hit the truth.

If Mr. Gassett's face had been red before, it was purple now. He fairly glared at Alice.

"You shall answer for this, you minx. You'll not find it so pleasant being dragged into court. I'll give you one more chance to hand over those papers peaceably—and if you don't, I'll have the law on you. As for you," including Mrs. Morton in his rage, "I'm surprised that you should encourage your servant to insult a gentleman in your own home."

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"This is Alice's affair, Mr. Gassett," replied Mrs. Morton coldly. "She has a perfect right to say what she thinks. I did not arrange to have this interview take place here you will remember."

It was plain to the others that Mrs. Morton was on Alice's side.

This unspoken sympathy acted like a tonic on the girl. She drew herself up in a remarkably good imitation of Mrs. Morton's grand manner.

"I've nothing more to say, Mr. Gassett."

Mr. Gassett did not take the trouble to say good-by. He clapped his hat on his head and banged out the front door.

Mrs. Morton seemed paralyzed with astonishment.

"And he is a member of our church! Alice, I believe you are right—I believe he did steal them. He didn't act like an honest man."

So Alice won one more friend in the Morton family.

They poured the tale into Dr. Morton's ears when he came home to dinner.

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"Well, Alice, I'm afraid you have a law suit on your hands. Have you kept your father's papers?"

"Yes, I've got a box full of old letters and papers."

"She'll have to have a lawyer, won't she?" asked Mrs. Morton anxiously.

"Oh, dear, how can I ever pay one?" Alice clasped her hands in despair at this new thought.

"You might get someone to take the case on a contingent fee. You don't understand—do you? Lawyers often take cases for poor clients with the understanding that they are to have part of the money if they win the case, but get no pay if they lose it."

"Oh, that would be fine! Do you suppose I could get somebody that way?"

Chicken Little and Ernest had been interested listeners.

"Dick Harding's a lawyer," observed Ernest.

"He is—and a mighty good one for a young chap," replied his father.

"Yes, and he's awful sorry for Alice, too. He said she was a plucky girl," Chicken Little broke in.

Alice blushed and Dr. Morton laughed.

"Here's a lawyer ready to your hand, Alice. But Gassett may think better of his threat when he cools off, though I think you may look for trouble."

The following evening Dr. Morton handed a letter to Alice.

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"O dear me," she said, "do you suppose it's from Mr. Gassett? No, it's from Cincinnati. Why it has 'Fletcher Iron Works' in the corner—I wonder—you don't suppose it could be from Uncle Joseph, do you?"

"Maybe he's dead and has left you something, Alice," suggested Dr. Morton.

Alice hurriedly opened the envelope, her amazement increasing as she read.

"Why, I can't understand—why how strange! Chicken Little Jane, did you write to Uncle Joseph?" she demanded, turning suddenly to Jane.

Poor Chicken Little sadly needed Dick Harding for reinforcements during the next three minutes. The entire family turned astonished and accusing eyes upon her, and it was plain to be

seen by her flushed and startled face that she was guilty.

But before either Dr. or Mrs. Morton could demand an explanation, Alice had dropped down beside her and was hugging her tight, half laughing, half crying.

"Oh, you darling, how did you ever happen to think of it? Oh, I'm so happy—I can go to school all I want to, he says. I'll never forget what you've done for me as long as I live, Chicken Little."

When Alice quieted down, it took the combined efforts of herself and Chicken Little to explain the situation to Dr. and Mrs. Morton.

Dick Harding had guessed off Uncle Joseph's character pretty shrewdly. The latter's pride had been touched at the idea of his brother's child working out.

"I am sorry," he wrote, "you had so little confidence in me that you would not write me of your difficulties! I was inexpressibly shocked to learn that your mother suffered want. I supposed her family would look out for you both—she had two brothers living the last I knew. At the time of your father's death I was extremely hard up myself and thought they were better able to care for her than I was."

"They were both killed during the war," Alice stopped reading the letter to explain.

"I am sending you money for clothes and railroad fare, and I trust you will let the past be bygones and come at once to make your home with us. You shall go to school till you are thirty if you want to. Tell Chicken Little Katy was right. I am stuck up—too stuck up to want my only niece to suffer. Tell her, too, I owe her a debt of gratitude for her frank letter that I shall try to pay at some future time."

"But Chicken Little Jane, how did you know where to send the letter, and what made you think of writing to Mr. Fletcher in the first place?" demanded Mrs. Morton, puzzled.

"Why Dick Harding said——" Chicken Little got no further.

"Dick Harding!" interrupted Dr. Morton. "Oh, I see," and throwing back his head, he laughed uproariously.





CHAPTER VIII
CHRISTMAS
AND THE DAY AFTER

Chicken Little's silver-spangled tarlatan skirts stood out crisp and glittering. Her straight brown hair had been coaxed by dint of two rows of curl papers to hang in shining brown curls. A silver paper star shone above her forehead and slippers covered with more silver paper made her feet things of beauty even in Katy's skeptical eyes.

She and Gertie fluttered in among eighteen other pink and white fairies in the improvised dressing-room at the front of the church.

A huge Christmas tree occupied the spot where the pulpit and the minister's chair usually held sway. The tree was likewise adorned with silver paper and tinsel, and pink and white tarlatan in the shape of plump stockings filled with candy and nuts. Each of the little girls was to have one of these, and each boy a candy cane. These also hung in red and white striped splendor on the tree.

The children sniffed the fragrance of the evergreen and eyed the candy longingly. The distribution of presents was not to come off until after the cantata. They peeped out at the sea of faces in front of the brown calico curtains separating the stage and dressing rooms from the audience.

"My, I just know I'll be scared," said Gertie with a little shiver.

"I sha'n't," declared Chicken Little stoutly. "Katy said I would and I won't! I'm going to pretend we're just playing ring-round-a-rosy on the school grounds and then I sha'n't mind the people."

The fairies had to circle round the despairing heroine while their queen promised her good gifts because she had been an astonishingly good little girl.

Sherm was to appear later when the good gifts began to arrive in visible packages borne by human messenger boys. The heroine and her Sunday School teacher, and her aged mother were supposed to weep for joy while the presents poured in, and ended by singing a hymn in which the messenger boys joined. Sherm came in and deposited his bundles with great eclat. Unfortunately he dropped one on the heroine's toe startling her so that she said "Oh!" quite audibly. Sherm's voice was a little weak on the hymn till the last Halleluyah, when it came out strong and a little off the key.

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It was ten-thirty P. M. before Ernest and Jane got home and settled themselves before the grate fire to munch candy and talk it over.

"I wish we could do it all again," said Chicken Little regretfully. "Mrs. Dart said we made beautiful fairies and I guess Katy thought so too. She said she never thought I could look so nice." She gave a little simper of satisfaction.

"You kids were all right, but I didn't care for all that singing. I wish they'd have something lively like fencing. Carol said he saw a man over at Mattoon, the time he went with his father, who was a wonder. Wish I could learn."

"I don't believe Father would let you, but I'll help tease if you want me to."

"Frank knows how a little—he showed me."

"Frank and Marian are coming over for breakfast in the morning, so we can have our presents all together. Say, let's hang our stockings up."

"Pshaw, we're too old for that—we never get anything in them but candy or oranges—and I don't think Mother wants us to any more."

"I don't care—it's fun. Come on!"

Jane got one of Ernest's socks and her own longest stocking. They were busy fastening them to the ends of the marble mantel when Alice came in.

Alice had not returned with the others, Dick Harding having undertaken to see her safely home.

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"Oh, children," she exclaimed, distressed, "I've lost one of my brown gloves. I wish you'd look for it for me first thing in the morning—it must be near the gate somewhere. And it's time for you to go to bed now. I guess your mother didn't hear you come in or she would have called you."

"Bet I beat you up in the morning," teased Ernest as they started upstairs.

"Bet you don't. Say, Ernest, please wake me up when you do. I'm awful tired and maybe I won't wake up early. I want to help fix the presents."

"All right, Sis, I will." Ernest gave her a little pat. He was very fond of this only sister but didn't care to show it in public.

But Ernest proved as sound a sleeper as Jane in the morning. Alice had breakfast almost ready and the family table bulged with numerous brown and white paper packages—this was before the epidemic of tissue paper and baby ribbon—when Dr. Morton's cheery "Merry Christmas, Sleepy-heads!" routed them out.

A chorus of "Merry Christmases" responded. Ernest's was vigorous and Chicken Little's sleepy, but Frank and Marian, just coming in the side door, called lustily, and Mrs. Morton chimed in with one for each individual member of the family.

Chicken Little flew down the stairs in her nightgown to have a peep at the fascinating table. She entirely forgot her stocking, which was perhaps just as well, for when she did investigate it after breakfast, she found only a piece of kindling neatly wrapped inside.

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"I told you Mother thought we were too old!" reminded Ernest.

But the table was all that could be desired. Chicken Little began cautiously feeling the packages at her place till her mother discovered her and sent her upstairs to dress.

"Oh, Ernest, there was one funny little flat box just like the one Katy's bracelet came in. You don't s'pose—do you?" And she gave one ecstatic jump in anticipation of the glorious possibility.

Chicken Little's hair went back with a sweep under the round rubber comb, tangles and all. She really couldn't take time to comb it—and her plaid dress had every other button carefully unfastened. Brother Frank remarked that the front elevation was more attractive than the rear, and Marian rushed her off upstairs to make her tidy.

Chicken Little's own contributions to the pile of gifts were made triumphantly after she had driven every other member of the family out of the dining room. She tucked her packages clear down at the bottom of each pile with the exception of Ernest's present. It crowned the heap because she couldn't wait to have him open it. Her father had given her the money for a pocket microscope which Ernest had been coveting for months.

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Mrs. Morton made Alice set a place for herself and share their family festival. Dr. Morton could scarcely finish saying grace before there was a general falling to at the parcels. For some reason Dr. Morton had a prejudice against Christmas trees, and it was always the family custom to have the gifts at the breakfast table.

Chicken Little waited just long enough to see Ernest's face light up over the microscope before she pounced joyously upon her biggest parcel which certainly looked like a doll.

The rest of the family suspended operations to watch her as she lifted the lid of the box, her face aglow with anticipation. She gave one long satisfied look at the contents in perfect silence then voiced her delight in a series of little shrieks.

"Oh Mother!—it is! Oh, the darling!—and it can talk! I didn't know it could talk! And see those red shoes—and isn't that the dearest dress? Oh—Mother!" Chicken Little jumped up from her chair to fling herself on her mother's neck in a grateful hug.

But there were more joys. One *was* a gold bracelet—from Frank and Marian. Alice had made a nightgown and a fascinating coat for Miss Dolly, and Ernest had bought a marvelous trunk for the young lady.

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Ernest's brackets proved to be really charming and the young workman was well repaid for his hours of toil by the general admiration. Mother and Father declared themselves delighted with Jane's painfully wrought book-mark and penwiper, and Alice was more than happy over the substantial coat and the family's gift to her in anticipation of her journey. For Alice was to go to Uncle Joseph's. It had been arranged that she should leave soon after New Year's.

Alice had another surprise later in the morning. A box of gloves arrived on top of which reposed the brown glove she had lost the preceding evening. No card was enclosed, but evidently none was needed for Alice blushed rosy red at sight of the brown glove and hugged the package close as she carried it upstairs.

"I wish Christmas came every day," sighed Chicken Little happily as she tumbled into bed that night almost too tired to undress.

But no one wished it the next day. Everybody was tired and cross and found it hard to settle down to common daily duties after the prolonged Christmas excitement.

Chicken Little went over to see Katy and Gertie in the morning but promptly quarreled with Katy over the respective merits of their Christmas presents. Katy had some new coral beads with a gold clasp that she considered put Chicken Little's bracelet entirely in the shade so Chicken Little gathered up her playthings and went home in high dudgeon, and had to nurse her wrath in lonely state till evening.

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Ernest went skating with the boys in the morning. The three cronies distinguished themselves by promptly getting into trouble with a crowd of Irish boys, who lived beyond the railroad in the new addition.

The Irish boys resented a certain irritating air of superiority that Ernest and his friends assumed and began a series of petty annoyances, bumping into them or crossing from the side just in front while they were racing. The boys contented themselves at first with warning off their tormentors by highhanded threats but the other lads outnumbering them grew more and more daring, till finally a boy named Pat Casey, deliberately tripped Carol, sending him sprawling on the ice. He was pretty badly shaken up and broke a skate strap. The trio considered this insult past endurance and a free-for-all fight ensued.

The trio were game, but they were outnumbered and would have fared badly if two older boys hadn't come to the rescue and driven the other gang off the pond. The Irish boys vowed vengeance and Ernest and his friends deciding that caution was the better part of valor, started for home. Ernest's nose had bled freely and Sherm had a black eye, while Carol plaintively declared that every inch of his fat anatomy was black and blue.

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They slipped into the kitchen at Morton's and got Alice to patch them up. After a good dinner their courage rose. Ernest had been ordered to split wood for an hour in the afternoon and the other boys took turns with him at the axe, while the three planned vengeance on their enemies.

"I saw Pat and Mike Dolan slinking past your house when I came over," reported Sherm excitedly. "I bet they're up to some devilment, I just wish they'd show their ugly mugs here—I guess we'd fix 'em!"

Sherm's wish was answered with startling promptness for at that moment the "ugly mugs" just mentioned appeared over the alley fence, and their owners uttered hoots of derision. The boys bolted with one accord for the fence, but their enemies were half-way down the alley, delivering a volley of cat calls and yells as they ran. The trio vaulted the fence and pursued in vain. The others were too quick for them.

They took turns acting as sentinel at the fence for the next hour, but there was no further disturbance. Late in the afternoon as Ernest and Carol were nearing the Morton home after an errand downtown, they were met by a broadside of snow balls as they were passing an alley. It was growing dusk and the alley was shadowy, but they had no doubt as to the perpetrators of this fresh insult, and grabbing handfuls of snow, they promptly charged the offenders. They proved to be the same Pat and Mike.

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"Here take this!—and this!" yelled Carol as he stuffed an icy mass down Pat's neck and administered a stout kick in the shins as nearly simultaneously as he could manage.

Ernest was equally successful in accounting for Mike and the enemy went away spitting and threatening.

"You dassen't show your faces out of doors tonight—allee samee!" was their parting taunt as they retreated.

As a matter of fact neither Ernest nor Carol were allowed to do much showing of their faces out of doors after dark unless they had some business, their parents being firm in the belief that thirteen and fourteen year old boys should be at home after night. But this slur on their courage was not to be borne.

"I'll ask Mother if we can't make some hickory-nut candy tonight, then we can slip out and watch for them," suggested Ernest after a few moments study.

"Bully, that'll work! Mother will be glad to have me out of the way because Susy's having a party."

It took some tact on Ernest's part before he secured the necessary permission, for Mrs. Morton felt that early to bed after Christmas dissipation would be wiser for all the children.

Chicken Little promptly demanded that Katy and Gertie be included, but Ernest was obdurate, threatening to shut her out if she teased.

Sherm and Carol arrived before the Mortons had finished tea; they shot in the side door with a swiftness that looked as if they were glad to be inside. Their words, however, belied any lack of courage. Sherm was armed with a baseball bat.

"I came round by Front Street," he said, "I just thought I'd see if any of the gang were hanging round. I knew they wouldn't dare tackle me when I had this." He caressed his weapon lovingly.

Carol had a bag of the hardest snow balls he had been able to manufacture.

"I'd liked to put a rock in every one of them," he declared bloodthirstily. "But Father said he'd lick me, if I ever did such a trick again, that time I hit Jimmy Smith. 'Twan't nothing but a bit of gravel either. I didn't suppose it would hurt him. But Father said it was lucky I didn't kill him 'cause it struck right square above the eye."

"'Tisn't safe, I guess, Father would never let me put anything in a snow ball," Ernest replied.

"Do you s'pose they'll come round?"

"Don't know—but say, boys, don't let on before Mother that any thing's up. And see that you keep mighty still, Jane Morton!" he admonished.

Chicken Little who had followed the boys upstairs unperceived and stood listening, round-eyed, was indignant.

"I don't know what you are talking about so how can I tell?"

"So much the better—now run along, don't bother, we're busy."

"But Mother said I could help you make candy and——"

"Hush," said Sherm, "I believe I heard somebody outside on the gravel."

The boys turned out the gas and tiptoeing to the window, peered cautiously out.

"It is—sure's you're born. I bet it's Mike and Pat!" said Carol.

"There's somebody else over by that tree!"

"Who—where—where?" Jane crowded up excitedly to the window.

"You might as well tell her," said Carol.

So Chicken Little was initiated into the mysteries of the feud and found it both interesting and terrifying.

"Do you s'pose they'll try to get in?" she quavered.

"Oh—Oh—there he goes!" she shrieked.

"Shut up," Sherm's hand was clapped firmly over her mouth.

"If you can't keep still you go straight to Mother. Do you hear?" added Ernest sternly.

But at this juncture "Mother's" voice was heard calling:

"Alice is ready for you now, boys. Try not to make too much muss."

"Well, let's go and make the candy now and we can slip out after a while."

"Gee, I'd like to take a shot at them from the window," and Carol fingered one of his snow balls.

"Here none of that! They'd fire back and break the window and we'd have the dickens to pay with Father and Mother!" Ernest remonstrated sharply.

After one parting look from the window, the boys filed reluctantly downstairs.

"I'm going to stay and watch them a while," said Chicken Little.

"All right—you come and tell us if they start anything."

"Whew, better pull the shades down!" said Carol as they entered the brightly lighted kitchen.

Alice looked up quickly. "What for? Nobody can see in here at the back of the house."

"Oh, there might some of the boys be hanging round to steal the candy when we put it out to cool," answered Sherm easily, trying to be off-hand.

Alice set out the molasses and butter and sugar and went off up to her room. The boys pulling the shades carefully down, set to work, and became so absorbed in the candy that they almost forgot their foes for the next ten minutes. Just as they were lifting the sticky mass from the

stove Chicken Little tore in.

"Boys, I guess they've heard you, because one boy came and told those two boys something and they all ran round to the back of the house—just now—and there were four! Oh, you must be awfully careful! Listen, wasn't that somebody at the door?"

There was an audible crunching of the snow outside. The door was bolted, but all four children stood for an instant with their gaze riveted upon it as if they expected to see it burst open at any moment.

"Pooh, they can't do anything!" said Ernest coming to himself, "and the candy'll be all spoiled."

"Say, let's go up to the north room and slip out on the kitchen roof while the candy cools. I bet we can see 'em from there."

The boys set the candy in a pan of snow to cool and bolted softly up the stairs. Dr. and Mrs. Morton placidly reading in the sitting room were blissfully unaware of the excitement.

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"I wonder what makes the boys so quiet tonight?"

The boys followed close by Chicken Little had reached the north room and were cautiously opening the window, inch by inch, lest the sound should be heard outside. Then they quietly clambered out. At first there seemed to be no trace of the intruders. But when Carol incautiously exclaimed in a stage whisper: "Bet they've all vamoosed!" a distinct "Hist!" was heard from below. Finally Sherm, who was flat on his stomach, holding on to the edge of the roof, solved the mystery. He held up his hand in warning to the others, and presently came crawling back and motioned them all inside.

"They're all close against the kitchen windows trying to find out what's going on. They like to caught us when Carol piped up that time. Gee, looked like there was a dozen, but some of 'em are little fellers. I wish we could make a rush at them, but I guess there's too many."

"Shucks, I hate to give up," growled Ernest.

"Well, we might as well go back and finish the candy!" said Carol after a pause. "We can't do anything with such a crowd—a sweet time we'll have getting home tonight," he added gloomily.

"Pshaw, they'll get tired and go home before that," Ernest reassured him. "Say I've got an idea they can hear about everything we say in the kitchen. Let's go down and pretend we're having an awful good time and——"

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"Yes, and let's guy them!" interrupted Sherm.

"Sam's in my room at school and he can't stand being made fun of."

The trio returned to the kitchen, and ably seconded by Chicken Little laughed and frolicked, jeering noisily at the crowd outside. The foes soon gave evidence that they could hear distinctly. They began to return the taunts and to rattle and pound on the doors and windows. They were getting cold and the penetratingly tempting smell of the taffy had evidently drifted through the cracks, for one shrill voice piped up:

"Say, give us some!" to be immediately hushed by his more warlike companions.

If the trio had been clever enough to act on this suggestion and treat, the feud might have come to a speedy end, but the lads were not at a tactful age. Instead Sherm hurled the most insulting defiance he could think of.

"Go get some yourselves, you red-headed Irish beggars!"

This taunt roused the wrath of the attacking party to a white heat, and an instant later the kitchen window came crashing in and a giant snow ball burst into masses of wet snow on the floor.

The boys made a dash for the door, but the bolt was hardly slid, when it, too, crashed, open, and Frank Morton stamped in, pushing Pat Casey and Mike Dolan ahead of him each securely gripped by the collar, in his strong hands.

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"Now look here, what's the meaning of all this boys?"

Before the boys could recover from their surprise sufficiently to answer, Dr. and Mrs. Morton and Alice came running in.

Frank stopped their questions with a word.

"Let me tend to this, please, Father."

Little by little he extracted the trio's version of the day's happenings.

He turned to the Irish boys. "Is that straight?" he demanded.

At first the lads maintained a sullen silence, but finally Pat volunteered.

"They don't own that 'ere pond any more'n we do."

"Who said they did?" asked Frank quickly.

"Nobody," admitted Pat, "but they allus act like they did. They told us to keep off the north end."

"How is that Ernest?"

"Well, we didn't want them mixing up with us."

"Anybody give you a deed to that pond?"

The boys were silent.

"Now look here, boys," Frank's voice was stern. "It strikes me you fellows were in a pretty poor business trying to hog half a public pond for yourselves. Now you have six times the opportunities for fun these boys have, and yet you try to spoil their skating. Pretty small I call that!"

"As for you boys," turning to his captives, "you weren't helping matters any by being mean—now were you? You didn't think acting that way would make you any more popular did you? By the way you're Mrs. Casey's boy, aren't you? Your mother is a fine woman and she works too hard to have to pay for broken windows, don't you think so, Son?"

Frank laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and looked straight into his eyes.

Pat shifted from one foot to the other uneasily.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled with an effort.

"Well, she isn't going to have to this time. I will give you a chance to earn the money to pay for it yourself? Want to?"

The boy nodded eagerly. Frank smiled in return.

"Ernest, pass that candy over here and you boys shake hands with Pat and Mike and see to it you treat them white after this! My brother and his friends aren't as small as they let on, boys," he added turning to the others.

The Irish lads grinned sheepishly, and shyly accepted the candy and apples which the trio, with a complete change of heart pressed upon them.

Chicken Little not to be outdone made them all laugh by offering her small fist, which was hopelessly gummed up with the taffy she had forgotten in the excitement.





CHAPTER IX
CHICKEN LITTLE JANE'S GIFT

"Well, Alice," said Dr. Morton, coming in one noon stamping and shaking the snow off his broad shoulders. "I have discovered why you haven't heard from Gassett again. He is down with typhoid fever—looks like a bad case. He won't be in a condition to start lawsuits for some weeks, so you may set your mind at rest for the present."

The Christmas holidays had gone by all too quickly for the Morton family. The children were already grumbling about starting back to school. Dr. Morton had a number of very sick patients on his hands and looked worried in consequence. Mrs. Morton was helping Alice with her simple wardrobe, and Alice was helping Mrs. Morton break in a new maid.

It was really a great comfort to Mrs. Morton to feel that Alice could now be received as an equal. She had grown fond of her unconsciously, but according to her rigid ideas, friendship with a servant was impossible. "I have always felt," she told her friends, "that Alice was too refined for her situation. Blood will tell, you know."

Chicken Little and Ernest mourned Alice's departure loudly. Ernest turned up his nose promptly at the new girl—a willing soul with scant intelligence.

"Have we got to have that thing round, Mother?" he demanded in deep disgust. He had just deluged his hot cakes with cream which Olga had put in the syrup jug by mistake.

"I'm afraid so, my son, until we can find someone better. Girls are hard to get in this town. Alice has certainly spoiled us."

"What did you let her go for?" Ernest grumbled as if keeping her with them were optional.

"Why, Ernest, I thought you were pleased with Alice's good fortune."

"Well, that's not saying I want her to go off and never see her again."

"Oh, you'll see me again, Ernest," said Alice, coming into the room just then and divining the boy's mood.

"I am coming back to Centerville as soon as I finish school. It seems so hard to leave you all. You've been so good to me—"

Alice broke down and turned hurriedly away to hide her tears.

Chicken Little jumped up and threw her arms around Alice's waist, laying her face against her hands lovingly.

Alice hugged the child tight.

"I am going to miss you so, dear. There won't be any little girl to cuddle at Uncle Joseph's."

Jane followed Alice into her room after breakfast to help pack the shiny new trunk. This was Alice's last day.

"My, isn't it grand! It's got a place for hats and your parasol—and what are these little places for, Alice?" Chicken Little was eagerly investigating.

"Oh, handkerchiefs and ties and gloves. I'm a lucky girl to have all these nice things. Just think—three new dresses! Blue and brown cashmeres for school and a green silk poplin for Sunday best—aren't these little bows down the front cunning?"

Alice surveyed her treasures with a sigh of satisfaction.

"If they'll only like me a little at Uncle Joseph's. I wish I could take you along, Chicken Little Jane, I wouldn't be lonely if I had you."

"Will you be dreadfully lonely, Alice?" Chicken Little was getting concerned.

"I am afraid I will, Chicken Little."

The child pondered the matter for the rest of the morning.

At dinner, she interrupted her father in the midst of a story to ask:

"Can people take dogs or birds on a train?"

"Yes, Chicken, what did you want to know for? The dogs are usually put in the baggage car."

"If it was just a puppy would it have to go in the baggage car?"

"Why if it was very tiny it might be carried in a covered box or basket."

Jane subsided for several minutes then interrupted again.

"Could you put a kitty in a basket?"

"I guess so, but don't interrupt me so much, child." Dr. Morton replied carelessly.

"Yes, Jane, that is a very bad habit you are forming. It is not polite to break into a conversation that way—especially when older people are talking," Mrs. Morton added impressively.

After dinner Chicken Little began to rummage. First she found a collar box with a cover. She took this to her mother and asked if she might have it. Her mother readily gave it to her, but apparently the child was not satisfied. She looked it over dubiously. "I don't believe it could breathe," she said to herself.

The collar box was discarded and she began another search. She finally resurrected a small covered sewing basket considerably the worse for wear, which her mother was also willing to part with.

Her next move was to line the basket with cotton batting after which she hunted out a doll blanket from her playthings.

"I guess that'll be enough," she remarked aloud.

These preparations completed, she tucked the basket under her arm and slipping out the side gates, went over to Grace Dart's. She had not taken the trouble to ask permission.

About ten minutes later she returned carrying the basket most carefully. Very little was seen of her till train time. When she started down to the station with her mother and Alice she still had the basket with her. Mrs. Morton did not notice it until Chicken Little put it down beside her on the seat of the omnibus.

"What are you bringing that old basket for?" she asked.

"Oh, just 'cause."

"Well, of all the queer children!" Mrs. Morton sighed. Chicken Little's whims were very puzzling at times.

Alice suspected that the basket contained some parting gift for herself. Ernest had hung around her at the last and had finally thrust a big bag of candy into her hand—an offering that deeply touched her since she knew he must have spent his last penny to buy it.



Give her this on the train and—please ... carefully.

They found Dick Harding at the station. Chicken Little heaved a sigh of relief when she caught sight of him. She had an idea.

When the train rolled in and he picked up Alice's valise to carry it into the car for her, Chicken Little pulled at his arm. As he leaned down, she whispered hastily; "Give her this on the train and—please, carry it carefully."

Dick Harding took the basket. Mrs. Morton was bidding Alice good-by and did not notice the transfer.

Mr. Harding seated Alice and delivered the sewing basket.

"Here is something very special Miss Jane Morton wished me to give you. I have an idea its contents may surprise you, judging from certain sounds I heard."

Alice took it on her lap and lifted the cover.

A sheet of bright pink note paper lay on top. It read, "With love for Alice so you won't be lonesome."

Beneath the note paper a tiny gray head peeped out from under a doll blanket and a plaintive "miauw" greeted her.

"Well, I never!" laughed Alice. "What can I do with it?"

"Keep the basket and I'll put kitty in my pocket and dispose of her some way."

"No, indeed, I'll manage somehow—bless the child. This must be the kitty Grace Dart promised her. If they'll only let me keep it at Uncle Joseph's I believe it will be a real comfort."

Dick Harding lifted Jane up for a parting wave to Alice through the car window as the train pulled out. Alice held up a pert maltese kitten and made it wave its paw in return.

"Why—where did she get that kitten?" gasped Mrs. Morton, a sudden suspicion entering her mind. "Chicken Little Jane was that what you had in that basket?"

Chicken Little looked abashed, but Dick Harding came to the rescue.

"Mrs. Morton, may Jane walk up with me—I'll take good care of her?"

After a moment's hesitation Mrs. Morton consented. Dick handed her into the omnibus and Chicken Little trotted joyfully along beside him. Dick Harding seemed to enjoy having the warm little hand tucked confidently into his own.

It was an ideal winter day, clear and crisp and gorgeously white.

They walked along in silence for a few minutes before Jane burst out with the idea that was occupying her small brain.

"Why does it make people nicer to go to school a lot? I don't think Alice could be any nicer, do you, Mr. Harding? Our teacher's gone to school, oh, most always, I guess, and I don't think she's near as nice as Alice."

Dick Harding laughed heartily.

"Miss Alice is A1, isn't she? And we don't like to have her go away so far—do we? Education

doesn't always make people nicer, but it often helps, Chicken Little. You like your father's ways rather better than old Jake's don't you? Well, your father has education and Jake hasn't. That's not all the difference but it is part. Besides, even if it didn't make us nicer to know things, it is rather good fun to learn them, don't you think?"

He patted the hand in his and smiled down at her. Chicken Little partly understanding yet puzzled, smiled back.

They walked on a half block farther before Jane found anything more to say.

"I guess Alice won't be lonesome now she's got the kitty. Don't you think it was a pretty kitty? I wanted it awfully bad myself but I've got Ernest and Katy and Gertie to play with and Alice won't have anybody you know."

Dick Harding stifled a laugh as he recalled Alice's surprised face.

"I think that was an uncommonly pretty kitty and you were very generous to give it away when you wanted it yourself. It is mighty hard to part with things we want ourselves, don't you think so, little partner?"

Dick looked off where the smoke of the departing train could still be plainly seen in the distance. Chicken Little followed his gaze but not his thoughts.

"Do you s'pose I'll ever go 'way off to school, Mr. Harding?"

"I think it likely some day. When you do, I'll promise to see you off and bring you a big box of candy, if I'm round when you start. Say, how would it do to stop in at Jackson's and get the candy today? I might not be there when the time comes, you know."

They stopped and made the important purchase after much deliberation as to kinds.

"I like gum drops and chocolate creams best," Jane volunteered naively.

"Mr. Harding is too generous," her mother remarked with a wry smile when Jane proudly displayed her trophy. She had never had a whole boxful of candy before. Usually a dime's worth had been the maternal limit.

Chicken Little treated Katy and Gertie and Ernest and Carol and Sherm and the new maid, with lavish generosity. She also ate all her mother would let her, herself. Finally, Mrs. Morton ordered her to put the rest away for the next day. It would have been well for Chicken Little if her mother's direction had extended to the next day as well. But by morning Mrs. Morton had forgotten all about the candy. Chicken Little had strict orders not to eat sweets before breakfast so she heroically withstood temptation until her last bite of waffle was swallowed, then munched away till school time. The box with its remaining contents accompanied her to school to her later undoing.

She had never known such popularity as was hers when the other children found what the big box contained. One boy made her a present of a brand new slate pencil on the spot. She was allowed to choose up for her side in "No bears out tonight," though this honor usually fell to one of the bigger girls. By the time the bell rang she felt blissfully important. She settled regretfully down to her work with the candy snugly tucked away inside her desk.

All went well until about the middle of the geography recitation, when turning around from her work at the board, she caught the small boy, who sat across the aisle, in the act of helping himself to a handful of her cherished sweets. She was surprised into forgetting where she was and exclaimed out loud:

"Oh, you mustn't!"

The teacher looked up in pained amazement.

"Who was that spoke out loud?" she demanded.

Chicken Little raised a reluctant hand.

"Jane Morton, I'm surprised—I wouldn't have believed it of you! You may stand on the floor by my desk for half an hour."

The teacher had been much annoyed by whispering that morning, the children being all more or less riotous after their vacation, so without stopping to investigate, as was her usual custom, she promptly visited the sins of the whole school upon Jane.

Jane had never stood upon the floor for punishment before and she felt the disgrace keenly. It hurt the child's sense of fairness, too, but she dared not try to explain lest Miss Brown should confiscate the remainder of her precious candy. She took her book and walked slowly over to the spot indicated in front of the whole school, her face growing redder and redder. It was several minutes before she dared lift her eyes and face her mates.

When she did, several of her friends telephoned furtive messages of sympathy that cheered her a little. But her humiliation over her disgrace was soon swallowed up in wrath when the offending small boy, who had caused all her troubles, added insult to injury by ostentatiously eating his booty whenever the teacher's back was turned. He would roll his eyes and smack his lips in the utmost enjoyment.

Chicken Little forgot her disgrace in a desire for revenge. She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing she cared. She set herself resolutely to study, avoiding even a glance in his direction. But she did more than study; she laid her plans for swift vengeance. When

permitted to go back to her seat, she still ignored him though he did his best to attract her attention.

His place in the line was just ahead of hers, and she followed him down the halls and the long stairs calculating to a nicety just how she would get even. The moment they passed through the outside door, the boy turned for a parting taunt. He did not get it out. Before he could utter a single sound Chicken Little struck him a resounding slap in the face with all her young might.

The youngster would have hit back, but another boy grabbed him and ordered him roughly to let little girls alone. And Chicken Little went home ashamed but solaced.

She was nervous for a while lest her mother should hear of her scrape. However, several days went by and she was beginning to breathe easier, when Brother Frank overtook her one morning on her way to school.

"Hello, Sis, what is this I hear about having a prize-fighter in the family?"

Jane's face grew hot, but she looked at him mutely.

"I thought it was only rough boys who smashed in people's noses and made them bleed. I didn't suppose my gentle little sister would do such a thing."

Chicken Little swallowed hard but still kept silent and Frank pressed harder.

"I have always believed my little sister was a lady. I am afraid Mother will be grieved to hear what her daughter has been doing."

Words came to Chicken Little at last in a burst of sobs:

"I don't care—he took my candy—I had to stand—on—on the floor—and it wasn't fair—you can just go and tell Mother if you want to!"

Frank took her hand and patted it.

"Out with the whole story, Sis. I suspected there was something more to it than I heard—you aren't usually warlike."

So Chicken Little sobbed out the woeful tale. Brother Frank smiled broadly above the bent head over the ludicrous incident, but he controlled himself sufficiently to admonish soberly.

"Well, Johnny seems to have deserved all he got. At the same time, Jane, I don't think I'd do such a thing again, if I were you."



CHAPTER X
SKATING

Chicken Little watched Ernest tie his red muffler around his neck and sling his skates across his shoulder, enviously.

"I wish I could go skating," she sighed.

"You shall some day, dear," said her mother, who was sitting sewing by the open fire. "But the pond is too far away for you to go without some older person to look after you."

"I don't see why Ernest and Carol couldn't look after me."

"They would forget you in ten minutes. No, you must be patient, little daughter, and wait till you are bigger."

Chicken Little flattened her nose against the cold pane ruefully.

"You may go and play with Katy and Gertie for an hour if you wish."

But Jane didn't wish. She was a child of one idea and her head was filled with visions of Cedar Pond and its crowd of gay skaters. She could fairly see the boys gliding away across the glistening surface or cutting fancy figures they loved to boast of. She knew some of the girls at school skated. She had listened to glowing tales of the sport at recess the day before.

She peered out the window, an ugly little pucker creasing her forehead. Marian, coming in a few minutes later, found her glooming there still.

"What a long face, little sister, what's the matter? Have you broken your Xmas dolly or lost that new bracelet or what?"

"Oh, Marian, did you ever skate?"

"Skate?—I should say so. Frank and I are going out this afternoon after the bank closes."

"Oh, Marian, couldn't I go, too? Mother said I might learn if I only had some grown up person to

go with."

"But you haven't any skates, Jane."

This was a poser, but Jane moved a way out. "Maybe Grace Dart would let me have hers. May I ask mother?"

Marian hesitated a moment, but the child's face was very pleading and she replied heartily:

"Come along if your mother will let you. We'll look after you—you may as well ask Katie and Gertie, too. Katy knows how to skate a little, I think."

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Mrs. Morton's consent was soon obtained as well as Mrs. Halford's. Grace Dart intended to use her own skates, but Mrs. Morton said Jane might as well buy a pair, if she were really going to learn. Marian volunteered to get them for her on the way down.

Chicken Little was gay as a robin redbreast when she ran to meet Marian at the side gate. She was in red from top to toe, red coat, red leggings and red hood. And she was so excited she acted like a much distracted robin, as Marian told her a little later.

"She does enter into things so heart and soul," Marian confided to Frank, "she fairly quivers with excitement sometimes. Katy and Gertie are so different. They enjoy themselves just as much but they don't tire themselves out as Chicken Little does."

"Sis is too high strung, I guess—gets it from Father's people. Funny, too, she's a sober little puss a good deal of the time."

The new skates were soon purchased and slung over her shoulder in exact imitation of the way she had seen the boys carry theirs. They looked delightfully sharp and glittering. Chicken Little felt immensely superior to Katy whose skates were two years old and not nearly so shiny.

It was a radiant afternoon, frosty and clear. The pond was covered with skaters of all ages. Some of the men were pulling women and children on sleds.

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Frank strapped the little girls' skates on firmly. Katy struck off boldly for herself, while Marian helped Gertie. Frank undertook to keep Chicken Little from measuring her length on the ice—no small task for the child was ambitious and daring. Great was her joy when she finally succeeded in taking a few short strokes without having her feet shoot out from under her. Presently Frank left her to her own devices while he went to skate with Marian.

"My feet don't seem to want to go the same way I do," she complained to Gertie after two hard bumps.

Gertie was proceeding more cautiously and had fewer falls in consequence.

"I guess you'll learn pretty soon—my—just see Katy!"

Katy was circling around as gracefully and easily as if there were no such thing as falls to dread. Chicken Little began to lose faith in the superiority of her new skates.

"Katy skates most as well as the boys—I don't see how she does it," she said enviously.

"Cousin Sim taught her last winter. Oh, see, those boys are making an eight on the ice and,—Carol's writing his name I do believe."

"Yes, and there's Pat and Mike—dear me, it seems as if everybody can skate just as easy 'cept me."

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The little girls stood watching the boys wistfully as they glided along cutting marvellous figures on the ice. The boys were bent on showing off for Marian's benefit.

"Tired, little girls?" called the latter, skating gaily past, her cheeks rosy with exercise and the frosty air.

"No—o," said Jane slowly, "I'm not tired but my ankles hurt and the ice seems to get slipperier and slipperier."

"I'll help you if you want me to," said a voice at her elbow, and Chicken Little looked around to find Pat Casey standing shyly beside her, cap in hand.

"I think I could be after showing you how to do it."

She hesitated a moment wondering what her mother would say to her skating with Pat, then deciding to take the chance, put out her hand with a little smile. Things went better after that for the Irish lad had a good deal of chivalry in his make-up and was very patient and careful.

"Hello, Pat," said Frank, skating up. "That's good of you—I believe you're a better teacher than I was. You'll skate like a bird in no time, Sis, you're so light. Ice is tricky at first—throws you like a balky horse till you get the hang of it. Come on, I'll take you for another turn."

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Frank took her spinning with him clear to the end of the pond. When they started back he made her strike out for herself, steadying her with his hand. Before they got back to the big bon-fire at the starting point, Chicken Little had discovered the all-important secret of keeping her balance.

Ernest and Carol came up in great excitement to tell them there were going to be races and the spectators must line up along the sides of the pond.

"See they are starting now—you must be careful to keep off the track, girls. Here, let's go over by that rock."

Frank made haste to post his small charges midway of the course, where they could have a clear view of both ends of the pond.

Six young men lined up at the starting point while the starter stood off to one side to give the signal and another man was posted at the farther end of the course.

"One, two, three—go!"

The starter snapped the words out and the men swung off in long steady strides. Faster and faster they came till it seemed to Chicken Little they fairly flew. She watched them closely as they came nearer—there seemed something familiar about one of the racers. Suddenly she gave a little shriek of surprise.

"Why, it's Mr. Harding—see, see! It is Mr. Harding. Oh, I just hope he'll beat! Don't you think he'll beat, Frank?"

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"He is a good skater, all right, Sis, but that dark chap is going it strong, too. They have to make the circuit of the pond three times. We can tell better the next lap."

Dick Harding heard Jane's exclamation and waved his hand at her as they swung by. He was about six feet behind the dark man, skating easily with long swinging strokes. Chicken Little waved her red mittened hand enthusiastically in return.

Carol and Ernest, who had been trying to follow the racers along the edge of the pond, pulled up along side for a breathing spell.

"Say, Frank," exclaimed Ernest, "they say that dark fellow is a professional skater—his name is Sanders."

"Yes, and Sherm says he's tricky—he has just come here from some place up on the lakes," added Carol.

"I'm afraid he has Harding outclassed," replied Frank watching the racers circle gracefully around the end of the pond and start toward them again. The dark stranger was in the lead and Harding a couple of lengths behind, with the other four spilling out at irregular distances in the rear.

"He keeps crowding Harding out—do you see? He cuts across his path every now and then, but part of the time he only makes a feint so Harding loses a stroke and he doesn't. I don't think that's fair!" Ernest raised his voice indignantly.

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Frank watched them a moment keenly before he replied.

"You're right—that is what he is doing—and it isn't clean sport. He's tricky—I'd like to see Harding beat him; but I'm afraid he can't. He's soft yet for we haven't had more than two week's skating here, and this chap has probably been at it for two months or more up north."

"Oh, Frank, isn't he skating fair? Do you think he's going to beat Mr. Harding?" Chicken Little was genuinely distressed.

"Can't tell, Chicken, watch and see!"

The racers turned the end of the pond for the second time and came swiftly past—Harding about the same distance behind the other as before. Again they turned and shot past for the third round, the stranger still pursuing his tactics of interfering with his rival.

"Jove, that makes me hot!" Frank exclaimed wrathfully. "I believe Harding could beat him on a fair and square race."

"Gee, I wish we could make him give way once himself, the scoundrel!" Ernest shook his fist viciously at Sanders' back.

"If he had to turn out just once would it help Mr. Harding?" demanded Jane.

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Her own party were so intent upon the race that no one replied, but Pat, who had just skated up, answered her question himself when he found the others were ignoring it.

"It'd help—but sure Mr. Harding's too grand a gentleman to do that kind of dirty work!"

"Oh, I just wish we could make him turn out!"

No one heeded her but Pat and he replied only with a grin.

Chicken Little clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. The men had made their last turn and were heading swiftly toward them on the home stretch. Harding had gained a little on his antagonist and was scarcely three feet behind.

"He is gaining—if Sanders will only play fair!" said Frank tensely, his eyes glued on the two dark forms.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Sanders made a feint to cross directly in front of his competitor and Harding lost a length in consequence.

"Confound him!" growled Frank, "the judges oughtn't to stand for that!"

Chicken Little stood fascinated, gazing at the advancing figures.

Her small fists clenched as she saw Harding drop the few paces behind. Suddenly an idea popped into her head. Forgetful of her own uncertain feet, and both ignorant and reckless of any danger, she darted forward, a small red danger signal directly in front of Mr. Sanders as he came opposite. The annoyed racer swerved quickly to the right, but poor Jane once started

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could not stop, and would have fallen a scarlet heap in Dick Harding's path had not Pat, divining her intention, followed swiftly and grabbing her by the shoulder steered her in a sharp curve out of the way. She got a good scolding from both Frank and Marian when Pat brought her back to them.

"You might have been hurt—you almost spoiled the race—don't you ever do anything so foolhardy again, Jane." This from Marian.

Frank was still more severe. "I'm ashamed of you, Sis. Did you suppose Dick Harding would be willing to win the race by a trick—besides you nearly tripped him. If Pat hadn't been so quick there would have been a bad mix-up."

Chicken Little scarcely heeded at first because from the far end of the pond a shout went up, and looking with wide eyes, she saw the dark stranger and Mr. Harding slip over the line together—it was a tie!

Then Frank's words began to sink in. The idea that she might have hurt or disgraced her beloved Mr. Harding frightened her much more than the possible danger to herself. Her eyes filled with tears and though she tried valiantly to wink them away, they soon overflowed.

Katy and Gertie eyed her curiously, and Frank and Marian though they felt sorry for the child, felt that she needed a lesson. Ernest returning from the finish, felt called upon to rub it in still further.

"What in the dickens were you trying to do, Jane Morton, were you crazy?"

Chicken Little answered never a word, but the tears dripped faster and an observing person would have noticed that the child was digging her finger nails into her palms to keep back the sobs. But her family was too disgusted with her to be either sympathetic or observing. They scarcely noticed that she was loitering behind.

She had no definite purpose till she saw they were about to pass Dick Harding who was the center of an admiring group. This was more than she could stand, and dropping a little farther behind, she slipped into the crowd and started off in the opposite direction. No one missed her for a time as they all stopped to congratulate Dick. It was not until he inquired what the child had been trying to do in her reckless dash, that her absence was discovered.

"Oh, Frank, I am afraid we were too hard on her!" exclaimed Marian.

Frank himself looked anxious for it was fast growing dusk. He scanned the thinning crowd on the pond sharply—no little red figure was to be seen.

"She can't have gone far!" he said now genuinely alarmed.

"Marian, you go on home with the children and I'll find her."

"Let me go with you—poor little girlie she was trying her small best to help me." Harding was scanning the pond narrowly as he spoke.

"I believe she must be behind that big tree across there. She could hardly have got completely out of sight any place else."

Dick Harding fastened on his skates and hurried across the pond to a big oak, which stood flanked by a clump of bushes close to the edge of the bank.

Sure enough, Chicken Little had flung herself down in the snow behind the tree, and was sobbing her heart out. He lifted her tenderly.

"Dear me, little friend, this won't do—where's my little champion who tried to help me win the race just now?"

Chicken Little hushed her sobs in astonishment.

"Frank said—he said—he——" the tears were coming again, "he said I'd disgraced you and I didn't think—you'd ever speak to me again!"

"Nonsense, Jane, listen to me. I am proud and happy that you wanted to help me—it wasn't the best way to do it, but you didn't know. Now come, dry your tears and let's hurry back to the others—they thought they'd lost you."

"And you aren't ashamed of me?"

"Ashamed of you? Bless your heart, I am proud to have such a staunch friend."





CHAPTER · XI
CHICKEN · LITTLE · JANE'S
BIRTHDAY

February was birthday month in the Morton family. Jane's came first on the thirteenth, Ernest's on the twenty-second, and Mrs. Morton came near having a birthday only once in four years, for hers was on the twenty-eighth.

"My, I'd hate to be born on the thirteenth. Cousin May says thirteen is awfully unlucky," said Katy impressively, when Chicken Little told her the fateful date.

"Yes, but you see I was born on Sunday, too, and Sunday's the very luckiest day there is to be born on."

"Yes, Jane, 'Blithe and bonny and good and gay, is the child who is born on the Sabbath day,'" chanted Marian, who was sitting by the window sewing. "You have something to live up to, little sister, if you are all that." 177

"I'm glad my birthday isn't coming on Sunday this year," said Jane thoughtfully. "It did one year and I couldn't have a party or nothing. I do think Sunday is the inconvenientest day—I wish God hadn't ever thought to make it!"

"But we need one day of rest," said Marian, struggling with a laugh.

"Ye—es, but I think we get enough rest sleeping nights; I think Sundays are awful tiring,—you have to work so hard remembering what you can't do."

"I like Sundays," said Gertie, "'cause Father's home and he reads to us Sunday afternoons."

"Father takes a nap, you can hear him all over the house—and Mother tells us to be quiet so we won't wake him. 'Sides your mother lets you do more things."

"I guess your folks are religiouser than ours," said Katy complacently.

"You think it is more religious to sleep Sunday afternoons, Katy?" interposed Marian smiling.

"Well, you can't do anything bad when you are asleep," replied Katy a little confused, but bound to stick to her point.

"Not a bad idea—whenever I am tempted to be bad after this, I'll take a nap and throw the devil off the track that way."

"My mother says it isn't nice to talk about the devil." Katy looked so gravely disapproving that Marian had hard work to keep her face straight. 178

"Oh, excuse me—I'll be careful not to mention his Satanic majesty again. Well, Chicken Little, are you going to have a birthday party this year?"

"Not a really party, but Mother said I could have Katy and Gertie and Grace Dart come to tea. There's going to be a sure enough birthday cake with candles and my name and age in pink frosting—and we're going to have chocolate creams—and all the dolls."

"I shall bring Violet—she's got a new dress and she's just had her hair glued on—I curled it on the curling iron," said Gertie.

"I'm going to bring my nigger Dinah and you can play she helps wait on the table," put in Katy.

"Dear me, is that the latest thing in doll-dom, to have the guests wait on the table?" quizzed Marian.

"I guess it would be all right to play she did," Jane responded with a grin.

"Your mother's birthday comes soon. What are you going to give her, Jane?"

"Yes, and Ernest's too, his is the twenty-second."

"And Valentine's day comes the fourteenth—just the day after your birthday."

"Yes, Father says I was intended for a valentine only I was mailed too soon. I was just wondering what I could give Mother, Marian,—and Ernest. I've only got sixteen cents. I don't think birthdays ought to come so near Christmas." 179

"Sixteen cents isn't much for two presents, is it? We'll have to put our thinking caps on. Let me see. How would you like to make Mother a little tidy for her rocking chair? I think I have a piece of honey-comb canvas left that would be just about the right size—you might do a Greek border with rose-colored worsted. It's fast work. You could do it easily."

"Oh, Marian, you do think of the nicest things!" and Chicken Little got up impulsively to give her a grateful hug.

"But Ernest will be harder—he wouldn't care for fancy work."

"He wants a new base ball—an awfully hard one like Carol's."

"Frank can get him that. I'll tell you, Chicken Little, I believe he'd like a nice strong bag for his marbles—it won't be long till marble time now. But, perhaps, we can think up something else."

"I wisht you'd come to my tea party, Marian."

"I'd be charmed to, and I'll bring my old doll, Seraphina. She is huge and hasn't any nose left and only one eye. Will she be welcome in this wounded state or had we better put her in a hospital?"

"Oh, Marian, will you?—I'd love to see her."

"She's down in the bottom of a trunk, but I am sure she would be delighted to get out in the world again. What are you looking at with those big eyes of yours, Katy?"

"I was just thinking she must be awful old."

"She is—frightfully—almost as old as I am. My aunt brought her to me from Paris when I was just seven. She was elegant then—all pink silk ruffles with a little wreath of forget-me-nots in her hair. I crowed over all the children I knew because she was so fine, but I must be getting home. Children dear, I wonder if your mothers would mind if you ran down to the postoffice to mail this letter for me. I want it to get off on the five o'clock train."

Chicken Little's boasted luck seemed about to fail her entirely on her birthday morning. She got up late and was so excited over her little remembrances that she almost forgot to get ready for school. She ran as hard as she could, so hard she had a stitch in her side, but the last child in the line was disappearing inside the school-house door, when she was still half a block away.

She knew what that meant. Miss Brown had a harsh rule for tardy pupils—they stayed one-half hour after school, rain or shine. And to stay in a half hour on one's birthday with a party on foot was unthinkable. Why it would be most dark when she got home! And her mother—well, maybe her mother wouldn't say very much since it was her birthday, but Jane wasn't keen about hearing what she would say.

She dragged herself reluctantly up the stairs, taking an unnecessarily long time to hang up her wraps and it was fully five minutes past nine when she took her seat. Miss Brown looked severe.

"You understand this means thirty minutes after school. I have told you I will not tolerate tardiness."

Chicken Little didn't try to catch up with Katy and Gertie going home that noon. She plodded along soberly by herself with such a forlorn air that Dick Harding, just behind her on his way to his own lunch, was struck by it, and overtook her to find out what was amiss now.

"Have to stay after school on a birthday—well, that is tough. I see plainly you need the services of a lawyer. I guess I'll have to take this under advisement and see what can be done. You know it's my turn to help you out. Clear up that solemn face, Chicken Little,—that's better—I see the smile coming. I'll tell you—wait by the school gate when you come back from dinner and I'll think up some way to mend matters."

Chicken Little hurried through her dinner and back to school, posting herself expectantly to watch for Dick Harding. She did not have long to wait. Mr. Harding had hurried, too, on her account.

"I have been considering this, Jane. I don't believe it would be quite fair to the other pupils to persuade Miss Brown to let you off, as I at first thought of doing. Do you think it would?"

Richard Harding regarded the child keenly, curious to see whether she would see the point.

Chicken Little looked up at him soberly.

"No, I guess it's just as bad to be late on your birthday as any other time. And I s'pose if Miss Brown let me go she'd have to let the rest go, too. And I guess there wouldn't be any rule if she did that."

"Right you are, but I think I have a plan that won't be unfair to anybody and will still keep the birthday intact. We couldn't have the birthday hurt you know, Chicken Little. It's such a little young birthday—it might cry!" Dick Harding smiled down at her whimsically and Jane smiled understandingly back.

"Why don't you ask me what my plan is? You haven't the proper amount of feminine curiosity."

Chicken Little smiled again—a confiding little smile.

"How would it do, Chicken Little Jane, if I should get a cutter with two gray horses and lots of bells—real noisy bells—and call for your guests first, then come here to the school after you? We could go for a nice sleigh ride before that supper party."

Chicken Little's face lit up as instantaneously as if someone had just turned on an electric light before it. She gave one blissful "Oh" then stopped. "If Mother—?" she said.

"If Mother' is all attended to. I met your father and he said he would make it all right with your mother. So if Miss Jane Morton will do me the honor to ride with me this afternoon, I shall consider the matter settled." Dick Harding made an elaborate bow.

Jane still beamed but found words difficult.

"I'm waiting, Miss Morton, you'd better hurry—I think the bell is going to ring."

The child glanced back at the school house apprehensively.

"Course I want to—awfully, and—Mr. Harding," Chicken Little reached up to whisper something and the tall man bent down.

"I love you most as well as Brother Frank."

"Thank you, dear—I've never had a little sister. Don't you think I might adopt a little piece of you?"

"That's what Alice said. She said little sisters were so nice and cuddly—I think you and Alice are a lot alike, Mr. Harding." 184

"I'm flattered—in what way?"

"'Cause you—she—why I guess 'cause you and she both know how little girls feel inside—and you're so comforting."

"Much obliged, little sister, I know Miss Alice deserves that nice compliment and I hope I do. Are you lonesome without her?"

"Yes, only when I'm with you it always seems as if she were close by, too."

"Happy thought! Perhaps, it's because I'm partial to being in her neighborhood myself. There goes the bell—I'll be here at 4:30 sharp."

Chicken Little was not the only unfortunate that afternoon. Two small boys were late at noon and Miss Brown set them all to writing long lists from their spellers as soon as the other children filed out. Chicken Little watched the clock anxiously, starting up at every distant tinkle of sleigh bells. It was a glorious clear crisp afternoon and the jingle of bells sounded at frequent intervals.

Her excitement rose as half-past four approached. Finally, just as the clock chimed the half hour, an answering chime tinkled in the distance and two or three minutes later, ceased suddenly in front of the school building.

Chicken Little ran quickly down the walk and there they all were. Dick Harding had a lovely double-seated cutter with white horses and two gay strings of sleigh bells on each horse. Packed snugly in under the bright colored robes were Katy and Gertie and Grace and sister Marian—and the entire family of dolls. Dick Harding had insisted on the dolls. He said he never approved of parents leaving their offspring at home to cry their eyes out, while they went skylarking. 185

Katy had secured the place next to their host and Chicken Little looked enviously as she started to climb in. But Dick Harding made room for her beside him, saying finally:

"I believe I am to have the honor of having Miss Morton and the birthday sit beside me."

A shadow of disappointment crossed Katy's face. Marian made a little sign to Jane and the child responded bravely.

"I guess Katy ought to have the best place 'cause she's company."

"The queen has spoken," replied Dick Harding with an approving smile. "Perhaps, I might hold the birthday on my lap."

"I wouldn't trust him with it Jane. Young lawyers always want to be older than they are," laughed Marian.

Jane made an elaborate pretense of handing over the birthday.

"You see Chicken Little Jane has a better opinion of me than you," retorted Dick. "Miss Morton, which way shall we go?" 186

The children were riotously happy. Mr. Harding let each child choose a direction to turn, and they whirled around corners and drove by each small guest's home in great state, so that mothers and sisters might see.

Bright hoods and caps and coats made the sleigh load look like a nosegay and Dick Harding treated them all with an exaggerated courtesy that kept them merry.

They landed at the Morton front gate at six o'clock. It was quite dark but the street lamps were lit and the cheer of gas and firelight streamed out from the old gabled house invitingly.

"This was a mighty sweet thing to do, Dick," said Marian as he helped her out.

"The pleasure is mine," he responded gallantly, "further I'm going to claim a toll of one kiss and a half from every passenger under twelve years of age."

The toll was paid promptly. He was most exacting as to the half kiss, demanding full measure. Marian insisted that the dolls came under the ruling, too, but he begged off. He said he felt it would be taking unfair advantage of their extreme youth.

But Chicken Little and Katy were too much for him. They declared that Marian's doll was older than any of them. So Mr. Harding duly took a peck at Seraphina's pallid cheek to the huge delight of the children. 187

The hot biscuit and chicken tasted doubly delicious after the long ride in the sharp air. Grace Dart took two servings of quince preserves but declined the apple butter saying she could get that at home.

At the close of the repast Dr. and Mrs. Morton and Frank and Ernest came in to share the

birthday cake. Ernest was the only one who could blow out all the candles at one fell swoop. When the last morsel had vanished Chicken Little had another surprise. Dr. Morton went out into the hall and pulled a large white envelope out of his overcoat pocket addressed to "Miss Jane Morton." It was postmarked Cincinnati.

"Oh, it's something from Alice—I just know—open it quick!"

"Bet it's a valentine," guessed Ernest.

"Yes, it looks like one of those beautiful lacy ones with hearts and doves on it," said Katy.

It not only looked, it was—the very fluffiest, laciest one Jane had ever seen, with marvellous cupids and hearts, and forget-me-nots and true lover's knots of blue ribbon. In a little white envelope inside was a tiny gold ring.

Chicken Little gave one squeal of ecstasy:

"Isn't it cunning—I always wanted a ring. Whatever do you s'pose made Alice think of it?"

"She didn't," said Mrs. Morton, "the valentine is from Alice, but her Uncle Joseph sent the ring. It seems he liked your letter and when Alice mentioned getting the valentine he wanted to send something too. You'll have to write him another letter to thank him."

"That reminds me that I saw Gassett on the street this morning. He looks pretty badly still," remarked Dr. Morton.

"Well, he can't get Alice's papers now 'cause she's got them way off in Cincinnati," said Chicken Little.

"Huh, that doesn't make any difference—they could make her send them back," Ernest replied.

Chicken Little turned to her father.

"No need to borrow trouble, Chicken, Alice has an Uncle Joseph to look after her now, anyway. Has it been a happy birthday, pet?"



CHAPTER · XII
POOR · ERNEST · AND
POOR · MARIAN

Ernest was so tired of being pitied he was in open rebellion.

"For goodness' sake, don't 'poor' me any more! My eyes will be all right as soon as they get a good rest—the doctor said so. I guess I can stand it if they don't hurt like sin. Everybody comes in like a funeral procession asking me how I feel, and hoping it will be a lesson to me to take better care of my eyes. People needn't rub it in because a fellow's down—and the last thing he wants to think of is how he feels!"

"I think you must be feeling better, Ernest, or you wouldn't be so cross," retorted Marian slyly.

Ernest relaxed his gloom enough to grin.

"Well, I don't care—Mother hangs around babying me as if I were six years old!"

Ernest's catastrophe had come about so gradually no one had suspected it. He was reading a letter from Alice, who wrote a fine close hand, when his father noticed that he was holding the paper almost to his eyes. An examination revealed the fact that the poor eyes were sadly overstrained and would have to have a complete rest for weeks or his eyesight would be permanently injured.

This was distressing news to bookworm Ernest who was never so happy as when lost in a book. The lad was immensely proud of his school standing, too, and he chafed sadly at the thought of losing it.

"No school for three months, Son," his father said sorrowfully after the boy's eyes had been thoroughly tested.

"It must be a dark room and a bandage for three weeks at the very least, Dr. Allerton says."

Ernest groaned and growled rather more than usual to keep from breaking down and playing the baby, when he heard this verdict.

"It was all that confounded scroll work!"

"I am afraid so—you remember your mother warned you against selecting all those intricate patterns."

Ernest remembered only too distinctly, but he preferred not to be reminded of it.

"Is there anything a fellow can do?" he demanded after three horrid days of close confinement with the blinds down.

"Not much, poor boy, I'm afraid," Mrs. Morton replied pityingly. "I'll read to you a couple of hours this morning and perhaps Sherm and Carol will come in for a while after school. I'll send word to them by Chicken Little. Mrs. Dart sent you over one of her custard pies just now."

The custard pie sounded comforting.

"How long is it till dinner time?"

"Only about three hours—we might let you have a taste now if you are impatient," Mrs. Morton said.

"Oh, I can wait but the hours seem so plaguey long when you can't see. Read me Alice's letter again, will you? Gee, I wish she were here—she always knew how to help a chap out."

"Better than mother?" Mrs. Morton couldn't help feeling a trifle nettled.

Ernest felt the tone.

"Oh, Mumsey, you're a brick, but Alice can always think up things—you know? Of course, she isn't like your mother." Ernest reached for his mother's dress and pulling her head down gave her a kiss—an unusual mark of affection.

It wrung Mrs. Morton's heart to see him grope to find her.

It took her a moment to compose herself before she went over to the window and raised the blind enough to see to read the letter.

Alice had written jubilantly of her progress.

"I am so happy today over a compliment—doesn't that sound vain?—that I am going to sit right down and share it with you. I should like to get up on a fence like that little bantam rooster of Darts' and crow it to all the world. Mrs. Martin, our principal, told me this morning I had done wonders in three months! And I was so stupid at first—French and Geometry seemed absolutely impossible. I used to put myself to sleep saying those awful French verbs. If the French had invented those verbs on purpose I'd never forgive them. But I suppose your language is like the color of your hair—you're not responsible. Funny how little of us is *us*, and how much is somebody else, isn't it? Tell Ernest the first ten pages of Geometry would have floored me completely if I hadn't remembered how patiently he used to saw round all those curves and curlicues in that scroll-work. Every time I flung the old book down and said 'I can't,' I seemed to see Ernest bent over that old scroll saw cutting Geometry out of wood. I could not let a fourteen year old boy beat me. Now the figures are getting as tame as kittens which reminds me of Jane's kitten.

"We call her Poky Pry because she is always poking her inquisitive nose into places where she has no business. I was afraid they might not want her here, but she frisked her way into favor at once. Her usual place for a morning nap is in Aunt Clara's work basket. We found her once in Uncle Joseph's silk hat. Another time she got shut in a bureau drawer and miauwed pitifully to be let out. But her funniest adventure was going downtown. Uncle Joseph got on the horse car one morning and was talking to a friend when they heard a soft purring. 'What on earth is that—it sounds like a cat?' asked the other man. They both looked all around. As soon as Uncle Joseph moved, the sound ceased. When they settled down to talk again the purring began again. 'Well, I never!' said Uncle Joseph. He made another search even getting down to look under the car seat. The sound ceased the moment he began to hunt. 'Pshaw,' said his friend, 'somebody is playing a trick on us. I've heard of people who can throw their voices so the sound seems to come from some other place.' So they settled down once more, and once more the purring began and grew louder. Uncle Joseph got fidgety. His friend watched the lips of the other passengers to see who was hoaxing them. 'It sounds,' he remarked finally, 'as if it came from your overcoat pocket!'—Uncle Joseph plunged his hand down into his pocket and felt soft warm fur. The whole car shouted when he drew Poky Pry out.

"I wonder if I told Chicken Little how Poky frightened the Pullman porter. She was sound asleep in her basket and I put it at the lower end of the berth, carelessly leaving the cover off. The porter was making up the next berth to mine. Suddenly I heard a wild shriek, and, parting my curtains, saw the porter dashing down the aisle with Poky Pry clanging distractedly to his kinky black head. She had crept out of her basket and made her way to the berth above the one he was making, to watch him. When he straightened up she evidently thought his woolly hair some new variety of mouse and she made a spring for it.

"Tell Chicken Little, Kitty has kept me from being lonesome and is a great comfort. Uncle Joseph keeps asking questions about Chicken Little. His girls are all boys and grown up. He was so pleased with her nette thanking him for the ring. He chuckled over her skating adventure for days. 'Starting out pretty young to straighten up the world, isn't she?' he remarked."

"Chicken Little Jane is a very rash child, I'm afraid," Mrs. Morton said as she laid down the letter a few moments later. "I only hope she won't get into trouble some day on account of it."

"Don't worry, Mother, she always comes out all right."

Jane came up at noon to bring Ernest his dinner—a dinner in which a generous quarter of the custard pie played an important part. Sherm and Carol would come right from school she told him. Chicken Little had established herself as head nurse out of school hours. She felt very important and amused Ernest with her airs.

The boys were good as their word that afternoon and she met them with a life-like imitation of her mother's manner, admonishing them not to get Ernest excited. As a result the boys lumbered in self-conscious and awkward. Never having paid a sick-room visit before, they were rather overpowered by Ernest's bandaged eyes and the twilight gloom the doctor prescribed. So much so in fact, that they nearly defeated the object of their visit, which was to cheer Ernest up. Indeed they were so stiff and sympathetic that Ernest gruffly requested them to drop that and tell him about school. Tongues limbered up immediately at this, for each boy had a grievance.

"You can be jolly glad you ain't there. Old Goggle-eyes gave us two pages of Algebra—20 problems! I spent a whole hour on the first ten and I'm shaky about them now. Oh, he's a honey, he is—the dried up old crank. I'll bet he was old when Methuselah was born."

"Well, I'd rather tackle Goggle-eyes and minus X than write compositions for Miss Halliday on Spring Flowers—Sper-ing Flow-ers," Carol simpered gently, and, letting his hands fall limp from the wrists, fluttered imaginary skirts in a fantastic promenade across the room.

"You must cultivate the love of the be-utiful—contemplate birds—and lovely flowers and express what they mean to you," he quoted in a high pitched voice. "Holy smoke, I had a notion to tell her that spring flowers meant digging dandelions at five cents a thousand, when I wanted to go fishing! She might at least save 'em till the ground thaws—it's colder than Greenland out today."

"Yes, Father says we're in for a blizzard tonight."

"You might tell her the blizzard nipped all the flowers in the bud, Carol."

"Nope, I'll put it on the list of things I'm thankful for next Thanksgiving, that there aren't any plaguey spring flowers in bloom to write about."

"Say, Pat's got your seat. But he wouldn't let Old Goggle-eyes take your things out. He said there was plenty of room for them. He's got them stacked up in one end of the desk all ship-shape. He's going to be on our nine next summer."

The boys were performing their mission nobly. Ernest began to feel actually consoled for missing school.

"I won three agates and a chiny off Fatty Grover—like to froze my fingers too. We got down behind the coal house out of the wind, but it didn't help much."

"Thought Fatty darsent play keeps?"

"Well, I guess his dad'd lick him if he found out—s'pose he'd most have to, being the Minister—but Fatty's game—he won't blab. Aren't they beauties?"

Ernest gave a little gesture of impatience and Sherm suddenly remembered the bandaged eyes.

"Oh, say, I didn't go to——" he began penitently.

Mrs. Morton appeared opportunely at this moment with a plate of hot doughnuts, a little anxious lest the boys should fall to romping.

Poor Marian's trouble began two weeks after Ernest's and proved to be much more serious. She had sympathized deeply with the bookloving boy in his irksome confinement, and she had been more than faithful about coming over to read or talk to him. It was coming through a storm to keep her promise to him that proved her own undoing.

She had a hard cold already—March had been continuously raw and blustery. The last day of the month had brought with it the worst blizzard of the season. A cutting wind swept down from the north and the snow was icy hard and stinging. Marian watched the storm from her windows for some time before she could get up courage to venture out. But Mother Morton's was only three blocks away and she knew Ernest would be doubly disappointed if she failed to come because of the dreary day. So she wrapped up warmly and braved the elements. The three blocks seemed a mile before she covered them. She had to fight every inch in the teeth of the wind and reached the gabled house thoroughly chilled and spent. A bad attack of pneumonia followed this exposure, and Ernest's troubles were almost ignored in the anxiety about lovely Marian.

The crisis passed safely by dint of loving care and good nursing, but her convalescence was slow. Ernest's eyes were well and he was back in school before Marian dared leave the house. It grieved them all to see her so thin and white.

Poor Ernest heard the story of her struggle with the blizzard for his sake repeated so many times, as sympathetic friends called upon his mother, that the boy began to feel a personal responsibility for her illness. He didn't say anything but he hovered around her as soon as he was permitted to go out, spending every cent of his slender pin money in dainties and flowers which he seldom presented to her directly. He would leave them on her bed or on the dining-room table with never a word. Frank and Marian were pleased and touched by his devotion. They laughed together over his bashful ways without suspecting that the lad was worried.

It was Chicken Little who finally wormed his trouble out of him.

"Gee, I wish I had some decent marbles. Sherm's got a stunner of an onyx and six flints and——"

"Why Ernest Morton, I thought Father gave you a quarter last night to get some."

Ernest grinned in embarrassed silence.

Chicken Little regarded him suspiciously.

"What did you do with it?"

Ernest did not deign to reply.

"Bet you spent it for those grapes for Marian."

Ernest drummed on the window.

"She doesn't 'spect you to take your marble money for her, goosie. Say, Ernest, what's the matter?"

The boy swallowed painfully.

"Tell me, Ernest, I won't tell. Honest to goodness, I won't." Jane cuddled up close to him laying her face against his shoulder caressingly.

Ernest was not proof against her sympathy and he blurted out his remorse.

"'Tisn't your fault a speck—you didn't tease her to come."

Chicken Little patted and argued in vain. Ernest found her comforting, but did not feel that she was old enough to understand.

Chicken Little took the matter up with Marian the very next day. She began very diplomatically because she had promised not to tell.

"Do you s'pose you'd got sick if you hadn't come to see Ernest that day, Marian?"

"Probably not, dear."

This was not reassuring.

"But you might have gone some place else, mightn't you?"

"I suppose so—only I don't think I should have been silly enough to go out in that storm without a good reason."

"But it wasn't Ernest's fault it stormed," Jane replied plaintively.

"Ernest's fault? Why, what do you mean?" Marian looked at the child in astonishment.

Jane's face was very sober.

"I just guess he couldn't help if it you got all cold and——"

"Of course not, Jane, what put such an idea into your head! I should have had more sense than to venture out in such a storm. Does Ernest—is that why he brings me all those things and hangs round so?—the poor boy? Dear me, this will never do."

"He wouldn't like it if he knew I told you," said Chicken Little ruefully.

"You haven't told me, dear. I guessed it, but I'll find a way to stop his worrying."

April came and went and Marian was still pale and weak. Dr. Morton looked grave and finally suggested to Frank that they should have the famous Dr. Brownleigh of Chicago down to examine Marian's lungs. Frank went white at the suggestion, but quietly acquiesced. Two days later the great doctor arrived.

Chicken Little knew there was some excitement afoot that morning when she went to school. Both Dr. and Mrs. Morton looked sad and Mrs. Morton sighed frequently. Ernest pushed most of his breakfast away untasted.

"What time will he be here, Father?"

"On the nine-thirty."

"Who?" Chicken Little demanded curiously.

"A man you have never seen, little daughter," her father replied quietly.

So Chicken Little went off to school mystified but curious.

The great physician did his work carefully. It was before the days of germ cultures, and the apparatus for such tests had not reached the perfection of today. There was much room for professional judgment.

Dr. Morton and Marian's mother were with Frank beside the bed. Frank looked miserably anxious in spite of his efforts at self control, and Marian's big eyes were questioning and wistful.

Dr. Brownleigh smiled cheerfully down at her as he finished.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Morton, you will live to be a nice rosy-cheeked grandmother. I predict you'll be plumper than your mother."

The tension was broken and Marian sighed with relief.

"There, I told you it was silly to be scared about me, Frank. It always did take me a long time to recover from an illness—even a cold. I'm afraid I'm lazy—you didn't know you had married a lazy wife did you?" Marian gave his hand a little loving pat and Frank silently stooped to kiss her, but he was not reassured.

He had watched the varying expressions of the great doctor's face and he was decidedly uneasy. With reason, he found when he accompanied his father and Dr. Brownleigh back to the old home.

Once inside the little sitting room Dr. Brownleigh turned to him gravely.

"Mr. Morton, your face tells me that you have read mine. Please don't make the mistake of imagining your wife is worse than she is. Her right lung is considerably affected, I am sorry to say. The left one seems to be perfectly sound there is no reason with proper care and a change of climate why she should not live for years."

"Change of climate?—that means what—a few months or a permanent move?"

"A year at the least—I should advise a permanent change to Kansas or Colorado or Arizona. She needs a dryer and more even climate, plenty of fresh air and an outdoor life."

Frank groaned. His father laid his hand on his shoulder sympathetically.

"It is hard, my boy, when you have such a good position here, too. Brace up—we'll find a way out—and Marian may be completely cured—remember that."

Many were the consultations in the Morton and Gates homes during the next few weeks. It was agreed not to tell Marian her weakness till she was able to be out again. In the meantime it was arranged that Dr. Morton should take a trip west to look up a suitable location.

Without telling her the real reason, Frank had talked Marian into the idea of ranching and the older people found her eager zest and enthusiasm for the new life, pathetic.

"I know I'll be lots stronger on a farm," she declared. "I shall have chickens and make butter. You can all come out and spend the summers—won't that be grand?"

Dr. Morton had offered to buy a ranch for Frank taking over their cozy Centerville home in part payment. Ernest had been taken into the family councils and understood all this. He was a reserved serious lad who could be depended upon not to talk. But Chicken Little was not so favored. She knew only that Father was going on a long journey out west, and she did not concern herself as to his errand.





CHAPTER XIII
FORBIDDEN BOOKS AND
CANDY HEARTS

During the weeks of worry over Ernest's eyes and the deeper anxiety over Marian's tragic weakness, Chicken Little was left much to her own devices. Mrs. Morton was too overburdened and harassed to give the child the usual care and oversight. Sewing lessons were dropped entirely and practising was so irregular that her music teacher was in despair. Fortunately the days were short and Jane didn't have much time out of school hours to get into mischief. While Ernest was shut in, she spent most of her play time faithfully trying to amuse him. But after he got out she proved the truth of the old adage of Satan and the idle hands.

Mrs. Morton always watched Chicken Little's reading most carefully for the child bade fair to be as much of a bookworm as Ernest. She was never permitted to borrow books from other children without having Mother look them over.

Miss Brown's room at school was cursed with the usual abnormal pupil in a silly overgrown girl called Sary Myers. Sary's parents were shiftless and ignorant people and though Sary was almost fifteen years old, and a woman in size, she was still among children of ten and eleven.

She was a good-natured girl, always willing to pet and humor the little girls, and they liked her in a half contemptuous patronizing way. Sary came to school one day with a book done up carefully in a newspaper. She was very mysterious about it taking it out of her desk when Miss Brown's back was turned, pointing to it with smirks and nods till the little girls were so curious, they could hardly wait for recess to see the wonderful volume.

At recess it went the rounds, Sary assuring them that it was a grand story with lots about love and getting married, and that there was a woman in it who treated a girl just terrible.

Chicken Little was not in the least interested in love or lovers, but she was not proof against Sary's mysterious manner. She promptly begged the loan of the precious book till noon. But there was only time for aggravating peeps in the short hour filled with recitations. So she coaxed Sary to let her take it home that night. Sary was easily persuaded. Reading was a painful process to her and she had been secretly hoping that one of the children would read the book and tell her the story.

Chicken Little slipped it home guiltily hidden in her school bag. She found it a weighty responsibility. No sooner had she ensconced herself snugly in one of the dormer windows to read, than she heard someone coming upstairs. It was only Olga. She thought possibly she would be safer in Ernest's room, but Ernest and Carol were doing their algebra there. At last she settled down in the front parlor and by tea time was deep in the adventures of Rosamond Clifford, romantic and unreal enough to satisfy the most exacting child.

For days the book was her constant companion outside of school hours. She read snatches of it to Sary and a chosen few in a corner of the schoolyard at recesses and noons. She hid it under her pillow ready for her devouring eyes at an early hour in the morning. To be sure Chicken Little never could wake up at an early hour, her mother having to call long and lustily before she could rouse her at all. Still the book was there if she should happen to want it.

After Chicken Little finished it, the story was passed from hand to hand among the children. Gertie being the only one with sufficient firmness of character to decline to read it without asking Mother. One adventurous child discovered she could get other books by the same author from the public library. These the children also passed round and gloated over their lurid adventures for days. The stories were doubly fascinating because each small sinner realized that the mushy volumes must be carefully concealed from mothers and teachers. The craze ended finally by Miss Brown's discovering a copy of "Cousin Maud" and confiscating it after a sharp lecture to the school on what children should read.

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But the mischief was done. Fully a dozen young heads seethed with romance. They imagined they were abused by unfeeling sisters or stern parents. They looked for unhappy lovers around every corner. They even tried to lie awake nights nursing broken hearts, but ten o'clock was the latest hour anyone reached, though Grace Dart said she knew she heard it strike one. Katy, indeed, walked in her sleep one night to her mother's horror. Mrs. Halford promptly gave her a liberal dose of castor oil and she was never able to repeat the wonderful feat.

At least six dolls were re-christened Rosamond Clifford, and seven others promptly became Cousin Maud. Marbles and tag and the usual spring outdoor sports were neglected while they planned doll elopements or family quarrels, and locked the tiny heroines in dark closets.

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Chicken Little was in great demand on these occasions because she had learned some of the choicest scenes in the stories by heart and she would talk for the dolls.

"My, you do Dr. Kennedy just grand!" said Katy stirred out of her usual calm by a thrilling scene in which her prettiest doll had defied a cruel stepfather made from a stick of stove-wood.

"It's awful easy," Jane responded modestly. "I've read it so often I can say it most all, and I just try to act mad."

The epidemic of play-acting among the dolls gave Katy's practical talents a chance also. There was a great demand for boy dolls. One badly damaged tin soldier and a fat sailor boy were all that could be found. But Katy was ingenious. She took her tallest doll and made her a complete outfit of men's clothes including a cunning straw hat with a black band. She sheared Angelina's blonde wig short and painted a smart black mustache on her rosebud mouth.

Angie was so changed she wouldn't have known herself in the glass. But she didn't need to. She became Horatio Seymour and was never permitted to wear petticoats again.

The other children were so charmed, Katy was besieged with teasing to make over their dolls. It was no small job and after being obliging once or twice, Katy had the happy thought of charging fifteen cents for the transformation.

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This was more money than most of the little girls had, so they took to borrowing boy dolls. Horatio Seymour was much over-worked. He took the parts of villain, lover and irate father on an average of at least once every day and from two to three times on Saturdays. Katy had to put a little stick up his back-bone, he got so limp.

But the interest in this doll loving began to wane after a time. The children looked about for something else exciting. They began to make Horatios out of the boys they knew. Some of the older girls started writing notes, and the smaller ones hung round breathlessly to hear the answers read. The boys were not always responsive. This was the height of the marble season and most of the lads were too crazy over the mooted question of "playing keeps" to care to spell out scrawly notes.

"Who is your beau, Jane?" Grace Dart demanded one day.

Chicken Little cherished a secret admiration for Carol, but she wouldn't have betrayed it for worlds. Still she felt that she must claim somebody to be in the swim. She thought about it for several days and finally announced proudly to Grace that Johnny Carter was her beau.

211

"Why he's the boy you slapped! I thought you didn't like him Jane."

"I don't so very well," confessed Chicken Little reluctantly. "That's the reason I took him. Don't you see—I'm going to reform him."

Grace looked decidedly puzzled.

"Yes, like the heroines do in books."

"What you going to do to Johnny?"

But Jane had it all thought out.

"His hands most always need washing awful bad—I did think of that, but they don't seem ever to

begin with hands. They most always make them promise not to use tobacco or drink wine and stuff."

"Yes," said Grace doubtfully, "but Johnny doesn't do anything like that—Mr. Carter would lick him if he did. He's temperance and awful strict with Johnny. I heard Mother say so."

"Johnny chews gum. I've seen him lots of times—I think gum's most as bad as tobacco don't you?"

"Maybe it's just as bad for a boy. Miss Brown always makes us throw it in the waste-paper basket."

"Well, my mother thinks it's a horrid habit. She says no lady would do such a thing."

"How you going to make him quit?"

This was a point that was not quite clear to Chicken Little herself. To tell the truth she and Johnny had not been on very good terms since the candy episode. She thought it best to be a little vague with Grace. 212

"For me to know and you to find out," she said with dignity.

"Bet you can't do it," retorted Grace, nettled. "Johnny Carter likes that red-headed girl who goes to our Sunday School better than you anyhow. I saw him talking to her. I guess it doesn't make a boy your beau, just wanting him to be!" And Grace departed with her nose in the air after this parting thrust.

It made Chicken Little feel a trifle uncomfortable. She wished she hadn't been so hasty about claiming Johnny's affections. She wished this still more when she went over to Halford's that evening for Katy called to her before she got inside the gate.

"Somebody's got a beau!—somebody's got a beau!" and Katy pointed the finger of scorn at her vigorously.

Chicken Little tried to appear unconcerned.

"Pooh, that's nothing—all the girls have."

Katy ignored this remark and returned to the charge.

"Jane Morton's got a beau! Johnny Carter is Jane's beau!"

Chicken Little began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. She did wish Katy wouldn't sing it out so loud.

But Katy was thoroughly enjoying herself. She had discovered Ernest and Carol coming along the walk and she saw her chance to make a hit. She took up the refrain again with embellishments. 213

"Jane Morton's got a beau
And I know what'll please her,
A bottle of wine—"

but she got no further. Chicken Little, too, had caught sight of her brother Ernest and Carol, and she flew at Katy like a young fury.

The remainder of the doggerel was largely drowned in the scuffle that ensued, but Katy managed to get "Johnny Carter" out in a shrill treble that carried far, in spite of the hands clapped over her mouth.

The boys heard it, grinned, and passed on. Chicken Little was furious.

"I'll never forgive you, Katy Halford, as long as I live, so there!" And she turned her back on the offending Katy, stalked straight out of the yard and banged the gate after her emphatically.

The feud lasted a week. Chicken Little passed Katy by as if she did not exist, and Katy lost no opportunity to hector her. She chanted Johnny's name every time Jane came in sight till the child loathed the sound. To add to her woes, Grace Dart began to demand some visible proof that Johnny was her beau. 214

"He hasn't ever given you anything, has he?" she quizzed. "He gave Sallie a big red apple yesterday at recess—I saw him."

Chicken Little grew desperate. She didn't care very much to have Johnny or anybody else as a beau. She wished there were no such things as beaux on the face of the earth, but her pride was stung to the quick. She began to imagine that Johnny grinned when he saw her. Suppose he had heard. She wanted to run every time she saw him coming, but she felt that she must do something to make friends with him.

Finally she thought out a way. She saw some of the older girls buying candy hearts at the grocery store one Saturday when she went downtown on an errand for her mother. That would be just the thing she thought. If she could find one with a nice motto it surely wouldn't be very hard to turn around and lay it on Johnny's desk.

The more she thought about it, the more feasible the plan seemed. Sunday afternoon she went upstairs and shook a nickel out of her bank which she invested in candy hearts the next morning, going downtown on her way to school—a thing strictly forbidden in the Morton household.

She didn't have a chance to look at them till she got home at noon, and then, alas, none of the 215

mottoes seemed suitable. She couldn't make up her mind to give him "You're my girl," or "I love you," or "Sweetheart mine," which appeared oftenest in flaming red letters on their tombstone surfaces.

She decided to try again. That night she took another nickel out of her bank and bought more hearts the following morning. This time she found two she thought might do. She wavered quite a while between "Be my friend," and "I like you," at length deciding on the latter.

She wrapped it up carefully in a bit of white paper, then waiting her opportunity took the rest of the bag of hearts and dumped them in the grate. She was sick of them. Her mother coming in soon after wondered what made such an odor of burned sugar.

But the act of putting the fateful heart on Johnny's desk wasn't as simple as she had fancied beforehand. If Miss Brown wasn't looking, Grace Dart was. It seemed to her that Grace didn't study a single bit that whole afternoon. Twice when the coast was clear, she actually turned around with the heart in her hand, but some way her courage failed her. One look into Johnny's impish eyes paralyzed her hand. Finally she decided to put it on his desk when he went to the board. She would wait till he was almost back to his seat so nobody could get it, and, then lay it down real quick.

216

The deed was done and Chicken Little turned back to bury her burning face in her Geography and await results. She listened to the rustling of paper as Johnny unwrapped the heart. There was a long silence. She wondered if he would eat it. But Johnny evidently didn't eat it. She couldn't detect the tiniest crunch. She began to grow more and more uncomfortable. Suppose he should show it to some of the other children—or to teacher.

But Johnny wasn't thinking of doing anything of the kind. He was furtively contemplating the tip of a very red ear and a strip of cheek, which were about all he could see of Chicken Little's face. Johnny had secretly admired Chicken Little ever since she had got even with him so artistically. He was considerably overcome by this unlooked-for mark of her favor. But he couldn't think off-hand of any suitable way of returning the courtesy.

He went through his pockets thoughtfully. Their contents were not inspiring—five marbles, a piece of string, two broken slate pencils and a red bandanna handkerchief slightly soiled. He cherished this handkerchief specially because he had seen so many teamsters and jockeys—his special admiration—carrying them. Further, he was the only boy in school who had one.

He smoothed the handkerchief out carefully and looked at it. Finally he folded it up into the smallest wad possible, tied it with the bit of string, and reached under the desk touched Jane's arm. He pressed it into her hand furtively when she looked around.

217

"Tain't much," he said apologetically, "but maybe it'll do for your doll."

Chicken Little walked on air going home from school that night. She called Grace Dart clear across the street to come over and see. Grace came and saw and bowed down. There was no need to ask who had given Chicken Little the trophy. Only Johnny Carter possessed such a one—and the handkerchief was undeniably big and masculine. But Jane's troubles were not over yet. Grace had a good memory.

"I don't care if he did give it to you. I saw him chewing gum this morning coming to school."

Chicken Little felt that having a beau was harder work than she had bargained for. She privately resolved never never to have one again, even if she never grew up to be like Rosamond Clifford. But she hated to back down on any part of her program before Grace. She didn't like Grace very well anyway.

But Johnny himself made things easier for her this time. He caught up with her going home from school the next day and carelessly extended a brand new paper of gum in passing.

218

"Oh, Johnny," she said, "I'd love it but Mother don't let me—and—Johnny—"

Johnny looked expectant.

"I wish you wouldn't chew it either."


Johnny was surprised. He didn't reply for a moment then demanded:

"Why, gum's all right."

"No, it isn't—my Mother says it's a very bad habit."

Johnny pondered. He wasn't walking along with Jane, he was about two steps ahead.

"Well, I don't mind quittin'—it's kind of girls' stuff anyway."



CHAPTER · XIV MAY · BASKETS

It was a late spring and both the wild blossoms and the early garden flowers were discouragingly scarce.

"I don't believe there is even a spring beauty or a dog-tooth violet out yet," Mrs. Halford replied doubtfully when the little girls broached the subject of May baskets.

"I don't mind your making them or hanging them—I think it is a charming custom—but I really don't see where you can get the flowers."

"Mother's got some geraniums in bloom. I think she'd let us have them," suggested Chicken Little.

"And maybe there'll be some plum blossoms out—it's three whole days till May Day and you can see the white on the buds." Gertie was always hopeful.

"Well, get your baskets ready and we'll do the best we can to find the flowers. We can take some green from the house plants to help fill up—my oxalis is blooming nicely—that will be pretty to mix in."

220

"I'm glad it comes Saturday. I wish we could go to the Duck Creek woods to hunt for wild flowers—I just know I could find some." Katy looked out the window longingly.

"Wait and see. Perhaps you can," Mrs. Halford answered. "But you'd better be getting your materials and start your baskets. What colors do you want?"

"I'm going to have mine all red and white—they're so nice and bright," Katy spoke up promptly.

Gertie decided on green and white and Chicken Little selected pink and blue.

They bought their materials that evening after school and started the dainty weaving at Katy's house. It was pretty, bright work and a good deal of a novelty to the children for a kindergarten had only recently been established in the town.

Katy did all the cutting of the strips of shiny paper. She had a truer eye and nimbler fingers than either of the others. But they were expert at weaving the gay-colored strips in and out, and the three finished six baskets the first evening. Mrs. Halford gave them each a box so they could keep their materials and completed baskets in good order.

"How many are you going to hang, Katy?"

"Six, but you needn't ask where for I sha'n't tell."

221

"I didn't hear anyone ask you, Katy," retorted Mrs. Halford slyly.

"I know two of the places anyway," added Gertie.

"I guess I know three," Chicken Little had been thinking.

"I bet you don't—where?"

"Oh, Katy, ladies don't bet," interrupted Mrs. Halford reprovably.

"I just forgot, Mumsey, but all the girls most, say it—you're so very particular."

"You'll be glad I am some day, I hope."

"Maybe, but I—I'm not just now. And anyhow Jane doesn't know where I'm going to hang my baskets."

"I do too, but I'm not going to tell."

"You don't either—you're 'fraid to tell 'cause you don't!"

Katy was crowding the truth pretty close. Chicken Little started to protest again when Gertie came to the rescue.

"You're going to hang one for Miss Burton—I heard you say so—and one for Cousin May, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. Perhaps I haven't decided."

"You are too, Katy Halford, you said you were."

"I s'pose I ought to hang one for Miss Brown," sighed Jane. "I don't want to very bad—she's been awful cross—and Marian. I'm going to give her the prettiest one I have. I wish I could send Alice one."

222

"How is Alice getting on?" asked Mrs. Halford.

"All right. I guess she's learned a lot—she says she stays up till ten o'clock every night studying."

Her aunt Clara gave her a pretty new dress—and a new coat. Her aunt's going to take her to the seashore with them this summer, maybe. I wish I could go to the seashore."

"I've been to the lakes—that's most like the seashore, isn't it, Mother?" Katy boasted.

"A little. But you haven't told us about the baskets, Katy. Where are the other four going? I'm getting curious myself."

Katy looked up at her mother's teasing face.

"I'll tell you, Mumsey, but I sha'n't tell the girls." Katy jumped up and whispered something to her mother.

"There, there, dear, you tickle my ear and I didn't half hear."

Katy put her mouth close to her mother's ear and hurriedly mumbled six names.

"That'll do—it feels as if you were exploding firecrackers in my ear. I guess I got them all."

"I heard, too," piped Chicken Little and Gertie almost in concert.

"You didn't either!" Katy looked up indignantly.

"I did, too. You said Miss Burton and Cousin May and Marian Morton and Papa and Grace Dart and Ernest—so there!" Gertie reeled off the names almost as quickly as Katy had.

"Gertie Halford, I think that was real mean of you to tell."

"I heard them all but Ernest, anyhow," Chicken Little said quickly.

"Jane Morton, if you ever tell Ernest I'm going to hang a May basket to him, I'll never speak to you again."

"You don't need to get so mad—I wasn't going to tell, but I just guess you told on me—and——"

"And what?" demanded Katy icily.

It had been on the tip of Chicken Little's tongue to add, "and you thought you were awful smart, too," but she suddenly remembered Mrs. Halford's presence and she didn't want to be a tattletale.

"Nothing," she finished lamely, and was deaf to further questioning.

The Fates favored Chicken Little and Gertie for Miss Brown suddenly decided to have a May Day hunt for wild flowers for her room instead of waiting for the usual June picnic.

They started out at nine o'clock Saturday morning. It was an ideal spring day—not a cloud in the sky and the sunshine so warm that coats and jackets were shed long before they reached the woods. Some of the plum trees were out in bloom, and purple and yellow crocuses were opening in a number of the yards they passed.

"We'll surely find a few spring beauties and yellow violets," said Miss Brown hopefully.

There was only a faint glimmer of green on twigs and brown earth as they came into the timber and, for a time, the little band searched in vain. But Miss Brown showed them where to look in sheltered places and under protecting leaves. Johnny Carter found the first—a little bunch of spring beauties fragile and exquisite. After showing them proudly to "Teacher" he shyly slipped them into Chicken Little's basket.

They found the flowers more plentiful as they penetrated deeper into the woods. Gleeful shouts of discovery grew more and more frequent as they swarmed up and down the creek banks, over fallen logs and through the underbrush, merry and chattering as the squirrels themselves. Chicken Little counted seven blue-birds and Gertie ten, besides one brilliant cardinal that flashed by like a flame, whistling joyously.

Chicken Little's basket filled quickly for Johnny's sole interest in the flowers was apparently the pleasure of finding them, and he gave most of his spoils to her. Most, but not quite all. He had a little pasteboard box in his pocket into which he occasionally tucked a particularly choice spring beauty, carefully moistening its stem in the creek first.

Chicken Little got so many that she generously divided with Gertie when noon came, and Miss Brown called her flock together. She showed the children how to preserve the flowers by wrapping their stems in damp moss and packing them carefully in the boxes and baskets.

The ground was voted too damp for the picnic lunch so "Teacher" aided by the bigger boys searched till she found a great fallen tree, whose trunk and spreading branches accommodated her thirty chickens nicely.

The girls lined up along the trunk as near Miss Brown as possible, but the boys perched aloft, sitting astride some crotch or forked branch with their dinner pails hung conveniently on a twig nearby.

Doughnuts and sandwiches and apples went from grimy hands to eager mouths with a rapidity that astonished even Miss Brown despite her ten years of teaching. She had brought a big box of bright colored stick candy to top off with. One thoughtful boy gratefully started three cheers for Miss Brown by way of the thanks most of the children forgot. The hearty cheering of the shrill young voices went far to repay her for the morning's trouble, and warmed her heart much more than the stiff little "I've had a nice time, Miss Brown," "Good-bye, Miss Brown," which the more gently-bred children conscientiously repeated at parting.

Chicken Little turned to look back at the teacher's plain face as they left her at the school-house

gate.

"I don't mind hanging her a basket now—she—she didn't act mad a bit today."

She went straight over to Marian's to display her treasures.

"Oh, the lovely woodsy things! I wouldn't have believed there were so many out—how I love them!" and Marian sniffed the wild-wood fragrance hungrily.

"Oh, I do hope I'll be well enough to go hunt them soon. Bring your baskets over here, Chicken Little—Katy and Gertie too, and let me help you fill them—I'd love to."

Jane had something on her mind. She wanted to lay it before Marian but shyness overcame her whenever she opened her mouth to mention it. She hung round Marian's chair restlessly till Marian discovered that she wanted something and helped her.

"What is it, Sis? Do you want some of my flowers for the baskets? Anything I've got except that big lily."

"Oh, Marian, I don't want to take your flowers—I just—wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away—I can give you advice to burn—it's about all I'm good for these days."

"It's about the May baskets. Do you think it would be all right to hang one for Carol?"

"Why sure, dear. Anybody would like one of your lovely baskets with these dear flowers."

"But—I—"

"Yes?"

"Johnny Carter gave me all his flowers and I thought maybe I ought to hang one for him."

"Well, you have plenty of flowers for two."

"Ye—es."

"Well?"

"I thought maybe it wasn't nice—to have two."

"Two what?"

Chicken Little wriggled uneasily and got rather red in the face.

"Two beaux."

Marian suppressed a laugh.

"Why, Chicken Little, I think you are a little young to be talking about beaux. I wouldn't, if I were you. Carol is Ernest's friend and he does lots of nice things for you. And you certainly don't want to neglect Johnny when he was so kind about giving you the flowers. It would be very nice for you to show your appreciation by hanging a basket for each of them. I'll write the names for you, if you want me to—then they won't recognize the writing."

"Oh, will you? And Marian—"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell Katy or Ernest—or Mother, will you?"

"I won't tell a living soul, dear, this shall be our very own secret."

"Katy's going to hang one to Ernest," said Chicken Little shamelessly betraying Katy's secret just after she had secured Marian's promise to keep her own.

"Is she? That's nice, but Chicken Little, if you don't want me to tell about you, you oughtn't to tell about Katy—ought you?"

"I am not going to tell Ernest," the child assured her hastily.

"Well, I don't believe I'd tell anybody. It's Katy's little secret. Let her tell it if she wants to."

Marian's admonition was well-timed but she felt it was rather wasted later that afternoon. The little girls had accepted her invitation and had brought their flowers and May baskets over for her help and advice. Katy was filling hers deftly, chattering as she worked. She was especially particular with one, taking the flowers out and rearranging them several times before she could get them to her liking.

"That must be for someone very special, Katy."

Katy looked pleased.

"Yes, it's for a very—special friend."

Marian saw that Katy wished to be questioned.

"Why, Katy, that sounds mysterious. I suppose we don't dare ask who this friend is?"

"It's somebody you know," volunteered Gertie.

Chicken Little giggled, appreciating the joke.

"Somebody you know very well," added Katy with emphasis.

"It can't be Frank?" Marian queried.

The children laughed in derision.

"You're getting a little bit warm," suggested Katy.

"Only a little bit warm—let me see—it's Dr. Morton. No?—then it must be Dick Harding."

Katy shook her head.

"I'm certainly a poor guesser. Is it Sherm?"

Jane was delighted with Marian's pretending and Gertie was burning to assist.

"He was here this morning," Gertie encouraged.

"He has weak eyes," Chicken Little was delightfully definite.

"Why, it must be Ernest!"

Katy smiled a self-conscious little smirk and the others nodded joyfully.

"Of course, how stupid I was. Let's see—you go after dark and hang the baskets on the door knob, then ring the bell and run—isn't that the way? That's the way we used to do with our comic valentines."

The little girls were not the only ones who came consulting Marian that day. Three rather sheepish boys appeared so promptly after the girls departed, that Marian suspected they had been hanging around waiting for the children to go.

"Say, Marian, do you s'pose you could help us fix up some of those May basket things everybody's talking about?"

"It's a little late in the day, Ernest. How many do you boys want?"

Ernest looked at Sherm and Sherm looked at Carol, and Carol saw something out of the window that interested him.

At length, Ernest, getting no assistance from the others, blurted out:

"One's enough for me. What do you say, boys?"

Carol and Sherm nodded.

"One apiece—my, this looks exciting. Somebody is to be very specially honored I see. It is too late to make the kind the little girls have, but you might buy some tiny baskets—I'd love to trim them up for you. Got any money, boys?"

An exhaustive search of trousers' pockets revealed a combined capital of twenty-five cents. The boys asked anxiously if it were enough.

"Yes, for three. Are you getting this for Chicken Little, Ernest?"

Ernest got red and looked uncomfortable.

"Never mind—I didn't mean to be prying—only I wish you big boys would hang some for the little girls—it would please them to death. If you don't mind my having a part in this. I'd like to put in a little money, too. Let me put in another quarter and I'll do the trimming and you boys can repay me by hanging a basket to each of the little girls as well as to your own friends."

The bargain was speedily struck and the boys hurried off downtown for the baskets and the ribbon for the tiny bows Marian had decided should adorn them.

They came back so quickly, it made Marian breathless to think of the pace they must have gone. Carol didn't come straight either. He slipped round by home to beg some blossoms from his mother's house plants. Not finding her, he promptly helped himself to all her most cherished blooms to her surprise and wrath when she discovered her loss.

Marian filled in with her own flowers and the boys hung round admiring, waiting upon her awkwardly and watching every move she made with the baskets.

"Is it all right?" she asked, holding up the first, filled with scarlet geraniums.

"Gee, that's a dandy!" Ernest approved.

"Say, I'd like to have that one," said Sherm.

"I like blue better anyway—make mine blue, will you, Marian?" Ernest added.

Marian thought of Katy's scarlet and white offering to be laid at Ernest's shrine and smiled.

"Yellow for me, please," put in Carol. "Yellow's so kind of cheerful—like sunshine or gold—I always liked dandelions only they're such a pest."

The little girls had been too happily full of their own plans to wonder whether they would get any baskets in return. But they came back that evening from the delightfully exciting task of hanging their fragrant gifts to find that friends and playmates had been equally mindful of them.

Katy had the most—seven. Jane and Gertie had each five. One of Jane's was a marvellous creation so heavy that she promptly investigated what lay beneath the flowers, finding a fat little box of candy hidden away. Another was a crude little pasteboard affair fairly overflowing with dainty spring beauties, and this, too, contained an offering in the shape of a jolly little homemade whistle. Still another had scarlet bows.

Katy wondered and wondered who sent her a similar basket with golden yellow bows on each side of the handle.

"I'm sure I heard Ernest and Sherm outside our gate. I just know Ernest gave me that," she

confided to Gertie.

Gertie's biggest basket had blue bows and Gertie loved blue.

Marian never knew where the mates to the blue and yellow and red baskets found a lodging place. She did not inquire. But when she saw Chicken Little's candy she promptly exclaimed "Dick Harding!"

"I just know it was," replied Chicken Little.



May seemed to have traded places with April that year for it was a month of many showers. Poor Marian got tired of watching the pelting rain and Mrs. Morton complained that it was simply impossible to clean house as the sunniest day was liable to end in a downpour.

Dr. Morton's letters from the west full of glowing accounts of the sunshine in Kansas and Colorado seemed almost irritating in their contrast. Alice, too, wrote of lovely spring weather, declaring it had been almost hot some days.

The children did not mind the rain—they merely objected to being shut in on account of it. Chicken Little told Dick a long tale of woe one evening when he came up to inquire about Marian and get the latest news of Alice.

"Fine weather for ducks and frogs, Chicken Little. Just try standing in the edge of a puddle—saying croak, croak and see if you don't like it. I'll have to give you a few swimming lessons," he consoled her teasingly.

"Don't put any such nonsense into her head, Dick. She is a born duck now and is forever teasing to go wading," Mrs. Morton had replied.

"Why we'll have to call you Ducky Daddles instead of Chicken Little," said Dick.

Mrs. Morton repeated the incident to Mrs. Halford the following day.

"Children certainly do have the craziest notions. Chicken Little has been fretting all spring to go out in the rain. I suspect several slight colds she has had are due to experiments of that kind." Mrs. Morton looked both amused and annoyed.

"Yes, Katy and Gertie have had the same craze—I guess it's natural. I remember the spring rains used to have the same attraction for me when I was a child. My father used to say children should be born web-footed—they love water so. Puddles do look tempting. I think the thing that cured me was one of those dashing spring showers that bring the earthworms out. Some kind child made me believe they rained down. I loathed the slimy things. You couldn't get me out doors, if it so much as looked like rain, for weeks after. I kept imagining the crawly things dropping down on my hair and face. Ugh! I remember just how I felt even yet."

"That might be a good way to cure our would-be ducklings."

"No, I don't think so—fear is never the best way to cure a child, and I like my girls to love rain as well as shine. But I've been wondering if it might not be a good idea to let them go out once in a good hard thunder shower just to get it out of their systems—though, of course, there would be fear in that, too."

Some two weeks after this conversation between the mothers, Chicken Little was spending

Saturday morning at the Halfords'. The children were playing keep house out under the gooseberry bushes. The bushes were very old and tall. Mr. Halford kept them trimmed up underneath, forming leafy aisles about three feet high. Here the little girls delighted to set up their doll goods in the late spring and early summer.

They had everything arranged to their taste on this particular morning. They had settled down in charge of a most extensive dolls' hospital, using the aisles between the rows of bushes for wards and the green gooseberries for pills—a most convenient arrangement because the supply of medicine never gave out. But, alas, before Dr. Katy had time to inspect a single ward, big drops began to patter down, and Gertie's cherished Minnie, suffering from a terrible attack of pneumonia, was well sprinkled before her anxious mother could remove her to a sheltered spot. The sprinkle was but the beginning of a smart shower that sent the children scurrying to the house with their arms filled with a jumble of patients and bedding. Gertie regarded them dumped in a heap on the kitchen floor, ruefully.

"Minnie'll take an awful cold and die I just know, and my new pink silk quilt got wet and the pink's run into the white!"

"I think it's horrid of it to rain just as we got everything fixed," added Katy.

"I wish we could stay out in it," said Chicken Little, staring out the window at the rain falling ker-splash on the brick walk outside.

"Wouldn't it be fun!" Katy exclaimed enthusiastically. "See what big drops—I most believe I could catch some in my hands. Oh, I wonder if Mother would let us go out—I'm going to ask her."

Mrs. Halford meditated a moment over the request, then putting by her sewing went to the window to take a look at the clouds.

It was growing darker with an occasional flash of lightning and an accompanying growl of thunder off in the distance. Mrs. Halford turned to the children with a twinkle of resolution in her eyes and astonished them by saying:

"Yes, you may. Off with your shoes and stockings and put on your gossamers. You may stay out in the rain just as long as you like. You too, Chicken Little, I'll be responsible to your mother. You can take my gossamer."

"Oh, Mother," Katy and Gertie both flung themselves at their little mother for an ecstatic hug.

"Yes," she continued, as soon as they released her. "You may take those old umbrellas in the woodhouse and go back under the gooseberry bushes if you wish—I want you to be thoroughly satisfied, so you won't always be teasing to go out in the wet."

"You don't need to think we'll get tired of it, Mother," Katy assured her.

"My, I could stay out all day—I love it so," Chicken Little protested.

"We'll stay as long as you'll let us, Mumsey."

Mrs. Halford smiled.

Shoes and stockings came off in a jiffy and the children ran out jumping up and down gleefully. They splashed about in the little puddles in the old brick walk, and dabbled their bare toes in the wet grass. They danced and squealed, catching the splashing drops in their hands and flinging them in each other's faces until the water was dripping in streams from noses and chins.

"Isn't it grand?"

"My, I never had so much fun in my life!"

"'Tisn't a bit cold."

They frisked and splashed till the novelty began to wear off a little, then adopted Mrs. Halford's suggestion about going back to their gooseberry playhouse.

The rain was coming down harder now and the roll of thunder and play of lightning were more frequent. But the little girls were too much absorbed with their own plans to notice this.

"I shall not take Minnie out in this rain—she would be sure to take a nasty cold," said Gertie decidedly, heartlessly denying her child the pleasures she was enjoying.

"Let's leave the dolls in the house—they'll get all messy—besides the paint comes off if you get them a teeny bit wet."

"Let's play we're sailing in a boat—and the umbrellas can be the sails and——"

"No, let's be Swiss Family Robinson in the tree house—we can just play pull the ladder up after us."

They all agreed to this and started out to fit up their abode under almost as discouraging circumstances as that famous family are supposed to have faced. Taking two of the old umbrellas Katy propped them up to reinforce their foliage roof over the driest spot she could find. She worked quite a while before she could get them moored securely. It was hard to manage with the rain driving in her face and the wind tugging at the umbrellas.

"My, it'll be fine when we get it all fixed. See, it's hardly a bit wet here——"

"Let's bring an old piece of carpet and spread down—and a book. We can read here just as

snug.”

“Yes, and some cookies and apples—I’m getting hungry.”

“All right—let’s.”

The children plodded back and forth under the remaining umbrellas looking like a six-legged mushroom. They found it difficult to get the carpet and provender safely placed without getting wet. And however willing they were to be ducks themselves water didn’t seem adapted to carpets or cookies.

Mrs. Halford watched the trio busy and dripping and laughed till the tears stood in her eyes. The Irish maid in the kitchen was scandalized but interested.

“Did you ever see the likes of ’em? They’re that wet, ma’am, they leave puddles on me floor every time they come in and they be after stayin’ out there and ’atin,’ ma’am! Now drinkin’ would sure be aisier.”

“Never mind, Maggie, it does seem foolish, but I want them to have their fill of it.”

“Fill—it’s sloppin’ over they are already. Howly Saints—hear that thunder! They’ll not be stayin’ out long to that music I’m thinkin’.”

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Mrs. Halford smiled and settled down to her sewing after one parting look at the camp under the gooseberry bushes.

It was truly a comical sight. The old umbrellas swayed uneasily above the green domes below and they could catch glimpses of the gossamer-clad figures, including a generous exposure of bare feet and legs in the leafy gloom beneath.

Maggie came to the sitting-room door a few moments later in the last throes of astonishment.

“And what do you think they be doing now? It’s radin’ they be—radin’! It’s swimmin’ they’ll be doin’ soon I’m a thinkin’!”

Maggie returned to her post indignant at such carryings on.

The rain was coming down steadily. Water was pouring off the eaves in great streams, branches were dripping, and some chickens huddled in a fence corner in the adjoining yard were so dejected that not even an aspiring tail-feather pointed heavenward. The streets were almost deserted and the few passers-by hurried along wet and forlorn. Mrs. Halford began to wonder a little anxiously how long the gooseberry campers would stick it out. She began to have painful visions of sore throats and bronchitis or at the best colds, caught from sitting on the wet ground. She was also fearful lest Mrs. Morton might not approve after all.

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“Have you got plenty of boiling water, Maggie?” she called. Hot drinks and hot foot baths could surely be relied upon to ward off colds, she reassured herself, if they didn’t stay too long. She wondered if they were really enjoying it.

The children were beginning to wonder themselves, though not for worlds would either Chicken Little or Katy have confessed to the other that this rainy day playhouse was not all she had fancied.

The trio huddled together close under the two umbrellas. The rain was pounding down through the gooseberry screen now and the carpet was decidedly damp on the edges. Little streams of water ran down the furrows in the garden about them. They had eaten all the cookies but one, which got wet and dissolved in a gluey paste. Katy read away valiantly but the story didn’t seem as absorbing as it had been the night before—the children found their attention wandering.

Gertie’s eyes kept straying to the forked streaks of lightning that were cutting the black clouds overhead.

“It’s getting pretty close,” she complained finally.

But the others’ courage was still good.

“Pooh, who minds a little lightning,” said Katy scornfully.

“I’m not afraid of lightning,” said Chicken Little valiantly, “but I wish it wouldn’t thunder so hard.”

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“Bet you are afraid, Jane Morton.”

“I am not, Katy Halford. I never said a word about going in. I just said I wished it wouldn’t thunder so much—and I do.”

A long reverberating roll gave point to her wish.

Gertie and Chicken Little both squirmed uneasily, but Katy caught her breath and went on reading, scrooging up a little closer under the umbrellas. The continuous drip from one of the umbrella points down on her back was making her nervous, she said. She could feel a little damp spot coming through her gossamer. Gertie drew her bare feet up under her and cast longing looks toward the house. She was getting cold and the drifting smoke from the kitchen chimney looked wondrously inviting. She did wish Katy would stop reading. But Katy read on as steadily as the rain pattered, rolling out the big words reckless of mistakes and lifting her shrill little voice almost to a shriek when it thundered, as if she defied the elements to do their worst.

“I don’t think it’s very intrusting,” Gertie interrupted plaintively.

“Why, Gertie Halford, you said you just loved it last night.”

Gertie could not deny the accusation. She didn't quite realize herself how very different the story seemed when listened to from the depths of a cushioned chair in a cozy, brightly lighted room and out here under the dripping bushes, chilled and frightened. Even the old umbrellas were getting soaked. Katy had to shift the precious book a time or two to avoid the drip.

Gertie returned to the charge.

"I guess the Swiss family got awful tired of their tree house if it rained like this. I am never going to play tree house again, Katy."

"'Fraid cat! 'fraid cat! I think it's lots of fun. Don't you, Jane?"

Chicken Little had begun to fuss about restlessly, shifting from one cramped position to another. She did not answer Katy's question right away.

"I guess it's most noon," she finally evaded diplomatically. "Mother said I must be home by noon."

But Katy saw through this flimsy excuse.

"Oh, you're backing out! 'Tisn't anywhere near noon—you're just making an excuse to go home. I bet you're 'fraid too."

"I'm not, Katy Halford, I'm not afraid the least speck and I can stay here just as long as you can!" Chicken Little repelled this slur upon her courage indignantly.

"Pooh, I'm going to stay here till the dinner bell rings," declared Katy with a confidence she did not feel. She had been secretly hoping for several minutes that her mother would call them in.

A blinding flash put a period to her sentence. There were three alarmed "Ohs!" and three pairs of frightened eyes blinked an instant from the glare.

Then Gertie picked herself up resolutely.

"I'm going straight in to Mother. I am 'fraid of lightning and I don't care who knows it—and you don't like it any better than I do, Katy, but you just think it's smart to pretend." And Gertie gathered her flapping gossamer about her and scurried for the house.

Katy looked at Chicken Little and Chicken Little looked at Katy. They were both longing to follow but neither would give in.

Suddenly another and then another dazzling flash blinded them. The forked flames seemed launched straight at them and the deafening crash that followed shook the very ground under their feet.

With a wild yell in unison, the children fled screaming to the house. Mrs. Halford met them at the kitchen door white and worried. She had not dreamed they would hold out so long.

The piece of carpet was left to a watery fate under the bushes. The book dropped from Katy's nerveless fingers unnoticed and forgotten till the next day, when Maggie picked it up limp and discolored near the kitchen door.

It took Mrs. Halford a full hour to dry and comfort the terrified trio. But once warmed and reassured Chicken Little and Katy promptly quarreled as to who deserted first.

"I wouldn't have come if Chicken Little hadn't been so scared. Of course, I didn't want to stay there all alone," Katy asserted blandly.

"It's no such thing, Katy Halford—I'm most sure you started first. It was 'cause you yelled so I got so scared. My mother always says I'm real brave about thunder."

"You did start first, Chicken Little Jane, and I just wish you could 'a' heard yourself yell!"

"Girls," said Mrs. Halford with a twinkle in her eye, "stand up together there."

The children wonderingly obeyed and she surveyed them both carefully.

"Do you know," she said reflectively, "I am sure it took you both to make all the noise I heard—I wonder how you did it—it sounded like a whole tribe of wild Indians. And if either of you beat the other to the house, it was because she could run faster."

The little girls edged apart sheepishly. The subject was dropped. Mrs. Halford was a quiet little woman who seldom scolded, but she had a way with her that silenced even obstreperous Katy.

"Now if you want to know what I think," she continued, "I think Gertie was the bravest one of the three."

"Why, Mumsey Halford—you know Gertie came in first of all." This was more than Katy could stand.

"Exactly, that's why I think she was the bravest. She was brave enough to stand being made fun of rather than be a foolish little girl and stay out in the storm needlessly. Your courage and Jane's, too, was mostly vanity, Katy dear. You wanted to show off—and each wanted to beat the other. That is the kind of courage that gets people into trouble in this world. The kind of courage I want my girls to have is the finer kind that does some good. It is the kind of courage that makes men risk their own lives to save people from drowning. Don't you remember, Katy, the story I read you of the life-savers going out in the terrible storm to get the people off a sinking ship? And you remember how thrilled you were reading about the awful hardships of the patriots at Valley Forge? Theirs was the courage to suffer for the sake of their country. Do you suppose we would honor them today if they had half-starved themselves in the snow that winter

just for fun? And the courage which is not afraid to refuse to do something wrong or silly, is just as necessary as the courage to do. I guess Gertie is one ahead this time. Don't you think so?"

The children were saved the pain of answering by the arrival of Ernest with umbrella, waterproof, and rubbers for Chicken Little.

Mrs. Halford laughed merrily when she saw them.

"After all, children, I guess the joke is on me. I am afraid I didn't have the courage to act at the proper time myself."





CHAPTER XVI
LETTERS AND A SURPRISE

The sitting room in the Morton home was cheerful with sunshine. It brightened the conventional flowers of the old crimson Brussels carpet into a semblance of life. It caught the gold outline of the wall paper and lingered there—even the somber steel engravings reflected the light from the polished glass over them. Mrs. Morton sat in her low rocking chair by the window reading a letter from her husband.

She had read it through for the second time, and still she gazed at the lines as if she could not quite comprehend their meaning. Her sewing had dropped from her lap unheeded. Ernest, coming in search of her, called three times before she noticed him.

"Yes, Son," she answered absently at last.

"What's the matter, Mother? Nothing wrong with Father is there?"

Ernest had recognized his father's writing on the closely written sheets.

"No, dear, just some perplexing business. Sit down and I'll read it to you—but don't mention the matter to anyone yet."

Ernest came close to his mother, putting his arm affectionately about her shoulders.

"Don't look so solemn, Mother," he protested.

"Am I looking solemn? Well, I do feel worried. Listen to this:

"My dear Wife,

"I was glad to get your letter of the 8th with the welcome news that you are all well and that Marian is getting about again. I have important news for you and for Frank. I am writing to him by the same mail. I have bought the ranch! A really choice one, I believe, and so cheap it must surely double in value in ten years. There is an entire section, and good water for house and stock—a wonderful big spring in a little rocky dell shaded by a great oak tree hundreds of years old. It will charm you all. Chicken Little will want to set up housekeeping under it immediately and you and Marian would find it a lovely cool nook for a summer afternoon. The big spring widens into a brook twenty feet below and goes singing away over the stones. A good-sized spring house has been built over it and crocks of butter and milk and great melons are set right in the cold running water. You never saw such a refrigerator. The place has magnificent orchards, peach, apple and cherry with grapes and blackberries also.

"Tell Chicken Little I saw a flock of quail in the apple orchard. Our baby quail got tangled in the long grass as he tried to scurry away and I picked him up. He was a jolly soft little brown ball with the brightest eyes. I would have liked to bring him home to the child but I was afraid I couldn't care for him. Tell her though I have a most astonishing present for her and she can never guess what it is, if she lies awake every night till I come. But to return to the ranch—it has two hundred acres of fine farming land, unlimited pasture, and a heavily timbered creek crossing it diagonally. The details I must give you when I get home. You have never seen a lovelier sight than the prairies at this time of year—I counted thirty-seven different kinds of flowers in one spot. Chicken Little would love the little sensitive plants that curl up their leaves when you touch them and open them again when they think you are gone. But I have forgotten the houses—there are two—which I suppose you and Marian will consider the most important of all."

"But—" Ernest interrupted, "why does he keep talking as if we were going, too? I thought he was just buying this for Frank and Marian."

"So did I—just wait—he explains in a moment."

"One is a roomy, comfortable farm house of two stories, the other a snug five-roomed affair just across the road from the first. Both houses are a little old-fashioned, but could easily be remodeled. One word as to the climate, then I have something for you to think over. Kansas is exactly the place for Marian—not so hot as Arizona, no startling change from hot days to cold nights as I found in Colorado. Now, dear, I want to know if you would be willing to consider coming out here to live also. The ranch is almost too big a thing for Frank alone and as you know I find my practice pretty hard work for a man of my age, but we'll talk all this over when I come home. Tell Ernest for me that he would never have weak eyes here. There is fishing and hunting enough to keep any boy out doors, not to mention having a horse of his own."

"O Mother," Ernest interrupted again, "wouldn't that be jolly?"

"Jolly, to leave our home and friends?"

Mrs. Morton's face was tragic and the tears flooded her eyes.

"Why, Mother—I didn't think—don't cry. Of course we won't go if you don't want to." And Ernest stroked his mother's hair awkwardly.

Mrs. Morton smiled through her tears.

"I mustn't give way—it's foolish. But it was so unexpected—and I'm afraid—perhaps we ought to do it on Frank and Marian's account—and your father's. It is hard for him to be up nights so much. We'll see."

Mrs. Morton kissed Ernest and picked up her sewing again.

Dr. Morton came home a week later sunburned and vigorous—full of the wonderful country he had been seeing. His trunk was a perfect treasure house of gifts for the family. Ernest's eyes shone when the canvas-covered case his father held out to him was found to contain a small shot gun. He had been begging for one for the past two years, but had been refused because he was too young.

"I think I can depend upon you to handle this with the greatest care, Ernest," said his father impressively. "I wouldn't have bought it for you if I hadn't felt assured you could be trusted."

Dr. Morton looked at the boy keenly and was pleased to see the way he drew up his shoulders and looked his father in the eye as he replied:

"I think you can trust me, Father, I'll do my best."

"I'm sure I can," said his father heartily. "The first thing you must remember is never to leave it loaded. Half the accidents occur because somebody 'didn't know it was loaded.' It's a simple matter to open it and slip out the shells before you put it away."

Dr. Morton took the shiny steel weapon across his knee and, opening it, slipped the shells quickly in and out, with Ernest and Jane watching intently beside him.

"I believe I could do that," Chicken Little remarked complacently.

"You'd better not try, Miss Meddlesome Matty," ejaculated Ernest sharply. "Don't you ever let me catch you touching it!"

The child looked rebellious but her father added sternly:

"Ernest is quite right, little daughter, you must never under any circumstances try to handle this gun—but I have something for you that will keep you busy. No," as she jumped up eagerly, "you must wait till the last this time."

"I just can't wait much longer, Father. I'm all going round inside. Please hurry!"

But for some reason her father wouldn't hurry. He brought out two gay Navajo blankets for Mrs. Morton and Marian and a wonderful Mexican bridle for Frank.

"You'll have plenty of use for it on the ranch. You'll be in the saddle half your time I fancy," he told the latter.

He even unwrapped a little Indian basket, which he asked Mrs. Morton to send to Alice. Still there was nothing for Chicken Little. She hung on the arm of his chair and fidgeted. Finally, he looked round at her quizzically:

"Why, my parcels are all gone and there doesn't seem to be anything for you. Dear me, did I forget it?"

Just then Ernest got up and went out into the hall, coming back presently, leaving the door open behind him. In spite of themselves the family all looked toward the door. Chicken Little looked too, but saw nothing. A moment later the queerest voice called:

"Chick-en Lit-tle! Chick-en Lit-tle! Poor Pete! Scat! Go off an' die!"

The words seemed to come from the floor and sounded as if they were fired out of a popgun.

Chicken Little jumped down from her father's chair and stood for an instant spellbound in the middle of the floor.

Then she fell upon the newcomer with a shout.

"Oh, it's a parrot! Ernest, it's a parrot!"

But Polly eyed her distrustfully.

"Scat—go off and die!" he exclaimed, promptly retreating toward the door.

At a safe distance he began to call again:

"Chicken Little—Chicken Little!"

"Why, Father, how does he know my name?"

"Father's taught him, silly—he makes him say it before he feeds him. He'll call you every time he wants his grub." Ernest could not resist airing his superior knowledge.

"Go get him a cracker, Chick, and he will make friends with you fast enough."

Pete caught the word cracker and observed plaintively—"Poor Pete—give Pete cracker. Bust my buttons—cracker—cracker!" Then remembering his latest lesson he called engagingly once more: "Chicken Little!"

"I am afraid it will be a sad nuisance," Mrs. Morton said, laughing in spite of herself at the bird's absurd talk.

"Let Chicken Little take care of it herself—she's old enough," Dr. Morton replied.

"Yes, she's old enough, but somebody will have to see that she does it!"

"Pete will see to that—he'll make life a burden for her with his 'Chicken Little' if he is neglected."

Mrs. Morton sent the pretty Indian basket on to Alice with a letter telling her that Frank and Marian were going West to their new home early in September. She did not mention Dr. Morton's new plan. She could not bear to admit even to herself the possibility of their all going. Her home meant much to her. She looked about the handsome, comfortable rooms of the old house and she felt that she loved every nook and cranny of it, though they had owned it but five years. She thought, too, of Alice's disappointment should her old home again pass on to strangers. They had taken great pride in restoring the place, which had been much run down when they bought it. The flower garden was her especial pride and care. It was lovely now with clove pinks, sweet williams, mignonette, and a dozen more old-fashioned blossoms, as she looked up from her letter to rest her eyes lovingly upon it. She had lain awake nights wondering if it was her duty to give up this home and her friends for the unknown ranch life. It would be giving up more still. The nearest church would be nine miles away—the children would have only an ungraded district school. She shook her head. No, she must take plenty of time to think all this over.

A day or two after his father's return, Frank caught up with him just outside the gate. "Heard about Gassett?"

"No—has he had a relapse?"

"No such luck, he has started a suit against Alice to recover those certificates."

"How did you hear?"

"His lawyer came to me to get Alice's address. And what do you think? Dick Harding told me this morning that Gassett tried to get him to take the case. Foxy, wasn't it? Dick declined promptly."

"Alice would do well to get Dick for her lawyer."

"I imagine Uncle Joseph will attend to that."

"Still, I think I'll drop her a hint."

But Alice had evidently not forgotten Dick Harding or Dr. Morton's remark about his being a good lawyer. Before the doctor's letter could reach her, a formal missive from Uncle Joseph requested Dick Harding to defend Alice's side and to get an older lawyer to help him.

Dick went promptly to work. Dr. Morton sent down the box of letters and papers Alice had left in his charge and Dick went over them carefully, but did not find what he was hoping for.

"It is a queer mix-up," he wrote Alice. "I cannot understand why there isn't a scrap of writing anywhere from Mr. Gassett to your father. There surely must have been some correspondence between them on business matters. Many things in your father's letters to your mother show this—but the letters are missing. It hardly seems likely your father would have destroyed them all. Do you suppose that he could have left them at the store and that they have fallen into Gassett's hands, too? Or could your mother have accidentally destroyed them? I remember though you said she was most careful to keep old letters. I have a queer feeling about all this—that the missing letters and papers still exist and will turn up yet. But feelings don't go in law courts. Is there an attic to the old house or any secret closet where they could possibly have been concealed?"

Alice talked the matter over with Uncle Joseph and he started rummaging among his papers to see if he could find anything in her father's old letters that would help. There were few references to business matters in these and no reference to Mr. Gassett except a mere mention of the fact that he had gone into partnership with him.

"It's no use, Alice. I am afraid we'll have to let Gassett have the stuff though I hate like sixty to give up," he said after his fruitless search.

"Well, I'm not ready to own beat yet—I have one last hope," Alice replied bravely.

That night she sat down and wrote a letter to Mrs. Morton.



CHAPTER · XVII
COUSIN · MAY'S · PARTY

Chicken Little found Pete Parrot a great joy and a great nuisance. Dr. Morton was right about his reproaching her if she neglected him. When Pete began to call "Chicken Little," Mrs. Morton would exclaim, "Why, Jane, haven't you fed Pete today?"

Pete had a wonderful appetite. He ate when he was hungry and he ate when he was lonesome and he ate when he was bored. Further Pete was deceitful. He would call Chicken Little persistently when he had food enough in sight to feed a small regiment of parrots. He seemed to prefer her to anyone else from the start. When he heard the front door open, he promptly croaked, "Chicken Little." When they let him loose he would follow her about the house, a trick that cost him dear later.

And Jane was devoted to Pete. She loved to talk to him. Pete would cock his head on one side and listen attentively, breaking out occasionally with "Bust my buttons" or "Go off and die." Sometimes he would listen solemnly for several minutes and then laugh his harsh croaking laugh.

One afternoon near the close of school Jane, coming in, heard her mother's voice calling from the sitting room and Pete echoing the call from upstairs.

"What is it, Mother?"

"I have some pleasant news for you, little daughter, Katy's cousin, May Halford, is to have a party next Saturday and here is a nice little note inviting you and your doll. I think May must have written it herself. It is very prettily done—I wish my little girl could write as neat a one."

"But she's two years older than I am, Mother."

"Yes, but you are not too young to learn to write neatly. I noticed your copy book had three great blots in it this month."

"Grace Dart jogged me—she wanted me to look at Johnny Carter. He had the back of his hand all covered with transfer pictures."

"Well, you must learn not to let your attention wander in school. Johnny Carter seems to be a very mischievous boy."

"What can I wear to the party, Mumsey?" Chicken Little wished to change the subject.

"I think you may wear your blue poplin and the white shoes if it's a nice day. But you must be a little lady and not romp—the poplin won't wash, you know."

"Couldn't I wear a white dress?—they almost always play rompy games at May's."

"My dear, it is high time for you to learn to take care of your clothes and Mother knows best what little girls should wear."

Chicken Little puckered up her mouth rebelliously but Pete walked in the door at this moment calling "Chicken Little" so plaintively that she had to pick him up and comfort him. She took him out in the yard and relieved her mind to him.

"Pete, if I ever have any little girls, I'm always going to let them wear exactly what they please—and I'm never going to tell them to be little ladies. Anyhow I guess I can wear my white shoes and there haven't any of the other girls got any yet."

Pete eyed her in silence.

"I shall take my Christmas dolly—she's the prettiest."

Pete cocked his head on one side and began to climb up in her lap. He had caught sight of Ernest and Carol coming in the front gate, and the boys often teased him.

As they came near he cuddled up close against Jane, calling vigorously, "Scat!—Go off and die!"

The boys laughed and Ernest held out his slate pencil which the parrot nipped fiercely.

On the afternoon of the party Katy and Gertie came by for Chicken Little. They were crisp and dainty as usual in ruffled white dresses with blue and pink sashes and hair ribbons. Chicken Little looked from them to her own silken finery regretfully.

Katy began by cheering her the wrong way.

"My, you'll have to be awful careful with your dress, Jane. I guess it would spoil it if you dropped ice-cream on it."

"I'm glad white will wash," added Gertie complacently, smoothing down her ruffles.

Chicken Little hugged her doll tighter and ignored these remarks.

"I'm glad it didn't rain today 'cause Mother wouldn't have let me wear my white shoes if it had."

"It rained hard enough last night—you'll have to watch out for puddles. Father said everything was soaked this morning," replied Katy.

"It's dried awful fast—May's going to have the party on the lawn. Her mother's set a table out under the trees," said Gertie.

"Yes, and she's going to have a prize for the prettiest doll. We're each to write a name on a piece of paper and put it in a hat and then they'll count them and give it to the doll that has the most."

"Mother made a new dress for Minnie and painted her cheeks where I washed the pink off, but I don't s'pose she'll get the prize—she's so old. Maybe your Victoria will, she has such pretty blue eyes."

Chicken Little looked down at Victoria's blue eyes and yellow curls appraisingly.

"Marian says she thinks Victoria is one of the prettiest dolls she's ever seen."

"She is pretty but I don't think her dress is near as pretty as Grace Dart's. Her doll's got the loveliest pink silk and a hat and parasol to match. It's a—what do you s'pose those boys are laughing at?"

Katy broke off her sentence to ask hastily, pointing across the street.

Two boys stood there chuckling, apparently staring straight at the little girls.

The three little girls stopped for an instant indignant.

"Oh, come on," said Chicken Little, "it's the Howard twins and they're awful mean. Just pretend we don't see them."

But the boys had started toward them.

The little girls had half a mind to run when one of the boys called: "Where did you get your bodyguard?"

They looked hastily behind them—there was no one in sight.

Katy was provoked.

"You think you're awful smart, don't you?" she called back.

The boys were shaking with laughter and were now half-way across the street. The larger one began chanting: "Mary had a little lamb," and the other added quickly: "His fleece was green as grass—"

The children stopped and looked around again. This time Gertie spied a small green body hovering close to Jane's white shoes.

"Poor Pete," it remarked plaintively.

"Why Pete—you naughty bird—how did you come to follow me? What can I do? Get down, Pete—you'll spoil my dress."

Pete was trying to climb Jane's skirts. He did not like the looks of the strange boys.

"Dear me, we'll have to take him back home," said Gertie.

"We'll take him for you. Can he talk?"

Before Chicken Little could reply something leaped into the midst of the little group and Pete gave a heart-rending squawk. The children jumped and screamed but before they fairly understood what had happened, Pete and a big gray cat were in mortal combat. Fur and feathers flew for several awful seconds accompanied by wails from the little girls and shouts from the boys who wanted to save the parrot but hated to spoil the fight.

The Howard boys made one or two ineffectual efforts to grab Pete getting nips and scratches for their pains. Chicken Little, terrified for Pete's life, tried to seize the cat and received a vicious scratch on the arm. The others pulled her away.

A crowd was quickly gathering. Rescue came opportunely in the shape of Pat Casey who had the good sense to arm himself with a stick. A few smart blows loosened the cat's grip and it slunk away. Pete, much disheveled and shorn of some of his gayest feathers, stood blinking dazedly for a minute. Then, catching sight of Chicken Little, he hopped feebly toward her, croaking hoarsely: "Bust my buttons."

The children set up a shout.

"I guess the cat pretty nearly did bust 'em," remarked Pat laughing.

Poor Pete was cuddled and fussed over to his heart's content. Pat offered to take him home for Chicken Little, and after much coaxing and scolding, Pete finally consented to hop on Pat's arm and permit himself to be carried homeward.

The little girls went on to the party pink with excitement. They could hardly wait to tell of Pete's adventure. Everybody wished they had brought the parrot with them. However, the doll contest soon absorbed their attention.

Chicken Little's Victoria proved a great favorite, but Grace Dart's Stella was beautiful to see in her rose pink silk. The children Oh-ed and Ah-ed over her hat and parasol.

Generous little Gertie worked hard for Victoria even going so far as to tell the children that Victoria was such a good doll—she most never cried. Katy was inclined to favor Stella. More than one little girl loyally voted for her own child. Others offered to vote for their friends' dolls if they in turn would vote for theirs.

The dolls were examined and compared most critically. Many of the little mothers took the matter very much to heart and resented any criticism. Gertie picked her Minnie up and cuddled her tenderly after a thoughtless child had hurt dolly's feelings by exclaiming, "What a homely doll!"

Chicken Little's eyes shone as she saw the many admiring glances Victoria received. She naively showed her off, putting her to sleep and waking her up to display her blue eyes and long fringed lashes or making her cry "Mamma" when the other children asked to hold her. She looked at Stella a little enviously. It would be so nice to have Victoria get the prize. Jane had never had a prize except once in Sunday School for learning the most Scripture texts. May Halford was displaying the mysterious box wrapped in white paper that contained it and everyone was eager to know what it was.

Many were the guesses. Several children felt the box, but May kept the secret. Chicken Little looked at it longingly. It might be a hat and parasol like Stella's—it might be a silk dress. She wished she knew.

When the little white slips of paper were finally passed around each little girl was asked to write the name of the doll she admired most and fold it up so no one could see. Jane looked sober. She was tempted to do something she felt would not be quite nice. She had firmly resolved to vote for Gertie's doll because Gertie had been so sweet about Victoria, but suppose Victoria needed just one more vote to get the prize. Chicken Little bit the end of her pencil and thought hard. She looked at Gertie holding Minnie close with a wistful look in her eyes. Gertie would be sorely disappointed if Minnie didn't get a single vote. Then she looked at Grace Dart, who was already putting on airs, and hardened her heart.

She moistened her pencil and wrote a big V, then paused and looked at Gertie again. Gertie was writing Victoria she could tell by the way she made the V. Jane closed her lips firmly.

"I guess I won't be mean if she doesn't get the prize," she said to herself.

She wrote Minnie very plainly, folded it up quickly and dropped it in the hat lest she should change her mind.

Stella got the prize by one vote. Chicken Little held her head high and had her reward. The little girls who had voted for Victoria crowded round her in wrath.

"She's ever so much prettier than Grace's doll! It's just her clothes made them vote for her."

"Yes, May's mother said your doll was the prettiest."

"I don't think it was fair to vote for the clothes. Mrs. Halford said the prettiest doll!"

These remarks were very consoling but did not comfort her as much as Gertie's words:

"I'm so sorry Vic didn't get it, Jane. If you hadn't voted for Minnie it would have been a tie."

"How do you know I voted for Minnie?" demanded Chicken Little.

"Oh, just 'cause and I'm real glad. I didn't expect Minnie to get it, but I'd felt awful bad if she hadn't had a single vote."

The prize proved to be a most tempting one, a tiny brush and comb and cunning hand glass in a little satin-lined box. Chicken Little sighed in spite of herself.

The arrival of the milkman created a diversion. Mr. Akers was a jolly soul and most of the children knew him. The jingle of his bell sent them all rushing to the gate to show their dolls. Mr. Akers greeted them heartily.

"Well, I declare this is about the gayest flock of birds I've seen for some time. A party? Well, I'm sorry I wasn't asked."

It took them some time to make him understand about the doll prize. He was called upon to inspect each doll first, then the two rivals were held up for his opinion.

Mr. Akers took his time. He took off his spectacles, polished them carefully on his sleeve, and made a second critical survey.

"You want me to tell you which is the purtiest, eh? Well, now they're both purty. I don't know as I ever saw handsomer dolls—or better behaved," he added, with a twinkle in his eye. "But if you really want my honest opinion I believe I like this one's face the best," pointing to Victoria, "though the other one there has a leetle the gayest clothes. The dressy one got the prize you say. Now it seems like they both ought to have a prize."

Mr. Akers fished a handful of coins out of his pocket and selecting a brand new dime which shone brightly among its dingier companions, presented it to Victoria with a flourish.

The children were delighted and Chicken Little started home comforted to tell the family that May's mother and Mr. Akers thought Victoria was the prettiest anyway.

The walk home proved almost as disastrous as the walk to the party. The streets seemed entirely dry by this time and the three little girls, chattering gaily about their good time, forgot to notice where they were going.

Just before they turned into Front Street they passed a yard where men had been digging a well. A quantity of the yellow clay had been carelessly tossed over the fence upon the sidewalk to be hauled away. This, alas, had been thoroughly soaked by the previous night's rain and when Chicken Little stepped upon it with her cherished white shoes, her small feet sank in up to her ankles. The white kid was sadly stained. Katy and Gertie did their best to help her get it off, but the white shoes were destined never to be white again. Mrs. Morton gave them a new lease of life by having them bronzed a few days later.

Chicken Little long remembered the day of the doll party. It would seem that Pete did also, for he never attempted to follow Chicken Little outside the yard again.



CHAPTER · XVIII
THE · CHILDREN · GO
EXPLORING

One hot day soon after the party Dr. Morton handed his wife a letter from Alice.

Mrs. Morton glanced through it while Olga cleared the table for the dessert.

"Poor Alice—she is worried because Mr. Harding can't find either letters or papers to prove her claim to the bank stock. It does seem strange that all the letters from Mr. Gassett to her father should have completely disappeared."

"Well," said Dr. Morton drily, "if you want to know my opinion, I believe that Gassett got hold of them some way and destroyed them."

"It doesn't seem possible he would do anything so dishonest though I don't like the man—he was so very rude the day he came here. Alice wonders if it could be possible there are any of her father's papers hidden away under the roof. You remember almost all of the closets run off under the roof. It is a wonder we don't have rats with them all open that way."

"It would be an unpleasant task to explore. I suppose there's twenty years of dust and cobwebs stored up in those nooks and crannies. There are places where the roof slopes to form the gables where a man could hardly crawl through. I suppose I might hire some boy to go through and see if he can find anything."

Ernest and Chicken Little had been interested listeners to this conversation.

"Say, Father, let me and the boys explore. We could put on some old clothes—it would be loads of fun."

"That might not be a bad idea. You couldn't come to any harm other than a few scratches and splinters. I don't believe you will find anything, but Alice will be satisfied at any rate."

"Can't I go, too?" demanded Chicken Little.

"Oh, dear no," her mother replied, "it would be horribly dirty and cobwebby—no place for little ladies to climb round in."

Jane looked disappointed.

"Why not let the child go, Mother? Put an old dress on her and tie up her hair. She'd enjoy the fun as much as the boys."

"Oh, well, there is that old blue calico in the rag bag you could slip on, I suppose."

"Goody, goody!" Chicken Little didn't wait to hear the subject discussed further lest her mother should change her mind. She started off to don the dress immediately.

Ernest ran over to get Sherm and Carol.

The boys were eager for the hunt.

"You mustn't take matches in there. You might drop one and set the house afire. You can use the little lantern—that will be safe. Be careful you don't come through the plastering—there must be some sort of an open space over the central part of the house though I don't know where there's any way to reach it. It will be stone dark if there is—there are no outside windows."

While the exploring party was trying to decide whether to start in with the front room closet or begin with the one in the maid's room at the back of the house, Katy and Gertie appeared on the

scene. They promptly begged to go, too.

"Well, ask your mother and get some old clothes on," Mrs. Morton consented finally after Chicken Little had teased for several minutes.

They were off and back in no time, arrayed in outgrown dresses that gave them the appearance of being all arms and legs.

"Mother said she wished she could come, too. She said it would be almost as much fun as exploring a desert island," reported Katy. 275

It was finally agreed to try the front room closet first. This closet was a lofty, roomy looking affair for about six feet, then as the roof slanted sharply downward, faded away into darkness. It was floored and ceiled to within three feet of the point where roof and floor met, and it was only by getting down on hands and knees that the children could crawl, through the aperture left unboarded, into the narrow, unused spaces next the eaves.

Sherm and Ernest made the first venture, but their progress was soon cut off short by a partition. So they wriggled back adorned with cobwebs and sneezing from the dust they had stirred up.

"Let's try the closet in Chicken Little's room next—that's one of the biggest."

This time Carol and Katy did the scouting with the same results except that they found an open space between the roof and the uprights and lath and plaster of the partition, which *seemed* to lead up to some sort of an attic over the main part of the house.

Carol hoisted Katy up on his shoulders to see if she could see anything but she lacked about a foot of reaching the top of the partition. Carol whistled to Ernest to come, but at this moment a voice called up from the foot of the stairs, "Ship ahoy!"

"It's Dick Harding, I do believe!" exclaimed Chicken Little, and she flew down to investigate, closely followed by Gertie. 276

It was Dick Harding, resplendent in blue overalls and an old cap.

"I met your father down street and he told me what the clan was up to. This is a business I am mightily interested in, so I asked if I might come, too. How do you like my regimentals?"

Mr. Harding surveyed his blue overalls proudly. He followed the little girls upstairs and listened to Ernest's report of their progress.

"Suppose you and I try that. I am taller than Carol and I think I could boost you high enough to get a look round. Got a light?"

They called to Carol and Katy to come out. Carol was quite ready to yield the place of honor.

"Gee, it's hot and stuffy in there!" he groaned, fanning himself with an old shoe he had picked up from the floor of the closet.

"You're so awful fat, Carol. I didn't mind it," said Katy frankly.

"Fat nothing—a shadow would smother in there. Your face looks red where it ain't black, which is pretty much all over," retorted Carol nettled. He didn't enjoy being called fat.

Dick Harding followed Ernest in. There was just about room enough for him to get to his feet. He gave Ernest a lift to his shoulder. This brought the boy's eyes about five inches above the partition. Ernest waved the tiny lantern about distractedly in an effort to pierce the gloom about him. 277

"Hold the lantern still and just look. Your eyes will grow accustomed to the dimness pretty soon and then you can see if there's anything there."

Ernest obeyed and in a few moments was able to see across to the slanting roof opposite.

"Not a thing but rafters and cobwebs," he reported at last in disgust.

"Shift your lantern and look again carefully—we don't want to miss anything. You don't see any old boxes or piles of papers do you?"

"Nope."

"Nothing that looks like a bundle of old letters? Take the lantern in the other hand and hold it out as far as you can."

"Not a blamed thing but a piece of old board and it's sticking up so there's nothing under it."

"Well, I really didn't suppose there would be. It would be too difficult a place to reach, but I wanted to be sure," returned Dick. "How many more closets are there?"

"Three."

"It's my turn next—and Gertie's!" declared Chicken Little.

"All right, crawl along. Perhaps you won't mind it if I follow, too," Dick replied, smiling. 278

They took Ernest's room next. Chicken Little slid past the coats and trousers and much accumulated junk which untidy Ernest had piled in on the closet floor. She knocked over a baseball bat in her haste and disappeared in under the eaves so promptly that Gertie felt quite deserted and decided she didn't want to go into that nasty dark place.

It was all Dick could do to follow. In fact he was afraid he was going to stick, the passage was so narrow. His overalls were run through with slivers from the rough boards. Fortunately, only one

penetrated his skin.

Chicken Little cheered him on by calling back.

"I've found some newspapers. Hurry up with the lantern."

It was a triangular space made by the gable. Chicken Little couldn't quite stand up and Dick could get no further than his knees. A big pile of dusty newspapers lay on the rafters. They had apparently been shoved carelessly in.

"Let's get them out to the light. I'll back out and you pass them through to me."

Jane did as she was bid, handing out a few at a time but just as she lifted the last layer, gave a squeal.

"There's something alive here!"

Dick started in again.

"Look out, Jane, it might be a house snake, though I didn't know we ever had them here."

"Tisn't any snake—it's a mouse nest. There are four baby mice—I can feel them. I'm going to put them in my pocket."

The children were so excited over the mice that they left the papers to Dick Harding.

He carried them to the window and ran through them hastily.

"Pshaw, nothing but old newspapers—wartime papers most of them, with long lists of men killed and wounded. Ugh—they certainly are gruesome!"

Dick dropped the pile and turned to have a look at the mice.

"Say," he added a moment later, staring at the minute heap of paper and its tiny occupants which Chicken Little had deposited on a chair, "there's writing on some of those scraps! They aren't all newspapers. Are you sure you found everything there was, Chicken Little?"

Jane wasn't sure, so Sherm took the lantern and went back to look. He found nothing, however, except a few scraps of paper.

In the meantime Dick Harding was running over the newspapers more carefully, taking them one at a time to see if any letters or documents could have been tucked away among them. He straightened up with a sigh of disappointment as he finished.

"Another fond hope blasted," he complained. "I never loved a bug or flower but what 'twas first to fade away."

The children looked at him in astonishment.

"No," he replied to their look of inquiry. "I'm not crazed with the heat, but I was just dead sure we should find something. Let's tackle the other two closets."

The exploring party moved on and made a thorough search of the other closet ends, and the open spaces under the eaves, but without result. One empty and extremely dirty pasteboard box was all they got for their pains.

"There's no other place about the house where anything could be hidden, is there?" asked Dick Harding of Mrs. Morton.

"I have never heard of any secret cupboards, Mr. Harding. The people who lived here before we bought the house might have found letters and destroyed them. But Alice said her mother, at the time of her father's death, searched every place where business letters or papers could possibly be concealed."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to give up," said Dick. "The worst of it is I'm afraid Alice can't hold the stock without further evidence."

"I am glad Alice has her Uncle Joseph to protect her," said Mrs. Morton. "But what black faces and hands, children! Go wash up immediately."

The party did seem a little the worse for wear. It was a warm day and trickles of perspiration had mingled with the dust till their faces resembled a cross-roads map.

Dick Harding looked from one grimy face to another with a twinkle in his eye.

"Suppose we all clean up and go downtown to get some ice-cream. I'll stand treat. Won't you come, too, Mrs. Morton?"

"I don't think I care to risk the walk in the sun. I fear it will take some time to make these children presentable."

Dick pulled out his watch. "Perhaps they might meet me at the ice-cream parlor at four. I certainly need to freshen up myself."

It was so arranged and there was a prompt scattering homeward to get ready. An hour later, shiny from much soap and water, and very stiff and starchy as to waists and dresses, they flocked around Dick Harding.

"I can eat two saucers of cream and three pieces of cake and I'm sure I can depend upon you boys to do as well. We'll limit the ladies to one saucer and two pieces of cake because they are supposed to be delicate. Is that right, Chicken Little?"

Dick joked and the children stowed away the dainties industriously. In the midst of the feast an

idea struck Gertie.

“What became of the baby mice?”

Sure enough what had become of them? Nobody seemed to know.

“I guess we just left them up on the chair in the bedroom,” said Ernest.

“They weren’t big enough to run away,” observed Carol.

“Oh, dear, I hope nothing will hurt them—they were so cunning,” mourned Chicken Little. She hunted them up the minute she got home. The tiny heap of paper was where they had left it, but the mice were gone. Olga and Mrs. Morton denied having seen them.

Ernest and Jane hunted the room over, but the mice had disappeared.

When they fed Pete that night he seemed droopy and turned up his nose at his best beloved dainties.

“Has Pete been loose today?” asked Dr. Morton.

“Yes, but I don’t think he went out of the front room upstairs,” replied Mrs. Morton.

“Well, I’d be willing to wager Pete knows what became of the baby mice,” laughed the doctor. “Trim him up with flowers, Chicken, and he’ll make a nice green grave for the dear departed.”

A few days later Jane and Gertie were playing paper dolls in one of the window recesses upstairs and remembering the mice decided to have a doll funeral. But a funeral required mourning and they couldn’t find a scrap of black paper. While they were rummaging, they came across their find of old newspapers, which Mrs. Morton had stacked up on a table till Dr. Morton found time to look them over. Jane noticed that some of them had heavy black bands across the front page.

“Say, they’d be fine—we could paste them close together on white paper for the dresses and veils.”

She started off to ask her mother’s permission to use them.

“Why, I don’t know whether your father wants any of them or not. He spoke as if he would like to save a few—you might take the ones the mice nibbled.”

There were four or five of these and the children were soon busily engaged in cutting out the black strips. When Gertie unfolded the last one two letters fell out.

Jane pounced upon them with a shriek. “Oh, Gertie, do you s’pose?”

“Maybe they are—let’s take them to your mother quick!”

The little girls pattered downstairs to Mrs. Morton, thrilled with excitement.

“Don’t get so excited, children. Little ladies should learn to compose themselves.”

She slowly put on her spectacles and deliberately examined the envelopes.

“They do seem to be addressed to Mr. Fletcher, but there isn’t one chance in a hundred they are of any value. However, I’ll turn them over to Mr. Harding.”

“Oh, Mother, see what’s inside, quick!”

“My dear little daughter, I have no right to read other people’s letters. Mr. Harding is Alice’s lawyer and it is his place not mine to examine these. You little girls may get your hats and take them down to Mr. Harding’s office. I think I can trust you not to drop them.”

The children surprised Dick Harding by rushing in waving the letters breathlessly. They had run about half the way in their zeal. He was a more satisfactory listener than Mrs. Morton—he was excited, too. It took him about four minutes to run through the letters, Chicken Little and Gertie explaining how they came to find them while he read.

The first letter he dropped impatiently, muttering, “No good.” After a glance at the signature of the second he said “Ah” softly.

When he had finished it, he jumped up and seizing Chicken Little with one hand and Gertie by the other, spun them round the room so fast he made their heads swim.

“Blessed be paper dolls and little girls! One sentence in that letter will do the work or I am no lawyer! Go home and look through the other papers and see if you can find any more, though I don’t believe we need them.”





CHAPTER · XIX
THINGS · HAPPEN

If there had been any person left to get married, Chicken Little would have been sure the family was preparing for another wedding during the next few weeks. Her father and mother had their heads together over something most of the time. Once she found her mother crying and she seemed grave and worried.

"I wish people weren't always having secrets," Jane complained to Ernest.

"It won't be a secret very long, Sis. They'll tell you as soon as they really truly decide."

"Decide what?—tell me, Ernest."

"I can't because Father and Mother don't want it talked about, if they don't go."

"Go where? Ernest, tell me. You're just as mean as you can be—I always tell you things."

"Well, I know mother is going to give in because Father's dead set on going. Cross your heart that you won't tell a living soul till mother tells you."

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Chicken Little crossed her heart emphatically. Ernest was quite as eager to tell as she was to hear and soon poured out his tale.

"Maybe we're going to Kansas with Frank and Marian to live on the ranch. I hope we'll go. Father says I can have a horse and there's lots of hunting, quail and prairie chicken and plover—and a man killed some antelope about sixteen miles west of the ranch last winter. There are a few deer left, too, on the creek, Father says. Oh, I'm wild to go, but mother doesn't want to a bit."

Chicken Little was dazed for a moment.

"Would we stay there always? Wouldn't I ever see Katy and Gertie and Dick Harding again? Why doesn't mother want to go?"

"Goosie, you could come back here to visit. Father told mother she should come back at the end of a year. And maybe you could have a pony. I wouldn't mind your riding mine sometimes when I don't want him, after you learn how to ride. We'd be a whole day and night on the train. Wouldn't that be jolly?"

"Oh, could I sleep in one of the little beds?"

"Of course, I told you we'd be all night on the train."

"Why doesn't mother want to go?"

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"She doesn't want to leave her friends and she doesn't want to live way off on a farm where there isn't any church close by and only a country school. What do you think, the school house has only one room and one teacher? You'd be in the same room with me. Father says he'll have to prepare me for college at home. I have to begin Latin next year. Gee, I bet Father'll make me study. He thinks if you haven't got a lesson perfect, you haven't got it at all."

Ernest was standing by the open window idly playing with the lace strap that looped the curtain back.

"Say, there's Frank and Marian coming in with father now. I wonder what's up. Bet they're going to settle the whole business right away."

The children listened until they heard the others go into the sitting room and carefully close the door behind them—hot weather as it was.

Ernest laughed when the door clicked.

"Family council—children and dogs and neighbors please keep out. They'll talk till dinner time. I'm going over to see Sherm."

Jane waited round a while expectantly, studying over the wonderful possibility of moving but finally got tired and went to Halford's.

When she came home to dinner the sitting-room door was still closed and a steady murmur of voices could be heard.

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Olga rang the bell for dinner twice before that closed door was opened.

Chicken Little eyed them curiously as they filed out. Her father looked eager and excited, but her mother's eyes were red as if she had been crying again.

Dr. Morton put his arm around Chicken Little as she passed her and drew her tenderly to him.

"How would you like to go and live on a farm, Humbug, where you could have chickens and calves and ponies to play with? It would put more color into your face I'll be bound."

"Could I have a pony, Father, all my own?"

Dr. Morton nodded.

"Gee, wouldn't that be fun?"

"Jane," said Mrs. Morton severely, "how often have I told you that little ladies do not use slang?"

"You seem to be planning to let the children run wild when they get out to Kansas," she added, turning to Dr. Morton, "but I will have them use correct English."

It did not take the news that the Mortons were moving to Kansas, long to spread in the small town. Visitors flocked in to sympathize with Mrs. Morton over going to a new country, and Dr. Morton's friends and patients stopped him on the street to express their regret at losing him.

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There were still many things to be arranged before they could set a date for their departure. Their chief concern was the home. Frank had been fortunate enough to sell his pretty cottage, but the old-fashioned gabled house with its wistaria vines and terraced lawns, was not so easy to dispose of. Dr. Morton hoped to rent it for a year or two until he could sell it. He was most anxious that they should all accompany Frank and Marian to the new home in September.

One afternoon as Chicken Little was coming leisurely up the walk with Katy and Gertie, Mrs. Morton called from the window:

"Hurry up, Chickabiddy, there is somebody here you would like to see."

The little girls started to run, guessing eagerly as to who the visitor might be.

As Chicken Little crossed the threshold the mysterious someone pounced upon her and lifted her up bodily from the floor, exclaiming:

"Oh, Chicken Little, I've been homesick to see you in spite of the kitty! Dear me, how you have grown!"

It was Alice, laughing and crying and hugging her all in one instant. Katy and Gertie came in for their share, too. Then they must all go into the parlor to meet Uncle Joseph, for he had come all the way from Cincinnati with Alice.

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Jane edged rather shyly up to the dignified, gray-haired man who was talking to her mother. She hadn't forgotten the evening when she had written to him in fear and trembling beside the very window where he was sitting now. But Uncle Joseph rose to meet her with a broad smile making little kindly wrinkles around his eyes.

"So this is Chicken Little Jane," he said, taking both her hands and looking down into her wondering brown eyes. "Well, Chicken Little, I believe I should have known you anywhere. You look so exactly like yourself, big eyes and all."

Uncle Joseph laughed at her mystified expression.

Alice came to the rescue.

"He means you look like my description of you, dear. I shall take great credit to myself."

"You needn't," said Uncle Joseph, "for that's only partly what I mean. She looks like what she does. What do you make of that?" he demanded, turning suddenly to Katy, who was regarding him with open-eyed curiosity.

Katy was startled but her keen wits hit the nail on the head promptly.

"I guess you mean she looks like she'd do anything she thought she ought to and you couldn't make her if she didn't want to."

"Good for you, child, that's just what I do mean—and it is a very valuable trait of character, little girls. Chicken Little, I was much obliged to you for showing me what I ought to do last winter."

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He drew her to him with an affectionate pat.

"And I am grateful to you for so many things, Jane. I shall never be able to half thank you, dear." And Alice came over to give her another hug.

"Don't praise the child so much, you'll spoil her," objected Mrs. Morton.

"I can't help it, Mrs. Morton—she and Mr. Harding have given me Uncle Joseph and now it looks as if the letter she took to Mr. Harding, might give me back my father's property and this old home."

"I am in hopes that may help you and Dr. Morton, Madam," said Uncle Joseph gravely. "Mr. Harding tells us Dr. Morton is anxious to sell the place, and if Mr. Gassett makes the settlement we hope for, he will simply pay back the purchase money to Dr. Morton because the place was never his to sell. He has arranged to meet us tomorrow morning."

It was several years later before Jane was old enough to understand exactly how the letter she and Gertie had carried to Dick Harding could work all the wonders it seemed to be responsible for.

Mrs. Morton said it was the work of Providence that this special letter was preserved and found at just the right time. Uncle Joseph declared that Alice's asking them to hunt through the old closets had more to do with it than Providence. But Dick Harding said it wasn't Providence at all—it was paper dolls and Chicken Little Jane.

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"At any rate," he said, "I never heard of Providence making a man turn green, and Gassett

certainly did when I showed him his own writing and read him about two paragraphs of it. There it was in black and white that the mortgage on the house had been paid in full, and that the bank had just returned Mr. Fletcher's stock certificates deposited with them to secure a firm debt. The letter was jubilant over the business success that had enabled Fletcher and Gassett to pay up, and Mr. Gassett declared he was grateful beyond measure to Alice's father for risking his bank stock for the firm credit. Nice way he took to show his gratitude, wasn't it?" Dick Harding looked the disgust he could not express.

Uncle Joseph had been telling the Mortons what happened when Mr. Gassett met them in Mr. Harding's office.

"Did he show any signs of fight at the start?" inquired Dr. Morton.

"Oh, he tried to bluster for a moment," replied Dick, "but I asked him 'Do we go on with this case in court, Mr. Gassett, or do we not? Yes, or no?' 'No,' said Mr. Gassett, so we got down to business."

"He was willing to do anything to hush the matter up," added Uncle Joseph. "It took exactly ten minutes to hand over a check for the money Dr. Morton paid him for the house, and to give Alice a paper resigning all claim to the bank stock. I have an idea the old rascal was afraid we might discover something else he had stolen."

"The Gassetts are going away I understand," said Dr. Morton. "Well, it's a lucky strike for me to get the money back for the house. I am delighted, too, that Alice is to have her parent's home. Do you ever expect to come back to live in it, Alice?"

Alice blushed and Dick Harding looked confused.

"I hope to—some day," she answered softly.

Uncle Joseph and Alice went back to Cincinnati on the fifteenth of August. The next two weeks were busy ones in the Morton home. The old gabled house was in the dire throes of packing.

Chicken Little could not remember any previous moving and she thoroughly enjoyed the excitement despite the fact that her mother looked worried, and her father was cross when she got in his way. She watched him fill box after box with books, for Dr. Morton had a large professional library besides the family books which ran into the hundreds. She loved to see the crates and barrels swallow up dishes and crockery like hungry monsters with wide-open jaws. She found even the wrapping of chair legs with excelsior, and the crating of bureau and tables, interesting.

"Looks just like they were put in cages," remarked Katy, peering through the slats at a lonesome-looking, marble-topped stand.

Gertie gazed about at the stripped walls and windows and gave a little shiver. "I don't like it—it looks like you were gone, Chicken Little."

The house certainly had a forlorn look and an empty ring. Pete sat on his perch grim and curious. He seemed to regard the bustle and hammering as a personal affront.

"It seems almost foolish to take Pete along," Mrs. Morton remarked as she passed him one morning. "You will have so many pets on the ranch? Why don't you give him to Katy and Gertie?"

"But, Mother, Pete wouldn't like it. He'd be lonesome without his Chicken Little—wouldn't you, Pete?"

Pete was not in a good humor. "Go off and die," he croaked morosely.

The family laughed at Jane's discomfiture.

As the time approached for them to go, the talk of leaving the parrot behind became more serious. It was already apparent that the family would be overburdened with hand baggage and Pete would be difficult to care for on the train.

Mrs. Morton's globes of wax flowers and fruit were proving a complication. It seemed impossible to pack the fragile handiwork and the delicate glass shades so there would be any hope of their reaching Kansas safely.

"Confound them," exclaimed Frank in desperation, "I wish mother could be persuaded to part with the old things. They always did make the cold chills go up and down my back. I guess I have been cautioned 499 times by actual count not to run into those globes and not to juggle the tables they were on."

"But, Frank, the wax flowers and fruit are the very apple of your mother's eye. They were the height of fashion ten years ago. She spent days and days making and coloring them—they really are exquisitely done," protested Marian.

"But they are such a nuisance! Just picture us lugging Jane's parrot and those two huge globes on the train in addition to the satchels and lunch boxes. We'll look like a traveling circus."

Marian laughed at his wry face.

"It is awful—but think of your mother. I'll carry one of the globes myself."

"Not much you won't. You will be tired enough with the journey without that burden."

"I'll carry the fruit," volunteered Ernest. "I expect the boys'll laugh but mother feels bad enough about going away anyhow."

"Yes, poor mother is giving up a good deal to go with us. We must always remember that."

"All right, behold me with two satchels in one fist, mother's tower of wax flowers hugged to my manly breast with the other hand, while I assist the ladies on the train, and clasp my friends' fists in fond farewell with a third. But what of Chicken Little's parrot?"

"I could carry Pete," said Chicken Little.

"Not unless we left his cage behind, Chick, but don't worry your head. We will find some way to get the family plunder on board."

Jane was thoughtful for the remainder of the day. She took Pete over to Halford's that afternoon and the children let him hop about from one room to another.

Gertie hovered over him a careful slave, but Katy enjoyed teasing him and made him ruffle up his feathers angrily a time or two.

Chicken Little rescued him, and cuddling him up on her shoulder, carried him tenderly home.

"No, I just couldn't," she said to herself. "I am sure he'd be homesick."



"Mother, there's a whole pile of my clothes up here you forgot to pack." Chicken Little's voice floated plaintively down the staircase.

"No, that is all right, dear. They are things you have outgrown and I am going to give them to Maggie Casey. Pat is coming for them this morning. By the way, if I am not here when he comes, just get them for him, will you, please?"

Pat was late and Mrs. Morton had gone over to Marian's before he arrived. Chicken Little gathered up the bundle and soberly presented it to him. Pat thanked her but lingered cap in hand, shifting his weight from one foot to the other uneasily.

"I am sorry you're after going away," he said finally, conquering his embarrassment. "You'll be coming back I hope."

Chicken Little was at a loss for the proper reply. She smiled and asked him if he would like to see Pete.

To her surprise the parrot walked over to Pat at his first chirrup and climbed up on the hand he held out and on up to his shoulder.

"Why, I never saw Pete do that with a stranger before. He must like you."

"We got acquainted that day I brought him home. Didn't we, Pete?" Pat stroked his feathers caressingly and Pete sidled up nearer to his face.

Jane watched them silently. She was thinking.

"I just know he'd be good to him," she said to herself. "And Pete likes him and I don't s'pose Pat's got any pet—but I would miss Pete awfully."

"Have you got a cat at your house, Pat?" she asked presently.

"No, mother doesn't like cats very well."

Chicken Little studied about two minutes longer then shut her eyes and made the leap.

"Pat, would you like to have Pete,—for your very own?"

"Cricky, I should say, but you're not after leaving him behind, are you?"

"I hate to, but mother says I'll have lots of pets anyhow at the ranch and Frank says he'll be a nuisance on the train. You'd be awful good to him, wouldn't you, Pat?"

Pat nodded eagerly.

"He calls me when he's hungry. You won't ever forget to feed him or let any of the boys tease him?"

"I'll take the best care I know and Maggie'd love him. She's always wanted a bird."

"I'll get the cage," said Chicken Little, turning away to hide the tears that would come.

But they came in spite of her when she gave Pete a parting squeeze.

"He'll never come to any harm if I can help it," vowed Pat, trying to reassure her, "but I wouldn't be wanting you to give him to me if you feel so bad."

"Yes, I want to—take him away quick, Pat." She shoved the handle of the cage into Pat's hand and flew upstairs to have her weep in private.

"It isn't as much fun going away as I thought it would be," she mourned.

That afternoon saw the last dray load of boxes and furniture taken down to be loaded into the freight car. The trunks were all packed and strapped and placed by the front door ready to be taken to the station on the morrow.

Dr. and Mrs. Morton with Ernest and Jane were to spend their last night with the Halfords. Chicken Little was to sleep in the trundle bed with Katy and Gertie. It was most exciting to see Mrs. Halford pull it out from under the big four-poster. It stood about a foot from the floor and was covered with a blue and white woven coverlid, which Mrs. Halford said her mother had made for her when she was married.

"I like a trundle bed," said Katy, "because if you roll out, you don't bump so hard."

"Katy is such a restless child she falls out of bed about once a week," laughed Mrs. Halford. "She sleeps all over Gertie. If she tries to take her third on your side just give her a punch, Jane. I am sorry I have to crowd you all in together, but I guess you little girls will sleep even if you are thick."

It seemed doubtful, however, if they would sleep themselves or permit anyone else to sleep that night. They whispered and tittered far into the night in spite of warning hushes from Mrs. Halford and sundry raps on the wall from Dr. Morton's side.

Neighbors and friends had flocked in that evening to say good-by to Dr. and Mrs. Morton. And the children, though banished upstairs, had kept tab on the gathering below by dashing to the head of the stairs, regardless of nighties, every time the bell rang.

When Dick Harding appeared they ducked down modestly behind the bannisters and yelled at him.

"I thought you were coming to the station tomorrow," Chicken Little reproached him.

"I am, Miss Morton, wild horses couldn't keep me away, but I wanted to have a little visit with your father and mother tonight. I will see you off tomorrow."

Chicken Little was awake early the next morning in spite of their late hours. The child had been wakeful, partly because she was unused to sleeping with anyone, partly because the unknown life ahead was beginning to oppress her vaguely.

Katy and Gertie were still sleeping peacefully so she wriggled out quietly and dressing herself, slipped over into the dear old yard she was so soon to leave for good. She took a last swing under the old apple trees, digging the tips of her toes into the worn place in the sod and listening to the birds in the branches overhead. There was a little choke in her throat as she stared at the alley fence, and the fence corner by the street where the remains of her last play house were still strewn about. She didn't like this new feeling, and getting out of the swing, she went over among the flower beds to cheer herself up. There a riot of autumn blossoms sparkled with dew drops in the early morning sunshine.

"I'll pick some pansies and mignonette for mother," she said half aloud, "she loves them so."

She picked till her hands were full of the purple and yellow and white flower faces and the fragrant green spikes. Then she laid her cluster down in the shade and fell to making morning-glory ladies with larkspur hats to match their gowns. A whistle from the fence disturbed her. She looked up and saw Pat Casey waving to her.

"I've got something for you."

She went to the fence.

"Hold your skirt," Pat commanded. She did so and Pat dropped in a handful of big yellow plums.

"I've got a lot more in my pockets," he said as she started to thank him.

He had. The pockets appeared to be practically bottomless, as Pat hauled out handful after handful till the skirt of Jane's neat little traveling dress began to sag dangerously with the weight.

"They aren't much," he said apologetically, "but I wanted to bring you something. Pete's getting along fine. Mother likes him—she says he'll be company for Maggie when she's out washing. And Maggie's that happy you wouldn't believe it. We're awful obliged."

Pat's desire to bring Chicken Little something seemed to be contagious. Grace Dart caught sight of them out at the fence and ran over bearing a parting gift.

"I want you to have it, Jane. I cracked the mirror and the lining of the box is torn a little but the rest's most as good as new. And I truly think Victoria is the prettiest."

She thrust the remains of the prize toilet set into Chicken Little's hands with a beaming smile.

Chicken Little entirely forgot that she didn't like Grace Dart.

"I'll write to you soon as we get settled," she promised.

Ernest came to fetch her to breakfast accompanied by Carol and Sherm, who had whistled for him before he was out of bed. These reinforcements soon lightened her load of plums and Grace Dart got her a paper bag for the rest.

Mrs. Halford's fried chicken and hot biscuit and honey were a great bracer. Chicken Little's teary mood slipped away and she revelled in the excitement of the good-byes. She promised everybody weekly letters for the remainder of her natural life.

"You must write to us the very first ones, Jane," Katy demanded.

"I see you young ones are fixing to break me up buying postage stamps," remonstrated Dr. Morton, trying to tease them.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Morton about an hour after breakfast, "has anyone fed Pete. I entirely forgot him last night and this morning. How could I be so careless?"

"Sure enough, where is Pete?" asked the doctor.

"He—he isn't here," replied Chicken Little. "I gave him away."

"That was nice—Katy and Gertie will take good care of him I know."

"I didn't give him to Katy and Gertie."

"Why—who?" Mrs. Morton looked puzzled.

"I gave him to Pat—when he came for the things."

"Well, I declare," ejaculated Mrs. Morton. "You certainly are the queerest child! Well, I suppose if you wanted to give your pet to a little Irish boy instead of to your best friends it's all right."

Katy looked reproachfully at Jane, but Mrs. Halford understood.

"I told you Chicken Little wouldn't give you Pete when you teased him. I am glad you gave him to Pat, dear. He is a kind boy and the parrot will mean far more to him than to my little spoiled girls."

"Here comes the expressman for the trunks," said Dr. Morton. "You had better get your things on, Mother, the bus will soon be here."

Chicken Little danced up and down as the big yellow omnibus backed up to the front gate and Dick Harding swung off the top, where he had been sitting beside the driver.

"How many passengers for Kansas?" he demanded.

"We're all going as far as the station if there's room," Mrs. Halford replied.

It was a merry group that gathered outside the car window. But tears were close to the smiles, for Marian was leaving father and mother and Mrs. Morton looked forward with anxiety to the new country and the new home.

Chicken Little felt blissfully important. Dick Harding had brought her a box of chocolate creams and gum drops to match Pat's bag of plums. She waved one in each hand as the train pulled out.

"Good-by, Mr. Harding. Good-by, Katy. Good-by, Gertie."

"Good-by, Chicken Little."

The rattle of the car wheels and the shriek of the engine drowned out their voices, but Chicken Little watched from the window until they were all a blur.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHICKEN LITTLE JANE ***

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