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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PEGGY-ALONE ***



**The girls paused and waved their
handkerchiefs.**

PEGGY-ALONE

BY
MARY AGNES BYRNE

AUTHOR OF
"THE LITTLE WOMAN IN THE SPOUT,"
"LITTLE DAME TROT,"
"ROY AND ROSYROCKS,"
"THE FAIRY CHASES," ETC.

DRAWINGS BY
ANNA B. CRAIG

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TO MY SISTER TRESS

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PEGGY-ALONE

CHAPTER I

PEGGY-ALONE

"Down, Prince!"

High above the shrill exclamations of surprise and terror came that thin silvery command which the dog, great black fellow that he was, obeyed at once, and his flight in pursuit of those daring petticoats which had intruded on his master's orchard was brought to an ignominious end.

"Girls, say, girls, don't be frightened! He won't bite!"

One of the children had already scaled the wall, dropping her apron of apples on the way. She stood ready to help the second down, while the third and largest, who had kept in the rear between the smaller ones and their pursuer, waiting to see them safely over ere hastening her own steps, on hearing those friendly words paused and looked back.

Some distance away, under the apple trees on the grassy terrace, stood a little girl dressed all in white; a wreath of green ivy-vines crowded her glossy curls which fell to her waist and framed her thin face; one tiny hand was raised in a beckoning gesture and the other was placed firmly on the head of the dog.

Leading him, she approached the girl who waited in mute surprise.

"Do tell them not to go. They needn't be afraid of Prince now!"

"She says not to be afraid," halloed the largest girl, whereupon the fugitives came back and seated themselves upon the wall overlooking the scene.

The girl with the dog had come forward. She stood looking half shyly, but with evident good-will, from the little maids on the wall to their friend who had turned after recalling the others, and came back a few steps to meet her.

"What are their names?" inquired the stranger.

"This is Ivy Bonner," the other said in a formal tone, pointing to her thinner companion, who swung her feet on the outside of the wall and, though she sat only half-facing them, seemed to see everything that went on. "And this is my sister Nettie," she continued, indicating the chubby, flaxen-haired party whose ruddy cheeks and great staring blue eyes reminded one of an over-grown doll-baby.

As each name was pronounced its owner gave a ceremonious little bow such as is always used in make-believe introductions, and the newcomer bowed gravely to each in acknowledgment. Then she turned again to the largest girl.

"And yours?"

"I am Laura—Laura Lee."

"What's hers?" called Ivy, who felt that there was something lacking in the ceremony.

"Oh, my name's Alene Dawson," was the answer, and then, turning to Laura, she added with a somewhat rueful laugh, "but Uncle sometimes calls me Peggy-Alone."

"Why does he call you such a funny name?"

"Why, you see I'm so much by myself, now that mother and father went away and left me here with Uncle Fred. I get lonesome all by myself!"

"I should think you would!" cried Laura compassionately.

"Let's sit down," suggested Alene. They did so, side by side, on the grass, while Prince reclined lazily beside them.

"Do you live in the Big House?" inquired Laura, glancing toward a building which stood far up on the level ground overlooking the terraced hill; a substantial house whose gray stone walls and square tower were partly hid with vines. It was the most pretentious habitation in the town and occupied the most beautiful site. Laura and her friends regarded it somewhat as a fairy palace, around which they wove many fanciful romances.

"I'm a-visiting there now but when Uncle goes down town and the maids are all at work I don't know what to do with myself; and when I saw you all here among the trees I just hurried down, I was so glad to see a crowd of girls, but naughty Prince ran ahead and scared you away! What were you playing?"

"We weren't playing; we were just picking apples."

Alene looked horrified.

"You see, Mr. Dawson allows us to come in and take all we want," explained Laura hurriedly, while a shrill voice from the wall cried:

"We weren't *stealing!*"

"I never thought that!"

"Well, she looked as if she did," commented Ivy.

"I looked surprised because—well—to think you would eat such green apples."

This statement brought forth a ripple of amusement from the two critics and Alene with reddened cheeks turned to the girl at her side.

"Well, they are dangerous, aren't they?"

"Don't mind those kids, they giggle at 'most anything. You see we are used to eating them and they are not injurious if you eat 'em with salt," explained Laura, though not very clearly.

"She's to take the kids and the apples with a little salt!" cried Ivy.

"Just try one!"

Alene sank her teeth rather gingerly into the rounded green cheek of the proffered apple.

"It's rather sour!" she said, trying to repress a grimace but unable to keep the tears from her eyes.

Laura took from her apron pocket a tiny glass saltcellar and shook some of its contents lightly over the next bite which Alene heroically swallowed.

"It's not so very bad," she murmured. So intent was she on accepting Laura's intended kindness graciously that she envied the ease with which Ivy and Nettie disposed of the apples, biting off great mouthfuls and chewing them, core and all, with evident enjoyment.

Laura forgot to eat any herself, being content to watch Alene's performance and never dreaming what a task it was for her.

"Say, Laura!" came a voice in a loud, hissing tone intended for a whisper; "she's got lace on her petticoat."

"And silk stockings and slippers!"

"Hush—'t isn't polite to whisper before comp'ny," admonished Laura.

"I don't mind the little thing," said Alene in a confidential aside to Laura, regardless of the fact that the "little thing" was nearly as large as herself.

"But she acts years and years older," was Laura's inward comment. "I guess she's used to 'sociating with grown folks."

"I don't like to wear lace-trimmed things, either," continued Alene.

"Why, I think they're lovely," said Laura, tenderly fingering one of the flounces which billowed like waves against her own blue print.

"But you don't have to wear them and be 'called down' by your governess every minute for fear they'll get torn or dirty!"

"Have you a governess?" inquired Laura in a tone of awe.

"Yes, but she took sick just after mother went away and had to go to the hospital. You see mother expected her to come here and take care of me. Uncle hasn't told mother 'cause he don't want to spoil their trip and he thinks it won't hurt me to learn to take care of myself. It's the first time I ever went round without a nurse or someone tagging after me, telling me to do this or not to do that—it's lovely to be free, girls!"

"Give me liberty or give me death!" said Laura in a tragic tone, and Alene squeezed her hand.

"Oh, Laura, it's so nice to talk with someone who understands! But in spite of being so free, I get so *lonely!*"

Laura's eyes shone with sudden comprehension.

"Oh, you poor little lonely baby," she said to herself, and then aloud,

"Alene, I wish you could join the Happy-Go-Luckys."

"The Happy-Go-Luckys? What are they?"

"A kind of *club*—you know."

"A club," said Alene, in such a doubtful tone that Laura took a sudden fit of laughter.

"Oh, Alene, you're so funny! It's not a club to *hit* with, but just us—a crowd of girls—to go together for fun and to do things."

"Oh, Laura! Would you really let me join, if Uncle will allow?"

"I'd love to, but we have some rules and bylaws—to be eligible the candidate's age must be at least twelve!" Laura from long practice was able to repeat the big words glibly.

"And I won't be twelve till July the seventeenth! Oh, Laura!"

"That's not so far off!"

"But what'll become of me till then? I'll die of loneliness!"

"I was going to say that July seventeenth is so near, and you seem so much older, that we'll have a special election, and—well, we'll stretch the rules to let you in."

Alene gave a sigh of relief.

"As I'm not so very large, you won't have to stretch them very far," she said, encouragingly.

"If she's little, she's old, like Andy Daly's pig!" Again came that sibilant whisper.

"Alene, don't mind her!"

"But why does she say that?"

"It's an old Irish saying. You see, Andy Daly took his pig to market and they objected to its size—'If it's little, it's old' said Andy Daly; and so they say, 'If it's little, it's old, like Andy Daly's pig!'"

Alene laughed and called over to the whisperer:

"If I'm little, I'm old enough to be a Happy-Go-Lucky—so there!"

CHAPTER II

UNCLE FRED

"Where is Peggy-Alone, Prince?" inquired Mr. Frederick Dawson.

The dog had come bounding over the grass to meet him at the Tower House gate, strange to say unaccompanied by the little girl who was usually the first to greet him each evening on his return from the office.

With Prince barking and snapping at his hand, the young man hurried along the path and into the

great hall.

"Yes, Prince, I know she's hiding somewhere, to jump out and scare her poor old Uncle and set his nerves all a-tremble! It was thoughtful of you to give me warning!" he said aloud. He hung up his hat, keeping a sharp lookout for the delinquent but she was nowhere in sight; no dancing footsteps were heard coming from any part of the house.

"I hope she isn't sick," he soliloquized, beginning to feel uneasy. "She's getting pale and listless. The poor little thing must be lonely here all day with no one but the servants. I wish she knew some children to play with! Confounded luck for the governess to fall sick and leave me as a sort of head nurse!" His grumbling anxious thoughts ended in an abrupt exclamation.

"Hello, there!"

Through the open door of the library he saw a little white-robed maid, seated in a great leather revolving chair, with her eyes fixed upon an object on the table beside her. If she noticed the young man's entrance or heard his voice she gave no sign, nor did she pay any attention to Prince, who led the way into the room, and strove with a great show of canine solicitude, in merry barks and gambols, to attract his young mistress' attention.

"Alene!" her Uncle said sharply, but the silence remained unbroken.

Half alarmed, he came forward and shook her by the shoulder.

"For heaven's sake, child, is anything the matter?"

Still she made no reply; she kept gazing, gazing in one direction as though fascinated.

Following her glance, he saw the fragments of a fancy Mexican tobacco-jar, which he had shown to her only the day before.

"Alene, I'm ashamed of you!" he cried in an angry tone. "Has the breaking of this jar brought you to such a state as this? Why, anyone would think—I'd swear it was the truth myself were anyone else in question—yes, they would think me an ogre who ate little girls who chanced to break something!" Turning away, he paced the floor with rapid steps backward and forward. The longer he walked, the faster he went, and higher the angry red glowed in his cheeks.

For a time Alene kept her unaccountable position. Presently her eyes strayed sidewise toward her agitated companion, who, intent on his own angry mutterings, was unaware of her inspection. The gleam of mirth that overspread her countenance was quickly banished; she rose and stood beside her chair and then crossed the floor to his side.

A little hand stole into his, a pair of blue eyes gazed contritely upward.

"Oh, Uncle, you said it was a present and I felt so badly! You aren't angry?"

"Ain't I? Do I look as if I'd beat a child?"

Suddenly his angry mood passed away, and he threw himself into a chair, in a paroxysm of laughter.

"Oh, Polly-Wog, what shall I do to make you pay up for this?"

"The jar? Did it cost so awfully much?"

"The jar you gave me when I came in, I thought you were in a trance! I had a wild notion to lose no time in bringing the doctor!"

She glanced ruefully at the broken vase.

"I was just wondering if it could be pieced together again—"

"Before the ogre got back?"

Alene perched herself on the arm of his chair with one arm around his shoulders.

"You're more like a fairy godmother—father, I mean."

"How did the terrible accident occur?"

"I picked it up to admire it and my hand got sort o' dizzy and let it fall."

"And you didn't think of running away and pretending you knew nothing about it, or blaming it on the maid?"

"Now, Uncle Fred—as if I'd be so dishonorable!"

"Well, I might, if I had such an ogre for an uncle as yours appears to be! I shouldn't fancy being ground to sausages!"

"Like Andy Daly's pig was, I guess! I must tell you about him, but there's something else to ask you first—something very important! Since you're the good fairy, you ought to grant me three wishes but I'll let you off with one."

"I'll not insist on granting the three until I hear Number One—Here goes! One, two, three—"

"Can I—may I—join the Happy-Go-Luckys?" implored Alene in an impressive voice, with clasped hands.

"The Happy-Go-Luckys! You're sure you don't mean the Ku Klux Klan? Hark, there's Kizzie coming to announce dinner. Come along and you can tell me all about it while we eat."

She took his arm with a mock fine-lady air, and walked beside him with mincing steps across the hall to the dining-room.

It was a square apartment with windows opening upon a green vista of gardens, now shut away by latticed blinds, through which the fresh spring air found way.

The bay window was filled with immense potted palms; another window led to a balcony where baskets with myrtle and other vines hung round like a heavy green curtain. The room was finished in light colored woodwork. A square rug in a pattern of tiny green and white tiles partly covered the polished floor; in the center stood a cosy round table, whose snowy napery and old silver and china were lit by a bronze lamp with an ornamental shade that resembled a gorgeous peony.

Seated opposite her Uncle, Alene, in her eagerness to relate her afternoon's adventure, almost forgot to touch the tempting dishes which Kizzie, the maid, served so deftly.

Her usually pale cheeks glowed and her eyes beamed brightly while she told of her new friends and the club.

Mr. Dawson listened with flattering attention.

"You may, you shall, you must, join the Happy-Go-Luckys! As a society for the prevention of loneliness to Peggy-Alone or any other forlorn little girl, it strikes me as a good thing," he declared.

"Oh, Uncle, you're a dear old thing!"

"An article of *virtu* as it were. Be careful how you handle me!"

Alene gave him a reproachful look.

"There, don't start that deadly stare again! I'm not insinuating anything!"

His air of alarm amused Alene. She laughed merrily. Her joy over his permission to join the Happy-Go-Luckys banished from her Uncle's mind any doubts he may have had of her mother's approval. However, he knew something of Alene's new friends, being personally acquainted with Mr. Lee, whose work as a riverman allowed him little time at home, while Mrs. Bonner was a widow who kept a small boarding house; both families, though poor, were highly respectable.

"Since I'm left in charge of Alene, I'll use my own judgment, which tells me that it's the very thing for her. She looks improved already and I'll not let any snobbish question deprive her of happiness." Which settled the matter there and then for all concerned.

* * * * *

"What's the matter now, Alene, that you pucker your brows over that ponderous tome?"

It was after supper, and Uncle Fred, seated in an easy chair beside the reading table in the library, was lazily puffing a pipe.

A stand near by held a large dictionary over whose pages Alene's head was bent.

Glancing up with a puzzled expression, she said: "I don't quite understand; this book says it means 'plain,' and I'm sure lots of children are quite ugly long before they are that age, and I don't think the girls are plain—Laura has lovely eyes and I never heard I was. Am I ugly, Uncle?"

"Well, one wouldn't pick you out in a crowd when all the lights were out, for a fright—"

"Oh, Uncle Fred, do be sober a minute!"

"Alene, I'm ashamed of you to hint that your guardian is ever anything else!"

"I mean grave!"

"A 'most potent, reverend and grave' old fellow am I!"

"Why, sometimes, Uncle Fred, you act as if you weren't any more than nine," said Alene, returning to the book with an air of tolerant resignation that amused the young man. He crossed to her side.

"Tell me what you are hunting; perhaps I can help you."

Alene ignored his air of exaggerated solemnity.

"You see, Laura said one must be twelve years old to be legible—to the Club, you know."

"Then if I'm not too old, I'm old enough to belong! But if I were you, I'd quit the L's and try something else very like it, with an E before," suggested Uncle Fred.

"Eligible, of course—how stupid of me!"

On the way upstairs that night Alene paused and gave way to a fit of laughter.

"What's the fun now?" called Uncle Fred from his cosy position by the table.

"It seems so funny to think that I," here came a series of mirthful sounds, "to think that you would think that I was afraid of you."

Uncle Fred's chair was overturned by his energetic uprising in pursuit of the little tease, who heeded the warning and was safely out of sight on the landing, with one parting giggle as the door of her room was shut with a resounding clap.

CHAPTER III

GUMDROPS

"Not a red gum drop was cast!" cried Laura as she jumped lightly from the garden wall and joined Alene, who for some time had been pacing the orchard impatiently with Prince jumping beside her.

Alene's look of pleased anticipation changed to dismay.

"I'm so sorry!"

"What for?"

"Why, Uncle Fred would have given me money to buy some, if I knew you wanted them!"

Laura's laugh rang out merrily.

"Why, Alene, it's *votes!* We don't buy them like 'lectioneers do—we get enough to give each member one red and one white gumdrop. Those who are for a candidate put in a white and those against her a red!"

Alene danced with joy.

"Then I'm elected!"

"You are now a member of the Happy-Go-Luckys and your name is duly inscribed on the books!" said Laura, in her judicial tone.

"And they all put in the white drops! How lovely of them!"

"Yes, all but Ivy; she put hers in her mouth to taste it, and before she knew, it was gone!"

"Dear me, and what did she do then?"

"She whispered it to me at the last minute, just after I got out the little mustard box where we cast our votes, and so I allowed her to put in a button instead. After it was over, some of us wanted to save the gumdrops for the first meeting you attended, but those greedy youngsters had devoured 'em all but two which I managed to keep."

Laura pressed into Alene's hand a small tinsel-paper package.

"You must eat half of each," said Alene, wisely surmising that it was Laura's own portion that had been saved, and resolving to leave for another day the blue ribbon-tied box of candy Uncle Fred had given her that morning, which she had just placed in the grass at the foot of a tree, awaiting Laura's arrival.

Seated on the green beneath the trees, they ate the gumdrops, whose scarcity perhaps made them seem the more delicious, and exchanged confidences concerning themselves and the Happy-Go-Luckys.

Alene, who was an only child, envied Laura's claim to two small sisters and a baby brother and one brother older than herself.

"Ivy is the only girl in the Bonner family."

"Like me!"

"Not quite—she has six brothers, four of them older than she is!"

"Gracious, I'd be lost in such a crowd of boys!"

As for the Club, it had formal meetings when an excursion to the woods or an exhibition was in view; then verbal notice was given to assemble at the home of one of the members. The other meetings were when two or more members met by chance or appointment for any object, whether study, play or conversation.

"So you see this is a meeting of two members, and I think I see a third," concluded the President, Miss Lee, craning her neck in the direction of the side street.

"Hello, Lol," cried a shrill voice, and Ivy's curly head peeped over the wall.

"I'll go and help her over," said Laura, rising quickly. As the wall was not very high, Alene idly wondered why such an active-looking girl should need assistance in scaling it.

"Why, I never dreamed she was lame," she murmured a moment later, swallowing something that seemed to choke her, when she saw Ivy coming forward on a pair of slender crutches. She strove to hide her emotion as she hurried down the grassy terrace to greet her.

Ivy may have noticed her start of surprise, for she said with a queer, unchildish laugh, as though she had read her thought:

"You didn't know I used these," with an expressive glance toward the crutches. "You see I kept 'em on the other side of the wall the other day. I wanted you to treat me as you would if I were like the rest, not handled gently and pitied!"

Alene tried to keep the pity from her countenance, for Ivy's words made her feel worse than ever. She wished she could run away somewhere, for a while, to have a good cry.

"Don't mind her, Alene! I do believe she talks that way to make us feel bad," said Laura in what Alene thought a very unfeeling manner; but she learned later that Laura's seeming harshness toward Ivy was only a cloak to hide her sympathy, and that it gave her an influence over the child who would otherwise use her infirmity to tyrannize over the others.

Ivy threw her crutches on the grass and sank down, saying,

"Horrid things! I hate them—and it makes me feel so mean to have to beg to get them back when the kids take 'em away from me!"

"Do they do that?" inquired Alene, indignantly.

"They have to do it sometimes, for she beats them with the crutches," explained Laura.

"That's the only way I can reach 'em!" said her friend, in self-defense.

Ivy was an elfin-looking creature with sparkling black eyes that seemed to see right through one; her small head was covered with a thick mop of curls of a blackness that, in some lights, had blue and green shades like the plumage of a bird; her wasted cheeks and brown, claw-like hands told pathetically of weary months on a sick-bed, which indeed she had only recently quitted, as Alene learned later.

"What a lovely sash you have on," she exclaimed, with a sudden change of mood, holding up an end of Alene's plaid sash. "It's like a baby rainbow stolen from a fairy sky and hung 'round your waist."

Alene glanced at her sash with a new interest. She cared little for pretty clothes and seldom noticed what those around her wore; that she was dressed finer and more fashionably than Laura and Ivy had not once occurred to her.

"That sounds like poetry," she observed.

"Yes, she writes poetry, too!" Laura returned proudly. "You must let Alene see some of it—and she keeps a book where she writes all about the sky when the sun sets—she sees lovely rivers and golden hills and ladies riding in skiffs—"

"Now, Lol!" cried Ivy with a hectic color reddening her cheeks. "It's just silly stuff, you know, that I put down to pass away the time when I'm laid up," she explained. "I thought of it one evening when the boarders were at supper; the boys were eating and mother of course too busy to stay with me. Hugh brought in my supper on a tray and hurried back to the dining-room and I sat there alone and ate my meal and watched the sky from my couch, which was drawn up close to the window. What wonderful things I saw then!"

"Tell me about them, won't you?" implored Alene.

"There were great purple mountains and emerald lakes and wonderful golden caves—people, too—angels with harps flying through the white clouds, ladies with crowns and long robes gliding along and little children swimming the river on the back of great swans like in the fairy books. Every evening it changed and at last I commenced to write about the different things I saw each day, and so I called it my Sunset Book. As for sunrises—" Ivy gave a sudden arch glance at Laura.

"Lazybones, I don't believe you ever saw one!"

"I'd love to see your book!" cried Alene; "and there are some beautiful sunsets looking from the Tower!"

Ivy glanced up toward the tower of the Big House that rose almost as high as a church spire from the top of the hill.

"I do believe one could see behind the hills over there in the west, to the other side of the world from those windows," she exclaimed.

"Well, you and Laura come up this evening and—"

"Won't your folks object?"

"There's no folks there but Uncle Fred and he's no objector. Promise to come and see how far we can see!"

"Over the hills and far away."

"Yes, we promise," cried Laura.

CHAPTER IV

THE GARDEN OF GOOD INTENTIONS

"Oh, Lol, I could hardly keep my face straight! To think we were actually invited up to the Big House really and truly, and were right there where we had so often pretended to live, you as Countess Terilla and I the Lady Clare-Come-to-See; I could hardly make this face of mine behave."

"Your eyes just shook inside; little, shining imps danced in them, wanting to come out. Yes, I saw them and—"

"And I was so glad of the chance to giggle out loud when you said something that wasn't at all funny but gave us a chance to pretend it was. I could have screamed!"

"After all, it wasn't near so fine as our palace, with its red room and its green room and its blue room with everything to match."

"But that library was beautiful. You couldn't help but see lovely things if you were writing there!"

"Alene is such a dear little thing! She never gave a thought to her home being so much finer than ours; she only thought of giving us a good time!" said Laura.

"She's no snob! She thinks people are what they are in themselves!"

"And thoughts are the most precious things—that's the reason she wanted to give you the pleasure of seeing His Gorgeous Lordship from the tower window!"

For a moment Ivy was silent; her gaze was far away; again she was looking from that little narrow window so close to the clouds.

"Do you know, Lol, if I owned the Big House I'd live in the tower when I wasn't in the library. But it wasn't me in particular, Lol, that Alene wanted. To her I'm only a lesser planet when you're near—it's hearts that count!"

"Yes, she's so good-hearted that you forget her pretty clothes and rich relations, and come to look on her as just a little girl like the others!" Ivy smiled indulgently as Laura applied her remarks to Alene, and the unconscious Laura continued, "At first when I proposed that she should join the Happy-Go-Luckys, it was just because she looked so lonely with only the dog to play with, in that great house with its acres of grounds; and when she said her Uncle called her 'Peggy-Alone', I could see the tears back of her smile and it came to me, 'what if Nettie or Lois were to be left all alone?' They're so used to tagging after me all their lives, you know, and so I just asked her in, though I was dreadfully afraid you would all be against it."

"And so we were! Just because we knew she was rich and might be in the way when we wanted

some fun, or would look down on us because we're poor. That," glancing at her crutches, "makes some people mild and sweet-tempered, they say, but it only makes me hatefuller and selfisher every day! Lol, I'm going to tell you something so you'll see what a selfish thing I am. I swallowed that gumdrop on purpose so I wouldn't have to vote! I didn't have the courage to vote against her because you were so eager to have her join."

"And then you got sorry as you always do."

"No, don't give me too much credit! I got ashamed when I compared my conduct with others; but you were unselfish—you didn't stop to consider the disadvantages to yourself. You only thought of her."

While Laura, with reddened cheeks, disclaimed this with as much earnestness as if taxed with a crime, Ivy went on unheeding:

"I thought it over this morning when I took out my Sunset Book, and instead of writing down what we saw from the tower window—which no one *could* describe, no painter nor poet that ever lived, glimpses of glory that God lets shine down, sometimes, when the Pearly Gate is opened just a narrow chink (to let some little white angel in perhaps) and the clouds reflect it, just as the river does the trees, you know—well, I wrote this instead!"

Laura took the precious book and perused it seriously.

"May I keep it and read it to Alene? I know she'd enjoy it!"

Ivy demurred, but at last consented and on Laura's next meeting with Alene she brought forth a green paper-covered copy-book and, with a few preliminary remarks, proceeded to read:

"Once upon a time—"

"It begins all right, anyway," interrupted Alene, settling herself comfortably against a tree, and half closing her eyes, as if to hear the better.

"Once upon a time," Laura's voice went on, "I wandered far away until I came to a narrow path, on one side of which was a beautiful garden blooming with flowers and fruit, with gay birds skimming through the air, while on the other side the grass and flowers lay withered, the trees leaned over, leafless and dead, and perched in their branches were mute, broken-winged birds. I went on until I came to the Witch of the Woods, who stood leaning on her hazel staff, with her red cloak wrapped around her, and her long, silvery hair falling, tangled, on her shoulders.

"What ails the little maiden that she looks so puzzled? Perhaps I can smooth the wrinkles from her brow!" she said in a harsh, cracked voice.

"Oh, wise woman!" I cried, for I felt so badly about what I had seen that I never thought of being afraid—'please tell me the mystery of the blighted garden!'

"My child, you have come through the Garden of Good Intentions—on one side are those which never came to blossom but died in the bud, whilst on the other are those which sprouted and grew and bloomed in beauty year after year, evergreen—'

"And the voiceless birds?'

"The mute birds of the broken wings are kind deeds, thought of, but left undone, while those performed multiply and fly, gay singing-birds, making many hearts glad!"

The reader's voice ceased; the book fell in her lap; a silence followed; Prince lay blinking in the sunshine; the birds and insects gave no token of their presence—even the leaves of the trees hung motionless.

The girls, sitting in the shade side by side, vaguely realized the calm; the heat gave them only a sense of well-being; their thoughts were at first too shadowy for words.

Alene was thinking of Ivy's story. It reminded her of the text she had heard the previous Sunday in the little vine-covered church on the crest of the hill; "Be ye kind one to another, merciful, forgiving one another even as God hath forgiven you in Christ." She wished that she too might go through the Garden of Good Intentions whilst flowers sprang up and birds sang sweetly round about her. But what could she do, what deed of kindness perform, however small, that might perhaps bloom as a wild flower by the wayside to gladden the passer-by?

She gave a start when with a sudden bark Prince leaped up and ran to chase some stray chickens; a breeze blew up till every leaf and blade of grass quivered with joy; a bird twittered softly and was answered by his mate and presently from each bush and tree came the voices of its lodgers in a song of praise.

Then Laura spoke, showing that her thoughts had divined Alene's in a sympathetic wave.

"Now, what do you think, Alene, of a 'Kind Deeds' article in the Happy-Go-Luckys' constitution, pledging each member to the sending out of little birds with strong wings that can fly?"

"And planting seeds to spring up in fragrant flowers? Oh, Laura!" cried Alene, "that would be beautiful!"

CHAPTER V

A DISGUSTED POET

When Laura rashly undertook the rôle of stage manager, or to say more truly, when the position devolved upon her as a matter of course, because she was the president of the Happy-Go-Luckys, she accepted the honor and the duties in blithe confidence, never dreaming of difficulties.

For a time everything went smoothly, and that lively sympathy for others in like position which marked her after years would never, perhaps, have been called forth was it not for her discovery one day in the attic of an old reader which contained something she thought could be used as a dialogue in the coming exhibition.

It was a poem in which each of four children expresses a cherished ambition to the mother, who comments on the wish with approval or censure.

The piece required two boys, and Laura's brother Mat and his chum, Hugh Bonner, were called upon, and after some grumbling on their part and as much coaxing on the part of the girls they "came in to help the Happy-Go-Luckys out," as they expressed it.

They were assigned their characters; Laura took the rôle of mother, giving the girls' parts to Alene and Ivy.

"I ask for beauty, for an eye
Bright as the stars in yonder sky;
For tresses on the air to fling
And put to shame the raven's wing;
Cheeks where the lily and the rose
Are blended in a sweet repose;
For pearly teeth and coral lip,
Tempting the honey bee to sip,
And for a fairy foot as light
As is a young gazelle's in flight,
And then a small, white, tapering hand—
I'd reign, a beauty, in the land!"

This was Alene's verse, but Ivy read it over and over instead of her own, and the oftener she read, the more discontented she grew.

"Why should Alene wish for 'a fairy foot, as light as is the young gazelle's in flight' when she has one already—two of 'em for that matter?" she thought. "The other wish is fine, I know—'a noble gift,' the mother says, but I don't care, I can't do justice to it as I could to the other! Of course, I don't care much for the 'eye, bright as the stars,' and all that rubbish, but I can imagine being light and gay and dancing!"

Although Ivy learned her part she went through it at rehearsal in such a spiritless way that Laura could not have failed to remark it if she were not occupied with so many other things.

When Alene's turn came and she stepped forward rather timidly to recite, Ivy listened eagerly to her rendition. It proved to be letter-perfect but expressionless. Ivy was justified in thinking that she herself could have done much better.

"She says it just in the way you might wish for a piece of plum cake or another gum-drop," she mused bitterly.

No one suspected her dissatisfaction except Hugh, who somehow understood all the moods of the frail little sister whom he worshiped.

In her sick spells, dating from a fall five years before, no one could move her so tenderly, nor place her in so comfortable a position as this sturdy lad of fifteen.

He resented Ivy's affliction even more than she did herself.

"I don't see why it couldn't have been one of us big lubbers of boys instead of her," he grumbled to his mother. "She seems to be made to run and dance and play—almost to fly like a bird."

"It's the Lord's will," returned Mrs. Bonner with a sigh.

"Umph! I don't know! When doctors fail to cure a disease, it seems pesky mean to blame it on the Lord! If we were only rich enough, I bet we could find some clever doctor who could make her O.K.! Why couldn't it have been a rich girl instead of her?"

"Oh, Hugh! That is wrong! Why need it be any poor little creature?" said the mother, who thought to herself that in this case money would indeed be a desirable thing; she never envied the rich except when she thought of Ivy.

But the boy, with all youth's revolt, hated the seeming injustice and his resentment often extended to those whose wealth made the difference so marked.

When Ivy, trying to conceal her own disapproval, spoke of Alene's joining the Happy-Go-Luckys, Hugh was opposed to it.

"I know just how it will be, and you girls are makin' a big guess when you take her in," he had warned.

"But she seemed so lonely, and Laura wanted it so much—"

"So did that city chap who used to go with us boys. He looked all right, but my, nothin' suited him. He laughed at our dug-bait, and fishin' rods, and our old-fashioned skiff and things, and talked about his pa's yacht and motor-cars and his ma's diamonds, until we were sick of 'em all!"

"But Alene is different," replied Ivy, and her brother said no more but wore a look of "just wait and you'll find out that I told you so," that was exasperating.

As time passed and he heard nothing but praises of Alene, and saw for himself her unassuming manners and her evident good will, he was obliged to confess that she was a good little thing in spite of her citified dress and her haughty relations; but in this dialogue affair he thought it too bad that the fortunate little maid, who had everything else, should stand in Ivy's way.

"I'll give a hint to Laura," he suggested.

"Oh, no, no, Hugh! Don't say a word to anyone! Not for the world!"

"After all, your part is fine. The other is silly stuff—sounds like some empty-headed thing!"

"Oh, Hugh, it's beautiful! Anyway, I could just enter into part of it! I'm tired of being tied to crutches and people thinkin', because of them, one never even wants any foolishness and fun, like other girls!"

Hugh looked troubled.

"It's a wonder Laura didn't think you might—"

"Laura didn't think anything about it! She just saw it was about a poet, and so the very thing for me!"

"Maybe Alene would—"

"Yes, I know she'd give it up if she knew I wanted it! She's an unselfish little thing. She took it because it was all that was left when Laura disposed of the 'soulful poet' part," Ivy said. Then after a silence, "I wonder why bad health makes me cranky and selfish and envious, instead of patient and meek, like the little girls in story books!"

Hugh smiled. He couldn't imagine his sprightly sister in the story book rôle of uncomplaining heroine, and he wouldn't wish to have her so, not for the world. Ivy was Ivy with all her faults; he wouldn't wish to have her otherwise except a happier Ivy, with the blessing of health and strength, flitting gaily through life, having part in the work and the play of the world.

CHAPTER VI

A SCORNFUL BEAUTY

Ivy could not have complained of Alene's want of animation had she followed her home after rehearsal one afternoon a few days later.

She entered the library, threw her hat on a chair and herself upon a snug little sofa that stood invitingly in the embrasure of a window, which, by drawing the crimson curtains, could be shut off from the rest of the room, leaving a cosy den—her favorite place for dreaming and reading, where her eyes, straying from her book, rested on an ever-varying picture of sky and river, which the window framed.

To-day, not waiting to shut herself away, and paying no attention to the smiling landscape, she opened a sheet of foolscap paper that she had held clasped tightly in her hand, and gravely perused the lines of Ivy's angular writing which covered it. A similar sheet had been given to the other actors in the dialogue so that each might learn his part at leisure.

"I ask for beauty—' yes, you little numskull, ask for it,—that's all people think you're good for! Laura, of course, never thought of it that way but others will! And I don't wish for it, I'd rather be a poet any day!

'I ask the poet's gift, the lyre,
With skillful hand to sweep each wire,
I'd pour my burning thoughts in song,
In lays deep, passionate and strong,
Till heart should thrill at every word
As mind is thrilled at song of bird!
Oh, I would die and leave some trace
That earth had been my dwelling place,
Would live in hearts forevermore
When this frail, fitful life is o'er!
Oh, for the gifted poet's power—
This is my wish, be this my dower!"

Alene jumped to her feet, and standing in the window facing the room, recited the words with a dash and a fire that brought forth a "Bravo!" from Uncle Fred, who on his way through the hall had heard her voice and, stopping softly at the door, witnessed her performance.

It formed a pretty picture, the little tragedienne, standing where the crimson draperies made an effective background for her slender, white-robed figure, with the long strands of ruffled brown hair straying over her shoulder, and her earnest, gray eyes deepening to black or sparkling into blue, her whole face lit with passion.

"You do your part well, Peggy," said the young man.

Alene's blushes of pleasure faded suddenly.

"But it's not my part, it's Ivy's! Why does everyone think when you're rich that's all you are good for or can wish for! This is my part," and she pointed tragically at the detested verse.

"Ah, I see," said Uncle Fred, glancing at the lines. "It's a pretty thing. 'Tis a pity to have it spoiled, as I fear it will be, since you dislike it. "Why not suggest a change?"

"I'm afraid Laura would feel hurt; besides it is more suitable to Ivy as she is a poet!"

"The very reason she may wish for something else!"

"Anyway, she said the verse in a sing-song style that just spoiled it!" declared Alene.

"Poor stage manager! It's almost as bad as being the leader of a choir! Pity Laura's not a mind reader! But why not be perfectly honest with her, and tell her how you feel about it; perhaps Ivy has no preference in the matter."

Alene thought that was out of the question; besides it would be selfish to want Ivy's part, just because she herself preferred it; poor Ivy, who, though so clever, was never quite happy.

"Then act on the Golden Rule; but don't spoil it by murdering the dialogue in revenge," said Uncle Fred. To which Alene assented, though she declared it was very hard.

"Since Laura's stars refuse to shine, why doesn't she call on me? Now, I rather fancy the part," said the young man; and taking the paper with an air of solemnity that the twinkling of his eyes belied, he proceeded to read the verse with an exaggerated air, emphasizing the wrong words and using gestures which seemed so funny to Alene that she threw herself on the rug and screamed with laughter. The noise attracted Mrs. Major and Kizzie, who reached the door in time to witness the bewildering wind-up, as the actor, dwelling softly on the words,

"And for a fairy foot as light
As is the young gazelle's in flight."

gave his right foot an upward movement bringing his toe in contact with the chandelier, and then executed a backward kicking act I am sure no gazelle, old or young, would wish to emulate.

THEATRICALS

The rehearsals went on. Alene and Ivy recited their parts in the dialogue in the same listless way, secretly criticising each other's rendition, but Laura, busy in directing and arranging so many things, failed to notice the discontent of those two important members of the Company.

It was only their love of the manager that kept them silent, and even then it was a hard task, considering Alene's ingenuousness and Ivy's impulsiveness, both traits alike foes to concealment.

At the last meeting before the great event, everything seemed to go wrong; the little ones forgot their lines or refused to obey the stage manager, declaring she was cranky, and threatening to throw up their parts and go out on the hillside to play; the boys were in a mischievous mood and teased their sisters unmercifully; Laura was on the point of tears, which fact Alene discovered by her unusual rigidity of countenance.

Laura crying would be something terrible! Alene had seen the others whimper and complain. She had been present when Ivy, in her sudden fierce passions of anger, would attack the little ones viciously with her crutches, unless they had previously stolen them away; in which event she would gnash her teeth, and stamp her feet, in powerless rage, and only Laura could bring peace by banishing her tormentors. But no matter what happened, Laura seemed a rock upon which to lean, and if, in adjusting a grievance, she sometimes failed to use tact, and the remedy proved worse than the disease, they knew in their hearts she was acting in good faith, trying to do what was right.

Therefore it behooved Alene upon this occasion to redouble her efforts to be helpful and cheering.

She won over the babies by promising them each a beautiful doll out of the trunkful she had at home; whereupon the big boys promised to be good if she would give them one also, but Alene took their chaffing good-naturedly and things began to proceed more smoothly.

The last thing on the program, "The Wishes," was called.

Laura, strange to say, for the first time found fault.

"Oh, Ivy, *do* put a little animation into it! One would think you were delivering a funeral oration," she cried testily.

Ivy's nerves, overwrought by the preceding irritations, gave way:

"Well, no wonder, for I hate it!"

"Hate that? Why, it's the finest thing in the whole piece; even the mother says 'a noble gift,' while she chides Alene for wanting mere beauty!"

Ivy's thin cheeks were like crimson roses. "I'd rather be a dancing beauty than a broken-winged robin!" she declared defiantly.

"And I'd rather be a poet than go mincing through the world with just a pretty face!" exclaimed Alene.

"Oh, Alene, would you really like my part?" cried the astonished Ivy. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Why, because I thought anyone would prefer it to that detestable beauty part! Why didn't you speak out?"

Now it would have taken quite a long explanation, each having, as we know, several reasons for not having spoken, so they only looked at each other and laughed.

Laura glanced from one speaker to the other, her look of surprise changing to compunction.

"Oh, girls, why didn't I ask you which verse you preferred instead of portioning it off as I thought you would like?" she queried ruefully. While they sought to reassure her, Mrs. Lee entered the room, and learning the cause of the excitement, said:

"That's just like Laura! The other morning I heard a great uproar. In I came to find Laura helping to dress Lois, insisting upon putting a certain shoe on her foot, while she cried against it. I investigated and found—"

"That I was bent on cramming her fat little footsie into a shoe two sizes too small for her—I had picked up Elmer's shoe in mistake!"

Although Ivy and Alene were somewhat embarrassed when they rehearsed the dialogue after exchanging rôles and did not render the new parts with the power of which they were capable, the improvement was marked and brought forth much applause, which however was not to be compared with the hand clappings received the night of the performance—but that is another story.

Mrs. Bonner's double parlors were used, the front for the audience, which filled the room. All of the boarders attended, and the neighbors came, bringing their own chairs. The back parlor, ordinarily used as a dining-room, was the stage, the sliding doors making a good substitute for a curtain.

Mat had a funny speech by way of introduction; then Lois was called for a song about lovers meeting at the garden gate, which in her baby English she rendered, "Meet me at the Garbage Gate." An original poem by Laura was unexpectedly brought to light by a mischievous friend, and read in a sing-song style by Lafe Bonner:

"That poor old slate
I always did hate,
But I had to use it
At any rate.
One day by accident (?)
It fell on the floor,
It broke to pieces,
And I saw it no more."

Fortunately the author's blushes were hidden along with herself back in a corner of the stage. "It's the only 'pome' I ever executed and I felt like executing Lafe when I heard him reciting it," she explained later.

Nettie, looking more than ever like a great waxen doll in her pink gingham and golden curls, brought down the house by her recitation:

"Little Bobby, come to daddy!
Holdy up his tiny paddy,
Did he hurt his blessed heady?
Darling, come and get some bready,
Don'ty cry, poor little laddie,
Come and kiss his precious daddy."

Baby Elmer represented Bobby, and the little maid went through the piece with appropriate gestures, unconscious of her audience and not forgetting a word,—to the joy of her instructor, Laura, whose heart beat nervously while she watched the performance.

Mr. Frederick Dawson and a few of his companions had come in rather late and seats were found for them in the rear, as they refused to allow any at the front to be vacated for them. It was just before the doors opened on the great dialogue where Laura was the mother, in a neat wrapper and gray wig and spectacles, standing in the midst of an interesting family. The back of an easy chair served to support Ivy, who was dressed in white, with red sash and hair ribbons.

What spirit she put in her lines, all leading up to, and centering in, the wish for the young gazelle's light footfall, the rest being only a prelude to that!

Then the other little white-robed girl from her seat in the big chair rose to declare her wish. A color that was not all excitement glowed in her cheeks, thrilling Uncle Fred with the conviction that the Happy-Go-Luckys by banishing loneliness had brought the blessing of health to Alene.

It was her first appearance before the public, and the thought of it had brought her much nervous apprehension that she might forget her lines, falter, or even run away at the last moment. To perform even before the other boys and girls at rehearsal had always brought a preliminary nerve tension which she had tried to conceal. This, however, was nothing compared with her dread of the great night when she thought of facing a whole roomful of people; but now, strange to say, all her tremors died away. She found it less difficult to recite before the crowd than at rehearsal; she forgot herself in the joy of her lines. That she recited even better, if anything, than when her Uncle had overheard her in the library is all that need be said.

When the ensuing applause died away and the doors refused to open again, Uncle Fred noticed the lips of a small boy seated near him puffed out in disdain. Stooping with a show of solicitude to learn the cause, he heard him say to a companion:

"A lip to tempt the honey-bee to sip'—I bet she never felt a stinger or she wouldn't wish for such a silly thing!"

"I don't see why that Dawson girl wants the poet's gift, 'the liar!' Do all poets tell whoppers, I wonder?" said the other boy, looking up into Uncle Fred's face with wide, wondering eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

PICNICKING

Such a merry crowd of Happy-Go-Luckys they were as they came marching along the country road that summer day, wearing gay caps of tissue-paper with floating streamers, while their brothers' hats were decorated with rosettes of the same material.

The day was a perfect one for their picnic; sudden, saucy breezes tempered the warm atmosphere, making the paper ribbons dance merrily around the heads of the girls.

As they came along with dancing steps and smiling faces, and lips of laughter and song, the sight of them was enough to lighten the heart of an onlooker and bring to his mind the shepherds and shepherdesses of old, who surely could not have been merrier nor a whit more picturesque.

But suddenly the gay voices fell to murmurs. A whispered command was borne along the line even to the last straggler. Laura's voice, low but impressive, said, "Hats off!" and off came those gay bonnets and the rosette-trimmed hats, and along the road the children went in solemn silence, with stately step; for over the hill alongside the road they saw a neat little house whose upper windows overlooked the road, all the blinds upstairs and down were closed, and on the door swung long bands of black crêpe.

It was this sad emblem which had curbed so suddenly the mirth of the Happy-Go-Luckys, and made them pay respect in their own childish but expressive way to the grief of the mourners; and it was not until the little house had been left far behind that the awe was lifted from their spirits, and the joy of childhood reasserted itself.

They had reached a road bordered with trees that almost met above them, forming a long green arbor into which the sunlight stole through every little chink, and Ivy was moving along almost forgetful of her crutches, her eyes intent on the green loveliness of the place and the pretty pink parasol with white lace trimmings which Alene carried, when suddenly the latter gave a shrill scream and threw the parasol away from her as far as she could.

Immediately the others gathered around, while she stood grimacing, saying nothing but "Ugh! Ugh!" to all their questions. They were greatly puzzled, until someone picked up the pink parasol at which its owner pointed so tragically, to find that all the fuss was caused by two caterpillars which had fallen from the trees.

"Fraid cat!" said Hugh, contemptuously; "I've seen little tads of four and five let 'em crawl up their bare arms!"

"I'm not a 'fraid cat! But those ugly, crawly things make me feel creepy!" Alene returned with crimsoning cheeks.

"Those ugly things, as you call them, turn into beautiful butterflies!" returned Hugh, in a tone that to Alene sounded offensively preacher-like.

"Well, let them wait until they are butterflies before perching on my parasol," she retorted.

"It's just one's nerves! They *are* ugly things, and Alene's not used to seeing them," said Laura.

"And they say the great Napoleon couldn't bear to touch velvet, and he was no coward!" cried Ivy, who felt that her brother was often unjust to Alene.

In spite of their protests, Hugh had his own opinion in the matter. There are some boys to whom Alene's timidity would have appealed, but he was not one of that kind. He was the most outspoken and the least gentle of all the boys with whom the Happy-Go-Luckys associated. But his downright honesty and fearlessness, his renown among the boys as an athlete, and especially his devotion to his little sister which Laura dilated upon, and of which new proofs were daily shown, had awakened Alene's admiration, and made her the more resent his calling her a coward.

"I've stumbled over my toe!" wailed little Lois, carrying the stubbed toe and tearstained face to Laura for repairs.

Mat ran to stroke the offending stone with an exaggerated air of sympathy.

"Naughty girl! The poor stone was standing in the road, never moving until you came along and gave it a kick," he said reproachfully, at which they all laughed, and the caterpillar affair was forgotten for the time by all except Alene, who had picked up her parasol and walked along with an air of unconcern that gave her friends no hint of the tears so bravely forced back.

"Fraid cat!" her thoughts ran; "why couldn't Hugh have been polite enough to keep from that slighting remark or at least laugh good-naturedly with the rest, and paid no more attention to it, instead of making so much of such a trivial affair!"

She felt at first that the day was spoiled so far as she was concerned; but the gay chatter of the others, the new experience of tramping the country paths, climbing fences and crossing runs, discovering new beauties at every step, made her presently forget her chagrin.

As the day wore on, the smaller children cast wistful glances toward the baskets, and even went so far as to peek through any little opening to make sure that certain favorite morsels, which they had seen put in, had not mysteriously disappeared.

"Laura, you and mother must have loaded this basket with cobblestones," cried Mat with a groan, leaning sideways almost to the ground.

"Cobblestones! You take very good care not to call them that when you're begging mother to cut her fresh pies! I'll tell her what you call 'em in company!"

"Well, it's funny how heavy this basket's grown in the last half hour!"

"I've noticed they always do grow heavier toward noon," commented Hugh. "Can't we lighten 'em some way?"

"Can't we? Just let me try! Keep off, Nettie, or I'll eat you up—I'm as hungry as Red Riding-hood's famous—or infamous—bear!"

"It was a wolf!" declared Nettie, in the tone of one who knew.

"So much the better to eat you up, my honey!" Mat smacked his lips voraciously, displaying two rows of firm white teeth, and made a dart at the little girl. She ran screaming to Laura, who, Ivy often declared, was the children's real and truly Noah's ark of refuge.

Everybody was hungry and they only waited to reach a suitable place for lunch.

"I know the very spot," said Hugh, leading the way.

"Behold a Moses to lead us out of the wilderness!" cried Mat.

"And behold the Promised Land!" Ivy screamed in delight, as her brother set his basket among the great knotted roots of a tree that helped to shade a stretch of green-sward which extended gradually to the river.

"This Moses remains to dine," said Hugh.

The girls spread a white cloth on the ground and proceeded to unpack the baskets.

Although they had made frequent stops on the road, Laura feared the walk had over-taxed Ivy's strength, and wished her to rest; but she refused to be left out of any activity. She it was who sat, a spirit of prodigality, in the midst of the baskets, dealing out the good things one by one, while Alene and Laura arranged them artistically, piling in the center a pyramid of fruit, and placing the cakes and pies and pickles in the most tempting proximity, not forgetting sandwiches, and plain bread and butter. Indeed, as Mat remarked when he came up from the spring with a pail of cold water, "The very look of it was enough to give an imaginative person the nightmare."

"Then don't eat any of it, Mr. Matthew," cried Ivy.

"Thank heaven, I'm not imaginative! I think I'll try a snack of that jelly-roll," he returned, reaching for the cake in Ivy's hand.

"I think you won't! Why, even those greedy children haven't been allowed a taste of anything, though it's a wonder their eyes have left a morsel! What are you laughing at?" she inquired, as Mat's glance strayed beyond her.

Net waiting for an answer she turned her head to find her little brother Claude standing at her shoulder, balancing in his out-stretched palm a slice of brown bread from which he had just taken a huge bite, whose buttered and jellied traces were seen on his plumped-out cheeks. Not far away was Lois with a monster pickle. At a distance, with backs discreetly turned, were two other small sinners whom Ivy eyed suspiciously, and she turned at last with a hopeless shake of her head to Laura, whom she suspected was to be blamed. But she was mistaken in her surmise for Alene was the real offender. Not being used to the always hungry state of a half dozen small brothers and sisters, she could not withstand the children's pathetic glances.

"You don't suppose it will spoil their appetite for dinner?" she inquired anxiously, when the truth was disclosed.

"I haven't the faintest fear that it will," returned Ivy, in a dry tone.

"The wisdom of the innocents! Wish I had tackled Alene instead of you," deplored Mat.

At that moment he was hailed by Hugh:

"Come along, Mat! We boys are going to pick some wild strawberries for dessert. I noticed some vines up there over the hill as we came along."

"That will be lovely; run along, little boy," said Ivy, and Mat, with a last despairing glance at the feast, was gone, leaving her free to resume her task.

Although there was quite a crowd, almost a dozen young people to feed, the baskets seemed to disgorge enough for twenty. But then they were Happy-Go-Lucky baskets!

"Leagues and Clubs somehow have a selfish sound—as though everyone outside didn't count for

anything," Ivy said one day. "We mustn't let ourselves get narrow that way," and they did not, for as Laura remarked later, "When it came to picnics and good times generally, the Happy-Go-Luckys was very 'stretchible'—it took in all the kids!"

While the girls proceeded blithely to get lunch, helped or hindered by the younger children, loud voices were heard and presently a crowd of ragged boys appeared on the upper road.

The girls, expecting them to go on their way, paid no attention to them, but the lads attracted by the bounteous display of dainties, at once gave notice of the find, and with whoops of delight came running down the hillside and attacked the spread.

The girls were alarmed but stood their ground nobly.

"You had better go! Hugh Bonner and the other boys will soon be here!" said Laura warningly.

"I've heard of the redoubtable Hughie—we ain't goin' to force our company, we just want them cakes an' things! Come on, boys! Hurry!"

Laura stood guard over the table and Ivy raised a crutch to strike the foremost but both girls were swept aside.

Some of the little ones turned to Laura for protection, while the others ran screaming in the direction of the berry-patch, and a moment later the berry-pickers were seen on the side of the hill.

Hugh, being somewhat in advance, saw the whole engagement.

When Laura and Ivy were routed, he noticed Alene turning as if for flight. However, instead of running away as he had expected, she stooped, picked up the pail of water left by Mat, and, turning back with a sudden movement, dashed the fluid into the boys' faces.

Choked and blinded by the unexpected assault, they fell back.

The smallest boy, who had been in the rear, was the first to recover from the sudden bath. With uplifted hand he made an angry dash at Alene.

"Don't you dare to strike that girl!" cried a boy who came running down from the road. He evidently belonged to the gang but had only appeared on the scene in time to witness their rout. He was a well-built lad of fifteen, with a bearing that showed him to be above his associates, of whom he proclaimed himself the leader by collaring the angry boy who had made the attack on Alene. Then the berry-pickers came hurrying along with cries of, "A rescue, a rescue!" and the strange boys fled, leaving the girls mistresses of the field.

Alene was surprised to find herself a heroine. The girls declared the day lost but for her, and the boys, who had all witnessed the last of the engagement, were loud in her praises.

"I heard that big boy say you were a brave little thing and I agree with him," declared Hugh, who had experienced a sudden compunction for his hasty judgment in the caterpillar affair.

Whereupon the last vestige of Alene's resentment vanished.

"I think I'm entitled to some of the glory," remarked Mat modestly, joining the group around the re-arranged feast. "Didn't I, with remarkable foresight, provide the pail of water for Alene to drown the enemy in?"

CHAPTER IX

TISSUE-PAPER HATS

Blame it all on those tissue-paper hats; the surprise and horror of good Mrs. Ramsey when she beheld Alene Dawson among that madcap crowd, skipping along gaily intent on her play, unobserving the pained expression of the portly lady who was coming up the other side of the street. Mrs. Ramsey had stopped suddenly, "so frustrated by the sight," as she said later, that she had not the strength to hail Alene and when her breath came it was too late, the happy crowd had passed from sight around the corner leading to the fields, and her feeble, "Why, Alene Dawson, I'll tell your Uncle about this!" sounded no farther than her own ears.

Panting with indignation and the heat of the day, she resumed her way up the steep street and in due time reached her home, a showy, buff brick house with fancy turrets and pointed roofs and tiny windows with wooden ornamentations, that gave warning of the interior, where none of the rooms was of good size or well proportioned. Most of the space on the first floor was taken by the reception hall which was not often used and the whole gave the impression of being built to show off the hall, of

which its owner was very proud.

She was also very proud of her two daughters, Hermione and Vera, whom she found on this occasion sitting in the study, a tiny alcove on the second story, which overlooked the garden. They were apparently deep in the mysteries of a French grammar which Vera had seized on hearing the click of the gate announcing Mrs. Ramsey's return, while Hermione busied herself in hiding under the cushion of her chair two borrowed books of fairy tales which their mother had denounced and forbidden and banned and would have burned with a zeal like to that which animated the burners of the witches.

"When I was your age I never cared for reading. I knew most books were lies from beginning to end. You couldn't hire me to read about goblins and witches," she often declared.

"What a dull, tiresome girl mamma must have been," said Vera in a low aside.

"But she didn't have to play exercises on the piano!" returned Hermione.

"No, nor try to *parlez vous* with a gibbering foreigner."

"I don't see any use for foreign babbling. As the nurse in the French tale says to the little girl who is studying English, 'Since the *bon dieu* wrote the Bible in French, it shows that he thought it good enough for anybody,'" said Hermione, laughing, and Vera continued,

"Grandpa was too poor to pay for extras, I guess."

"I almost wish we could say the same of Pa Ramsey, only I'd hate to be poor—I don't see how poor people can stand it!"

"Oh, they are used to it. They don't mind it," returned Vera with a yawn.

"Tissue-paper hats!" they cried when their fond parent, sinking on a lounge, had recovered sufficient breath to relate her adventure; "Tissue-paper hats!"

Hermione's thoughts flew to her own room where, reposing in a box, was her best hat, a huge affair of fine white straw, with ribbons and flowers galore, whose glories made Alene's headgear appear the more offensive. She was wishing she had been along with Alene, wearing her own hat, of course, until her mother went on to say:

"That wasn't the worst of it! What can Frederick Dawson mean to allow Alene to associate with the town children!"

"Town children, mamma! Do you mean from the poorhouse?"

"No, Miss Density, mamma means that Lee girl and Ivy Bonner and—"

"Oh, them! They go to our room! That Bonner girl is awfully bright but so sarcastic, and Laura Lee is all right!"

Mrs. Ramsey shook her head.

"This comes of the public schools, where the president's child is made to rub shoulders with the miner's!"

"And the miner's child often beats him in his lessons and the rest of the scholars are apt to remark and remember it," said Hermione. "Only for that, the rich boys could pose as being extra smart!"

"I should have got you girls a governess only papa said he couldn't possibly afford it, as times are dull; when the children are grown it's embarrassing to know how to meet their former schoolmates!"

"Nothing easier! Just turn your shoulder or look straight ahead!" Vera stood up, and, using a chair to represent the offending party, illustrated her remarks with appropriate gestures.

"Yes, but the girls aren't like that chair. They wouldn't be sat upon so easily!" exclaimed Hermione.

"They would understand the next time unless they were unusually dense," retorted Vera.

Hermione laughed.

"I can imagine I see you trying to cut Ivy Bonner that way! She would toss up her head and give you the 'icy stare'. As for Laura, she wouldn't understand; she'd only think it a pity you were so near-sighted!"

"Well, girls, don't get to quarreling," interrupted their mother. "I'll make it a point to warn Alene's uncle. I'm sure her mother would have collapsed had she been in my place to-day! I'm afraid the Dawsons will be vexed because I've not had her over here to get better acquainted with you girls!"

"You have asked her often enough, dear knows, and she never came, yet she seems very intimate with those other girls!" commented Hermione.

"I admire her taste," said Vera. "It's all because her mother's not here to look after her. Some men

are queer. Very likely her uncle never sees the difference between those town girls and others!"

"Well, what difference is there, except that Ivy and Laura are more clever than the average?"

"Hermione, you talk like a—a socialist! The barriers between the classes must be preserved, especially in these times when education is trying to sweep them away! Else where would we land?"

"We, the royal family," muttered Hermione in an aside to Vera. "Don't you remember Grandpa Green's prize pigs?"

Vera pretended not to hear, and their mother, taking breath, continued, "There's no use talking, girls, those children are not in the Dawson set! The idea of wearing tissue-paper hats on the street in broad daylight!" So saying, she sailed from the room and the hidden books were promptly brought forth and the interrupted reading resumed.

CHAPTER X

ALENE'S VISITORS

"Alene, Mrs. Ramsey stopped in the office yesterday to lecture me on the criminality of tissue-paper hats," said Uncle Fred at supper the next evening. Although his voice was solemn, the twinkle in his eyes told much to the observant Alene.

"Tissue-paper hats! Why, Uncle!"

"She was surprised, or I should say scandalized, when I remarked that I had superintended the putting on of yours, and that I was sorry I was too young, or not old enough, to go along with you."

"Oh, Uncle Fred, you are just the right age for—anything; but we couldn't coax you to go that day!" Alene protested.

"And then I told her of my surprise when I reached the office that morning to find my hat adorned with a red-white-and-blue rosette, which horrified her so much that I was glad—I mean sorry, that she hadn't met me wearing it."

"I wish she had, meddling thing!"

"She thinks I'm very lax in my duty to allow you on the street without a *chaperone*. Alene, I'm a failure as a stern old guardian! I think, to put myself right with the townspeople, I'll have to get arrested for beating my incorrigible niece!"

"If they find fault with you, just send them to me and I'll—I'll settle them," cried Alene, with angry vehemence, holding her fork in such a threatening position that Kizzie, coming in with the tray, half paused.

"Don't be alarmed, Kizzie. She's not going to attack you or me; she's only indignant because everyone doesn't agree with her in holding me up as a model guardian!"

"Oh, Mr. Fred, how you do go on!" returned Kizzie with a laugh and a blush, giving Alene a glance that showed upon whose side she stood.

"But I haven't come to the end of my tale. It seems that Mrs. Ramsey's real object in paying me a visit was not to lecture me, as I supposed, but to say that her two daughters are coming to visit you tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh, bother! Laura and Ivy promised to come and stay for tea!" grumbled Alene.

"Well, the more the merrier. The Ramsey girls seem to be amiable enough," returned Mr. Dawson who failed to see any reason for the little girl's vexation. Indeed, Alene herself could not define what was, in reality, the dismay any hostess might feel if called upon to entertain a group of people which she knows to be utterly uncongenial.

"Don't worry, child! Just do the best you can," was the advice of the housekeeper, when Alene, kneeling on a chair at the window next morning, viewed the forbidding, rain-soaked grounds.

"But I depended on the garden to help me out," said she, giving a reproachful glance at the soggy grass and dripping trees. "The girls could swing and run about in the grass, and now we'll all have to stay cooped together in the house! I wouldn't mind it a bit with Laura and Ivy. We could do lots of things inside—but the Ramsey girls!"

"There's the tower room and the wide halls. Surely you can play some games there! It does seem unfortunate how things turn out sometimes, but we must just bear it!" said Mrs. Major.

"That's what makes it so much harder, we *must* bear it! Ivy says if we could take our burdens just because we wanted to for a noble cause, like some of the martyrs did, it wouldn't be half so hard as when they are put on one!" grumbled Alene. "But there, I'm not going to cry about it!"

"I wouldn't, either," cried Kizzie, broom in hand, her face glowing from an attack on the upstairs carpets. "It would only make things damper!"

The smiling visage of the plump little maid seemed to have captured some of the sunshine hidden away by the clouds; it radiated from her blue eyes, her yellow hair, her round rosy cheeks; Alene, turning from the depressing outside where the rain was steadily falling, felt an answering glow when she met that sunny gaze, and retorted gaily:

"Does she mean to be profane or funny, or only puny!"

"I mean to tell you what I was thinkin' about! Wouldn't it be fun for you and the girls to make taffy this afternoon?"

Alene clapped her hands.

"Oh, Kizzie, the very thing! And please, *please* let me be chief cook—I think it would be lovely to potter round the pans and things!"

"I could come in and show you how, only Mrs. Major let me off this afternoon and my sister's expecting me—but I might send her word," said Kizzie.

"No, you mustn't do that. Just tell me how much to use and where to find the stuff—but I don't want anyone to help me!"

So Alene listened solemnly, with a delightful sense of responsibility, to the directions given by Kizzie and the housekeeper. It seemed so easy, just so many cups of sugar, so much vinegar and water, a lump of butter not too large and enough vanilla to make it taste; then the greased pans and the flour to use in pulling it.

"Oh, I know it by heart! Don't say another word till I bring you some upstairs to the sewing-room this afternoon! And I'll save some for Kizzie when she comes."

As the girls intended coming at one o'clock to stay not later than five, Alene felt secure in having provided something that would pass the greater part of the time, so she paid no more attention to the weather. It could not interfere with the taffy pulling.

She flew happily round making her preparations and it did not seem any time until Prince gave a joyous bark to notify her of the near approach of friends.

She ran to the door. Sure enough, it was Laura and Ivy making their way through the rain; they were coming around the curve of the walk which led from the front gate.

"And Laura's holding the umbrella over Ivy so that she herself gets nothing but the drippings," Alene observed. She seized an umbrella from the rack and hastened to meet them, while Prince ran on ahead to assure them of a welcome.

The barking of the dog and the chatter of the girls made such a din that it reached Mrs. Major, who came and stood in the hall, enjoying the excitement.

After greeting the visitors she went upstairs, feeling a pleasant glow in the consciousness that the little girl, whose loneliness had been a source of anxiety to the older inmates of the house, was now light-hearted and happy with companions of her own age.

"Girls, girls, I'm so glad you've come in spite of the rain!" cried the beaming Alene, dancing round, more of a hindrance than an aid in her endeavors to help them off with their things.

"Mother was against my going out in the rain, but Hugh knew how much I wanted to come, and just as he was coaxing her, Laura came in, and they hustled me off!"

"It's well I did, or the Bonners would have had a weeping Ivy on their hands, and dear knows it's moist enough without that, so I carried her away just for pity!" explained Laura, who stood before the rack mirror surveying a few locks of straight hair which stuck to her forehead. "I was just telling Ivy it's good there's no lightning; but the rain does take the starch out of things. Just look at my poor hair, while Ivy's curls are kinkier than ever!"

"Poor Lol, I'd gladly turn some of the kinks over to you if I could," cried Ivy with a laugh, as she gave her mop of curls a vigorous smoothing, trying in vain to make them lie closer to her head. "But talking of lightning, when I was quite small I remember one day in school it stormed hard. The thunder rolled and the lightning flashed and one of the girls got frightened and began to cry, which surprised me very much; not because she cried, but because she was a doctor's daughter—I don't know why I thought a doctor's daughter should be braver than anyone else's child!"

"It's funny the thoughts we have and the queer things we believe when we're small," returned Alene. "A girl told me one day if you put beads in the oven more beads would grow. So I put in my

string of pink coral but it only got hot and didn't grow a bit bigger! I never believed in that girl again!"

"I never told you of the spring that Ivy and I made when we were little. We thought it would be so nice to have cold water handy, so we dug a hole in the cellar, big enough to put a good-sized tin pan in, and filled the pan with water. We put pebbles in the bottom and moss around the rim and thought we had a perpetual well; but when we came back to it the old pan was dry. The water had leaked through the holes! We were awfully disappointed that no other water had run in!"

As Laura completed her contribution to ancient history, divested of their rain-coats, hats and rubbers, they were ready to follow Alene into the library.

"Ivy's brought a book along, 'Tales of the Angels.' Let's read turn about," proposed Laura.

Sitting close together, Ivy half reclining among the cushions of the little sofa and Alene upon a leather arm chair with Laura between them on a hassock, all shut in by the crimson curtains of the cosy corner, where the rain beat against the window panes and the vines stirred in the wind emphasizing the comfort of their snug retreat, they spent a happy time reading and talking over the beautiful little stories until Prince's renewed barking attracted their attention.

"Somebody's coming," announced Ivy, peering through the blurred window pane.

"I guess it's the Ramseys," said Alene, going out to meet them.

"I hoped the rain would keep them away," murmured Ivy with a grimace.

"So did I," answered Laura. "I felt like turning back when Alene said they were coming, but I hated to hurt her feelings!"

They heard Alene greeting the new-comers, then footsteps and voices in the hall, and presently the three girls came in together.

The sisters were in the midst of an argument. Vera had found a small rent in her silk umbrella for which she declared Hermione's umbrella responsible.

"But I was walking ahead of you all the way, not near enough for the rib to touch your umbrella! It must have been done when you crowded up against the fence to let Mrs. Park and her baby carriage go past."

"Well, I couldn't go in the muddy street, could I? I don't see why they bring babies out on such a day as this, brushing others up against damp walls! But it's just a little cut such as only an umbrella point could give. It never touched the fence!" Vera's grumbling came to a sudden pause—"Oh say, Alene, I didn't know you had company!"

"I had no chance to tell you on the way in."

"No, Vera gives no one a chance when she has a grievance to air!" said Hermione. "Howdy'do, girls!"

She crossed the room and sat beside Ivy and Laura. Vera took an easy chair near the table, somewhat apart from the group, and gave all her attention to the careful removing of her kid gloves. The conversation with her mother as to the manner in which to meet her poorer schoolmates in society was fresh in her mind. Now was the opportunity to act upon her convictions. She resolved to be very cool in her treatment of Laura and Ivy.

The other girls chattered away, apparently unmindful of her abstraction. Alene was showing them some sheet music which had come in the mail a few days before.

"Here's the new Raindrop two-step. How appropriate for to-day," cried Hermione. "Have you tried it yet?"

"Yes, it's real sweet! Would you like to come into the music room and hear it?"

They all assented, and presently from the little room opening off the library came the notes of a piano.

"I'd like to try the step," said Hermione, "if only there was someone to dance with!"

"Where's Vera?"

"Sulking in the library, I guess. Come, Laura, won't you?"

Laura hesitated until Ivy joined in, "Do, Lol! She dances beautifully, Hermione, only she—she won't sometimes," and as the two girls paired off, "When I'm along she seems to think I'll mind it more because—"

"Yes, I know," returned Alene, slipping her hand from the keyboard to give Ivy's brown fingers a sympathetic squeeze.

"But I won't let her; I don't want to be a *bete noire* to my friends!" said Ivy, leaning her head

against the piano and letting her eyes stray from Alene's nimble fingering to the graceful swaying of the girls in the dance. Around the room they circled, out along the hall, and presently back again through the library.

CHAPTER XI

TAFFY PULLING

Vera found that being cool was very dull. Besides, it had no effect upon the others. As time went by and the gay strains of the piano mingled with talk and laughter filled the air, and the dancing began, and the two girls whirled by, their twirling skirts almost brushing hers, it dawned upon her that she was being left out in the cold! Her coolness was reacting upon herself! If Alene had helped her by devoting herself to her, to the exclusion of the others, she felt that she might have carried out her original program. As it was, she came to the conclusion that Alene was too stupid to perceive her superiority.

Shortly after the dancers had sunk on a divan near the piano, Vera came in from the library, declaring that she too wished to dance; but the girls failed to respond to the invitation, saying they were tired.

Presently with a smile she slipped up to Alene and gave her what on the surface seemed a playful pinch on the arm but Alene drew back with a rueful glance while tears of pain came into her eyes, and when she thought herself unobserved she pulled up her sleeve and found a great bruised spot already getting black and blue.

"Oh!" the watchful Ivy commenced but she checked herself and pretended not to have seen this little by-play. Somewhat later when Alene was sitting beside Ivy, whose arm was around her waist, Vera came again to Alene and with some humorous remark reached out to give her another pinch. As Alene shrank back, Vera gave a scream and turned suddenly away.

"Oh, that vicious Alene, she can't take a joke!" she cried, rubbing her arm, but Hermione to whom she complained gave her little sympathy.

"Serves you right," was all she replied.

Laura, looking up from a book in which she had been absorbed, received an expressive glance from Ivy which told her as plainly as words that something unusual had taken place. She learned what it was when they found themselves apart.

"Poor Alene could hardly keep the tears back and when Vera came with that sweet, unconscious air, and reached for a second pinch, Alene put out her hand to ward her off—at the same time mine flew up some way, I don't know how, it seemed to go of its own accord and Vera didn't know what had happened! Neither did Alene! I thought I'd die laughing when she turned round to me and asked, 'What's the matter with Vera?'. 'Looks as if she had a pain,' said I—"

"She thinks it was Alene, so she won't bother her again. I've heard the girls at school talking of the Ramsey grip! She only uses it when she's vexed with a girl. I don't see what Alene did to her!"

"She doesn't want her to be so friendly with us," explained the observant Ivy.

Laura laughed.

"She doesn't know that Alene is a true Happy-Go-Lucky," she said with proud confidence.

"No, they stick together like—like postage stamps!"

"Girls," cried Alene, "I'm taking Hermie and Vera up to see the tower room. Do you care to come along?"

"Not I, thank you, I'll wait for some brighter day," returned Ivy.

"The distinguished author of the Sunset Book does not wish to look from the tower window upon anything less than a sunset!" explained Laura. "So I'll stay and try to console her in the absence of one."

Ivy curled herself among the cushions of the friendly little sofa in the cosy corner and fell to dreaming, while Laura sat at the piano and played several pieces, some of which, though very difficult, she rendered by ear with expression and fidelity. Laura's talent was fully known to Ivy, who on this occasion found the sweet sounds chiming in with her own idle fancies.

How long she lay snuggled there, half hid by the crimson curtains, while the rain made its

unwearied assault upon the window panes and the wind souged mournfully among the trees, she did not know. When she awoke, Laura was playing the two step, to the wonder and admiration of the Ramsey girls who were practising the dance together. Ivy did not see Alene anywhere and for a moment she had a strange, half-waking dream, that she was upstairs all alone in the tower room, weeping because Vera had beat and pinched her.

"Why didn't I go up with them? I thought only of myself, as usual," Ivy muttered. She was on the point of rising to go in search of Alene when a noise was heard and there in the doorway stood a queer little figure enveloped from head to foot in a blue gingham apron. That she was no stranger was evidenced by Prince leaping joyfully beside her.

"I've come to invite you-alls to a taffy pulling in the kitchen," she said, with a drawl and an odd little courtesy that made everybody laugh, "No one admitted except *en costume*," pointing to her apron, "so each of you must find one hidden somewhere in the hall or dining-room!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good fun!"

"Come along!"

A rush was made and the search began.

Ivy was the first to find an apron in the folds of an umbrella on the hall rack, the very place where, strange to say, Laura had searched unsuccessfully a moment before. With the help of the latter she was soon draped in its red and white bars and joined Alene in watching the others.

Hermione's search at the back of a door was rewarded by the discovery of a costume hanging on the knob; Vera found another folded under a cushion in the dining-room and Laura, by lifting the lid of a covered-dish on the sideboard, disclosed the last.

"We look like a crowd of orphans out for a walk," said Ivy, as holding on to each other's apron strings, they filed into the kitchen.

"I'm the mammy and you-alls are tied to my apron string! Behave yourselves, chillun!" cried Alene, glancing back warningly along the line.

The kitchen was a square room with tiled-linoleum floor covering. A highly-polished, range whose copper boiler glowed like a mirror occupied one side along with a spotless sink; besides a mammoth cupboard, there was an old-fashioned corner cupboard with glass upper doors; two well-scoured tables stood at convenient points, the one near the window having a rug beside it and a hospitable rocking chair, which, with a few other chairs, a small time-piece and a calendar, completed the furnishings. The wide door opened upon a commodious porch with two steps leading to the garden.

It was a very jewel of a kitchen, this in which good Mrs. Major reigned queen. Mr. Dawson declared that he always regarded his boots doubtfully ere venturing in upon the floor and that he was afraid to touch the immaculate objects it contained.

"Do you really cook potatoes and make vulgar mush in those pots on that range? Do you actually use these tables?" he would ask, and one day, running his hand across a shelf, he pretended to find a speck of dust which he carried away in triumph to preserve.

"You girls think I'm only fooling," he said to Kizzie and Alene one day; "but I assure you if I were to make a grease-spot on that table I'd run away with visions of Mrs. Major, butcher knife in hand, at my heels, and I'd never dare to enter the house again!"

His niece did not share in his scruples as she and her guests entered upon the spot dedicated to quiet and order, and soon, like spirits of disorder, upset its calm. Half a dozen cooking utensils were brought forth, drawers opened, cupboards and pantry rifled.

"One would think we each had forty mouths to eat with, judging by all the material set out," said Laura, who, following where the others led in their mad assault upon the provisions, tried to keep a semblance of order, by returning things to their places.

Amid all the havoc Vera was the only one who preserved her calm. Seated in the rocking chair, she swung lazily back and forth, pausing occasionally to reach for a cube of sugar or to taste the various condiments on the table. She was enjoying herself thoroughly in spite of the consciousness that it was all on a par with tissue-paper hats and other affairs peculiar to the Happy-Go-Luckys, that queer club of which she had heard.

"They get a lot of fun out of it. I don't see why the girls in our set couldn't start one!"

While she pictured herself presiding over the new club, which no one outside the favored few would be allowed to enter, the other girls, after careful measuring, had placed on the range a pot half filled with the materials necessary for the taffy of which Alene wished to make enough not for themselves only, but to share liberally with all the Lee and Bonner children.

"Sweets to make it sweet, and sours to make it sour, fire to heat, water to dissolve, and butter to

make it run down our throats!" intoned Ivy like a witch making an incantation over her brew, while Alene, taking a large spoon, kept stirring the mixture until, exhausted, she was relieved by Hermione.

"Our motto is 'Keep Stirring,'" said Hermione; "but this takes so long a time to thicken, my arm's about broke."

"I never made sugar taffy, but molasses doesn't take any time hardly!" returned Laura.

After a consultation the mixture was emptied into a square, buttered pan and carried to the porch to cool.

When Laura went out presently to test it, she uttered a cry of dismay.

"It's gone back to sugar, girls!" she announced when the others came hastily to investigate.

Sure enough, instead of taffy ready for pulling, they found a sheet of sugar that could be broken into pieces.

"Put the pan back on the stove with some water, and let it melt, so we can try again," someone suggested.

They made surmises as to where the fault lay.

"Surely not in the stirring," cried Hermione, rubbing her elbow.

With renewed vigor they attacked the melted sugar—they stirred and stirred. Even Vera lent a hand, and the stuff boiled and boiled but thickened very slowly and when set out to cool hardened as before.

"Keep stirring! Indeed, I think if we stirred it from now until doomsday it would stay just sugar," declared Laura.

"I'm sure I remember the recipe just as Kizzie told it," said the disappointed Alene who, as head cook, felt responsible for the disaster. "I'll run up to the sewing-room and ask Mrs. Major what she thinks is wrong."

"Oh, girls, guess where the trouble was! In the stirring, after all," she said, returning a few minutes later, breathless from her hurried trip.

"No!"

"It can't be!"

"We didn't stop a minute!"

"But we shouldn't have commenced! All we have to do is to let it alone until it thickens!"

"My poor broken arm feels worse than ever," grumbled Hermione.

"'Love's labors lost,'" said Ivy, and Vera declared that she had suspected they were overdoing it!

"The third time's the charm," cried Laura, breaking hopefully into the chorus of lamentations, "Let's get to work!"

When the mixture was returned to the fire she took Alene by the shoulder and placed her on a chair with her back to the stove, "for fear her reproachful glances set the pan a-tremble and that obstinate sugar be glad of the chance to escape taffying!"

Whereupon Ivy, with a parting grimace toward the range, gravely moved her chair around and the others followed her example, until all had turned their backs upon the offending pan.

After a while Ivy craned her neck stealthily. She saw the mixture bubbling. She gave a scream.

"It's stirring of its own accord! Girls, girls, stop it, stop it!"

"I'm not surprised," Hermione remarked. "The poor thing no doubt feels very much 'stirred up.'"

"Yes, it's fairly boiling over with rage," said Alene. Then, forgetful of the prophesied consequences, she flew to test it.

They crowded around her as she poured a spoonful of the sweet into a glass of water, Then followed a hilarious cheer—

"Joy, joy, our task is done!
The sugar's thickened!
Taffy's won!"

CHAPTER XII

A STRING OF FISH

"Let me alone and I'll die myself," cried Alene who, after a vigorous rocking in the big swing, was coming to a leisurely stop which Kizzie's appearance threatened. The latter, seeing that her good intentions were not necessary, stood inactive until the swinging died away.

"Kizzie's mad and I am glad," sang Alene, noticing a cloud on the girl's usually good-natured countenance. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, the fish wagon didn't come and Mrs. Major says Mr. Fred can't do without his fish. I have to go round to the big gate to watch for one of the boys to come along from the river, and I had just finished my work in a hurry, so's to have an hour at the sewing machine, to finish my waist."

"If that's all, I can watch for the boys and buy the fish, so just give me the basket, Kizzie darlin'!"

The girl's face brightened.

"If you would—if you're sure you ain't puttin' yourself out!"

"Why, it will be fun for me! So run in to the machine and make it run."

Alene took the basket on her arm and went singing along the walk toward the big gate, while Kizzie smilingly re-entered the house calling a thousand thanks upon the head of the obliging little maid.

Tired of racing with the shadows cast by the swing on the sunny spots amid the trees, Prince lay sunning himself on the front door steps. He now came forward with a merry barking and joined his young mistress. He rubbed his nose against the basket and looked up inquiringly into her face.

"You want to carry the basket, old fellow? Well, here it is!"

Prince wagged his tail and took the basket, and then they had a merry race along the wide pathway to where the double iron gate between thick vine-covered posts opened upon a short flight of stone steps leading to Forest Street, the finest residence avenue of the town.

Alene ensconced herself upon the shaded upper step with Prince keeping guard over the basket at her side, and fell into a pleasant reverie.

Presently she heard boyish tones; and the group of lads for whom she was waiting came in sight. Bare-legged, with trousers turned up at the knees, coatless, wearing a variety of hats, some having brims minus crowns and others crowns only, they came along carrying fishing-rods and tin cans for holding bait.

Several had strings of beauties yet moist from the river, whose scaly sides glittered in the morning sunshine.

Alene rose hurriedly at the first sign of their coming, intending to parley with the first comer, but her courage oozed away when a nearer view of him disclosed the boy who had rushed to strike her at the picnic.

Perhaps the others were his partners in the raid of that memorable day. This thought kept her standing mute and inactive while the boys filed past her up the street.

"What will Kizzie think of me? Mrs. Major will scold her, and I promised!" Alene gazed forlornly up the street as the lads got farther and farther away, bearing the precious freight which she had made no effort to buy. They were all gone but one, a tall boy who was almost at her side when she glanced around.

Noticing only that he had a magnificent string of fish, she held her basket toward him in desperation, feeling that she must redeem her word to Kizzie, and save her from the housekeeper's wrath, and Uncle Fred from a meal minus the fish, for which he had a special liking.

Her eyes were fixed upon the fish which she felt were the only ones she could get now. If she let them go, her opportunity would be lost and her good offices in Kizzie's behalf fruitless, so she gasped hurriedly, "Say!"

The boy had noticed the little girl standing like a statue gazing up the street. He had given her a glance as he approached but her eyes were intent upon the fish; he was going on his way, half glad to escape notice when he heard her feeble call.

He came to a standstill.

"Did you speak to me?"

His voice sounded strangely familiar to Alene. Hastily looking from the fish to their owner, she

encountered a pair of frank, gray eyes, whose rather deep setting and coal black brows gave the whole face an odd, but singularly attractive expression.

She recognized him at once.

"Why, is it you?" she exclaimed, in a startled voice.

The boy flushed.

"Don't be scared—I won't rob you," he said, with a note of vexation that recalled Alene to herself.

"I must have appeared ridiculous standing here looking half scared to death," she thought.

"I never dreamed of such a thing! I guess I did look funny but it was because of those other boys," she replied with an expressive nod up the street.

"The rascals! I came near giving them up that day! I hope it didn't spoil your fun! How the rest did guy that fellow who tried to strike you! I bet he'll never try to strike a girl again!"

His tone giving assurance that he had effectually disposed of the delinquent caused his hearer a thrill of satisfaction.

"But I'm jolly glad you weren't afraid of me!" he concluded with an air of relief.

Then the humor of the situation seemed to strike Alene.

"The idea! No, I wasn't a bit afraid. I knew you didn't mean to rob me but I intended to rob you!" she said in a mischievous tone.

He gave a ringing laugh and looked very much relieved.

"Well, say, I would never have suspected it! What did you want, the fishin' rod or bait?"

"No, not those ugly, squirming things. I've seen Hugh digging for them!" she drew back from the can with a look of disgust.

"Well, I've nothin' else worth takin' 'cept the fish!"

"That's it. Mrs. Major wants them."

"Mrs. Major wants my fish? Why, I never heard tell of the lady!"

"Yes, it's for Uncle Fred's supper! She's the housekeeper, you know, and the fish-cart didn't come round to-day! So I told Kizzie I'd come out and get some from the boys, you know!"

"Oh, I see! Well, it won't do to disappoint Uncle Fred, the housekeeper and Kizzie and you—especially you!" So saying, he tendered her the big string of fish.

As Alene reached for it, one of the fishes gave a sudden jump. She recoiled.

"Oh! Do put them in the basket, won't you? Their tails wriggle up so!"

He laughed, and while he busied himself to obey her, Alene opened her little silver purse. When the boy glanced up from his task she offered him a silver dollar.

"They're not for sale, thank you!" he said, turning away.

"Oh, then I can't take them!"

"Turn about's fair play!" he cried, quickening his steps; a beam of mischief shone in his eyes, lighting up his face.

"What do you mean? Come back and get your fish," cried Alene, swinging the basket as far as she could reach. She rushed up the street a short distance but, seeing the hopelessness of overtaking him, came to a halt while the dog stood barking beside her.

"Here, Prince, take the basket and follow him," cried Alene excitedly, but Prince failed to understand why he should rob his master of the supper they had procured for him. He took the basket in his mouth and waited for Alene to lead the way.

"Oh, Prince, you—you idiot! Boy, boy, say!" she screamed with such a sharp, insistent treble that it reached the lad's ears. He turned around and waved his hat.

"Highway robbery!" he cried, making a trumpet of both hands, and then with a parting wave he passed from view, leaving the exasperated and almost tearful Alene to return to the house, with the disobedient Prince at her side proudly carrying the spoils.

CHAPTER XIII
A GIRLISH TIFF

<p>GRAND PANORAMA!</p> <p>MOVING PICTURES! THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS!</p> <p>AT JARRETT'S HALL,</p> <p>FRIDAY EVENING, JULY THE 16TH</p> <p><i>Admission 25 cts.</i></p> <p><i>Reserved Seats 50 cts.</i></p>
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Thus read the attractive handbills scattered throughout the town by half a dozen small boys, while a man went from street to street posting gorgeous pictures of the different scenes, until the whole population, especially the younger portion of it, was aroused into the desire or intention of attending the show.

The boys who by a happy chance were on hand when the advance agent stepped from the train, and had secured the privilege of distributing the bills with the accompanying reward of free admission to the hall, were the envied of their less favored friends.

Loud was the lamentation of Lafe Bonner, Ivy's eleven-year-old brother, whose only consolation was the memory of a happier time in the early spring when the circus had come to town with its elephants and caged animals, its clown in cap and bells, to say nothing of its fine ladies in red and green velvet habits all gold bespangled, riding so gracefully the high-stepping horses to the music of the band, perched high on a scarlet-and-gold mirrored chariot—not to forget the calliope bringing up the rear. Then, with glowing countenance and swift-beating heart, Lafe and his companions had followed the parade to "the bottoms," a level space sacred to the circus and baseball, where men were busy erecting tents for the afternoon's show.

One lusty fellow whose bronze cheeks were tanned by the wind and sun of many climes immediately engaged the three boys to carry water to the animals, in exchange for passes to the evening performance, the memory of which would never, never fade from Lafe's mind, were he to live as long as Methuselah himself. Every detail, the sawdust-covered racetrack around the ring, the acrobats swinging and diving so far, far up in the air that one held his breath till they made a safe descent; the jokes of the clown never too old to evoke laughter, the noises of wild animals which might break through their barred cages and cause a panic among the people, a possibility that lent spice to the whole; the peanuts and lemonade,—weak in lemon but strong in sugar, and of a lovely shade of pink,—genuine circus lemonade, on which they had spent their last pennies, with all this comparatively fresh in his memory no wonder that Lafe gazed longingly on the posters, and read with avidity every item concerning the attraction, which, if not the circus, was related to it in a sort of third or fourth cousin degree.

Lafe could not gain entrance by the drawing-of-water method, nor yet, alas, by scattering bills; and he knew it was useless to apply at home. Did not the pinching of shoes worn the first time the Sunday previous remind him of his mother's latest ill-spared expenditure? All he could do, therefore, was to grumble at his luck in having missed the agent. This he did so persistently and in tones so loud that everybody either commiserated or scolded him, with the exception of Ivy, who only laughed and dubbed him Master Glumface. To her, who measured every woe with her own, his disappointment seemed a pitifully small thing to bewail.

"Now, I'm sure I'd love to see the Pilgrim's Progress—that picture where Christian is crossing through the Dark Valley just gives me thrills—and yet I don't go round like a big baby complaining. And I didn't even see the circus when it was here, only the side show!" she said.

Lafe gave her a withering glance. He felt inclined to catch hold of that provoking curl that bobbed so impertinently in his direction as she tossed her head, and give it a good hard pull.

But Laura, who had just come in, soothed his ire by saying in a sympathetic voice:

"Lafe seems so much taken with the circus and things I shouldn't wonder if he turns out to be an actor! Don't you remember how well he did at our exhibition?" Ivy nodded. "So of course, he feels it worse than we do. But I'd love to go too and take Nettie. She's wild about that picture where the angels are flying. She thinks they have real angels at the show. Mat has a quarter saved up toward a bicycle

and—"

"He'd better get an automobile while he's about it," interrupted Lafe.

"He wants me to take it and go; as if I would do such a thing! You know, Ivy, he made me take that dime he had saved up when the circus came, and go to the side show with you; and we had a lot of fun shaking hands with the giant and the fat lady and seeing the animals; but this is different, and his mind is quite set on the bicycle."

Which remark reminded Ivy that her admission to the side show—the bright silver dime—was given her by Lafe, and that before he had any hope of himself seeing the circus. So she began to feel sorry for her flippant attitude and said in a more kindly tone:

"Well, this is only Friday noon and the performance doesn't come off till to-night. Who knows what may turn up before then?"

This might have had the intended effect were it not for that curl which in some way affected Lafe's nerves. It now gave a careless bob that exasperated him.

"Something may turn up;" he muttered, "an earthquake or Mat's motor-car, perhaps!"

He went away in disgust and Ivy turned to Laura with a sigh:

"Now, what did I say to make him flare up that way?"

"He thought you didn't care—"

"Well, I don't—I don't! Laura, if I were to go sympathizing with six brothers—and boys are always clamoring for attention—I'd end in a mad house!"

Laura could hardly repress a smile at the thought of Ivy's six sturdy brothers depending on her in their troubles, knowing as she did that stone bruises, torn garments and other calamities incident to boyhood were always carried to their mother, while, as Laura often said, Hugh made himself a regular oak-tree for Ivy to twine around.

No further remarks were made on the subject, however, and the two girls started side by side on their way to a shady spot near home, to spend a few hours of the hot afternoon.

The wind caught them rather sharply at a street corner and Ivy's endeavors to balance her crutches while holding her hat in place renewed her irritation.

"If some people had troubles like this, they would have room to preach," she cried.

"I'm sure I never thought of preaching," returned Laura stiffly. "But there's no use always harping on one's own trials and thinking nobody else has any!"

"Meaning me, of course! Anyway, I don't care to play this afternoon. I think I'll go home," said Ivy, turning away with crimsoning cheeks.

Laura gave a backward glance at the haughty little maid hurrying along as fast as she could, while the wind sent the mop of curls flying around her head in all directions.

For a few moments she stared blankly down the street, half expecting Ivy to turn around, but she failed to do so, and Laura, with a heightened sense of injury, went on her way intending to take the first side-street home.

But the longer the distance grew between herself and Ivy, the unhappier she became, the more she repented her harsh words. It was really no wonder that Ivy had thought them unfeeling at a time, especially, when she was already upset by her encounter with Lafe. Perhaps, too, this was one of Ivy's bad days when the least contradiction irritated her.

In this strain ran Laura's thoughts and the longer she pondered, the slower she walked until at last she came to a standstill.

It was right at the top of a hilly street which commanded a fine view. In the distance were the blue shadows of mountains; the river swept along between green-verdured hills; a steamboat with lowered stacks was passing beneath the bridge that hung like a black line connecting the east and west sides of the town. Overhead shone the midday sun in a sky of cloudless blue, but nature spread her canvas all in vain for Laura. Another time she would have paused to drink in the beauty of the scene, to follow with admiring eyes the movements of the boat which, brave in a new coat of paint, swept along in a wake of billowing foam, but to-day she stood unheeding. All that she saw was the pathetic figure of a little girl with crutches receding in the distance.

Something clutched at Laura's throat. Her resentment against Ivy died away, leaving only blame for herself. With a sudden resolve she turned and hurriedly retraced her steps.

"Nothing but a cross cat would act the way I did!"

Faster and faster she went until, as she came around a corner, she almost collided with someone hastening up the street. A little hot hand clutched her arm—

"Oh, Lol, is it you? I came back to make up! Someway I can't bear to be on the outs with you!"

Ivy was breathless and perspiring and her hat was blown all to one side.

Laura reached over and set it straight carefully, almost caressingly.

"Oh, Ivy-vine, neither can I—Isn't it funny? Shall we go on?"

Laughing softly and blinking back the tears of which they were half ashamed, they continued up the street, happy in the reconciliation, so facile and so complete in childhood, when by-gones are by-gones, and there is no danger of ghosts, once laid, ever rising up again to give added rancor to future disagreements.

What a beautiful day it was and how the sun shone and how blissfully they drank in the air!

"Oh, Lol, see, there's a wagon in front of Jarrett's Hall! I do believe those men belong to the show!" cried Ivy.

"Let's go up and look round," proposed Laura.

They had reached a long building fronting on Main Street, the first story of which was occupied by a half dozen stores. They climbed a covered stairway that led to the second story. At the top of the "hall stairs," as they were called, was the main entrance to the hall which occupied the second story of the edifice. These stairs also opened upon a sort of court, from which a broad flight of stone steps led to an upper street.

By walking along the court, the girls were on a level with the inner windows of the hall. The outside shutters stood wide open to admit light, and a few children were peering curiously through the dusty panes. Further away was a narrow door sacred to the use of actors or employes of the hall.

Laura observed that this door was closed when she and Ivy first appeared upon the scene; but after a time, leaving Ivy at a good position at the window with her inquisitive eyes pressed against the glass, Laura strayed back and found the door open.

She hastened to the threshold and took a long, eager look into the dingy hall, from the curious little box-like office at the "grand entrance," as the double wooden door was styled, past the rows of rough benches to the stage at the upper end of the hall, where some carpenters and other employes were busy making arrangements for the evening's performance.

Neither the dust nor the dinginess was seen by Laura. A subtle fascination held her in thrall—she saw everything through a golden light.

She, who had been stage manager so often under the disadvantages of improvised platforms and home-made curtains, could appreciate a real hall and a real stage with a real curtain, were they ever so crude.

She was on the point of returning to fetch Ivy to view the magic scene and share her joy, when one of the men, who appeared to be a personage of authority, left the stage where he had been directing the movements of everybody, and proceeded down the aisle.

His coat brushed against a bench and sustained a smudge of dust which he viewed with an exclamation of disgust.

Returning to the dressing-room, he hunted round and found a feather-duster which he carried away in triumph.

He came down the aisle for the second time, wielding the brush with vigor, making frantic dabs at the benches on each side, and raising great clouds of dust that rose and enveloped him, and settled back again on the furniture.

Laura was so interested in his movements that she forgot her manners, and stood watching his ineffectual efforts at cleaning up, with a smile of amusement mingled with compassion.

At length the stranger was seized with a fit of coughing as the dust invaded his throat, and he stood for a moment to rest from his labors.

Then for the first time he noticed the little girl standing smiling in the doorway.

He gave her an answering smile, lifted his hat and, to Laura's dismay, crossed over to her side.

He was very dark and foreign looking; she recognized him as one of the gentlemen whom she and Ivy had noticed on the street.

"Pardon, *mademoiselle*," he said; "but perhaps you are the good fairy to help me out!"

Laura answered him with a blush and a look of inquiry.

"The dust, *c'est terrible*," he went on to explain; "but there is no one to remove it from the seats. The ladies will have fear for their beautiful costumes. Can you not direct me to someone who will manipulate this woman's weapon? I confess it is beyond my powers!"

He glanced so ruefully at the feather brush that Laura laughed aloud.

"Why, I can dust the benches in a little while, if you wish!"

"Did not my heart tell me you were my good angel? Oh, *mademoiselle*, if you will be so kind!"

He handed the duster to Laura with a sigh of relief and returned to the overseeing of things in another part of the hall.

"Why, Lol, it's like belonging to the troupe," cried Ivy, who came at her friend's call and seated herself on a back seat where she could see everything that went on, while Laura gave the benches a careful overhauling.

Meanwhile the open doorway was filled with a group of curious children, wide-eyed and smiling, among whom were Nettie Lee and little Claude Bonner.

Laura's task completed, she placed the duster upon a front seat and turned to go away with Ivy. They had almost reached the door when they heard a voice:

"*Merci, mademoiselle*," cried the foreign gentleman, overtaking them; "may I prevail upon you to accept this ticket to the performance, as a slight acknowledgment of my obligations—or, better still," as he glanced at Ivy, "come to the side door tonight and ask for Mr. Edmonds and bring your sister and," his eyes strayed to the line of wondering childish faces at the door, "the rest of your little brothers and sisters!"

Laura's surprised and happy look and Ivy's gasp of pleasure gave testimony to their delight, and the man smiled as he watched them going away joyfully.

"*Merci, mademoiselle!*" cried Ivy, with a titter of delight, "Oh, Lol, isn't it lovely to be able to go after all!"

"Yes, it's fine! But I shall have to hurry home; there will be so much to do. I must help Nettie to get ready."

That little girl who was walking behind them clapped her hands.

"What are you going to wear, Laura?"

"Me? My white, I guess—"

"I'll wear my old standby—the dotted lawn."

They went down the street chatting gaily but presently Ivy's enthusiasm died away; her mind seemed intent on something else. At last she turned to Laura, saying in a rather choked voice:

"Lol, would you mind taking Lafe instead of me? You know he is so anxious to go!"

Laura veiled her surprise at this new phase in her friend, who had always hitherto claimed the best as her right. Her eyes glistened as she replied,

"Yes, indeed, I would mind his coming instead of you, but I shouldn't mind his coming along; tell him to bring Donald, too."

"But what will Mr. Edmonds think?"

"He said all my little brothers and sisters. I'm sure you folks are just the same thing. Lois is too small to go, she can't keep awake after eight, so we can smuggle Claude in, instead." Whereupon that little lad who had been walking along dejectedly at Nettie's side gave a whoop of delight. Laura continued, "It's too bad Hugh and Mat can't pose as my little brothers!"

"They are so inconveniently tall. Seems to me I can see Hugh's legs lifting his poor head up higher and higher every day," said Ivy dolefully. Laura laughed.

"The oak will never grow beyond the ivy's reach, so never fear! But I'd better hurry home, for there's Alene, too—I must send a note to her!"

"That will be splendid! Oh, Lol, your Mr. Edmonds will think when he sees us all of that verse in the Scriptures, 'Go out into the highways and byways and call the lame, the halt and the blind.'"

When they paused to say good-bye at the parting of the ways Ivy said with a sudden rush of words:

"Now, Lol, don't go to thinking I'm a heroine because I proposed to keep in the background for once! You don't know how I hesitated and hated it."

"Don't you remember your story about the blooming flowers and the singing birds?"

"Oh, Laura, it's so much easier for me to write about kind deeds than to do them!"

"I only wish the rest of us Happy-Go-Luckys may do as well when the time comes!" returned Laura.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

"Come here, Nettie," cried Laura; "I'll plait your hair so it will be wavy for to-night, and then I want you to take a note to Alene."

Nettie was glad of the chance to visit the Towers but she objected to having her hair brushed so vigorously.

"Mother, do make Nettie behave! She won't keep still and her hair gets all tangled!"

"Nettie, you are too big to make so much noise. If you don't wish to go with the others to-night, say so and Laura needn't bother," admonished Mrs. Lee.

"Of course I want to go but I hate this fussing," returned the little girl.

"It would only serve you right if mother kept your hair cut straight around from your ears, like the Hoover children!" remarked Laura.

This veiled threat had a good effect; Nettie made no more trouble and soon her long tresses were confined in six tight braids and she was free to seize her hat and go on her mission.

Holding the note folded tightly in her hand, she went up the steep street and along the vine-covered wall of the Tower grounds, and finally reached the stone steps leading to the double gates of iron, through which a broad walk in the midst of grass and trees curved toward the house.

The gate opened readily to Nettie's touch and then shut with a loud bang that attracted the attention of a big, black dog which came bounding across the grass. At his first bark Nettie's heart stood still. She paused just inside the gate, too terrified to move, but in a moment she felt secure, for she saw Alene coming along the walk, calling imperiously to Prince.

"What a shame to scare the little girl! Go right home, sir! Don't be frightened, Nettie, he won't harm you. He only barks that way to let you know how glad he is to see you! Come in, girlie!"

"It's only a note from Laura; I can't wait," said Nettie shyly.

Alene glanced at the note.

"Isn't that fine? Yes, tell her I'll be down at seven, if Uncle Fred is willing! And you are going, too; I thought there was something up when I saw your hair; Laura's so proud of it and no wonder! But come in just for a moment!"

She took Nettie's hand and led her to the house, back to the immaculate kitchen, where, sitting in the rocking chair, the little girl enjoyed some cakes and milk provided by Kizzie, while Alene brought Prince in to beg her pardon and get better acquainted.

Their friendship grew so rapidly that by the time Nettie was ready to go home she was brave enough to stroke his glossy head, and she screamed with delight when, accompanied by Alene, all three raced to the gate.

"You won't be afraid next time," said Alene encouragingly as she held the gate open.

"No indeed, thank you!" returned Nettie, "Good-bye! Good-bye, Prince!"

She turned away, joyfully clasping to her breast a satin-striped box, in which beneath paper lace and tinsel was the most delicious candy; a whole box full all but a few bites, as Alene had said; while the latter leaned over the wall calling more good-byes, and Prince kept up a continuous barking that said so plainly, once you understood his language, "Good-bye! Good-bye! Come back again!"

But when Alene, with an armful of flowers, reached the Lee house that evening, she found poor Nettie in a state of revolt; the process of being washed and dressed in her stiff-starched pique and having her plaits undone was very trying to both her and Laura.

She glanced up at the yellow canary swinging so blithely in his cage.

"I do wish people were like birds," she cried, "they are always dressed just in their feathers!"

"Even then you wouldn't want to take your bath," said Laura, giving a last touch to the shining locks which hung like a veil to the child's waist. "I'll be ready in a minute, Alene," she continued, as she released the little girl, "I didn't feel satisfied until I saw you coming!"

"I got all ready when Nettie left, and could hardly wait for Uncle Fred to come home to show him your note. The old dear said yes, right away, but insisted upon my taking some dinner first. Then I waited to gather these roses for your Mother. Shall we start now?"

Ivy was standing at the door with her seven-year-old brother awaiting their coming, and taking note of Alene's dress of white challis o'erstrewn with pink rosebuds which, as they came nearer, disclosed a yoke embroidered in the same design, while a wreath of roses adorned her hat. She thought it was a beautiful costume, and that the other girls looked nice, too, though Laura's white dimity and Nettie's blue pique were as well worn as her own familiar lawn.

"Where's Lafe?" inquired Laura.

"He ran ahead with Donald to join us later. I think they are ashamed to be seen with this mob!" returned Ivy with a laugh. "What will Mr. Edmonds think of us?"

Laura declared he wouldn't care, but when they reached the hall where a great crowd was congregated, and she saw so many getting their tickets at the box-office and filing, one by one, past the door-keeper, she began to feel less confident.

They threaded their way slowly through the crowded court, where all the children of the town seemed to have collected and finally reached the side door.

"Here comes an orphan asylum," was the derisive and no doubt envious cry of a boy who had heard of the wonderful luck that had befallen the Lees and their friends. Indeed the knowledge seemed general, and as they came along, first Laura with Nettie clinging to her skirts, and then Alene, to whom it was all so new and exciting, trying to keep little Claude safe from harm, with Ivy bringing up the rear, they were the objects of many curious glances.

"Mr. Edmonds said to ask for him," Laura faltered, when the line halted at the side door.

"Oh—Ah," said the young man who was on guard. He turned to look for that gentleman, and Laura glancing backward, felt like a kite with a long, embarrassing tail, which stretched apparently to the upper street.

What a relief it was to hear a genial voice saying,

"Oh, *mademoiselle*, is it you? Come in, come in!"

The speaker's smiling countenance and kindly air banished Laura's fears and she passed the threshold proudly, followed by her triumphant train.

Glancing at Mr. Edmonds, Ivy saw his smile grow broad and broader as they filed past one by one. Her trepidation vanished and when her turn came she met his amused glance with an answering smile.

"Are there any more of you?" he inquired, in a whimsical tone.

"No, sir, unless Lafe and Donald; I guess they're ashamed to be seen!"

"Hello there, Lafe and Donald," cried the gentleman, and the two boys, who were standing aloof, ashamed to be seen, and yet afraid they wouldn't, pushed their way through the crowd with an air of bravado which their blushing cheeks denied, and were duly admitted. Upon reaching the inside they joined a crowd of their chums, leaving the girls to be piloted to a reserved bench by an usher whom Mr. Edmonds had delegated.

How happy and proud they felt as they settled themselves in their places and looked around them!

The stage was in darkness, making it seem the more mysterious in contrast with the glaring light of the auditorium.

The hall was filling rapidly with the citizens, their wives and daughters, all dressed in their best, and our party was much interested in watching the new arrivals when suddenly Ivy gave Laura a nudge, and the latter, following her glance, saw a short gentleman accompanied by a tall lady in a rustling summer-silk coming up the aisle followed by two girls, one dressed in white, the other in pale green, with mammoth white hats.

"The Ramseys!" whispered Laura, and Alene, who was watching the little ones, looked up in time to receive a gracious smile from Vera, who appeared not to see the other girls, although she was entering the seat directly in front of them.

On being seated Hermione looked around and seemed pleasantly surprised to see them. She nodded and smiled and holding her arm, leaned back to whisper,

"Don't mention taffy or my arm will start stirring again!"

Suddenly the lights went down in the main hall, to shine with redoubled brilliancy upon the stage.

"Look at the Jacks-in-the-boxes!" cried Nettie, as several heads were seen popping from under the stage.

"It's the band," explained Laura. Sure enough, it was the musicians who took a row of chairs in front of the curtain, and with a preliminary tuning up and a few toots of the clarinet, began a swinging march.

How hard it was for the little ones to keep their feet still, though they knew that was the proper thing to do! Claude, however, found his little legs swinging in time, being careful not to let them touch the floor, and Nettie's bright head and busy hands kept up a sort of lilting movement, both children requiring some outlet for all that pent-up exhilaration.

The music died gradually to the softest murmur, the curtain ascended slowly, a movement and flutter went through the hall, and the people settled themselves in their seats with their faces turned to the stage.

Up, up, the curtain soared toward the ceiling. Little Claude watched it with a fascinated glance, expecting it to go right through the roof but when it stopped just in time he gave a sigh of relief and directed his eyes toward the stage. Then his face lengthened—as far as such a chubby face could—for all that he saw in front of him was a huge round affair of some soft material, all decked with flowers.

"Great scissors!" he muttered, as he gazed upon it in amazement; then he noticed at the other side of the hall a portly gentleman who held a sort of wand with which he pointed toward the stage where something interesting was taking place but, alas, all that was visible to Claude was the topmost part which resembled a clouded sky.

He gave a sigh of disappointment and glanced toward the girls. Alene was leaning forward with a rapt expression, Ivy's mouth was half opened—she appeared to have forgotten the world—and Laura's head was craned painfully to one side of that huge affair in front. Then he glanced at Nettie who sat beside him. Her face was the picture of woe, her lips were curled ready to cry.

"What's the matter?" he whispered sympathetically.

A tear came running slowly down her cheek.

"Don't you see—I can't see a thing!"

Alene, attracted by their restlessness, glanced round. There they sat, looking blankly at Hermione's mammoth hat, that shut away everything else from their gaze. To be sure, it was a beautiful creation of white chiffon, green foliage and pink ribbons; but when one has feasted his eyes for a week on gorgeous posters, and has been washed and starched and brought to the show to see wonderful things on a real stage, a girl's hat, be it ever so fine, is surely a poor substitute!

"You little martyrs!" exclaimed Alene, feeling that she must do something to help them.

She knew it would be useless to have them change places with her or the other girls. It was only by leaning to one side that they were able to see the pictures, for the brim of Hermione's hat met that of Vera's, a rival in pale green and white, forming a screen which completely hid the stage.

With a sudden compunction Alene remembered that her own hat was of goodly proportions, with a lovely lace cascade rippling over the brim. She glanced behind to find that she, too, was an offender, for a little girl whose head was on a level with Claude's, sat directly in the rear.

For a moment only Alene hesitated, then she reached for her hat pin, and whispering, called the attention of Laura and Ivy to the situation. They gave her a nod and following her example took off their hats which, while not so fine as Alene's and the Ramsey girls', were just as effectual in shutting out the view.

The people back of them nodded their approval and the mother of the little maid whom Alene had first noticed leaned forward to thank her, but the action of the three girls gave little relief so long as those other hats stood up defiantly in front.

What could be done? They were all missing the first scene and Nettie and Claude might just as well have remained at home for all enjoyment they were having.

Alene leaned over and tapped Hermione on the shoulder. The latter glanced around.

"Would you mind removing your hat, Hermione? The children—"

"What a shame! Thank you for telling me! I'll tell Vera, too!"

Vera glanced at her sister wonderingly when she commenced to unfasten her hat.

"The children can't see," she explained. "Take yours off too, Vera, do!"

"Are you crazy'? The very idea! No one can see it if I do!"

"That's the point, no one wants to see it!"

Vera tossed her head.

"It's just in people's way!" persisted Hermione.

"Well, it will be in my own way if I have to keep it in my lap."

Just then came a loud whisper from the rear—

"Country style! No one in the city ever wears a hat at the theatre!"

A chorus of low laughter followed this remark, and Vera, not knowing it was made by Ivy, began to have doubts as to the correctness of her position.

It was Alene, she knew, who had inaugurated the style here, and she was from the city. Vera noticed, besides, that all over the hall the women and children who wore large hats were taking them off.

"Well, if it's the correct thing. But what's the use of having a fine hat if it's not to be worn in public?" she murmured, as with a show of complacency the "screen" was removed.

Claude and Nettie gave a murmur of joy when they beheld the beautiful painted canvas spread out before them.

At the end of the scene when the curtain fell, the lecturer in a few words thanked the ladies for their courtesy and thoughtfulness. "To have regard for the rights and feelings of others is to act upon the Golden Rule! Not alone for the audience but for myself also I thank you! Especially do I thank the little girls who set the good example." He turned to the bench where the originators of the movement sat and gave them an impressive bow, then he stepped back, and the band started up with a crash and a bang that resounded throughout the hall.

"It was Alene who deserved all the credit," commented Ivy.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Laura warmly.

"He looked straight at me," whispered Vera.

"Miss Vanity, it was all Alene's work!" returned her sister.

At that moment Alene's gaze, straying to another part of the hall, spied her Uncle Fred who had come in unobserved by the girls and taken a seat not far away.

He was looking in her direction with such a pleased and happy countenance that Alene, meeting his glance, flashed him a radiant smile over the heads of the people.

"I wonder what makes him look so pleased," she murmured.

CHAPTER XV

AFTER THE SHOW

Meanwhile, outside in the court, many boys and girls who were unable to attend the show found a great attraction in its immediate vicinity.

To watch the doors through which so many lucky individuals passed had proved very interesting earlier in the evening, and after the door had closed upon the latest comer to creep closely to doors and windows, and listen to the hum and flutter of the crowd, and then to hear the band's inspiring strains was a source of joy. But when the music ceased and a great calm settled on the audience, they knew very well it was because the show had commenced, and that, alas, was not visible through thick boards.

One window, whose shutters were pierced by penknives in former years, was held valiantly all the evening by a special clique of youngsters who relieved each other at intervals in pressing their eyes to the holes, thus getting glimpses of the mysteries within.

A certain ingenious lad had repaired to a nearby house, borrowed a red hot poker, and returning to the hall, bored two peep-holes through another shutter, while an enterprising companion pried open a third window, thus giving a full view of the pictures to all who were fortunate enough to get near.

All these delinquents at first were thrown into intermittent thrills of fright whenever the word went

round that the constable was coming; but when, after many false alarms, that worthy man was discovered sitting comfortably in the hall, well up toward the stage, they felt secure, knowing they could easily find safety in flight at the first show of activity on his part.

The panorama moved on. Christian's movements were followed with intense interest, especially by the younger onlookers. Claude found a special fascination in the big bag fastened upon the hero's shoulders. He wondered what it contained and when, toward the end, it was lost in some mysterious way that he could not understand, he felt very much disappointed not to have found out. Nettie whispered she guessed it was old clothes, but Claude knew it was something more interesting than that.

At last came the Dark Valley and then the Grand Transformation scene, when through the great pearly gates a glimpse of the Celestial City was obtained. Little white-robed angels, with crowns and harps, were seen flying through the pink tinted air; the white walls and shining domes of the heavenly mansions glittered in the distance, and Christian's trials were past. The children, gazing enraptured at the scene, were sorry that it could not last forever.

Nettie felt a special interest in one chubby cherub who reminded her of Lois, and wished for a closer acquaintance, and Claude still hoped to see the bag bobbing up again to display its contents, like a wizard's hat but, alas, in a moment the fairy scene was blotted out by the descending curtain!

Everybody rose and took place in the procession toward the door.

At that moment a crash was heard; a pane of glass was shattered by some one outside leaning too heavily against it. In a moment the score of heads which were peering in had disappeared. The red-faced constable was seen edging his way through the crowd, and Claude and Nettie had visions of handcuffs and the jail in store for the offenders, who, however, were far away when the enforcer of the law arrived upon the scene.

Ivy nudged Alene, who in turn nudged Laura, who looked round just in time to see Mr. Edmonds standing near the box-office.

"*Bon jour, mesdemoiselles,*" he cried, with a smile and a bow that included them all. "I hope you enjoyed your evening."

"Yes, indeed, thank you, sir!"

"It was beautiful!"

"Lovely!"

"Where do you keep Lois, I mean the cherub?" murmured Nettie in so shy a tone that only her lips were seen moving, and Claude wished he were well enough acquainted to ask about the missing bag.

The girls felt a thrill of pride at their prominent position. Speaking to one of the show people was next to being a real actor, but they had to move on with the crowd which pressed around them.

Mr. Edmonds handed the beaming Laura a pretty book, which proved to be an illustrated copy of the Pilgrim's Progress, and with a parting *au revoir*, re-entered the box-office.

"Decidedly forward, keeping everyone back this way," said Mrs. Ramsey, who was slightly in the rear, having waited to fasten Vera's hat. "Alene Dawson is a bold piece! The idea of making everybody remove their hats! I was glad I wore a close-fitting bonnet or I'd actually have had to take mine off too. One can't be odd, you know!—Oh, there's Mr. Dawson! Good evening! Why don't you call upon me to chaperone Alene for you? She seems so forsaken, poor thing! I assure you I'll take her gladly any time with my girls!"

"You are very kind, but to-night is a sort of a Club affair I believe!"

"Club affair!"

"Is it the Happy-Go-Luckys?" inquired Hermione with a smile.

"Yes, Alene came on their invitation."

"But to be out so late, going home alone!" gasped the lady.

"She is never alone! Half a dozen of the girls and boys intend escorting her home to-night and, besides, you see I am not far in the rear!"

"What a likely tale!" cried Mrs. Ramsey, as the crowd carried the gentleman away. "As if the Lees or the Bonners could afford such an expense! I'll wager Fred Dawson paid for them all; but then he's always been odd—don't you remember that little foreigner he made such a fuss over because Mrs. Truby had him arrested for stealing? He actually spent a lot of money to get him off!"

"But the boy was innocent, mamma. Don't you remember how the lady found the money a long time afterward, where she had hidden and forgotten it?"

"But that is not the point—Fred Dawson didn't know he was innocent. And there's old Miss Marlin, the best teacher of painting and the languages in town—who charges outlandish prices because he upholds her, and he actually gives her a house, rent free!"

"She is his old teacher and very feeble! Dawson is a great-hearted fellow. In his quiet way he does more good than many of our famed philanthropists," said the usually silent Mr. Ramsey.

"Philanthropy, indeed! Were I Alene's mother I wouldn't like it at all, throwing his money away. If he doesn't marry, it will all go to Alene!"

"She will have plenty in any case; her father is very well fixed!" commented Mr. Ramsey.

"Is Alene an heiress?" cried Vera. "How funny! No one would ever guess it from her manner!"

"It's well you are not; you would want an air-ship in order to live up in the clouds above the heads of ordinary people! Alene has brains!" returned Hermione.

"An unspoiled child, I should judge," said her father.

CHAPTER XVI

LAURA'S PROPOSITION

"There's a club or something of that kind. I think it's a branch of the Sunshine Society," said Laura, as they sat under the trees on the terrace one bright afternoon, "that keeps a record of the birthdays of certain members who are sick or shut away from active life, and everybody is invited to a sort of surprise party, as it were; letters, books, or mementos of any kind are sent to reach the person on a certain date; it's a red-white-and-blue letter date for her, I guess—"

"Not blue," interrupted Ivy, "I'd call it a red letter day!"

"Well—" said Alene when Laura paused as if to ponder over something suggested by her words.

"Well," she returned, coming back to the present, to find her two friends waiting interestedly. "Well, it strikes me as a good idea for adoption by the Happy-Go-Luckys. It wouldn't be original with us, but if we wait to do only things which have never been done before, we may remain idle forever and ever, for there's nothing original under the sun."

"Except original sin," suggested Ivy.

Laura gave her a withering glance that included Alene who always found Ivy's sallies amusing. Perhaps Alene's smile on this occasion caused Ivy to continue:

"Yes, Lol, I've found that's true, especially when one's writing. If you put down something you think is decidedly fine or smart, you're sure to find that the Bible or Shakespeare or the Daily Observer in to-day's paper has said it all so much better! But excuse me, I'm interrupting you!"

Laura was too full of her subject to give more than a stiff little contraction of the lips to Ivy's digression; she went on to say:—

"Well, what made me think so much of the birthday idea was what Mother said when she came home from Mrs. Kump's this morning. The old lady lives all alone. She makes a living by doing odd jobs, so Mother wanted to get her to do some quilting. She does it beautifully, in an old-fashioned way that few understand now-a-days. When Mother got there she found her going round doing her work on her hands and knees—her feet were too sore to walk on. She told Mother she had been that way for a week. She was glad of the quilting, not having been able to do any other kind of work for some time. Mother was afraid she might be in actual want, but she didn't dare say a word for fear of offending her. Mrs. Kump happened to remark that Thursday, the day after to-morrow, is her birthday, and hearing that, just after reading about the birthday party, made me think of the Happy-Go-Luckys' 'Be kind' clause. So, girls, what do you think?" Laura turned to them a shining, expectant countenance.

"That we might set some birds a-flying straight to the poor old lady," was Alene's prompt reply.

"Yes, the birds will be the best in this case as it is rather quick time for flower seeds to take root and bloom," remarked Ivy.

"But these are a kind of magic flowers that spring up in a single night," said Alene.

"And who knows, some of them may turn out regular century plants. I read a poem not long ago, about a pebble cast upon the beach, that sent out ripples to the farther shore, which I suppose means that sometimes our smallest action may have a far reaching influence," said Ivy, who reclined on the

grass, with her eyes fixed dreamily on the blue expanse of sky that stretched across the river and met the dark blue line of hills beyond.

"Come down out of the clouds! We have work to do and precious little time for its doing," cried Laura, giving her a shaking. She sat up laughing.

"Sounds like a sermon on the shortness of time! What's time to us children of eternity? But what shall we give to poor old Mrs. Kump?"

"That's the question," said Laura, glad to have arrived at something practical, a matter she often found rather difficult with Ivy. "Mother has promised a loaf of bread."

"And I'll ask Mother to give some rolls—but that's bread too; sounds so dry—I hate dry bread!"

"Kizzie always gives me a dish of honey for breakfast. I'll ask her for some of it, and Mrs. Major gets the loveliest little pats of butter from the country, marked with a dear little cow—I'm sure she will give me one!"

"Instead of a bird that will be a butterfly," interposed Ivy; "or a cowslip!"

"Or a buttercup and a honey-bee," returned Alene.

"You wretches! Here's one to get even. As Mrs. Kump works at quilting, we ought to send her a quilting-bee!"

Laura's sally was greeted with groans.

"Well, there's something you won't groan about. Mrs. Kump was lamenting that she couldn't go out to pick any berries this year and so will miss her jam. Let's go blackberrying to-morrow morning, if the boys will go along; we can get home before noon and I'll make her a jar of jam."

"Splendid!" cried Alene, "I've never gone berrying in my life!"

"What's the matter with you, Ivy? You are not usually so shy!"

"It will be too far for me," said Ivy dejectedly.

"Where did you think I meant to go? Why, just around the road, on the hillside near the bridge!"

"There's not a berry left there! Hugh went over this morning and found the bushes stripped! The nearest place is Thornley's, three miles away!"

"Then of course we won't go! I wonder if you could go horseback? I was thinking that Mat could borrow the groceryman's horse."

"No, Lol, I never learned to ride. Besides, it would be so jolty! The rest of you go without me; the walk will be only a pleasure for you!"

The girls protested against this; they talked of other things connected with Mrs. Kump's birthday party, and the blackberry project was apparently abandoned.

A bright thought had come to Alene, however, which she resolved to keep a secret until she found if she could carry out her plan.

It all depended on her uncle, whom she expected to come up the street at any moment, on his way home from the office. She jumped up when she saw him coming.

"Stay here, girls, until I speak to Uncle Fred."

She ran to the wall and climbed up at the spot where she had first seen her new friends.

Mr. Dawson crossed in answer to her call.

After a few moments' conversation she returned to the girls, saying gaily:—

"It's all right, he says we may have it!"

They gazed upon her wonderingly.

"What do you mean?"

Alene laughed.

"There, I forgot it was a secret. Well, here goes—All the horses are out at the farm now, but Uncle Fred says we may have the surrey if Mat can get a horse!"

Laura clapped her hands, and Ivy, who had been unusually silent and depressed in the last half hour, brightened and her face was fairly radiant with joy as she cried:

"Oh, Alene! You good fairy godmother! It's just like Cinderella and her pumpkin coach!"

"But we mustn't wear glass slippers," said Laura. "You see, Alene, when we go a-berrying we always wear our heaviest shoes and battered bonnets and patched dresses, for the thorns tear our shoes and clothes."

Alene's face clouded.

"I'm afraid I can't find a battered dress or a patched bonnet. Will I have to stay at home?"

"No, you goose! Just wear the plainest you have!"

CHAPTER XVII IN THE BERRY PATCH

As if in a dream Alene heard a voice:

"It's after five o'clock, Miss Alene. You better get up if you want to be ready by six!"

Alene sat up with a yawn. She blinked her eyes and gazed solemnly at the rosy, smiling face of the little maid.

"I wonder why it's so much easier to get up the night before!" she ejaculated.

Kizzie laughed as she crossed the room and raised the blinds. The lace curtains billowed in the fresh air and the soft light of dawn stole into the room. A pretty room it was, too, with blue and gray matting, blue tinted walls, its white stand and dresser, and little brass bed.

With another yawn Alene slipped her feet to the white rug beside the bed, stood up, and lifting her gown as if for a skirt dance, skipped lightly to a willow rocker which stood invitingly before one of the tall windows overlooking the terrace and the town.

"I'll run downstairs and get some breakfast ready, and then come back and help you with your hair and buttons," said Kizzie.

Alene knelt down beside the chair and buried her face in its blue cushions to say her morning prayers.

There was a time when she had first come to the Towers when to her regular prayers she always added a sort of petition—"Please, dear Lord, I am so lonely!"

Now her heart was filled with the beauty of the day, its promises of joy. She had so much that for herself there was nothing more to ask—only thanks to give, but for her friends, beginning with Mrs. Kump, the latest, and ending with her parents, the oldest and best beloved, she petitioned many blessings.

Only a few moments given to God, but they were a consecration for the day!

Alene rose with a song on her lips and proceeded with her bath and dressing. She found herself doing so many things now-a-days that a few months before would have seemed an impossibility.

"I used to be a bigger baby than Nettie or even Lois," she reflected as she buttoned her shoes and started to comb her hair. This was always a difficult task. The comb that went through those long locks so smoothly when manipulated by some one else, encountered many snarls, and Alene was glad when Kizzie came back to relieve her. A vigorous brushing and curling soon brought the refractory hair to the required state, and the glossy brown curls were finally tied at the nape of her neck with a bow of blue ribbon.

She was too excited to eat her breakfast; it was only Kizzie's reminder that, "Mr. Fred will ask if you ate a good breakfast. He will be displeased if you don't," that induced her to partake of anything.

She had scarcely finished her bowl of milk and crackers when the big gate clanged through the still air, then came a medley of gay voices; the walk resounded beneath the tread of light footsteps, and Prince's sonorous bark gave forth a challenge.

"There they come!"

"Here they are!" Alene rushed from the table.

She paused for a moment in the open doorway in sheer amazement and then she gave a peal of laughter.

"No wonder Prince was scared!" she cried.

For there stood the girls with their sunbonnets drawn over their faces, and their skirts spread out to display each rent and patch, of which there were not a few. Laura put one foot forward that a dilapidated shoe, from which her toes peeped, might not escape notice, and Ivy seemed proud of a pocket, turned inside out, that was apparently all holes.

A snickering sound came from the depths of the bonnets and then their laughter rang out loud and long.

"We had rehearsed a speech about tramping along the tracks all night, but I couldn't say a word to save my life when I saw your bewildered face!" explained Ivy when their mirth had subsided.

"You poor girl!" remarked Laura with a commiserating glance at Alene's neat blue gingham gown with its trimming of fancy braid; "is that the 'very worstest' you could scare up?"

"Kizzie helped me to look through my trunk and wardrobe and we couldn't find a thing plainer. I looked it over but there's not a tear in it! I might have sewed a patch on, but that would have been make-believe!"

Alene's tone was disconsolate.

"Well, never mind, come along! There's Hugh waiting near the gate and Mat's minding the rig! You needn't take your hat, I brought Nettie's bonnet; it will do fine. It's too big for her!"

They ran along the walk and scrambled into the surrey. The girls took the back seat, Hugh jumped in beside Mat, and with gay good-byes to Kizzie and Prince they were off on their way to the country.

The bells of the factories rang out, calling the men to work. Few pedestrians, however, were seen for the majority of the working people lived in the streets nearer the river, while the merchants and leisurely class occupied residences in the upper streets, along which they drove. Occasionally an energetic maid was seen cleaning the front steps or porch, and just on the out-skirts of the town they passed a group of boys going the same way, who eyed them curiously.

"Hey, Hughie," cried one, "where are you bound for?"

"Berryin'!"

"So are we!"

Mat gave the grocer's slow-going nag a touch that livened him and they were soon carried out of range of the lads.

"It's that Stony Road gang!" Hugh glanced round to explain.

"The ones who tried to steal our lunch that day? But I didn't see Mark Griffin with them—he's your fish-boy, Alene," said Ivy.

"I guess he'll join them later on; that's his home!"

Hugh pointed to a low stone house that stood some distance in from the road, beyond a well-trimmed hedge and broad stretch of lawn, with grape-arbors and barns showing in the rear.

"Why, his folks must be well off," said Laura in surprise.

"Old man Griffin owns the boat-yards over in Westville."

"Well, his son might find better company than that, surely!"

"Mark's been away at school most of his life and when he came home this vacation, the first thing we knew he was hobnobbing with that gang. They steal and play cards and torture animals!"

"Horrors!"

"I don't think he would torture anything, he doesn't look like that kind of a boy!" exclaimed Alene, warmly.

"Might as well be bad as in bad company," returned Hugh, with that "preacher air" of his which Alene always found exasperating.

"Mark and Jack Lever used to be thicker'n flies, but I've not seen 'em together this year," interposed Mat.

"Jack's fine as silk, couldn't stand the Stony Road pace, I guess! Fact is, I haven't seen him for six weeks. He's never in his father's store; must be out of town."

"Gee up!" interposed Mat. "If I didn't keep up a perpetual song, I believe Old Hurricane'd stop still and never go on again; can easily see he used to be a race horse!"

"Yes, he always raced the last few yards home for his grub!"

"He's doing splendid. Only for him we wouldn't be here, so don't spurn the ladder by which we climb," cried Ivy.

"Well, he'd make a better ladder than anything else, he's so bony; besides that he'd rather stand still any day and let us climb him!"

"You ungrateful Mat! But, Oh, girls and boys, to sit and let the air blow upon us, and feast our eyes on the glorious sunrise and the lovely green fields and flowers! The air is like champagne I tasted once, kind of thin and clear and nippy and refreshing!"

"If I knew you were a boozier, Miss Bonner, nothing would have induced me to undertake the management of this nervous racer. If the air brings on an attack of the delirium tremenjous, how can I manage the two of you?"

"Just manage your own tongue, Mr. Lee, but that would be an impossibility," said Ivy.

"Talking of wine and things reminds me of Claude," said Laura. "I overtook him coming down street the other day and we walked together. He stopped to peer in at the bars of the jail. 'I'd hate to be put in a stall like the poor drunkards.' (He called them Dunkards.) 'And I'm sure you never will, Claude,' said I. He threw back his shoulders and said, 'Well, I drank root-beer till I was six years old and then swore off and haven't drank a drop since!' I could have screeched!"

Hugh laughed heartily.

"The little scamp! He insisted on taking the pledge when I did last year! The temperance lecturer was here. He was a speaker, I can tell you! When he cried that ancient warning:

'Young men, Ahoy there!
'What is it?'
'The rapids are below you.'

I could see some of our old soaks shrinking in their seats; and when he wound up, 'Shrieking, howling, blaspheming, over they go,' it was simply immense! There was such a stampede for the platform that you'd think we were drowning, and scrambling for life-buoys. I knew from the way Mother spoke when I set out for the hall that she would like me to pledge myself. Someway I didn't see any use in it, but that lecturer made me see lots of things, so I up and followed old man Potter who hadn't drawn a sober breath ever since I could remember. Claude clung to my coat-tails. "I want a ribbon, too!" he screamed. The lecturer gave one look at the little shaver and the crowd roared as he pinned a badge on the boy's coat. Ah, here we are at the patch!"

Mat turned the horse into a lane leading to the left.

"Here's your bonnet, Alene," cried Laura. "Don't forget the buckets, boys!"

Mat tied Old Hurricane to the fence beneath a shady tree and they started for the nearest clump of bushes, each carrying a tin cup, which, when filled with berries, was to be emptied into one of the buckets placed at a convenient spot.

Alene gave a gasp of joy, when parting the branches she found an abundance of delicious fruit. Her first scratch, a tiny one on the back of her hand, was proudly exhibited to the others.

"How many have you eaten?" inquired Laura.

"Not a one!"

"Show your tongue, little girl," said Ivy in a doubting tone. "Why, you poor thing, you haven't tasted one! Look at mine," she opened her mouth.

"Poor Mrs. Kump!" said Alene.

The others laughed.

"Oh, there will be plenty for her. Eat all you wish, Alene; Mat and Hugh are noted pickers, there's no fear of our taking home empty buckets," said Laura.

Alene's lips were soon in the same state as Ivy's. The air had given her a sharp appetite, and when in the course of the morning, Laura found a package of sandwiches and tarts hidden under the seat of the surrey, she declared that nothing had ever tasted quite so good as the portion she disposed of, along with her tin of clear cold water from a neighboring well.

While enjoying luncheon her eyes wandered over the berry patch which sloped gently upward to the road. A great many children and a few men and women were scattered over the field, stripping the bushes.

Across the patch a barred gate led to fields of pasture, and some of the boys on the safe side of the fence were goading a great red bull into a state of frenzy.

As he tossed his head and bellowed, stamping and goring the ground, Alene was glad there was a strong fence between them. She thought she recognized among the mischievous lads one of the crowd they had passed on the road in the early morning.

The girls brushed away the crumbs of the feast and went back to the bushes, while the boys returned the borrowed water bucket to its owner, who lived a short distance up the lane.

Alene was busy picking the ripe berries from an unusually heavy-laden branch, rejoicing to see her measure filling so rapidly, when she heard a terrified shriek.

She jumped to her feet, letting the cup fall from her grasp, and turned to find the other girls standing with horror-stricken faces, gazing across the patch. In a moment she knew what had happened. The wide, barred gate had become unfastened in some way, probably by one of the boys. It was standing wide open and the angry bull had come through and was seen tearing like a mad creature in the middle of the patch.

Everyone sought places of safety, the small children clinging to their elders with frightened cries, while one or two of the more courageous young men who tried to head the animal and turn him back to his pasture were compelled to fly, to escape injury.

The three girls stood for a moment as if paralyzed; then Laura grasped Ivy's arm.

"Quick, quick, to the fence! He's coming straight upon us!"

"It's my red dress," gasped Ivy.

Alene glanced round. She saw they were not far from the fence but that it would be necessary to skirt a row of thick-grown bushes in order to reach it. Could they do so in time?

In the meantime Mat and Hugh, returning leisurely along the lane, were startled into activity by the sight that met their view. Their gaze at once sought the place where they had left the girls. It was deserted; but not far away, Ivy's dress made a bright spot that immediately held their glance, and the bull apparently had singled it out for attack; his mad flight led straight in the path of the girls.

The boys, with one impulse, made a dash across the fence; with clenched hands and set teeth they stumbled onward; but alas, they were too far away to render any help!

CHAPTER XVIII

TO THE RESCUE

And then an unlooked-for actor appeared upon the scene; a boyish figure, supple and well built, sprang, as if miraculously, out of a dense clump of bushes, just beyond the terror-stricken girls.

With a ringing shout he darted straight in front of the infuriated brute, and flung his coat defiantly in its eyes. Angry and snorting, it tossed the coat aside and started after its tormentor.

The trembling girls, thus suddenly and unexpectedly rescued from their peril, found new anxiety for the safety of their brave deliverer.

With bated breath they watched him as, having succeeded in diverting the attention of the enemy, he half circled the field with the maddened creature in hot pursuit, so close at times that he felt its hot breath on his neck.

Always heading in one direction, toward the open gate of the pasture field, the boy led the race, and finally breathless and almost exhausted, he gained the goal.

Through the gate he ran and gave, as he cleared it, a sudden jump to one side, while the momentum of the bull carried it forward and beyond him. A moment later he stood in the friendly grass of the berry-patch, with the gate closed securely between him and the foe.

"It's Mark Griffin!" cried Ivy.

"Yes, I knew him at once," returned Alene.

The three girls clapped their hands joyfully, starting a round of applause. Soon from every part of the patch came cheers and shouts and whistling; a small boy, who perhaps was the cause of all the trouble, scrambled from a tree near the big gate with a whoop that would have startled an Indian brave. He ran across the field, picked up the coat from where it lay on the ground almost in ribbons, and returned it to its owner.

With a humorous glance at the crumpled and grass-stained object Mark flung it over his shoulder

and, followed by the urchin and one or two other boys, started away from the field and was soon out of sight down the lane.

"He wouldn't wait a minute," explained Hugh apologetically, when he and Mat returned to the girls.

Ivy curled her lip.

"There's a great deal in the way things are asked," she said, and Hugh knew she was offended.

"Who wouldn't run away from a lot of girls ready to slobber over him with thanks and prayers?" said Mat with a broad grin.

"As if we would make him a courtesy and say, 'Thank you, sir, for saving my life!'" retorted Ivy.

Hugh busied himself picking up the tins and the upset buckets. He sympathized with Mark's dislike of a scene.

"Any of you fellows would have done the same if you had the chance," the latter had said.

"Did she expect us to bring a fellow by the coat collar to be thanked? Girls are queer, they always enjoy fussing and the limelight," concluded Hugh. He kept resolutely away from them.

"What's the matter with Hugh?" whispered Laura after a time.

"Why?"

"He seems kind o' grumpy."

Ivy picked out a monster berry and put it into her mouth.

"The wind's changing I guess! Boys are like weather-vanes, you never can tell what way they're going next!"

Laura smiled at the idea of comparing staid, dependable Hugh with anything so uncertain as a weather-vane.

Ivy kept on filling her tin cup and pretended not to pay any attention to her brother. She knew her uncalled-for, sarcastic remark had offended him. Had it been anyone else, she would have made ample apology, but it was only poor old Hugh—it was not necessary to trouble herself about him. He would "come round" after while, as he always did. No matter how far in the wrong Ivy might be, it was always Hugh who made the first advances toward a reconciliation. Perhaps if he had waited longer, Ivy might have behaved differently, but Hugh never waited.

Sure enough, he soon gave signs of the "coming round" process, but instead of "coming round" to Ivy with a handful of flowers he had found, he gave them to Alene.

After that it was to Alene he came when he had an especially large berry to show; he insisted upon her eating it; he compared the state of his tin cup and hers, and they made a wager as to whose cup would be filled the first.

His celerity amazed Alene.

"How can you fill yours so quickly?"

"By sticking to a good bush when I find one!"

"You girls lose time by flitting from bush to bush like butterflies," added Mat.

"We are more like busy bees, Mat. We gather only the best as we fly! There's Laura, no boy can beat her picking berries," said Ivy.

"I believe there's a good deal in what Hugh says," remarked Laura, "not only in berry picking, but in work and study. We accomplish more by sticking to one thing at a time. They say 'Beware of the man of one book.'"

"I would indeed be beware of him. He'd be an insufferable bore!" retorted Ivy, as she moved away to another bush.

"Now we will transmigrate ourselves into robins and do the 'babes in the wood' act!"

Ivy gazed at the speaker compassionately.

"Has the poor boy gone daffy?"

Mat pointed to the two buckets, by that time filled with berries.

"We will cover them over with leaves!"

"Do you know what Claude does when he's angry or out of humor?" inquired Ivy.

"Throws himself on the floor and kicks, I guess!"

"No, he runs to a corner and hides his face!"

"Well?"

"If I were you, I'd follow his example!"

"But I'm not angry or out of humor with you, Ivy. On the contrary, I feel as mild as a lamb, and I'm so razzle-dazzle-dizzled pleased with getting these buckets filled in spite of you girls, that I could—could—"

"Please don't, whatever it is you could do, be wise and don't do it!"

"What's the time?" asked Laura.

"Eleven A.M.!"

"Are you sure of the A.M.?"

"I'm surer of it than of the eleven! I made a guess at that!"

"We'd better start home. It will take some time to make the jam and get Mrs. Kump's basket ready," said Laura.

Mat made a horn of his hands and gave a yell.

"What's that for?"

"To call our party in."

"We don't want everybody in the field; we're all here but Alene and Hugh."

"Where are they? Haven't seen 'em for some time! Ah, here they come!"

"Hugh took me over to see a thrush's nest," explained Alene. Her face glowed with animation beneath Nettie's pink lined bonnet; her lips and fingers were stained with berries and Laura asked herself if this could be the white-cheeked, forlorn, little Peggy-Alone she had seen standing beside Prince on the terrace just a couple of months before.

They trooped gaily into the carriage, Mat again took the reins and away they went on the return trip.

They came into the town by a different route, which led past the Ramseys' buff cottage.

"There's Vera and her mother and some ladies sitting on the porch," remarked Alene.

"And see, there's Hermione at an upstairs window," said Ivy.

The girls waved their hands to that smiling friend and the boys gallantly doffed their hats as they raced Old Hurricane past the house.

Mrs. Ramsey gazed after the vehicle with a look of amazement. She had obtained a glimpse of the girls, in their print dresses and sunbonnets, but had failed to recognize them.

"Who can they be?"

"They evidently know you," said one of the ladies, smilingly. "Didn't you see that little curly-headed girl swinging her bonnet?"

"Not at us, surely!"

Vera smiled at her mother's shocked tone.

"That was Ivy Bonner; they were waving at Hermione upstairs."

"I thought it looked like Dawson's rig, but surely Alene wasn't—"

"Yes, she was there, with her face all stained with berry juice! I guess they were out picking blackberries!"

Mrs. Ramsey raised her eyes in despair. "What does Fred Dawson mean by allowing it? If that poor child's mother only knew!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLUE BOX

It was eight o'clock when Jed Granger, a youth of eighteen, who acted as a sort of under gardener at the Towers, left a hamper at the Lee home.

"Here's a note from Alene," explained Laura, running her eyes over the sheet of tinted paper. "Of all the foolish things to do!"

Ivy sat beside the kitchen table, writing a neat label for Mrs. Kump's jar of jam. She glanced up at Laura.

"Well?"

"Just listen! Mother, listen to this!"

"Laura Dear:—

Good luck! Uncle Fred gave me two dollars to buy something for Mrs. Kump. Didn't have time to consult you or Ivy but I know you will be pleased! It's on top of the hamper. Be sure and look at it.

Good-bye!

"Alene D."

"Candy! Let's look at it!"

Laura, still wearing a look of disgust, opened the package, displaying a box of pale blue and silver tied with narrow ribbons, which after a careful untying and lifting of the lid disclosed a splendor of lace-work and tinsel-paper, over layer upon layer of bon bons and candied fruit, with a cute little silver tongs.

"Delicious! And what a beautiful box!"

"It's certainly very fine!"

"But for old Mrs. Kump!" cried Laura. "The money or something substantial would do so much better!"

"There's plenty of substantials in Alene's hamper," said Mrs. Lee. "Butter, coffee, tea."

"But this fine candy and the ribbons and fixings! It's like throwing the money away!" said Laura sharply, as she wrapped up the box and replaced it on the hamper.

Though Ivy had doubts of the usefulness of Alene's gift, she felt a certain satisfaction in having it to send along with the more practical things; she wished she had a volume of her own poetry, bound in blue with the name just as she had often pictured it in silver letters, "Early Blossoms," to send; it would go so well with Alene's box. Laura's condemnation, however, made this seem a foolish desire, which she would not dare to mention.

They returned to the work of getting everything ready for the boys to carry to Mrs. Kump. Ivy completed her label and pasted it on the jar, where the fancy initials looked effective. Laura and her mother proceeded with the packing. The former still wore a disapproving countenance and her vexation hung round them like a cloud.

"This reminds me of something that happened to me once upon a time," said Mrs. Lee, who had occasion to move the hamper. Ivy smiled encouragingly.

"Ob, a story, a story! Come and sit here, Lol, and listen!"

"Once upon a time," Mrs. Lee began, "I and my cousin Clementina, just about my own age, ten years, were the best of chums, even thicker than you Happy-Go-Lucky girls, for we had just ourselves to play with, all the other members of both families being much older; the next in age was my sister Roxana, going on sixteen. Clemmie and I used to watch the store windows and I remember one day we stood transfixed at a new display in Smithley's drug store. In addition to drugs, they sold many other things, so there we stood, Clemmie admiring a pair of pink garters with silver buckles, while I looked longingly at a volume of *Jane Eyre*.

"Only thirty cents! If I only had a pair!" sighed Clementina.

"A dollar and a half," I lamented, for in those days there were no cheap editions of books.

"Day after day on our way to and from school we stopped before our idols. Clem told me she often dreamed of that pair of garters with its shining buckles!"

"Saturday's my birthday; if some kind, rich old gentleman would happen along and adopt me before then, the first thing I'd ask for would be a pair of pink garters like these!"

"That day when I reached home I found a small package which my godmother, Mrs. Keyes, had left for me. It was a pretty handkerchief with my initial in the corner, and knotted inside was a silver half dollar. To me that was quite a fortune and Roxana gave me much advice as to its disposal, but I scarcely heard what she said; I was thinking of something else; you can guess what it was."

"Yes, we know, we know," cried Ivy.

"Friday evening, I sneaked away from Clem and went to Smithley's.

"I could hardly control my voice to speak when the proprietor came forward. I had come to a halt near the show window.

"What's your lowest price for *Jane Eyre*?' I found myself saying.

"A dollar and a half. It's a most fascinating book, but for your own reading I'd advise—"

"Thank you, sir, but I think I'll buy those.'

"I pointed to the garters. Mr. Smithley wrapped them up and tied the package with a pink and white cord.

"I could hardly wait to get home before opening the precious parcel. I wanted to show it to mother the first thing, but she was not in and I proudly displayed it to Roxana. She eyed the garters dubiously.

"Very easily soiled! How much did you pay for them?"

"Thirty cents, at Smithley's.'

"Thirty cents! The idea! For something you can't wear!"

"I don't intend wearing them! It's my present for Clementina's birthday!"

"You foolish thing! Why didn't you consult me? A pair of black ones would wear so much longer!"

"Roxana's manner did not chill my pleasure. I went upstairs and wrote an inscription on a card:—

"For Clementina on her Tenth Birthday, from Edna,' and placed it with the garters.

"I could hardly wait for the next day! I pictured Clem's surprise and rapture.

"Mother came home, and after supper I slipped away to get the package to show to her. I knew when I returned to the sitting-room, that Roxana had told her about my purchase and how she regarded it.

"She said it was pretty but—well, they kept on about it, until I began to think myself a culprit. I could hardly see the pink garters for my tears. At last Roxana suggested an exchange. By that time I didn't care for anything; all my pleasure in the gift was spoiled.

"I'll not give Clementina anything,' I said.

"Don't be unreasonable, child, the black garters will be so useful,' chided my mother.

"But Clementina admired these!"

"She never dreamed of owning them, though,' said Roxana.

"Yes, she did!"

"Well, it resulted in Roxana's carrying off my foolish purchase and coming back with her sensible one.

"I can smile at it now, but at the time it was a real tragedy to me. Mother never suspected my disappointment. We were all so used to accepting Roxana's opinions as laws that to rebel against them would lay oneself open to the charge of treason.

"Well, the next day I went to Clementina's. She came running down to the front gate to meet me.

"Happy birthday,' I faltered, thrusting the little package into her hands.

"Why, Edna,' she said, but I hurried away, not daring to wait to see her open it.

"That was apparently the end of our friendship.

"When we met again, Clementina treated me very coolly; I was terribly cut up but I did not blame her. I knew it would have been better taste not to have given her anything, but it was too late then.

"For several days we kept apart.

"I avoided Smithley's window, but one day I stopped before it almost in spite of myself. There hung the pink garters, with their shining buckles. They seemed to mock my chagrin. Then all at once Clementina stood at my side. She held out her hand!

"Forgive me, Edna, I might have known it was Roxana!"

"My lip trembled.

"Carrie Smithley told me just now. You see, she was in the store when you bought the pink garters and when Roxana returned them she told Mr. Smithley what a foolish thing you had bought; she said you were too stubborn to come back yourself and she had to do it. She always had to do the things the rest of the family shirked!"

"I had to smile at Clem's mimicking Roxana, it was so true to life.

"Poor Clem! She said she never expected me to give her anything, but when she opened the parcel and saw the black garters, she rushed into the darkened parlor and cried and cried, on the sofa behind the door! Not because of the garters, but because she expected different treatment from me—'It just seemed like a slap in the face,' she said."

"I guess it did," murmured Ivy. "Is that the end?"

"There's a kind of a sequel," said Mrs. Lee with a smile. "Clementina gave a glance into Smithley's window.

"Say, Edna, would you care if—"

"Oh, Clem, I'd be so glad!" said I."

"And so it ended happily after all!" cried Ivy.

"Yes; and Cousin Clem has them to this day—put away in a cedar box that belonged to her mother!"

Laura smiled rather doubtfully.

"And of course there's a moral, Mother Lee, but this is different!"

Going home, Ivy talked the matter over with her mother.

"I'm inclined to take Mrs. Lee's view. The poem says 'Give to the hungry potatoes,' but I guess it doesn't mean to give potatoes only!" said that lady.

CHAPTER XX

MRS. KUMP'S BIRTHDAY

Mrs. Kump's home, a one-storied frame building, stood on the west bank of a run that trickled down from the hills to the river; a small window faced the main road, while two others with the 'front' door between, opened upon a porch thickly trellised with grape vines; a couple of steps at one end of the porch led to a wooden platform which bridged the stream.

At six o'clock that morning the dew lay heavy upon the matted grape leaves, and over the little vegetable garden behind the house, with its outlying poles of hop-vines and sweet-peas.

The scent of pennyroyal came from the banks of the stream; the birds twittered round the little gray house and the sun shone upon it feebly, through a thick wall of fog.

Stepping softly across the bridge and through the green opening of the porch went Hugh and Mat, those worthy aids of the Happy-Go-Luckys; in front of the door they placed the birthday offerings, and then, giving a resounding knock on the panel, they ran and hid in the bushes across the road.

Presently the door opened and a gray head peered forth, then out stepped a thin figure in a blue calico wrapper. With hands upraised she advanced to the porch steps.

"The grocer's man made a mistake," the boys heard her say. She gazed along the road but no one was in view. Retracing her steps she bent over the baskets.

"There's a card on 'em. The owner's name, I reckon. I'll get my specs and see!"

"Now's our chance to light out!" whispered Mat, and away they flew.

Mrs. Lee crossed the bridge that same evening, followed by Nettie in starched white frock and

golden curls.

A clump of hollyhocks made a gorgeous splash of color against the wall of the house beneath the end window. Four-o'clocks, ragged-robins and blue lark-spur struggled up through the cabbages and long grass of the little garden, to bid them welcome, and at the door they were met by the mistress of the house, who had heard their footsteps.

Mrs. Kump was a large-boned woman of medium height; her complexion was of golden bronze; the flesh had fallen, giving her cheeks a square set, and her dark eyes gleamed brightly beneath a broad wrinkled brow; a cap of black lace surmounted her head, a white net fichu was crossed on her breast and fastened with a cameo pin in a wide gold frame, and her dress was of silver gray.

She led the way into the little sitting-room and drew aside the muslin half-curtains. Through the open window came the murmur of the running stream, the scent of pennyroyal, and the rays of the setting sun.

A striped rag carpet covered the floor and the walls, with gorgeous papering of flowers and vines, were hung with many old fashioned pictures.

There was the Lord's Prayer in an intricate design of crimson and gold, a framed sampler and motto, and smaller pictures in square and oval frames; these for the most part friends and relatives of the owner, their pictured features shadowed and dimmed by time.

In the middle of the room a square table with a red, woolen cover, held a half-dozen books cross-cornered one upon the other in several groups; a glass lamp filled with red-colored water and oil stood in the center, the top covered with a paper shade and the bottom swathed in a woolen mat.

A high, wooden mantel, painted black, occupied the other end of the room; the fireplace was hidden by a square, cambric screen, with a cut-out picture of fruit and flowers pasted in the center. Nettie's glance was immediately taken by a white marble book, with yellow painted edges and clasps, lying upon the old glass-knobbed bureau.

Mrs. Kump drew the straight-backed rattan rocker to the open window, giving it a hurried dusting with her black silk apron, and invited Mrs. Lee to be seated.

Then, as she noticed her visitor looking at the quilting frames which occupied one end of the room, she said,

"You'll think I'm slighting your quilt, Mis' Lee!—I got so far back on the job, with my poor legs bothering me so! But sez I to myself, 'I'll try and catch up on Thursday,' but when I went to the door this mornin' and found the good fairies' offerings, I fairly wilted. I made up my mind to keep the day, and I'm keepin' it; I haven't done a stroke of work!"

Mrs. Lee looked interested.

"The day—yes—I believe you told me—"

"My birthday—sixty-seven—the years do run up when once you begin to count 'em! But about the baskets—thinks I to myself, 'The grocer's man left 'em at the wrong place,' but he must have druv away fast, there wasn't a soul in sight, and then I comes in for my specs and there was my name writ in black and white 'Mrs. Keturah Kump, with best wishes for her birthday!' I nearly wilted! I got so narvous-like that I could hardly lift 'em! And who was livin' to care for me or my birthday? All my folks dead—all but the young ones. They live out west and don't bother their heads about me. But about the baskets—you'd orter see what they held—a good share of everything—I'll show you my cupboard stocked, and lots of things down cellar—and there, I'd been worryin' and doubtin', not bein' able to work for so long. I don't mind tellin' you, Mis' Lee, now that things is changed for the best, that I was about at the end of my string. Sugar and tea about out and not enough flour to last a day longer! I unpacked the baskets and stood and looked at the things—butter and eggs and bread and cake and blackberry jam, the only spread I ever et, and I put 'em away as if in a dream, leavin' out a snack to make breakfast, though I was so excited I couldn't swallow a bite!"

"I put on a drawin' of tea, and pattered about settin' the table, when all at once I spied a little passel that I had set aside when I brought the baskets in. So I opened it—and what do you think! I sat right down by the table and cried and cried! It seemed to me that the other things might be for any old, worn-out woman, but this was just for me, and it went straight to my heart! The loveliest blue box, the inside fixed with lace just like the valentines that poor David sent me when he came courtin', and it was filled with candy, the loveliest you ever saw!—with real cherries and vi'lets fixed up, lookin' too good to eat! Just think—for me, a poor old woman that most people would think it all wasted on! Something beautiful came over the day, I felt young again, and vigorous and proud and happy all at once, just like I used to feel long years ago when I'd first see the Johnny-jump-ups in the spring, way down in the medder near the creek!"

Mrs. Kump rose suddenly and went to the big bureau, wiping her glasses as she went. Coming back, she proudly displayed Alene's box.

"Take some, child," she said to Nettie, "and you too, Mis' Lee! I thought at first it was too good for me to eat but it'll get spiled, so I'll eat it little by little, and I can keep the box to hold some trinkets I've

had for years! Just see the little silver tongs! Nothin' was too good for me! Why, I felt so perked up that I got out my best dress and my silk apron, to do honor to the day!"

A score of years seemed to fall from the speaker, her eyes gleamed brightly, as she glanced from her silver-toned best dress to her listener's sympathetic countenance.

As she wended her way homeward with Nettie, who carried a huge bouquet from Mrs. Kump's garden, Mrs. Lee's thoughts dwelt on the old lady's words.

"I wish the girls had been along to hear—Ah, there they are!" she said, as, coming in sight of the Bonner house, she saw Laura and Ivy seated on the front steps.

Nettie gave a screech of delight and jumped across a gutter to make a short cut to exhibit her flowers.

Mrs. Bonner, hearing voices, came to the door and one of the boys brought out chairs for her and Mrs. Lee.

"As you are all so much interested, I guess I'll sit down a while and tell you all about Mrs. Kump's birthday!" said Mrs. Lee. "Now, not so many questions! Yes, she got the baskets with her name printed so artistically on the card, and she never suspects who gave the things. She has enough to tide her over for a long time, and the jam went to the right spot, but guess what it was that pleased her the most."

"Old ladies are very fond of tea," ventured Mrs. Bonner.

"The print of butter!" cried Ivy.

"Mrs. Bonner's coffee cake," said Laura.

They made several other guesses but Mrs. Lee still shook her head.

"I know," said Nettie quickly, "it was that blue box!"

"Not Alene's candy!" cried Laura, incredulously.

"Yes, that was it!"

Mrs. Lee thereupon told what Mrs. Kump had said, word for word.

A silence followed the recital.

"Who would have thought it?" Laura said at last.

"Ah, Laura dear, you forgot the thought behind the gift. 'The love of the giver is greater than the gift of the lover,'" said Mrs. Lee.

CHAPTER XXI

TO CHINA IN A GLASS-BOAT

At the upper end of the wharf a small boat was anchored, gay in red paint with black trimmings. It consisted of a single deck only, on which was a raised cabin that extended the whole length of the boat, having doors at each end and several small windows on the sides.

The girls hastened along the broad plank, over the shallow space of water between the boat and the shore, and entered the wide front opening.

The interior resembled a country store.

A counter, running three quarters of the length of the boat and stacked with all sorts of glassware, divided the room in two parts.

Sandwiched between the counter and the shelves, which were also heavily laden with glass, was a clerk, intent upon the customers who crowded the narrow aisle.

And what queer customers they were! Boys and girls, for the most part poorly dressed, who kept an eye on the different articles displayed, or hovered round the large scales at one end of the counter, guarding strange looking bundles and baskets.

To Laura, who had visited the boat each summer for as long as she could remember, it was a familiar scene, but everything proved new and wonderful to Alene.

For a time they were content to wait and watch before making any investments.

"What are they doing?" inquired Alene, pointing to two boys who had dragged a battered basket and a great bundle to the scales.

"Just watch and you'll see."

The clerk took the basket which was filled with pieces of old iron, small bolts, nails, and such things, rusty and apparently good for nothing, and weighed it on the scales; its owners watched carefully to verify its correct weight, and while they calculated its value the clerk proceeded to weigh the bundle.

"Rags," whispered Laura to the wondering Alene. "They buy them from all the towns along the river and sell them in the city to make paper and things."

"The iron?"

"No, silly—that's made over I guess at the foundries."

Alene became interested in watching the two boys whose property had been valued. With an air of importance they turned their attention to choosing its equivalent in crystal ware.

After examining critically the different articles, the older boy at last decided upon a large plate with "Give us this day our daily bread" in fancy letters around the rim, but his companion hesitated between two pitchers.

"Oh, Laura!" Alene's cry of dismay drew Laura's attention. "He's going to buy that purple monstrosity!"

"I think that blue one with the bulgy sides is out o' sight," the boy was saying, his gaze straying from one to the other; "I wonder which ma would like the best!"

Laura stepped forward with an elder-sisterly air.

"Is it for water?" she inquired.

"Yes; ma broke her chiny one the other day and I want to s'prise her."

"Then I'd buy that white one with the frosted flowers; it will look so cool with the water sparkling through. You think the blue one is prettier I know, but it would not be so suitable for water. Don't you think so?"

"That's so, thank y', miss," said the boy, lifting the straw crown which served him as a hat.

Alene drew a breath of relief. "Oh, Laura, you know just what to do! I'm sure he wanted the purple-blue one awfully and he took the other just to please you!" she whispered as the boys left the boat with their treasures, giving a doubtful look backward at the abandoned pitcher.

Laura shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, boys are funny; they mean well but their tastes run to bright things. Any girl in a gaudy dress is beautiful in their eyes!"

"And there isn't always a Laura near to point out the superiority of the girl in plain white," returned Alene with a sanctimonious air at which they both laughed.

"Now for our own choosing," said Laura briskly, and the clerk came forward to her nod.

They spent a delightful half hour at the counter fingering the pretty things, sometimes having as much trouble to decide between different objects as the boys had with their pitchers.

"I'll take this sweet little blue goblet for Ivy, and that pitcher for Mrs. Major, and the berry dish for Kizzie. I'd like to get Uncle Fred a new tobacco-jar to replace the one I broke, but I don't see any." Alene pointed out the things desired, all of which Laura had helped in selecting; then Laura bought her mother a cake-stand and Mrs. Bonner had commissioned her to buy a dozen tumblers, which purchase took much time and thought.

Presently Alene became aware of a pattering on the roof. Softly it came at first, then more and more insistent.

"Why, Lol, it's raining like—like in the days of Noah!" she cried.

"It's only a summer shower," said Laura carelessly.

Having completed their purchases, they strayed to the far end of the boat and discovered a narrow, paneled door which led to a tiny private cabin.

"It would make a lovely play-house!" exclaimed Laura as they peeped in.

It certainly looked inviting with its gay rug and crimson-cushioned furniture.

"What do you say? Let's slip in and wait for the rain to be over!"

Laura's proposition almost took Alene's breath away.

"But will they allow?"

"Oh, yes, what difference could it make? It's empty, so we won't be in anyone's way!" returned Laura airily, and as the rain still beat upon the boat, and they were both very tired, having been on their feet for several hours, so they entered the inviting little parlor without further hesitation.

It was cosy and snug within but rather stuffy, the small windows being closed; but the girls seated side by side on the big chair beside the table found the situation very enjoyable.

"I feel like a traveler, as if we were taking a sail to some outlandish place," said Laura, getting up to adjust her hat before a small mirror set in the wall, beneath which was a stationary wash-stand with holes for bowl and pitcher.

"Let's pretend we're on one of those funny Chinese boats like Uncle Fred told me about; they have large, painted eyes without which no Chinaman would set sail. They say; 'No got eye, no can see—no can see, no can walkee!'"

Alene placed her bundles on the center table and leaned back cosily in the cushioned chair. She was in the midst of a reverie where a queer-looking Chinese mandarin was trying to persuade her to buy a blue glass pitcher, when Laura's voice brought her back to reality.

"Alene, Alene, it's moving—the boat!"

"But it's tied to that big iron ring—it can't move from the wharf!"

There was a creaking and straining of the woodwork around them which they had not noticed before. Laura ran to a window, followed by Alene. The hills appeared to be gliding by! Sure enough, the boat was moving; it had left the shore while they were talking.

For a moment they had a strange sensation.

"It's like being abducted," said Alene.

"Oh, dear, I wonder how far they will go!"

They ran through the paneled door to the front of the boat. The clerk was busy arranging his stock.

"Why, I thought everybody was gone!" he cried in surprise.

"We went into the cabin to rest awhile; we never dreamed you were going away. Where will the boat go?"

The young man laughed.

"Oh, don't get scared! We are only bound across the river a few miles above, to catch the train! Wait, maybe I can get Jones to return and land you first."

He came back in a few minutes.

"He says he can't do it; the captain is coming on the train and if we fail to meet him 'on the dot' it's as much as his job is worth. But it won't take very long and then we'll put back and land you at home."

The girls were forced to be content. They returned to the cabin and discussed the situation.

"I wish Ivy could have come along, she would enjoy this," cried Laura.

When the boat at length drew near to shore and a plank was thrown out, they went on deck and gazed around.

In front and on each side as far as they could see, a steep, scrubby bank reached up to the railway tracks which swept along the foot of the hills. A small wooden tower stood near the tracks a short distance away. The rain had ceased as suddenly as it had come and the sunlight lay on river and land.

"The train must be late," remarked the clerk. A muffled rumble was heard—"Hark, there it is now!"

But it turned out to be a freight, which drew its long length past, like a many-jointed snake.

Time passed slowly to the impatient girls. The young man ran up to the tower to make inquiries.

"The operator says our train may be hour late," he reported.

He felt very sorry for their dilemma, but he knew it would be useless to ask the man in charge to make a special trip to let them off.

Laura and Alene glanced at each other.

"If he says one hour, it may be more and then it will take quite a time to get back," murmured the former.

"Couldn't we walk to some bridge and cross over?"

"I don't know the way, and I never heard of any bridge nearer than Westville, three miles above. Let's take a walk, it'll help pass the time," proposed Laura.

They crossed the plank and wandered arm in arm along the shore.

"I suppose they'll soon have the bellman out ringing for us! To think the dire fate I've often predicted for Nettie when she tarries on the way from school should happen to myself instead!"

"Hello, there!"

Across the water came this welcome hail. A skiff manned by a boy came in sight rounding the bend of the river.

The girls paused and waved their handkerchiefs.

"Is he calling to us? I wonder who it can be!"

"Why, it's Mark Griffin!" cried Alene, with a gulp of delight.

They stood watching the movements of the skiff, fearing it would turn in some other direction and leave them in their plight.

"Maybe he's going on down the river," wailed Laura.

Alene waved her handkerchief more energetically.

"He wouldn't do that!"

"But he doesn't know we're abducted and cast away on this unfriendly coast," rejoined Laura, whose courage increased with the nearer approach of the boat.

It was evident the rower had no intention of turning aside; he aimed in their direction with even and rapid strokes of the oars which soon covered the expanse of water between.

"I noticed you girls running out on deck when the boat drew off and I thought something was wrong and hurried over to see," he explained half shyly, as he drew the boat to shore.

"Oh, have you come to take us home?" cried Alene. "How lovely of you!"

"I'll run back to the cabin for our packages," and Laura, not waiting for his reply, hurried away.

"If you don't object to going with me!"

"Object! Why, we are delighted at the chance! We didn't know what to do!"

Alene told the cause of their predicament, which the boy had already guessed.

"It seems funny you thought we would object to being rescued by you; you didn't wait to find out if we objected or not, that day at the picnic, and the day you faced the mad bull!"

He laughed.

"Excuse me, you see the old fellow was so quick he didn't give me a chance! But this is different!"

Alene was silent. She was afraid he might think her a great baby were she to say how very, *very* much relieved she was by his presence.

"Well, I guess Hugh Bonner would object," returned the lad.

Alene stepped gingerly into the boat, trying to hide her nervousness when it rocked beneath her and Mark came to her assistance.

"Sit here in the bow and I'll bail out this water," he said.

Alene found it a very spacious and pleasant seat; the rolling of the boat which had alarmed her when standing gave her only a delightful sensation. She put her hand over the side of the skiff and let the water glide through her fingers while she watched with interest the movements of the boy.

"You didn't answer my question," he remarked at last.

"What question?"

"About Hugh objecting."

"Why should he object? Here's Laura with our bundles!" She moved aside to let her friend step into the boat.

The packages were put in a safe place, Mark grasped the oars, Laura, who felt perfectly at home on the water, took a third oar and they started on their homeward way.

"How glad I am to leave the bleak coast of China!" cried Laura.

"You mean Glass-gow, don't you?" spoke up the boy, pointing over his shoulder to where the friendly clerk stood calling, 'Bon voyage!' from the deck of the glass-boat.

The girls laughed.

"I guess we will have to forgive him?"

Alene glanced across the water.

"I suppose we had better, at any rate until we reach dry land," she replied.

"Won't Ivy be sorry she missed this good chance to say 'thank you, sir,' for rescuing us again?" remarked Laura.

"Do you mean the little girl with the big, snapping eyes and—"

"Yes; she was offended with Hugh because he failed to drag you back with him to be thanked prettily by us girls!"

"I didn't want any thanks, but I suspect Hugh wasn't sorry I wouldn't go with him. I'm afraid he doesn't approve of me?"

Laura became suddenly occupied with her rowing and Alene felt called upon to answer.

"Why—" she hesitated.

"You needn't be afraid to say; I know they think I'm a bad case!"

"Oh—no, Hugh said you were all right by *yourself*!"

"Then he doesn't like my chums?"

"He said if you would give up those Stony Road boys—"

"I'm no snob to go back on a boy because he's poor!"

"Why, it's not that! Hugh and his chums are poor but—"

"They say they torture animals!" broke in Laura.

"I told them I was sure you wouldn't allow that," Alene protested.

Her warm defense seemed to mollify the boy; his air of mockery and resentment fell away and he gave her a grateful glance. Then his attention became absorbed in keeping the skiff a safe distance from some passing barges.

For a time there was silence. The boy cleared the tow and continued rowing, giving all his attention to the boat.

The girls glanced at each other, fearing they had offended him.

With a sudden impulse he ceased his energetic rowing and let the skiff drift. His face flushed as he said:

"For myself I make no defense, but you may tell Mr. Hugh that so far as my chums are concerned he's bearing false witness. They may be poor and rough and unruly, but they're not cruel! They belong to the Torchlights!"

"The Torchlights?" cried the girls in duet.

But the boy had resumed his oars, cutting the water vigorously as though glad of a vent for his pent-up indignation. Alene wondered what he meant by the Torchlights, but did not like to ask; Laura more venturesome inquired,

"The Torchlights? What are they?"

"A sort of club," he responded, shutting his mouth with an air of finality that vexed them.

They glanced at each other. Laura's half-curved lip said plainly, "As if we really cared!" and Alene's returned scornfully, "The idea!"

They pretended not to notice his taciturnity and talked lightly to each other of their purchases and

other personal matters.

The lad, left to his own reflections, continued rowing manfully. Presently he announced, "I'll land you at the upper end of the wharf, that will be nearer home."

"Oh, thank you, that will save us quite a walk!" returned Laura.

"And I'll get home before Uncle Fred," cried Alene.

"Wouldn't they all have been scared if we had had to wait for the glass-boat to take us home?"

The boy smiled. He thought there were others who would have been scared in that event.

"Is Mr. Fred Dawson your uncle?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I used to be captain of the Fred Dawson Baseball Club," he replied with a tone of pride.

"How nice!" and Alene determined to ask her uncle all about it that very night. "Ah, here's the wharf! It seems to be coming right up to us!"

A few minutes later their light, little craft swept in to shore.

Mark gallantly gathered up the bundles and handed them out to Laura, who had skipped lightly across the bow to the bleached stones of the wharf, then he gave his hand to his more timid passenger and she stepped ashore.

"And the Happy-Go-Luckys will be on time as usual," cried Laura, as they said good-by to Mark, who intended taking the skiff farther up the river.

"The Happy-Go-Luckys? Who are they?" he exclaimed.

"A sort of a club," returned Laura demurely, glancing mirthfully at Alene ere they turned away to climb the hilly homeward path.

CHAPTER XXII

VEXATIONS AND CONSOLATIONS

Ivy turned disconsolately from the window. She had waved good-by to Laura and Alene when they had looked round at the corner ere passing from view on their way to the glass-boat.

The trip had been postponed from day to day in the hope of her being able to go along, and even at the last moment her friends had wished to give it up and devote the afternoon to an indoor meeting of the Happy-Go-Luckys; but Ivy would not have it so; she insisted on their going, she vetoed every argument to the contrary, but now that they were beyond recall and she faced the empty room she almost regretted her persistence.

And yet it was a pleasant room enough, with nothing of luxury to recommend it but having an air of quiet comfort. An unobtrusive wall paper, a green-and-oak carpet, a bright rug before the fire-place, which was filled with tall ferns; a picture of the "Mammoth Trees of California," above the mantel, a lamp with a green globe hanging over the center-table, a few chairs, and Ivy's couch drawn close to the two windows with their snowy curtains—all beautifully neat and clean, but alas, so tiresomely familiar to the little prisoner. Even the sight of her books piled at the foot of the lounge wearied her!

She threw aside the beloved Sunset Book after vainly trying to get interested in it. How flat and unprofitable it seemed! Why could she never write anything but the trite and useless things that almost anyone who was able to hold a pen could say as well or better? The verses about the four o'clocks, which the other day had seemed a pretty conceit, to-day sounded silly, fit only for the little wastebasket at her side, where she threw them with disdain.

Life was unprofitable, friends noticeable only by their absence; even the faithful Hugh had deserted her. He had made no motion toward "making up" since the day they went blackberrying—it would have served him right if the bull had put an end to her! If that boy Mark Griffin hadn't interfered—and why he had she didn't know, what business was it of his?—Hugh, instead of wearing his air of indifference, would be crying his eyes out beside her dead body—or rather her grave, for she would be buried and done with by this time. But no; here she herself, instead of Hugh, was crying over it! For the last week he had been even less attentive than ever; he was up and out long before she awoke in the mornings, came home at noon to snatch a hasty lunch and was off again after supper until bedtime, with only a careless nod to her, Ivy, whom he had hitherto allowed to claim all his attention and the little leisure

time he could spare from his work as office-boy and assistant clerk in a real-estate firm down street.

Heigho! Who was that coming? Claude and Nettie, hand in hand, with beaming faces and crumby lips!

"Oh, you greedy youngsters, where do you put all the cake and things you devour, anyway?"

Simultaneously two mouths were opened wide.

"They are big enough naturally, you needn't stretch them! No wonder you are both noted dunces in your class—you are nothing but mouth and stomach! Come here, I've a little time. Let's see what you can do!"

"I can figure!" said Nettie proudly, but she eyed the slate upon which Ivy had written, half abashed.

"Three plus two equals what?" said Ivy.

"Six!"

"No, try again!"

"Six!" cried Nettie decidedly again.

"No; five, stupid!"

"Six," reiterated Nettie, "Teacher says so!"

"That's three multiplied by two; I said three *plus*—"

"Well, it's six at our school," declared Nettie doggedly, her eyes half filled with tears.

"To think you are any relation to Laura! Why, she's as bright—"

"She's big, and awful old, and not half as nice as Nettie!" cried Claude.

"Indeed, no wonder you stand up for her! You don't even know the alphabet!"

"Yes, I do!"

"Well, see here!" Ivy picked up his primer.

"I don't want to study—it's vacation!" said Claude, drawing back.

"He may injure his brain by overstudy; such a precocious scholar!"

Nettie pursed out her lip. "Precious scolder herself!" she muttered.

"Come, Claude, I'll give you this big red apple if you say it correctly," urged Ivy.

"A—B—C," commenced Claude bravely, "A—B—C—Poke Bonnet."

"No, that's D!"

"Well, it looks like a poke," returned Claude.

"How funny! It only needs a bow and string, see?" cried the little girl.

Claude proceeded with the letters:

"L—M—N—the same old hoop—I ought to know its name."

"O," whispered Nettie.

He turned upon her indignantly—

"I was just going to say O—that's easy! P—Q—R—little wormy thing—Oh, bother T—U—V—W—let's see, see-saw, X—wizie!" he concluded triumphantly and with a sudden movement he snatched the apple from Ivy's lap.

"Come back, you didn't earn it!" commanded Ivy.

"I did, didn't I, Nettie?" he cried, digging his uneven little teeth into the rosy cheek of the apple.

"Come here at once!"

Ivy reached for her crutches but Nettie, too quick for her, grabbed one and fled with Claude, while Ivy in a rage threw the other after them. Across the floor it sailed and hit against the wall with a resounding clap.

"That's the end of my teaching, and everything I do trying to help others ends just that way! Now in

the story-books the children are good and no matter how dull, anxious to learn and thankful to be taught, and the teacher gets some satisfaction out of it! I believe the only respectable children are in books; the others are imps! Dear me! I feel like knocking my head against the wall!" She threw herself upon the sofa and pressed her face against its fir-scented cushions.

Presently soft footsteps were heard. A lady entered the room, and glancing from the discarded crutch to the couch, crossed the floor and placed her hand caressingly on the curly mop of hair.

"Are you asleep, Ivy?" she inquired gently.

"No, mamma, just thinking."

"Is there anything I can do? Here is a cool drink."

"No, thank you—yes, I guess I will, I am rather thirsty!" She sat up and eagerly drank the lemonade.

"Were the children naughty? I thought they might amuse you for a while—"

"They were simply diabolical—but just on a par with all the rest! The girls gone to enjoy themselves—and that hateful Hugh running away every day as though afraid I might encroach on his valuable time—and—"

"Hugh? Why, what has he done?"

"He's not been the same since that day we went blackberrying."

"We have pleasant words for the stranger,
And smiles for the sometimes guest;
But for our own the bitter tone
Though we love our own the best,"

quoted Mrs. Bonner. "I'm afraid that's your way with Hugh, sometimes, Ivy, and as for the girls leaving you alone, you almost ran them out of the house!"

"They might as least have called in on their way home!"

"Have they gone past?"

"I haven't seen them, but they were to be back about half past four and see, it's nearly six—Ah, here they are now!"

The girls came bustling in.

"All the way from China!" cried Laura breathlessly.

Ivy listened to their adventures with glowing eyes.

"So the buccaneers took you captive for ransom and carried you across the ocean; but a gallant ship, flying the American colors and commanded by a brave knight, came to your relief, swept the pirate fleet from off the sea and brought you away, leaving the waves red with gore!"

"And here we are with all our valuables intact, even to this little vase of purest amethyst," said Alene, handing Ivy the blue glass goblet, while Laura gave a package to Mrs. Bonner, saying impressively:

"And these tumblers of priceless glittering crystal are yours, dear madame; here's your change—fifteen cents—they only cost a nickle apiece."

This called forth a chorus of mirthful exclamations, in the midst of which two little figures came quietly in. Emboldened by Ivy's smiling countenance, they stole to her side and displayed a collection of bright pebbles which they had picked up from the flat, tar-coated roof of the foundry, which, being built against a hill, was easily reached from the upper street.

"We gathered them for you," said Nettie shyly.

"Oh, girls, while you were in China, these tots journeyed to the sea-shore in search of treasure, and I'm the Princess Lazybones who sits at home, and receives her subjects' peace-offerings."

"There, Alene has forgotten something," said Mrs. Bonner, picking up a small bundle from the table. Laura reached for it, intending to overtake Alene who had gone away a few minutes before, but a glance showed that it was marked in pencil, "For Laura," in Alene's handwriting.

"For me, and she didn't buy a single thing for herself," grumbled Laura, untying the cord. "Isn't it just too sweet!" She held up a dish of pale pink glass with a knot of blue forget-me-nots in the corner.

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Ivy. "I was just going to say that somebody else forgot to buy a single

thing for herself, but I see Alene didn't forget her!"

"That little sly piece, and I never noticed her at it!" Laura said, secretly hoping that a certain quaint amber-colored bowl which she had deftly tucked away among Alene's purchases would prove as pleasant a surprise to Alene.

Hugh, coming in to supper just before Laura went home, peeped into the room in time to hear Ivy's laughing remark,

"We should confer upon Sir Mark the title of 'Rescuer-in-Chief to the Happy-Go-Luckys!'"

Hugh, with a hasty nod to the girls, turned away.

"Don't be in such a hurry, Hugh! I've just been telling Ivy how thrilling it was, when just in our moment of despair, Mark Griffin appeared—"

"Like the hero on a stage," interrupted Hugh.

"No, in a skiff," corrected Laura.

"I've no time for rhapsodies now," said Hugh curtly. He turned away with Ivy's voice, "Hear! Hear!" ringing mockingly on the air.

Through the open window came the sound of children's voices,

"Here comes an old woman from New Foundland.
With all of her children in her hand,"

shrill and clamoring, but powerless to disturb Ivy who, seated beside the window with her blue goblet beside her and a pad of writing paper on her lap, was busy writing.

After a series of brow puckerings and erasures, she gave a sigh of contentment.

"There it's finished! I'll read it over and put it in the Sunset Book to-morrow!"

The old woman from New Foundland had gone home to bed, and Claude, one of her shrill-voiced children, had rushed in sleepily and thrown himself upon the rug, where he lay oblivious to all things, when the absent-minded Ivy came out of her trance; the first thing she saw was his chubby, outstretched form with both arms flung above the tousled head from which his cap had partly fallen.

The smile of sisterly love and pride with which she enveloped him, must have pierced the vale of unconsciousness, for the lad stirred and smiled in his sleep.

Ivy took the goblet and poured the pebbles into her lap. They fell against one another with a velvety sound, and gave forth a rainbow of color, like precious stones in the light of the lamp.

She mused happily over them, the children's treasures, gathered so carefully and given so generously.

"How cross I was to-day and all for nothing! I must be one of those 'hirelings' who are always 'looking for consolations' for I feel consoled to-night; if only Hugh—"

A noise was heard in the little entry; footsteps and voices, and then a pushing as of something being moved up the steps.

"What's that? It's Hugh's voice and there's someone with him!"

Ivy glanced expectantly toward the open doorway. Presently Hugh and another boy, their faces reddened with exertion, appeared carrying some object between them. Could it be—yes, it was a writing desk, such as Ivy had often seen in dreams and store windows, but never hoped to possess! Her heart gave a sudden jump and then seemed to stand still.

"Bub, be careful you don't scrape it against the side of the door! Hello, sis—where's the best place to put it?"

Hugh tried to speak in a careless tone, but Ivy's scream of pleasure, the sudden crimson roses that bloomed in her thin cheeks, and the shower of stars which flashed through and dried the mist in her eyes, brought a funny grip to his throat; he gulped and made a wry face.

"Say, Fatty, look out! You knocked my hand against the wall!"

Attracted by the noise, Mrs. Bonner came in, Claude awoke and everybody crowded round to see the new article of furniture.

It was placed where Ivy could admire it at leisure, and the strange boy having said good-night, Hugh displayed a lovely bronze key, unlocked the lid and disclosed all its attractions.

"See this little drawer and the shelves, and the place for your ink and paper, and the large drawer below, and then there's a secret drawer I'll show you when the rest are not here," Hugh whispered the latter part.

A secret drawer! Ivy clapped her hands—what a heavenly culmination of attractions! And the desk as a whole, of quartered-oak with bronzed handles and a shelf with a tiny mirror above, was indeed a beauty.

"Oh, Hugh, how—where did you get it?"

"I've been working overtime nights at Pearson's furniture store. The old man's sick and his son had to stay home evenings. I bargained to stay in his place and take it out this way! I kind of thought you'd like it," Hugh explained breathlessly, glancing from his auditors to the desk.

"Oh, Hugh!" cried Ivy deprecatingly.

"It was dead easy! Hardest part was to keep it quiet so to surprise you. It wouldn't do to get too friendly or I'd a blurted it out!"

Hugh's head was bending over the desk, dangerously close to Ivy as it proved, for she gave his hair a sudden pull.

"Oh, Hugh, you good-for-nothing!" she cried.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CRIMSON BAG

"Uncle Fred, I'm going to play being poor for a whole week," said Alene, meeting Mr. Dawson at the gate one evening.

"What put that idea into your head, child?"

"You see it's so much more exciting to do things when you haven't money! We felt quite hilarious this afternoon when Nettie discovered that one could get a great big sugar cake for a cent at the new bakery. It was Ivy's treat and we all went in a crowd and bought half a dozen for five cents! We really don't see how they can afford to give such big ones!"

"They depend on large sales and small profits, no doubt; besides it will attract other customers. A good advertisement too, for here am I, for one, who would have gone past the new bakery a hundred times, never once glancing that way, never dreaming of those elephantine sugar cakes, were it not for you! Are you sure the bakery didn't bribe you girls to sound their praises?"

"The idea!"

"It's not so foolish after all; I'm almost famished for one of those sugar cakes. Greedy Alene, to devour them every one!"

"No, I did not! There was Laura and Ivy, and Nettie and Claude, and Lois and little Elmer, besides myself, to divide among!"

"Which suggests my school days and problems in arithmetic! I think this would be a question in short division or would it be short cake?"

"No, indeed! We all had almost enough! But, Uncle, do behave! Here's my purse; I want you to keep it."

"With all my lordly goods I thee endow!" Why, thank you, Miss Dawson! I hear the gold pieces clinking! But I don't know if my mamma will allow me to accept such valuable presents!"

There was a little gurgling laugh from Alene.

"Do let me finish! I only want you to keep it for me until the end of the week!"

"Indian giver! Indian giver! Take your old purse! I guess it was only the clink of pennies I heard, anyway!"

Alene clasped her hands behind her back.

"You must keep it or I can't play being poor! Now Uncle, won't you be good! I feel so ashamed to have so much when the other girls have so little, and I want to try it for just one little week; besides, it will be fun!"

"Fun for you, but what a temptation to put in your own Uncle's way! However I don't want to be too selfish. I'll keep the purse."

"For a week. Thank you, Uncle!"

"Have you any more stray pennies to put in my charge?"

"I have exactly six cents left and I must get along on that."

"Won't you allow me to contribute an occasional quarter?"

"Well, not more than a nickel at a time. Just pretend I'm a poor little girl who is hired to run errands at the Towers!"

"And if you demand part of the content of the purse?"

"Don't give it to me! But I shan't!"

Alene held her week's allowance in her hand until they entered the house; then she placed it beside her plate at dinner. She found it troublesome keeping track of it.

"I need a small purse to put it in. There's a pretty one for a quarter at Nixon's store—ah, I forgot already, I haven't enough money."

Uncle Fred offered her the use of a flat red-morocco pocketbook, but Alene said it was not convenient to carry, and besides, people would expect so much from its size! She at last decided to use a small knit bag of crimson silk with silver rings, which she kept in a box upstairs.

The next day she had a long letter to mail to her parents, and the girls accompanied her to the post-office.

On the way back they heard music.

They soon came to where the players stood, a crippled Italian and a little, dark-skinned boy, with a harp and violin.

At the conclusion of several numbers the boy went through the crowd, holding out his battered cap.

Laura put in all she had, a bright new cent.

"I haven't a penny," lamented Ivy.

"I have just one solitary, shamed little fellow, done up in crimson satin and silver buckles," announced Alene, taking the pretty bag from her wrist.

Ivy giggled.

"Everybody is looking, Alene! They expect a piece of silver, at least, from that gorgeous purse!"

"Well, I can't help it! I paid a nickle postage on my letter, you know!"

"Yes, I know, but the rest of the town is in ignorance of that great expenditure."

"You needn't laugh, Miss Bonner. Considering the amount of my capital, it was a big payment to meet!"

"And so early, too, in your poverty-stricken career, I can sympathize with you," said Laura.

The bright bag with its shining rings, over which the heads of the three girls were bent, seemed to have attracted the attention of the crowd as Ivy had said, and the penny, hidden away in its crimson corner, while Alene fumbled in vain for it, held them longer in the public gaze.

Laura gave a relieved sigh and Ivy a squeak of delight when it at last appeared, and Alene dropped it, as if it burned her fingers, into the outstretched cap.

As she turned away with cheeks that were blazing to match the hue of the bag, a tall boy standing near lifted his hat courteously, and gave way to her.

"Sir Mark!" whispered the irrepressible Ivy. "And looking as grave as a cemetery, without the ghost of a smile!"

"If he hadn't, I'd never, *never* have spoken to him again!" declared Alene. "Girls, I can sympathize now with those who would like to help others and can't."

"Giant Generosity with his pigmy purse," suggested Ivy.

"It's so much pleasanter as well as more blessed to give," remarked Laura.

"But, after all, money isn't everything!" said Alene. "If we are poor we can still give love and sympathy and unselfishness—"

"And advice," broke in Ivy. "And feel the richer the more we give!"

Alene said never a word to her uncle, that evening, relative to the state of her finances. She kept her collapsed purse hidden away.

"When one is poor, one is too proud to beg!" Which reflection did not keep her from being very glad when Mr. Dawson remarked:

"Here, child, is a nickle for the little maid who trimmed my lamp so nicely."

She dropped him a courtesy.

"Thank you, Uncle. I think she will be very glad to get it. I feel quite prosperous again," she said, shutting the coin away in her crimson bag.

Mr. Dawson laughed.

"I suspect you will find that wealth has its uses, and when you are of age and have command of a large sum of money, I only hope that you will use it well. I think your experiences as a Happy-Go-Lucky will teach you much that you would not otherwise learn."

"There's one thing I should like to do—find that clever doctor who cures the lame children, and have him cure Ivy. When I'm grown up I'll build a hospital just for the poor children—but then it will be too late to help her!"

"My friend Dr. Medway, who assists in those operations, promised to pay me a visit this summer," remarked the gentleman.

Alene clapped her hands.

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

"What about, Miss Jump-at-Conclusions?"

"To think that if I'm not grown up, someone else is," said Alene mysteriously.

Uncle Fred made no reply but smiled thoughtfully as he puffed away at his pipe.

Heralded by Prince's loud barking, and escorted by Jed and Kizzie, who ran out to investigate, a vendor, laden with a large square basket, came to the kitchen door. Alene, who was at luncheon, hurriedly gulped down her coffee and joined the group.

The man opened his basket and exhibited some really fine specimens of Mexican drawn-work, beaded moccasins and Indian blankets.

Mrs. Major bought a centre piece, Kizzie a collar-and-cuff set, and Alene looked longingly at a pair of dainty moccasins that were now, alas, beyond her means. She thought regretfully of the cut-steel purse in Uncle Fred's possession.

"But even if he were here I wouldn't ask for it. That would be breaking my word," she said sturdily. The man used all his persuasive powers in vain; she looked and longed and sadly shook her head.

At last he took from the bottom of the basket a long wooden box, and raised the lid.

"How lovely!" They all crowded round with cries of admiration.

"You thinka them vair fine!" the man said, picking up a handful and turning them over in the light till they shone like fairy lanterns of rainbow-tinted dew.

"Here-a is whata you call heem, black fire opal, here-a meelk, here-a cherry, here-a blue!" cried the seller volubly.

Alene stood in silent ecstasy! How she would love to buy three, one each for Laura, Ivy and herself! She knew she could borrow the money from Mrs. Major, and repay her upon Uncle Fred's return that evening, or even let it stand until the next week, when she would regain her fortune but—

"And here-a, leettle lady, ees de jewelry—de feela-gree broocha and de Swastika charm," continued the man persuasively, having noted the little girl's indecision. The others, who were aware of her vow of voluntary poverty, looked on in sympathy and were ready, as she knew, to help her if she desired.

"The other girls often wish to buy, and it's just as hard for them when they can't; besides, it wouldn't be right to borrow for such things when one is poor, and I'm not supposed to know this week that I'll be able to afford it next," reasoned Alene, shaking her head the more energetically to fortify her resolution.

The man, disappointed, slowly repacked his wares, shouldered them and shambled away, while Alene stood looking on.

"After all, opals are unlucky," said Kizzie consolingly.

Alene felt Prince's soft nose against her hand.

"You feel sorry, don't you, old fellow? But this is what the rest of the Happy-Go-Luckys have to bear all the time! I've been used to going through the world picking up everything I fancied, with never a thought for others who had to go without. This is a sort of experience week for me! But cheer up, Prince Sobersides, and come along for a run!"

"Girls, this is the Crimson Bag's last night, and it's my treat!" announced Alene, when she met her friends Saturday evening.

They proceeded blithely down the street, dressed in their best, in honor of the evening which was generally observed in the town as the gala time of the week, when the stores were kept open to accommodate the workingmen who were paid that night, and the young people promenaded Main Street as far as the ice-cream parlors.

When the girls reached "Clyde's Parlors and Restaurant," as the highly gilded sign in the window proclaimed it, they found the place crowded.

Ivy gave Laura a nudge and the latter, turning suddenly, collided with another girl.

"I beg your pardon—Oh, Hermione, is it you?"

"You can't think it's my ghost that nearly knocked your hat off! Ah, there's your other two-thirds, Alene and Ivy! How d'you do, girls?" She paused for a chat until Vera with several other girls came along on their way out of the store.

"Ah, good evening, Alene! Let me introduce my friends," she said, proceeding with the ceremony and totally ignoring Laura and Ivy.

"And these are my friends, Miss Lee and Miss Bonner," said Alene.

Vera soon hurried her party away, but they had gone only a few steps when she paused at a show case, apparently much interested in its contents.

"I want to see what Alene Dawson is going to buy!" she explained in an undertone. "That's the reason she likes to go with those girls; she can 'show off' more with them and act the Lady Bountiful! Mamma says it's a shame for her uncle to allow her so much money to throw away!"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, come along, girls; it's none of our affair," said she, but Vera's words had aroused the curiosity of the others and they loitered beside her.

All unconscious of their spying, Alene and her friends went their way. Instead of taking seats at one of the many little tables placed invitingly around, they stopped at the next counter. Alene unfastened the crimson bag and gravely searched within it.

"More show!" whispered Vera.

"Three Dill pickles, please; you need not wrap them up," said Alene, laying a nickle on the counter.

Then Vera made a hasty retreat amid the raillery of her friends.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GARDEN PARTY

"Letters for the whole bunch!" cried Lafe Bonner, coming into the sitting-room on his return from the post-office. "Hugh Bonner, E—s—q—Esquimau—wonder why they call his nibs that? Master Donald Bonner, Master Roy Bonner, Little Claude Bonner, Master Walter Bonner and—" Lafe stammered and got very red when he saw the address 'Gen. Lafayette Bonner.' "One for me, too," he continued hurriedly; "and last for Mrs. L. Bonner."

All the members of the family in reach took their letters, and Ivy, seated at her new writing desk in the corner next to the window, turned round expectantly, saying,

"Where's mine?"

Lafe held up his empty hands.

"You may search me! Somebody's forgotten this time!"

"Come here," commanded Ivy.

Lafe advanced, wearing a guileless expression until Ivy ran her hand into his empty coat pocket, and fumbling round, found a snug space in the lining and brought forth the missing epistle.

"Of course I couldn't fool her in that," mused Lafe sheepishly, when he read the contents of his high titled note:

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO A
GARDEN PARTY AT THE TOWERS ON
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER THE FIRST.
HOURS 1:30 TO 8 P. M.

The opening of the mail, always an important event in the town, had proved a pleasantly exciting one that day.

There was a shower of white envelopes from the little square window. Almost everyone who called received one or more, according to the number of children in the family; many regular inquirers who were never known to get even a circular, were at last rewarded, and proudly waved their little white banners so that all the world might see. The unusually large number of mail-bearing pedestrians gave Main Street a gala air.

Ivy, on watch at the window, hugged herself and smiled contentedly, for was she not one of the conspirators who, in league with the Post-office Department, had sent all those little white flags a-flutter through the town?

It was Mr. Dawson who had suggested the idea.

"You have enjoyed so many merry-makings at your friends' hands, don't you think it would be a good thing to make some return, Alene alanna?" he inquired one evening, when they sat by the library table, he smoking a pipe as usual, while Alene finished a page of a daily journal which she sent each week to her parents.

She beamed at the questioner across the table.

"Oh, Uncle Fred, I'd love to! What shall we do? May I get the girls to help, and make it a regular Happy-Go-Lucky affair?"

"Certainly—and the boys, too, if you wish. I notice they are generally mustered in, 'to help or to hinder,' as the case may be. You might have an outside party if the weather is fine."

"And then we could invite so many more!"

"Invite all the town if you wish. I'll see that there's enough big sugar cakes to go round if we break the bakery. Suppose you ask Mrs. Major and Kizzie in, and see how it strikes them!"

Alene skipped away and soon returned with the buxom housekeeper and the rosy little maid, all in a stir of excitement.

"I see Alene had no trouble in finding enthusiastic allies," said Uncle Fred in his genial way, that always set people at ease.

Everybody found seats and a pleasant hour followed in offering suggestions and making plans, while Prince lay on the rug lazily nodding approbation, or giving a friendly bark when Alene asked his

opinion.

That was only the beginning of a happy time. The girls were deep in blissful preparations the next ten days; the cheerful helpers, Mat and Hugh, held many consultations with Jed and the gardener and Uncle Fred; an array of pavilions, swings, maypoles, rustic seats and tables sprang up in the Towers' grounds, and the kitchen range glowed like a furnace, turning out enough good things to feed a multitude.

Laura, Ivy, and Alene spent two afternoons in the library, making out lists and addressing invitations. Uncle Fred peeped in once or twice, bringing sheets of postage-stamps.

"May I take a few invitations? There are some fellows big and little I'd like to ask," he inquired.

Alene glanced up from her task, pen in hand and nodded absent-mindedly.

"I suppose so."

Apparently overwhelmed by her condescension, he furtively picked up half a dozen invitations and slouched away with a culprit-like mien that made Ivy lean back in her chair and laugh till she was out of breath.

Alene gazed at her wonderingly with such an innocent air that another explosion resulted, and sober Laura, all unaware of the little by-play, gave Ivy a smart rap on the back, which only increased her mirth.

"Hysterics?" inquired Alene.

"I thought she was choking, but she's only practising to be a contortionist," returned Laura, gazing apprehensively at the convulsed figure beside her.

"You girls will be the death of me, along with Mr. Dawson; he looked so funny," explained Ivy, in gasps, wiping her eyes.

They settled back to work with a will.

"Shall we ask Mark Griffin?" inquired Laura. "I have him on my list."

"So have I."

"And I!"

"One invitation will answer, I fancy! Kindly address it, Miss Dawson."

"And now the Happy-Go-Luckys may be as reckless as they please; fall off tree-tops, get lost in the grape-arbors, or tumble into the fountain—it's all the same," cried Ivy.

"If he comes!"

"Perhaps he won't, without his band of buccaneers. I wonder if they are the Torchlights," said Alene.

"He 'shut up like a clam' as Mat says, when I asked him that day, but I got even with his High Mightiness," returned Laura.

"Say, girls," broke in Ivy, "I feel kind of lonesome! Everybody in town will have a bid but us."

"Poor child, she shall have one!" Alene held out for inspection a missive duly stamped and addressed.

"Now, Ivy, you might address Hermione's, and I'll send Vera's."

Ivy made a grimace.

"I'm glad you don't put it the other way!"

"I'd like to ask Hermione to help in our tissue-paper work, but we can't ask her without Vera."

"Hermione's a dear, so for her sake let's set up with Vera," said Laura.

Ivy gave a prodigious groan.

"Take the bitter with the sweet,' though it will be Vera bitter."

So it came to pass that the library was the scene of many more busy hours, and the working-force of the Happy-Go-Luckys was increased by the Ramsey girls, who threw themselves heartily into the making of tissue-paper caps, rosettes and flowers, in which Vera proved an adept, and her productions were so much admired and praised by the others that she became quite amiable, and gave them no reason to regret the invitation.

The time went fast enough to these busy workers, though it seemed very slow to the rest of the young people.

Every lawn in town flew yards of dainty garments all belaced and beruffled; many small frocks and waists having seen much service were patched and mended to see more, there was an epidemic of ribbons, curling-irons, and fancy slippers, which grew worse as the great day approached, and when it came at last—as fine a day as one could wish—each house sent forth its quota of shining-faced, bedizened merry-makers to besiege the Towers' gates.

The smaller children were directed to the library, where they were captured by the larger girls, decorated with tissue-paper favors and set loose; "like a flock of birds and butterflies," as Hermione said, or "a plague of hungry locusts," to quote Ivy, who stood on the porch at the front door watching their flight.

"I don't want this old red cap," declared Claude.

"And I want a yellow one like Lawa's weaf," wailed Lois, while Nettie, for once figuring as amiability, with a blue top-knot on her golden tresses, only lingered with the others to give them countenance, as it were.

"Shoo, shoo!" cried the unfeeling Ivy, waving them away with her skirts. "Who are those boys who went past just now, looking so much amused, Laura? The short one stared at you as if he knew you."

"I didn't notice," returned Laura, glancing after the lads.

"It's that boy you made buy the white pitcher," said Alene.

"The other looks like one of Mark Griffin's soldiers of misfortune. Hoy, Mat!" Ivy hailed the latter in passing. "Who are those boys?"

"Bud Waters and Artie Orr; they came with Mark Griffin and Jack Lever,—there's Jack now."

"That thin boy leaning on the cane? I wondered who he was!"

"Yes, he's been laid up with a broken leg; is just able to hobble round; that's the reason we haven't seen him and Mark together for so long. They are hobnobbing with the Stony Road gang to-day."

"The gang? Why, are they all here?"

"Five or six, I should say. Mr. Dawson seemed to know them and sent Jed to show them round."

"That explains where Uncle Fred's invitations went."

"I shouldn't wonder if he knows all about the Torchlights, too!"

"Neither should I, Laura."

"The Torchlights?" cried Vera; "Who are they?"

"A sort of club," said Laura, shutting her lips together in an imitation of Mark.

CHAPTER XXV

IVY'S FRIEND

In the middle of the afternoon as Ivy sat alone on a bench beneath a tree, listening to the band and watching the children circling merrily round a number of maypoles, she heard a voice at her side:

"Excuse me, but may I have part of your seat?"

"Why, certainly!" she said, making room for the speaker, a middle-aged man with genial blue eyes and a blonde beard, who was dressed in an easy-fitting, light suit, and carried a large book which he placed with his hat on the grass at his feet.

"I guess he's a friend of the housekeeper's; I noticed him speaking with her to-day," thought Ivy, her gaze straying back to the light-footed dancers.

"It looks easy, twirling those ribbons around the poles, but isn't it rather warm weather, for dancing?"

Ivy turned upon him a pair of eyes full of pity for his ignorance.

"Why, it would be lovely! I'm sure I'd never think of the heat if—" she glanced eloquently at the crutches which leaned against the tree.

"It's too bad, at a time like this especially; I shouldn't like that either! Though my dancing days are past, I like to walk a lot and gather 'yarbs an' things,'" he said. Taking up the big black book, he displayed a collection of pressed plants, leaves and flowers, in which Ivy took so much interest that he showed her through the book, explaining the value and rarity of his treasures gathered from many places, and relating incidents connected with his travels in search of them.

Ivy gave a sigh of admiration.

"How lovely to travel that way! One could write a book about it!"

"Do you like to write? I hope then you will get a chance some day to visit all those countries."

Ivy shook her head.

"Not hopping around on those," she said bitterly, and with a few sympathetic questions he drew from her the sad story of her affliction. She was afterwards surprised at her own volubility, being, as a rule, very shy with strangers.

"I have seen children who were even worse than you completely cured," he said; he related several instances while Ivy listened with flaming cheeks and glistening eyes. A dozen questions trembled on her tongue when a crowd of girls came along, one of whom paused beside her, saying,

"Ivy, Ivy, come on! Don't you hear the bell?"

"Oh, Laura, I forgot all about eating," said Ivy somewhat ruefully.

The stranger smiled.

"Then you are the only one to forget, for see, the youngsters are racing from everywhere right upon us." He glanced at his watch. "Four o'clock—it's time for me to seek my place at the visitors' table!" He picked up his book and hat while the girls hurried away.

The children assembled in front of the Towers and marched in five battalions headed by chiefs wearing different colored tissue-paper wreaths.

Laura with yellow roses led the yellow-capped tots; Vera with blue flowers, the blue-capped ones; Hermione crowned with lilacs, the lavender; Ivy in crimson roses, the red, and Alene in pink roses, the pink.

A few of the children marched in wrong companies. Lois, despite her blue cap, clung closely to her beloved "Lawa."

"With Claude it's not color blindness, but Nettie," explained Ivy, when that rebellious red-cap was seen stepping brazenly in Vera's train.

Vera for once seemed to forget herself in seeing to the welfare of her small charges, who one and all regarded her with admiring eyes; she enjoyed the sensation of being the centre of attraction and graciously accepted their homage, although the majority were "nobodies" whom she had affected to despise.

"Vera bitter has become Vera sweet," observed Ivy, giving a shy nod to the Botanist who was seated with the other grown-ups at the visitors' table watching the children filing past. Beside him was Mrs. Ramsey, resplendent in black net over coral-colored silk, who at that moment was explaining for his benefit:

"The tall, fair girl, wearing blue flowers, is my daughter Vera, and there is Hermione, my oldest, in white with the lilac wreath."

"The Happy-Go-Luckys are partial to tissue-paper," Mr. Dawson said, smilingly.

"The dear girls! And the tots look like fairies in those pretty caps!" said the lady, proud of her daughters' success.

"This active life has certainly done wonders for Freddie's little niece. She was pale and delicate when she came here in the spring and look at her now!" and Miss Marlin, a slight little woman in Quakerish gray, smiled at Alene whose cheeks outvied the roses in her wreath.

"Her mother will be delighted to find her so improved," said Mrs. Ramsey. "My girls think the world of Alene and that funny club, the what-do-you-call-'ems?"

"The Happy-Go-Luckys," suggested Mrs. Major, who wore her best black silk in honor of the day.

The Happy-Go-Luckys, unconscious of having won a champion, passed on to their respective tables; soon all were placed and with mirth and laughter the feast began.

And what a feast it was!

"Niagaras of lemonade, seas of milk and coffee, pyramids of fruit, hills of candy, mountains of cake, whole continents of toothsome things—"

"Not forgetting Sandwich Islands," said Jack Lever, interrupting Mat's flow of oratory.

"Is that in reference to our cannibalistic appetites?" inquired Mark Griffin.

"The bogie man will get you if you don't be good!" squealed Artie Orr in a high falsetto voice.

"Who is that farmer-looking gentleman at the visitors' table? The one speaking to Mr. Dawson?" Ivy asked in an aside of Kizzie who flitted from one table to another, her rosy face like a small sun shining above a cloud of pink and white lawn.

"He's visitin' Mr. Fred—he's from the city, I think. He just came to-day and I didn't hear his name."

"Why, that's Dr. Medway," said Alene; "he's from Dr. Luke's hospital."

"I never dreamed he was a doctor! I talked away like a graphophone, and he told me about many children worse than I am who were cured, just think!"

"Oh, Ivy, Ivy, he'll cure you then!" cried Alene with a quick breath of ecstasy.

Ivy's joy subsided; the tears came in her eyes.

"But I guess it would cost a fortune," she said dejectedly.

Shortly after lunch Dr. Medway, sauntering along the walk enjoying a cigar and escorted by Prince, who had taken a fancy to him, was arrested by a voice.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but are you Dr. Medway?"

"I am. What can I do for you, young man?"

"Ivy, the little lame girl—I'm her brother, Hugh Bonner—you told her about so many cures—Oh, sir, if you would undertake to cure her—why, I haven't any money now, but I'd pay you some day if it took me a lifetime, and I'd—I'd work my fingers to the bone for you!" cried the lad, forgetting in his earnestness the dignified speech he had prepared, and speaking with all the intensity of his long-cherished desire.

"You are a good brother, Hugh, my lad, but I'm not a Shylock. I heard of the little girl before I came here. I shall see your mother about her to-morrow; and be assured the main thing is to cure Ivy—nothing else matters!" and the doctor gave Hugh's hand a vigorous grip.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN ADVENTURE

"Where is Lois?" Laura flitted from one group of people to another, growing anxious in her continued failure to get any information.

"She was naughty, and she's gone!" screamed Claude and Nettie, who came rushing hand in hand out the front door.

"Where did she go?"

"Over the roof."

Laura grew pale.

"The roof? Whereabouts? Where is she, I say? Where were you?" She took hold of their shoulders as if to shake the answers out of them.

Alas, when they spoke her worst fears were confirmed! The children had climbed the four flights of steps to the tower room, where Lois had crawled out upon the roof; they called to her and in trying to turn she had slipped out of sight over the edge.

Laura ran moaning toward the foot of the tower, dreading to find a little crushed body lying there inert, but no! the crowd was gazing upward horror-stricken, and she caught a glimpse of a white object clinging to a swinging ladder high up in the air.

Between the second story and the sloping tower roof a scaffold had been erected by workmen who

were repairing the walls. Fearing possible injury to the children by falling stones, Mr. Dawson had instructed them not to work on the day of the picnic and they had secured the scaffold from the reach of mischievous boys, placing it fortunately just in position to arrest the child's fall.

"If only she doesn't get dizzy!" a voice was saying and Laura for the first time noticed that a boy was scaling the wall. Favored by the thick vines and uneven stones up he went with the agility of an acrobat. He was bareheaded and the sun shone on his face, reddened with exertion, and on his sandy hair and Laura recognized him as one of the Stony Road boys, the one she had talked with on the glass-boat.

"It's Bud Waters—the rest of us were too heavy to try it, and he was off like a squirrel, soon as he saw the child," explained Mat hurriedly. He was with a crowd of boys, among whom were Mark, Hugh, and Jed, carrying a coil of rope.

"We're going up to the roof—if she only holds out that long!"

"Mat, Mat, it's our Lois!" wailed Laura. She saw Mat's face blanch, and the crowd passed, leaving her half crazed. She knew that Alene and Ivy were standing beside her with tears in their eyes, murmuring half audible prayers, but she did not see them. Her gaze turned steadily upon the little hanging figure, and on the boy who went climbing up the wall.

Ah, he has almost reached the goal—he has grasped the ladder—a thrill went through the crowd—he is holding the little one safe from harm! Then, seated beside her on the ladder, he gave a whoop of joy that was answered by the crowd's enthusiastic cries. A moment later the other boys were seen at the narrow windows above and the rope came gliding over the roof.

Then everything became a blur to Laura; she heard a shout of many voices and knew no more until she found herself sitting on a bench with Mrs. Major fanning her, Miss Marlin demanding fiercely from everybody why she had forgotten to bring her lavender salts, Kizzie dancing round with a glass of water, and Ivy and Alene kneeling on the grass chafing her hands, and then, oh blessed sight, Uncle Fred coming across the lawn with Lois safe in his arms!

On seeing her big sister, she stuck a tiny finger into her mouth half abashed.

"Lawa, don't cw y! I didn't mean to go so far down the woof!" she cried, cuddling into Laura's arms.

"Oh, girls! I could kneel to that boy! I'd go and kiss him now only I know boys hate to be fussed over!" declared Laura.

"I'll give him a bushel of kisses!" cried Lois rapturously, whereupon they kissed her all round while Nettie looked on enviously at the stir the little maid was making.

"I wonder why when I'm naughty I get a scolding instead of kisses," she confided to Claude.

"I suppose it's because you've never been quite that naughty, though you've been pretty bad," he said, which latter assurance consoled his chum.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE TOWER

Later in the evening when the smaller children had gone home, some of the others proposed a visit to the tower room to view the sunset, and a gay crowd scurried up the stairs.

Ivy, who could climb the stairs almost as nimbly as her mates, lingered in the rear with Jack Lever.

"It's pretty hard lines," he remarked smilingly, answering her sympathetic expression.

"Yes, indeed, but you will be all right in no time! Just be thankful it won't last for years and years!"

"The brave little gipsy!" thought Jack. He gave her a kindly glance, noting with an insight gained by his late acquaintance with pain, the marks of suffering always so pathetic on a childish face.

"Things like this teach us a lot, don't you think? I feel as if I'd become quite old, tied so long to a sofa, like a thing-um-bub—those lace affairs the girls make, you know—"

"A tidy?"

"Untidy I call 'em, always sticking to a fellow's coat! If it wasn't for the Torchlights, I'd have gone all to pieces."

Ivy started, but curbing her curiosity and profiting by Laura's experience she merely repeated,

"The—the Torchlights?"

"Yes, our club, you know."

Ivy felt that Jack was ready and willing to enlarge upon the theme; she chuckled inwardly, gleefully anticipating the tale she would have for the other girls.

Alas, at that moment Jed came up the stairs with a large pitcher of lemonade and glasses on a tray, and Kizzie followed with a huge frosted cake.

"We thought you would like this, along with the sunset," she said.

Together they climbed the fourth and last flight of stairs and received a noisy greeting from the others on entering the tower room.

Jack gave them an elaborate bow.

"I assure you, my friends, we feel flattered by this demonstrative welcome."

"We don't want to throw cold lemonade on your joy, me boy, but your credentials are excellent," returned Mat, taking the cake from Kizzie.

Jed and the little maid, assisted by the boys, proceeded to pour out lemonade and to cut cake amid the clinking of glasses and merry talk.

The tower room was of octagon shape; crimson tapestry curtains edged with tarnished gilt fringe hung at the eight narrow windows, and a rug of faded crimson velvet half covered the painted floor. A heavy walnut table and a revolving bookcase graced the centre of the room, and an old fashioned wooden settee and several ancient chairs stood round, now occupied by the young people who ate and drank and chattered, the majority quite unmindful of their journey's object—Old Sol, in his departing splendor, glorifying the clouds with prismatic color, ere he sank beyond the far-reaching hills.

"You look quite uplifted," cried Alene, when Ivy, one of the few onlookers, turned from the window.

She gave an expressive glance backward toward the fast-fading sky.

"It's that and something Hugh just told me. He spoke to Dr. Medway—"

"Yes, I know, and oh, I'm so glad!"

"And I too!" cried Laura, joining them.

"I like Dr. Medway; he never once called me 'an interesting case' but talked as if I were just a little girl he would like to see cured. When I think of it I feel so queer, I have to keep tight hold of my crutches, to keep from floating away into the air, like a balloon!" Ivy glanced across the room. "Things seem to be upside down, for there I imagine I see Hugh and Mark Griffin buzzing together like two old gossips!"

"It's not imagination; all the boys are as amiable as the children when they play Mrs. Come-to-See! They were tottering on the brink of friendship and Lois toppled them over into each other's arms."

"You Happy-Go-Luckys look to your laurels; Hugh and I belong to a club of our own now!" called Mat.

"What, the Torchlights?" chorused the three.

He looked surprised.

"How did you know about it?"

They looked wise but said not a word, and Ivy whispered to the girls how near she had come to finding out.

At that moment, taking a glass of lemonade, Mark Griffin stood up.

"To the clever and plucky,
The Happy-Go-Lucky—club!"

he cried, with a sly smile, which told them he knew all about it.

"How did you know?" asked one.

"Who told you?"

"Hugh, that was shabby of you!"

"You girls are always patching up some mystery or other. How was I to know?" said Hugh.

Jack Lever, who was leaning against the table, came over and sat on the settee beside the girls.

"Mark didn't play fair; he never said a word about it till Mat and Hugh had told your secret, so to get even I'll tell you his."

Amid the girls' applause and Mark's protests he commenced.

"You ought to know Phillip Gamer, the first Torchlight, ran away from home when he was twelve to join the Salvation Army. He was a drummer boy in the ranks until a detective, hired by his dad, shadowed him and brought him home, but last year at school he said the Army had helped him to a view of a question which had puzzled him all his life. His mother declared that even as a baby, he had protested in lusty tones against silver-backed hair-brushes and perfumed soaps, and when the nurse perambulated him in the park, a bunch of ragged, barefoot kids would surround the beaming youngster in his silk-lined carriage. There might be a dozen other baby vehicles round, which they wouldn't think of touching, nor of speaking to those tony babies, but they seemed to overlook Phil's frills and laces and took to him like brothers.

"At school he refused one of the high-priced rooms, because it would separate him in a way from the boys he wished most to meet, the boys who thought things out for themselves. Phil's coming knocked out that feeling,—a sort of caste—which divided the rich scholars from the poor; his room was a meeting point—the plane upon which they became fellow-men. Here the Torchlights came into being. Our counter-sign, The Brotherhood of Man, and though there was only one of us who intended to work as a minister in the slums, each was pledged to individual effort in his own locality.

"Mark and I were the only Torchlights from this town, and the first thing I did when I got home was to break my bones in a runaway, and that put me out of the race."

"But it didn't keep him from doing a lot for the boys," said Mark. "Every week we all visited him and had a jolly evening with games, reading and singing and a dandy lunch. At first Jack's people rather scouted the idea of entertaining the Stony Road gang. The first night one of them cut a fine china plate in two, and another shied egg-shells over his shoulder against the wall. Mrs. Lever was horrified, but we begged her to wait and give us another trial."

"Now mother and the rest are completely won over and help us lots. I believe I would have knocked my brains out against the wall this summer, only for the Torchlights. I found we can't do good to others without receiving a reactionary benefit. As Phil says, many a rich lad joins in a patronizing way, thinking he's going to revolutionize things, and soon finds it's himself that needs to be done over."

"We were surprised to find a sister club ahead of us here, but we are not at all jealous!" said Mark.

"We can help each other out."

"I thank you in the name of the Happy-Go-Luckys! The Torchlights are fine!" said Laura heartily.

"We might all take for our club poem this little verse," and, half embarrassed by the sudden silence, Alene recited softly—

"Jesus bids us shine,
With a clear pure light,
Like a little candle,
Burning in the night.
In the world is darkness,
So we must shine,
You in your corner,
And I in mine."

"Your lights are torches, you can take them with you out into the world," said Laura.

"As we are all so solemncholy, I'll propose a toast:

'To the dear, ducky duckies,
The Happy-Go-Luckys!'"

cried Mat.

"And here's another—take it for your motto:

'For lofty flights
The Torchlights!'"

Ivy's neat allusion brought forth three cheers for Bud Waters.

"Mr. Dawson inquired about Bud to-day. I bet he'll look out for him, though he has been kind to the Torchlights all along."

The girls glanced at each other as if to say, "What did I tell you?"

"The other day he gave us the use of a big room over his offices; said we could use it for a library and he'd provide the books and furniture," said Mark.

"When there's 'something doing' in the way of reform, Fred Dawson is right there," said Jack.

Whereupon there followed three ringing cheers for that gentleman, which made Alene color with pride. And then the meeting adjourned.

They all descended to the first floor, where the boys joined the men in the library, and the girls went outside for a parting ramble and chat, with Prince gambolling around them.

"There are things about the Torchlights we might copy," remarked Laura. "They take in members whether they like them or not, and try to help them."

"We might invite Hermione and Vera to start with," suggested Ivy.

"That would be kind. I think they would like it," said Alene.

They had reached the grassy terrace beneath the apple-trees, and Ivy, with a sudden recollection exclaimed,

"Girls, it was here we first met, or I should say parted, for Net and I ran so hard we lost our apples in tumbling over the wall, leaving poor Lol to be eaten up by Prince."

"That was the fifteenth of June. I remember it so well," said Laura.

"We have had some lovely times together since then," said Alene.

"To-day was the loveliest of all," declared Ivy.

Then Alene uttered hopefully a prediction that in time proved a true one:

"Girls, we'll have a happier time still on the anniversary of that day—Ivy will be cured, and we'll dance round the Maypole together, the 'maddest, merriest' Happy-Go-Luckys in all the world!"

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PEGGY-ALONE ***

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