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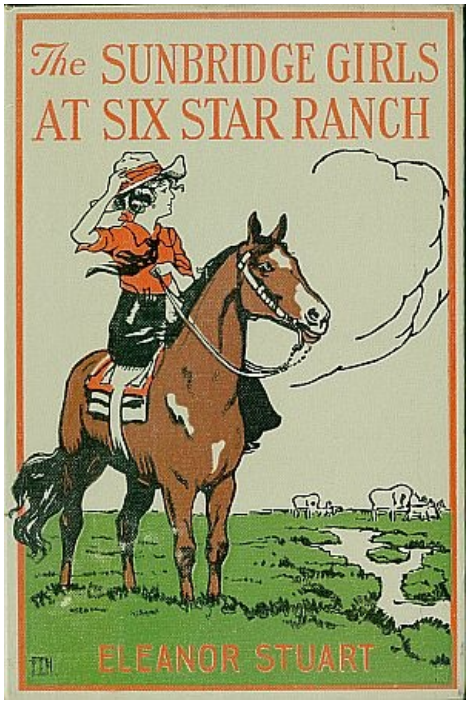

"REDDY WAS RIGHT THERE EVERY TIME"
(*See page 113*)

The Sunbridge Girls at Six Star Ranch

BY

ELEANOR STUART

ILLUSTRATED BY

FRANK J. MURCH

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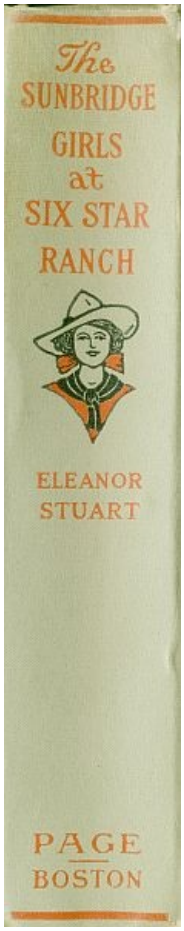

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The Sunbridge Girls at Six Star Ranch

[1]

CHAPTER I

AUNT SOPHRONIA

The Reverend Thomas Wilson's sister, Miss Sophronia, had come to Sunbridge on a Tuesday evening late in June to make her brother's family a long-promised visit. But it was not until the next morning that she heard something that sent her to her sister-in-law in a burst of astonishment almost too great for words.

"For pity's sake, Mary, what is this I hear?" she demanded. "Edith insists that her cousin, Cordelia, is going to Texas next week—to Texas!—*Cordelia!*"

"Yes, she is, Sophronia," replied the minister's wife, trying to make her answer sound as cheerful and commonplace as she could, and as if Texas were in the next room. (It was something of a trial to Mrs. Thomas Wilson that her husband's sister could not seem to understand that she, a minister's wife for eighteen years and the mother of five children, ought to know what was proper and right for her orphaned niece to do—at least fully as much as should a spinster, who had never brought up anything but four cats and a parrot!) "Edith is quite right. Cordelia is going

[2]

to Texas next week."

"But, Mary, are you crazy? To let a child like that go all the way from here to Texas—one would think New Hampshire and Texas were twenty miles apart!"

Mrs. Wilson sighed a little wearily.

"Cordelia isn't exactly a child, Sophronia, you must remember that. She was sixteen last November; and she's very self-reliant and capable for her age, too. Besides, she isn't going alone, you know."

"Alone!" exclaimed Miss Sophronia. "Mary, surely, the rest that Edith said isn't true! Those other girls aren't going, too, are they?—Elsie Martin, and that flyaway Tilly Mack, and all?"

"I think they are, Sophronia."

"Well, of all the crazy things anybody ever heard of!" almost groaned the lady. "Mary, what *are* you thinking of?"

"I'm thinking of Cordelia," returned the minister's wife, with a spirit that was as sudden as it was unusual. "Sophronia, for twelve years, ever since she came to me, Cordelia has been just a Big Sister in the family; and she's had to fetch and carry and trot and run her little legs off for [3]
one after another of the children, as well as for her uncle and me. You *know* how good she is, and how conscientious. You know how anxious she always is to do exactly right. She's never had a playday, and I'm sure she deserves one if ever a girl did! Vacations to her have never meant anything but more care and more time for housework."

Mrs. Wilson paused for breath, then went on with renewed vigor.

"When this chance came up, Tom and I thought at first, of course, just as you did, that it was quite out of the question; but—well, we decided to let her go. And I haven't been sorry a minute since. She's Tom's only brother's child, but we've never been able to do much for her, as you know. We can let her have this chance, though. And she's so happy—dear child!"

"But what is it? How did it happen? Who's going? Edith's story sounded so absurd to me I could make precious little out of it. She insisted that the 'Happy X's' were going."

The minister's wife smiled.

"It's the girls' 'Hexagon Club,' Sophronia. They call themselves the 'Happy Hexagons.' There are six of them."

"Humph!" commented Miss Sophronia. "Who are they—besides Cordelia?" [4]

"Bertha Brown, Tilly Mack, Alma Lane, Elsie Martin, and Genevieve Hartley."

"And *who?*" frowned Miss Sophronia at the last name.

"Genevieve Hartley. She is the little Texas girl. It is to her ranch they are going."

"*Her* ranch!"

"Well—her father's."

"But who is she? What's she doing here?"

"She's been going to school this winter. She's at the Kennedys'."

"A Texas ranch-girl at the Kennedys'! Why, they're *nice* people!" exclaimed Miss Sophronia, opening wide her eyes.

Mrs. Wilson laughed now outright.

"You'd better not let Miss Genevieve hear you say 'nice' in that tone of voice—and in just that connection, Sophronia," she warned her. "Genevieve might think you meant to insinuate that there weren't any *nice* people in Texas—and she's very fond of Texas!"

Miss Sophronia smiled grimly.

"Well, I don't mean that, of course. Still, a ranch must be sort of wild and—and mustangy, seems to me; and I was thinking of the Kennedys, especially Miss Jane Chick. Imagine saying 'wild' and 'Miss Jane' in the same breath!"

"Yes, I know," smiled Mrs. Wilson; "and I guess Genevieve has been something of a trial—in a [5]
way; though they love her dearly—both of them. She's a very lovable girl. But she *is* heedless and thoughtless; and, of course, she wasn't at all used to our ways here in the East. Her mother died when she was eight years old; since then she has been brought up by her father on the ranch. She blew into Sunbridge last August like a veritable breeze from her own prairies—and the Kennedy home isn't used to breezes—especially Miss Jane. I imagine Genevieve did stir things up a little there all winter—though she has improved a great deal since she came."

"But why did she come in the first place?"

Mrs. Wilson smiled oddly.

"That's the best part of it," she said. "It seems that last April, when Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Chick were on their way home from California, they stopped in Houston, Texas, a few days, and there they met John Hartley and his daughter, Genevieve. It appears they had known him years ago when they were 'the Chick girls,' and he came to Sunbridge to visit relatives. I've heard it whispered that he was actually a bit in love with one of them, though I never heard whether it was Miss Jane, or the one who is now the Widow Kennedy. However that may be, he was delighted to see them in Texas, report says, and to introduce to them his daughter, Genevieve." [6]

"But that doesn't explain how the girl came here," frowned Miss Sophronia.

"No, but I will," smiled her sister-in-law. "Fond and proud as Mr. Hartley very plainly was of his daughter, it did not take Mrs. Kennedy long to see that he was very much disturbed at the sort of life she was living at the ranch. That is, he felt that the time had come now when she needed something that only school, young girl friends, and gently-bred women could give her; yet he could not bear the thought of sending her off alone to an ordinary boarding school. Then is when Mrs. Kennedy arose to the occasion; and very quickly it was settled that Genevieve should come here to her in Sunbridge for school this last winter—which she did, and Mrs. Kennedy has been a veritable mother to her ever since. She calls her 'Aunt Julia.'"

"Hm-m; very fine, I'm sure," murmured Miss Sophronia, a little shortly. "And now she's asked these girls home with her—the whole lot of them!"

"Yes; and they're crazy over it—as you'd know they would be."

Miss Sophronia sniffed audibly.

"Humph! It's the parents that are crazy, I'm thinking," she corrected. "Imagine it—six scatter-brained children, and all the way to Texas! Mary!"

"Oh, but the father is in the East here, on business and he goes back with them," conciliated [7]
Mrs. Wilson, hastily. "Besides, Mrs. Kennedy is going, too."

Miss Sophronia raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I can't say I envy her the thing she's undertaken. Imagine *my* attempting to chaperon six crazy girls all the way from New Hampshire to Texas—and then on a ranch for nobody knows how long after that!"

"I can't imagine—*your* doing it, Sophronia," rejoined the minister's wife, demurely. And at the meaning emphasis and the twinkle in her eye, Miss Sophronia sniffed again audibly.

"When do they go?" she asked in her stiffest manner.

"The first day of July."

"Indeed! Very fine, I'm sure. Still—I've been thinking of the expense. Of course, for a minister —"

Mrs. Wilson bit her lip. After a moment she filled the pause that her sister-in-law had left.

"I understand, of course, what you mean, Sophronia," she acknowledged. "And ministers' families don't have much money for Texas trips, I'll own. As it happens, however, the trip will cost the young people nothing. Mr. Hartley very kindly bears all the expenses."

"He does?"

"Yes. He declares he shall be in the girls' debt even then. You see, last winter Genevieve [8]
sprained her ankle, and was shut up for weeks in the house. It was a very bad sprain, and naturally it came pretty hard on such an active, outdoor girl as she is. Mrs. Kennedy says she thinks Genevieve and all the rest of them would have gone wild if it hadn't been for the girls. One or more of them was there every day. Then is when they formed their Hexagon Club. It was worth everything to Genevieve, as you can imagine; and Mr. Hartley declares that nothing he can ever do will half repay them. Besides, he wants Genevieve to be with nice girls all she can—she's had so little of girls' society. So he's asked them to go as his guests."

"Dear me! Well, he must have some money!"

"He has. Mrs. Kennedy says he is a man of independent means, and he has no one but Genevieve to spend his money on. So, as for this trip—in his whole-hearted, generous Western fashion, he pays all the bills himself."

"Hm-m; very kind, I'm sure," admitted Miss Sophronia, grudgingly. "Well, I'm glad, at least, that it doesn't cost you anything."

There was a moment's silence, then Mrs. Wilson said, apologetically:

"I'm sorry, Sophronia, but I'm afraid you'll have to stand it till the children go—and there'll be something to stand, too; for it's 'Texas, Texas, Texas,' from morning till night, everywhere. Genevieve herself is in New Jersey visiting friends, but that doesn't seem to make any difference. [9]
The whole town is wildly excited over the trip. I found even little Mrs. Miller, the dressmaker, yesterday poring over an old atlas spread out on her cutting-table.

"'I was just a-lookin' up where Texas was,' she explained when she saw me. 'My! only think of

havin' folks go all that distance—folks I know, I mean. I'm sure I'd never dare to go—or let my girl.'"

"Very sensible woman, I'm sure," remarked Miss Sophronia.

Mrs. Wilson smiled; but she went on imperturbably.

"Even the little tots haven't escaped infection. Imagine my sensations Sunday when Bettie Barker, the primmest Miss Propriety in my infant class, asked: 'Please, Mis' Wilson, what is a broncho, and how do you bust 'em?'"

This, indeed, was too much for even Miss Sophronia's gravity. Her lips twitched and relaxed in a broad smile.

"Well, upon my word!" she ejaculated, as she rose to her feet to go up-stairs to her room. "Upon my word!"

An hour later, in that same room, Mrs. Wilson, going in to place some fresh towels upon the rack, found a huge book spread open on Miss Sophronia's bed. The book was number seven in [10] the Reverend Thomas Wilson's most comprehensive encyclopedia; and it was open at the word "Texas."

Mrs. Wilson smiled and went out, closing the door softly behind her.

It was, indeed, as Mrs. Wilson had said, "Texas, Texas, Texas," everywhere throughout the town. Old atlases were brought down from attics, and old geographies were dug out of trunks. Even the dictionaries showed smudges in the T's where not over-clean fingers had turned hurried pages for possible information. The library was besieged at all hours, particularly by the Happy Hexagons, for they, of course, were the storm-center of the whole thing.

Ordinarily the club met but once a week; now they met daily—even in the absence of their beloved president, Genevieve. Heretofore they had met usually in the parsonage; now they met in the grove back of the schoolhouse.

"It seems more appropriate, somehow," Elsie had declared; "more sort of airy and—Texasy!"

"Yes; and we want to get used to space—wide, wide space! Genevieve says it's all space," Bertha Brown had answered, with a far-reaching fling of her arms.

"Ouch! Bertha! Just be sure you've got the space, then, before you get used to it," retorted Tilly, aggrievedly, straightening her hat which had been knocked awry by one of the wide-flung arms. [11]

The Happy Hexagons met, of course, to study Texas, and to talk Texas; though, as Bertha Brown's brother, Charlie, somewhat impertinently declared, they did not need to meet to *talk* Texas—they did that without any meeting! All of which merely meant, of course, retaliated the girls, that Charlie was jealous because he also could not go to Texas.

CHAPTER II [12]

PLANS FOR TEXAS

It was a pretty little grove in which the Happy Hexagons met to study and to talk Texas. Nor were they the only ones that met there. Though Harold Day, Alma Lane's cousin, was not to be of the Texas party, the girls invited him to meet with them, as he was Texas-born, and was one of Genevieve's first friends in Sunbridge. On the outskirts of the magic circle, sundry smaller brothers and sisters and cousins of the members hung adoringly. Even grown men and women came sometimes, and stood apart, looking on with what the Happy Hexagons chose to think were admiring, awestruck eyes—which was not a little flattering, though quite natural and proper, decided the club. For, of course, not every one could go to Texas, to be sure!

At the beginning, at least, of each meeting, affairs were conducted with the seriousness due to so important a subject. In impressive silence the club seated itself in a circle; and solemnly Cordelia Wilson, the treasurer, opened the meeting, being (according to Tilly) a "perfect image of her uncle in the pulpit." [13]

"Fellow members, once more we find ourselves gathered together for the purpose of the study of Texas," she would begin invariably. And then perhaps: "We will listen to Miss Bertha Brown, please. Miss Brown, what new thing—I mean, what new features have you discovered about Texas?"

If Miss Brown had something to say—and of course she did have something (she would have been disgraced, otherwise)—she said it. Then each in turn was asked, after which the discussion was open to all.

They were lively meetings. No wonder small brothers and sisters and cousins hung entranced on every word. No wonder, too, that at last, one day, quite carried away with the enthusiasm of the moment, they made so bold as to have something to say on their own account. It happened

like this:

"Texas is the largest state in the Union," announced Bertha Brown, who had been called on first. "It has an area about one twelfth as large as that of the whole United States. If all the population of the country were placed there, the state would not be as thickly settled as the eastern shore of Massachusetts is. Six different flags have waved over it since its discovery two hundred years ago: France, Spain, Mexico, Republic of Texas, Confederate States of America, and the Star Spangled Banner."

"Pooh! I said most of that two days ago," muttered Tilly, not under breath. [14]

"Well, I can't help it," pouted Bertha; "there isn't very much new left to say, Tilly Mack, and you know it. Besides, I didn't have a minute's time this morning to look up a single thing."

"Order—order in the court," rapped Cordelia, sharply.

"Oh, but it doesn't matter a bit if we do say the same things," protested Alma Lane, quickly. (Alma was always trying to make peace between combatants.) "I'm sure we shall remember it all the better if we do repeat it."

"Of course we shall," agreed Cordelia, promptly. "Now, Alma—I mean Miss Lane—" (this title-giving was brand-new, having been introduced as a special mark of dignity fitting to the occasion; and it was not easy to remember!)—"perhaps you will tell us what you have found out."

"Well, the climate is healthful," began Alma, hopefully. "Texas is less subject to malarial diseases than any of the other states on the Gulf of Mexico. September is the most rainy month; December the least. The mean annual temperature near the mouth of the Rio Grande is 72°; while along the Red River the mean annual temperature is only 80°. In the northwestern part of the state the mean annual—"

"Alma, please," begged Tilly, in mock horror, raising both her hands, "*please* don't give us any more of those mean annual temperatures. I'm sure if they can be any *meaner* than the [15] temperature right here to-day is," she sighed, as she fell to fanning herself vigorously, "I don't want to know what it is!"

"Tilly!" gasped Cordelia, in shocked disapproval. "What would Genevieve say!"

Tilly shrugged her shoulders.

"Say? She wouldn't say anything—she couldn't," declared Tilly, unexpectedly, "because she'd be laughing at us so for digging into Texas like this and unearthing all its poor little secrets!"

"But, Tilly, I think we ought to study it," reproved Cordelia, majestically, above the laugh that followed Tilly's speech. "Elsie—I mean, Miss Martin,—what did you find out to-day?"

Elsie wrinkled her nose in a laughing grimace at Tilly, then began to speak in an exaggeratedly solemn tone of voice.

"I find Texas is so large, and contains so great a variety of soil, and climate, that any product of the United States can be grown within its limits. It is a leader on cotton. Corn, wheat, rice, peanuts, sugar cane and potatoes are also grown, besides tobacco."

"And watermelons, Elsie," cut in Bertha Brown. "I found in a paper that just last year Texas grew 140,000,000 watermelons."

"I was coming to the watermelons," observed Elsie, with dignity. [16]

"Wish I were—I dote on watermelons!" pouted Tilly in an audible aside that brought a chuckle of appreciation from Harold Day.

Cordelia gave her a reproachful look. Elsie went on, her chin a little higher.

"Texas is the greatest producer of honey in the United States. As for the cattle—prior to 1775 there were vast ranches all over Southwestern Texas, and herds of hundreds of wild cattle were gathered and driven to New Orleans. I found some figures that told the number of animals in 1892, or about then. I'll give them. They're old now, of course, but they'll do to show what a lot of animals there were there then."

Elsie paused to take breath, but for only a moment.

"There were 7,500,000 head of cattle, 5,000,000 sheep, and 1,210,000 horses, besides more than 2,321,000 hogs."

There was a sudden giggle from Tilly—an explosive giggle that brought every amazed eye upon her.

"Well, really, Tilly," disapproved Elsie, aggrievedly, "I'm sure I don't see *what* there was so very funny in that!"

"There wasn't," choked Tilly; "only I was thinking, what an awful noise it would be if all those 2,321,000 hogs got under the gate at once."

"Tilly!" scolded Cordelia; but she laughed. [17]

She could not help it. They all laughed. Even the little boys and girls on the outskirts giggled shrilly, and stole the opportunity to draw nearer to the magic circle. Almost at once, however, Cordelia regained her dignity.

"Miss Mack, we'll hear from you, please—seriously, I mean. You haven't told us yet what you've found."

Tilly flushed a little.

"I didn't find anything."

"Why, Tilly Mack!" cried a chorus of condemning voices.

"Well, I didn't," defended Tilly. "In the first place I've told everything I can think of: trees, fruits, history, and everything; and this morning I just had to go to Mrs. Miller's for a fitting."

"Oh, Tilly, *another* new dress?" demanded Elsie Martin, her voice a pathetic wail of wistfulness.

"But there are still so many things," argued Cordelia, her grave eyes fixed on Tilly, "so many things to learn that—" She was interrupted by an eager little voice from the outskirts.

"I've got something, please, Cordelia. Mayn't I tell it? It's a brand-newest thing. Nobody's said it once!"

Cordelia turned to confront her ten-year-old cousin, Edith.

"Why, Edith!"

"And I have, too," piped up Edith's brother, Fred, with shrill earnestness. (Fred was eight.) [18]
"And mine's new, too."

Cordelia frowned thoughtfully.

"But, children, you don't belong to the club. Only members can talk, you know."

"Pooh! let's hear it, Cordelia," shrugged Tilly. "I'm sure if it's *new*, we need it—of all the old chestnuts we've heard to-day!"

"Well," agreed Cordelia, "what is it, Edith? You spoke first."

"It's gypsies," announced the small girl, triumphantly.

"Gypsies!" chorused the Happy Hexagons in open unbelief.

"Yes. There's lots of 'em there—more than 'most anywhere else in the world."

The girls looked at each other with puzzled eyes.

"Why, I never heard Genevieve say anything about gypsies," ventured Tilly.

"Well, they're there, anyhow," maintained Edith; "I read it."

"You read it! Where?" demanded Cordelia.

"In father's big sac'l'pedia." Edith's voice sounded grieved, but triumphant. "I was up in auntie's room, and I saw it. It was open on her bed, and I read it. It said there was coal and iron and silver, and lots and lots of gypsies."

There was a breathless hush, followed suddenly by a shrieking laugh from Tilly. [19]

"Oh, girls, girls!" she gasped. "That blessed child means 'gypsum.' I saw that in papa's encyclopedia just the other day."

"But what is gypsum?" demanded Alma Lane.

"Mercy! don't ask me," shuddered Tilly. "I looked it up in the dictionary, but it only said it was a whole lot of worse names. All I could make out was that it had crystals, and was used for dressing for soils, and for plaster of Paris. *Gypsies!* Oh, Edith, Edith, what a circus you are!" she chuckled, going into another gale of laughter.

It was Fred's injured tones that filled the first pause in the general hubbub that followed Tilly's explanation.

"You haven't heard mine, yet," he challenged. "Mine's right!"

"Well?" questioned Cordelia, wiping her eyes. (Even Cordelia had laughed till she cried.) "What is yours, Fred?"

"It's boats. There hasn't one of you said a single thing about the boats you were going to ride in."

"Boats!" cried the girls in a second chorus of unbelief.

"Oh, you needn't try to talk me out of that," bristled the boy. "I *know* what *I'm* talking about. Old Mr. Hodges told me himself. He's been in 'em. He said that years and years ago, when he was a little boy like me, he and his father and mother went 'way across the state of Texas in a prairie [20]

schooner; and I asked father that night what a schooner was, and he said it was a boat. Well, he did!" maintained Fred, a little angrily, as a shout of laughter rose from the girls.

"And so 'tis a boat—some kinds of schooners," Harold Day soothed the boy quickly, rising to his feet, and putting a friendly arm about the small heaving shoulders. "Come on, son, let's you and I go over to the house. I've got a dandy picture of a prairie schooner over there, and we'll hunt it up and see just what it looks like." And with a ceremonious "Good day, ladies!" and an elaborate flourish of his hat toward the Happy Hexagons, Harold drew the boy more closely into the circle of his arm and turned away.

It was the signal for a general breaking up of the club meeting. Cordelia, only, looked a little anxiously after the two boys, as she complained:

"Harold never tells a thing that he knows about Texas, and he must know a lot of things, even if he did leave there when he was a tiny little baby!"

"Don't you fret, Cordy," retorted Tilly. (Cordelia did not like to be called "Cordy," and Tilly knew it.) "Harold Day will talk Texas all right after Genevieve gets back. Besides, you couldn't expect a boy to join in with a girls' club like us, just as if he were another girl—specially as he isn't going to Texas, anyway."

"Well, all he ever does is just to sit and look bored—except when Tilly gets in some of her digs," chuckled Bertha. [21]

"Glad I'm good for something, if nothing but to stir up Harold, then," laughed Tilly, as she turned away to answer Elsie Martin's anxious: "Tilly, what color is the new dress? Is it red?"

It was the next day that the letter came from Genevieve. Cordelia brought it to the club meeting that afternoon; and so full of importance and excitement was she that for once she quite forgot to open the meeting with her usual ceremony.

"Girls, girls, just listen to this!" she began breathlessly.

The Happy Hexagons opened wide their eyes. Never before had they seen the usually placid Cordelia like this.

"Why, Cordelia, you're almost girlish!" observed Tilly, cheerfully.

Cordelia did not seem even to hear this gibe.

"It's a letter from Genevieve," she panted, as she hurriedly spread open the sheet of note paper in her hand.

> "Dear Cordelia, and the whole Club," read Cordelia, excitedly. "I came up yesterday from New Jersey with the Hardings for two days in New York. I have been to see the animals at the Zoo all the afternoon, and I'm going to see the Hippodrome this evening. That sounds like another animal but it isn't one, they say. It's a place all lights and music and crowds, and with a stage 'most as big as Texas itself, with scores of real horses and cowboys riding all over it. [22]
>
> "I am having a perfectly beautiful time, but I just can't wait to see my own beloved home on the big prairie, and have you all there with me. I sha'n't see it quite so soon though, for father has been delayed about some of his business, and he can't come for me quite so soon as he expected. He says we sha'n't get away from Sunbridge until the fifth; but he's engaged five sections in a sleeper leaving Boston at eight P. M. So we'll go then sure.
>
> "Mrs. Harding is calling me. Good-by till I see you. We're coming the third. With heaps of love to everybody, Your own
>
> "GENEVIEVE HARTLEY."

"Well, I like that," bridled Tilly. "Just think—not go until the fifth!"

"Oh, but just think of going at all," comforted Alma Lane, hurriedly; "and in sleepers, too! Sleepers are loads of fun. I rode in one fifty miles, once—it wasn't in the night, though."

"I rode in one at night!" Tilly's voice rose dominant, triumphant.

"My stars!"

"When?"

"Where?" [23]

"What was it like?"

"Was it fun?"

"Why didn't you tell us?"

Tilly laughed in keen enjoyment of the commotion she had created.

"Don't you wish you knew?" she teased. "Just you wait and see!"

"Yes, but, Tilly, do they lay you down on a little narrow shelf, really?" worried Cordelia.

"I sha'n't take off a single thing, anyhow," announced Bertha, with decision, "not even my shoes. I'm just sure there'll be an accident!"

Tilly laughed merrily.

"A fine traveler you'll make, Bertha," she scoffed. "Sleepers are made to sleep in, young lady—not to lie awake and worry in, for fear there'll be an accident and you'll lose your shoes. As for you, Cordy, and the shelf you're fretting over—there are shelves, in a way; but you lay yourself down on them, my child. Nobody else does it for you."

"Thank you," returned Cordelia, a little stiffly. Cordelia did not like to be called "my child"—specially by Tilly, who was not quite sixteen, and who was the youngest member of the club.

"But, Tilly, are—are sleepers nice, daytimes?" asked Edith Wilson, who, as usual, was hovering near. "I should think they'd be lovely for nights—but I wouldn't like to have to lie down all day!" [24]

Tilly laughed so hard at this that Edith grew red of face indeed before Alma patched matters up and made peace.

It was the trip to Texas that was the all-absorbing topic of discussion that day; and it was the trip to Texas that Cordelia Wilson was thinking of as she walked slowly home that night after leaving the girls at the corner.

"I wonder—" she began just under her breath; then stopped short. An old man, known as "Uncle Bill Hodges," stood directly in her path.

"Miss Cordelia, I—I want to speak to ye, just a minute," he stammered.

"Yes, sir." Cordelia smiled politely.

The old man threw a suspicious glance over his shoulder, then came a step nearer.

"I ain't tellin' this everywhere, Miss Cordelia, and I don't want you to say nothin'. You're goin' to Texas, they tell me."

"Yes, Mr. Hodges, I am." Cordelia tried to make her voice sound properly humble, but pride would vibrate through it.

"Well, I—" The man hesitated, looked around again suspiciously, then blurted out a storm of words with the rush of desperation. "I—years ago, Miss Cordelia, I let a man in Boston have a lot of money. He said 'twas goin' into an oil well out in Texas, and that when it came back there'd be a lot more with it a-comin' to me. So I let him have it. I liked Texas, anyhow—I'd been there as a boy." [25]

"Yes," nodded Cordelia, smiling as she remembered the prairie schooner that was Fred's "boat."

"Well, for a while I did get money—dividends, he called 'em. Then it all stopped off short. They shut the man up in prison, and closed the office. And there's all my money! They do be sayin', too, that there ain't no such place as this oil well there—that is, not the way he said it was—so big and fine and promisin'. Well, now, of course I can't go to see, Miss Cordelia—an old man like me, all the way to Texas. But you are goin'. So I thought I'd just ask you to look around a little if you happened to hear anything about this well. Maybe you could go and see it, and then tell me. I've written down the name on this paper," finished the man, thrusting his trembling fingers into his pocket, and bringing out a small piece of not over-clean paper.

"Why, of—of course, Mr. Hodges," promised Cordelia, doubtfully, as she took the paper. "I'd love to do anything I could for you—anything! Only I'm afraid I don't know much about oil wells, you see. Do they look just like—water wells, with a pump or a bucket? Bertha's aunt has one of those on her farm."

"I don't know, child, I don't know," murmured the old man, shaking his head sadly, as he turned away. "Sometimes I think there ain't any such things, anyhow. But you'll do your best, I know. I can trust *you!*" [26]

"Why, of course," returned Cordelia, earnestly, slipping the bit of paper into the envelope of Genevieve's letter in her hand.

In her own room that night Cordelia Wilson got out her list marked "Things to do in Texas," and studied it with troubled eyes. She had now one more item to add to it—and it was already so long!

She had started the list for her own benefit. Then had come the request from queer old Hermit Joe to be on the lookout for his son who had gone years ago to Texas. After that, commissions for others followed rapidly. So many people had so many things they wanted her to do in Texas!—and nobody wanted them talked about in Sunbridge.

Slowly, with careful precision, she wrote down this last one. Then, a little dubiously, she read over the list.

See the blue bonnet—the Texas state flower. Find out if it really is shaped like a bonnet.

Bring home a piece of prairie grass.

See a real buffalo.

Find Hermit Joe's son, John, who ran away to Texas twenty years ago.

See an Osage orange hedge.

See a broncho bursted (obviously changed over from "busted").

Find out for Mrs. Miller if cowboys do shoot at sight, and yell always without just and due provocation. [27]

See a mesquite tree.

Inquire if any one has seen Mrs. Snow's daughter, Lizzie, who ran away with a Texas man named Higgins.

Pick a fig.

See a rice canal.

Find out what has become of Mrs. Granger's cousin, Lester Goodwin, who went to Texas fourteen years ago.

See cotton growing and pick a cotton boll, called "Texas Roses."

See peanuts growing.

Inquire for James Hunt, brother of Miss Sally Hunt.

See a real Indian.

Look at oil well for Mr. Hodges, and see if there is any there.

"Now if I can just fix all those people's names in my mind," mused Cordelia, aloud; "and seems as if I might—there are only four. John Sanborn, Lizzie Higgins, Lester Goodwin, and James Hunt," she chanted over and over again. She was still droning the same refrain when she fell asleep that night.

CHAPTER III [28]

THE COMING OF GENEVIEVE

Genevieve was to arrive in Sunbridge at three o'clock on the afternoon of the third of July. Her father was to remain in Boston until one of the evening trains. The Happy Hexagons, knowing Genevieve's plans, decided to give her a welcome befitting the club and the occasion. They invited Harold Day, of course, to join them.

Harold laughed good-humoredly.

"Oh, I'll be there all right, at the station," he assured them. "I've got Mrs. Kennedy's permission to bring her up to the house; but I don't think I'll join in on your show. I'll let you girls do that."

The girls pouted a little, but they were too excited to remain long out of humor.

"Don't our dresses look pretty! I know Genevieve'll be pleased," sighed Elsie Martin, as, long before the train was due that afternoon, the girls arrived at the station.

"Of course she'll be pleased," cried Alma Lane. "She can't help it. I can hear her laugh and clap her hands now, when she sees us—and hears us!" [29]

"So can I," echoed Bertha. "And how her eyes will dance! I love to see Genevieve's eyes dance."

"So do I," chorused the others, fervently.

Sunbridge was a quiet little town in southern New Hampshire near the state line. It had wide, tree-shaded streets, and green-shuttered white houses set far back in spacious lawns. The station at this hour was even quieter than the town, and there were few curious eyes to question the meaning of the unusual appearance of five laughing, excited young girls, all dressed alike, and all showing flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

At one minute before three o'clock, a tall, good-looking youth drove up in a smart trap, and was hailed with shouts of mingled joy and relief.

"Oh, Harold, we were just sure you were going to be late," cried Cordelia.

"Late? Not I—to-day!" laughed the boy. Then, with genuine admiration: "Say, that is pretty slick, girls. I'll take off my hat to the Happy Hexagons to-day all right!" he finished, with an elaborate flourish.

"Thank you," twittered Tilly, saucily. "Now don't you wish you had joined us? But then—*you* couldn't have worn a white frock!"

A prolonged bell-clanging and the rumble of an approaching train prevented Harold's reply, and sent the girls into a flutter of excitement. A moment later they stood in line, waiting, breathless with suspense. [30]

"A TALL, SLENDER GIRL . . . APPEARED AT A CAR DOOR"

They made a wonderfully pretty picture. Each girl was in white, even to her shoes and stockings. Around each waist was a sash of a handsome shade of blue. The same color showed at the throat and on the hair.

Quietly they watched the train roll into the station, and still quietly they stood until a tall, slender girl with merry brown eyes and soft fluffy brown hair appeared at a car door and tripped lightly down the steps to the platform. They waited only till she ran toward them; then in gleeful chorus they chanted:

> "Texas, Texas, Tex—Tex—Texas!
> Texas, Texas, Rah! Rah! Rah!
> GENEVIEVE!"

What happened next was a surprise. Genevieve did not laugh, nor cry out, nor clap her hands. Her eyes did not dance. She stopped and fumbled with the fastening of her suit-case. The next minute the train drew out of the station, and the girls were left alone in their corner. Genevieve looked up, at that, and came swiftly toward them.

They saw then: the brown eyes were full of tears.

The girls had intended to repeat their Texas yell; but with one accord now they cried out in dismay:

"Genevieve! Why, Genevieve, you're—crying!" [31]

"I know I am, and I could shake myself," choked Genevieve, hugging each girl in turn spasmodically.

"But, Genevieve, what is the matter?" appealed Cordelia.

"I don't know, I don't know—and that's what's the trouble," wailed Genevieve. "I don't know why I'm crying when I'm so g-glad to see you. But I reckon 'twas that—'Texas'!"

"But we thought you'd like that," argued Elsie.

"I did—I do," stammered Genevieve, incoherently; "and it made me cry to think I did—I mean, to think I do—so much!"

"Well, we're glad you did, or do, anyhow," laughed Harold Day, holding out his hand. "And we're glad you're back again. I've got Jerry here and the cart. This your bag?"

"Yes, right here; and thank you, Harold," she smiled a little mistily. "And girls, you're lovely—just lovely; and I don't know why I'm crying. But you're to come over—straight over to the house this very afternoon. I want to hear that 'T-Texas' again. I want to hear it six times running!" she finished, as she sprang lightly into the cart.

On the way with Harold, she grew more calm.

"You see, once, last fall, I said I hated Sunbridge, and that I wouldn't stay," she explained a little shame-facedly. [32]

"You said you hated it!" cried Harold. "You never told me that. Why, I thought you liked it here."

"I do, now, and I did—very soon, specially after I'd met some one I could talk Texas to all I wanted to—*you*, you know! I reckon I never told you, but you were a regular safety valve for me in those days."

"Was I?" laughed the lad.

"Yes, even from that first day," nodded Genevieve, with a half-wistful smile. "Did I ever tell you the reason, the real reason, why Aunt Julia called you into the yard that afternoon?"

"Why, no—not that I know of." Harold's face showed a puzzled frown.

"Well, 'twas this. I'd been here a week, and I was so homesick and lonesome for father and the ranch and all. I was threatening to go back. I declared I'd walk back, if there was no other way. Poor Aunt Julia! She tried everything. Specially she tried to have me meet some nice girls, but I just wouldn't. I said I didn't want any girls that weren't Texas girls. I didn't want anything that wasn't Texas. That's what I'd been saying that very day out under the trees there, when Aunt Julia looked toward the street, saw you, and called you into the yard."

"Is *that* why she introduced me as the boy who was born in Texas?" laughed Harold. [33]

"Yes; and you know how I began to talk Texas right away."

"But I couldn't help much—I left there when I was a baby."

"I know, but you'd been there," laughed Genevieve, "and that helped. Then, through you, I met your cousin Alma, and the rest was easy, for I always had you for that safety valve, to talk Texas to. You see, it was just that I got homesick. All my life I'd lived on the ranch, and things here were so different. I didn't like to—to mind Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Jane, very well, I suspect. You see, at the ranch I'd always had my own way, and—I liked it."

"Well, I'm sure that's natural," nodded Harold.

"I know; but I wasn't nice about it," returned the girl, wistfully. "Father said I must do everything—everything they said. And I tried to. But Miss Jane had such heaps of things for me to do, and such tiresome things, like dusting and practising, and learning to cook and to sew! And it all was specially hard when you remember that I didn't want to come East in the first place. But I love it here, now; you know I do. Every one has been so good to me! Aunt Julia is a dear."

"And—Miss Jane?" queried Harold, eyeing her a little mischievously.

Genevieve blushed. [34]

"Miss Jane? Well, she's 'most a dear, too—sometimes. As for Sunbridge—I love both the East and the West now. Don't you see? But, to-day, coming up from Boston, I got to thinking about it—my dear prairie home; and how I had hated to leave it, and how now I was going back to it with Aunt Julia and the girls all with me. And I was so happy, so wonderfully happy, that a great big something rose within me, and I felt so—so queer, as if I could fly, and fly, and *fly!* And then, when I saw the girls all dressed alike so prettily, and heard the 'Texas, Texas, Texas'—what did I do? I didn't do anything but cry—*cry*, Harold, just as if I didn't like things. And the girls were so disappointed, I know they were!"

"Never mind; I guess you can make them understand—anyhow, you have me," said Harold, trying to speak with a lightness that would hide the fact that her words had made him, too, feel "queer." Harold did not enjoy feeling "queer."

A moment later they turned into the broad white driveway that led up to the Kennedy home.

On the veranda of the fine old house stood a sweet-faced, motherly-looking woman with tender eyes and a loving smile. Near her was a taller, younger woman with eyes almost as interested, and a smile almost as cordial.

"You dears—both of you!" cried Genevieve, running up the steps and into the arms of the two women. [35]

"Thank you, Harold," smiled Mrs. Kennedy over Genevieve's bobbing head; "thank you for bringing our little girl home."

"As if I wasn't glad to do it!" laughed the boy, gallantly, as he picked up the reins and sprang into the cart. To the horse he added later, when quite out of earshot of the ladies: "Jerry, I'm thinking Genevieve isn't the only one in that house that has 'improved' since last August. It strikes me that Miss Jane Chick has done a little on her own account. Did you see that smile? That was a really, truly smile, Jerry. Not the 'I-suppose-I-must' kind!"

Genevieve and the two ladies were still on the veranda when the five white-clad girls turned in at the broad front walk.

"We came around this way home," announced Tilly. "You *said* you wanted us."

"Want you! Well, I reckon I do," cried Genevieve, springing to her feet. "Come up here this minute! Now say it—say it again—that thing you did at the station. I want Aunt Julia to hear it—and Miss Jane."

The change in Genevieve's voice and manner was unconscious, but it was very evident. No one noticed it apparently, however, but Tilly; and she only puckered her lips into an odd little smile as she formed in line with the other girls: Tilly was not without some experience herself with Miss Jane and her ways. [36]

"Now, one, two, three, ready!" counted Cordelia, sternly, her face a tragedy of responsibility lest this final triumph of their labors should be anything less than the glorious success the occasion demanded.

Once more five eager, girlish countenances faced squarely front. Once more five fresh young voices chanted with lusty precision:

"Texas, Texas, Tex—Tex—Texas!
Texas, Texas, Rah! Rah! Rah!
GENEVIEVE!"

It was finished. Cordelia, with the expression of one from whom the weight of nations has been lifted, drew a happy sigh, and looked confidently about for her reward. Almost at once, however, her face clouded perplexedly.

Genevieve was dancing lightly on her toes and clapping her hands softly. Mrs. Kennedy was laughing with her handkerchief to her lips. But Miss Jane Chick—Miss Jane Chick was sitting erect, her eyes plainly horrified, her hands clapped to her ears.

"Children, children!" she gasped, as soon as there was a chance for her voice to be heard. "You don't mean to say that you did *that*—at a public railroad station!" [37]

Cordelia looked distressed. The other girls bit their lips and lifted their chins just a little: they did not like to be called "children."

"But, Miss Chick," stammered Cordelia, "we didn't think—that is, we wanted to do something to welcome Genevieve, and—and—" Cordelia stopped, and swallowed chokingly.

"But to shout like that," protested Miss Chick. "You—*young ladies!*"

The girls bit their lips still harder and lifted their chins still higher: they were not quite sure whether they more disliked to be "children" or "young ladies"—in that tone of voice.

"Oh, but Miss Jane," argued Genevieve, "you know Sunbridge station is just dead, simply dead at three o'clock in the afternoon. Nobody ever comes on that train, hardly, and there wasn't a soul around but that sleepy Mr. Jones and the station men, and that old Mrs. Palmer. And you know *she* wouldn't hear a gun go off right under her nose."

"Genevieve, my dear!" murmured Mrs. Kennedy—but her eyes were twinkling.

Cordelia still looked troubled.

"I know, Genevieve," she frowned anxiously, "but I never thought of it that way—what others would think. Maybe we ought not to have done it, after all. But I'm sure we didn't mean any harm." [38]

Promptly, now, Mrs. Kennedy came to the rescue.

"Of course you did not, dear child," she said, smiling into Cordelia's troubled eyes; "and it was very sweet and lovely of you girls to think of giving Genevieve such a pretty welcome. Oh, of course," she added with a whimsical glance at her sister, "we shouldn't exactly advise you to make a practice of welcoming everybody home in that somewhat startling fashion. That really wouldn't do, you know. Sunbridge station might not be quite so dead next time," she finished, meeting Genevieve's grateful eyes.

"That really was dear of you, Aunt Julia," confided Genevieve some time later, after the girls had gone, and when she and Mrs. Kennedy were alone together. (Miss Jane had gone up-stairs.) "Only think of the pains they took—to get themselves up to look so pretty, besides learning to give that yell so finely. I was so afraid they'd be hurt at what Miss Jane said! And I wouldn't want them hurt—after all that!"

"Of course you wouldn't," smiled Mrs. Kennedy; "and my sister wouldn't either, dear."

Genevieve stirred restlessly.

"I know she wouldn't, Aunt Julia; but—but the girls don't know it. They—they don't understand Miss Jane." [39]

"And do you—always?" The question was gently put, but its meaning was unmistakable.

Genevieve colored.

"Maybe not—quite always; but—Miss Jane is so—so shockable!"

Mrs. Kennedy made a sudden movement. Apparently she only stooped to pick up a small thread from the floor, but when she came upright her face was a deeper red than just that exertion would seem to occasion.

"Genevieve, have you been to your room since you came home?" she asked. There were times when Mrs. Kennedy could change the subject almost as abruptly as could Genevieve herself.

"No, Aunt Julia. You know Nancy carried up my suit-case, and I've been too busy telling you all about my visit to think of anything else."

"Oh," smiled Mrs. Kennedy. "I was just wondering."

Genevieve frowned in puzzled questioning.

"Well, I'm going up right away, anyhow," she said. "Mercy! I reckon I'll go up right now," she added laughingly, springing to her feet as there came through the open window behind her the sound of a clock striking half-past five. "I had no idea it was so late."

Genevieve was not many minutes in her room before she ceased to wonder at Mrs. Kennedy's questioning; for in plain sight on her dressing-table she soon found a small white box addressed [40] to Genevieve Hartley. The box, upon being opened, disclosed in a white velvet nest a beautiful little chatelaine watch in dark blue enamel and gold.

"To keep Genevieve's time.
With much love from
Jane Chick."

read Genevieve on the little card that was with the watch.

"Oh, oh, oh, how lovely!" breathed the girl, hovering over the watch in delight. "And to think what I said!" With a heightened color she turned, tripped across the room and hurried down the hall to Miss Jane's door.

"Miss Jane!"

"Yes, dear."

"May I come in?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I—I want to thank you—oh, I do want to thank you, but I don't know how." Genevieve's eyes were misty.

"For the watch? You like it, then?"

"Like it! I just love it; and I never, never saw such a beauty!"

"I'm glad you like it."

There was a moment's pause. Over by the dressing-table Miss Jane was carefully smoothing a refractory lock of hair into place. She looked so calm, so self-contained, so—far away, thought [41] Genevieve; if it had been Aunt Julia, now!

Suddenly the girl gave a little skipping run and enveloped the lady in two wide-flung young arms, thereby ruffling up more than ever the carefully smoothed lock of hair.

"Miss, Jane, I—I've just got to hug you, anyway!"

"Why, Genevieve, my dear!" murmured Miss Jane, a little dazedly.

From the door Genevieve called back incoherently—the hug had been as short in duration as it had been sudden in action:

"I don't think I can be late now, Miss Jane, ever—with that lovely thing to keep time for me. And I wanted you to know—next year, when I come back, I'm just sure I shall cook and sew beautifully, and do my practising and everything, without once being told. And if I do sprain my ankle I'll be a perfect angel—truly I will. And I won't ever keep folks waiting, either, or—mercy! there's Nancy's first ring now, and I'm not one bit ready!" she broke off, as the musical notes of a Chinese gong sounded from the hall below. The next moment Miss Jane was alone with her thoughts—and with the lock of hair that she was still trying to smooth.

"Dear child!" smiled the lady. Then she turned abruptly and hastened from the room, her hair still unsmoothed. "I'll just tell Nancy to be a little slow about ringing that second gong," she [42] murmured.

When Genevieve came down-stairs to supper that night, she brought with her two books: one a small paper-covered one, the other a larger one bound in dark red leather.

"Here's the latest 'Pathfinder'—only I call it 'Path*loser*,'" she laughed, handing the smaller book to Miss Jane Chick; "and here is—well, just see what is here," she finished impressively, spreading open the leather-covered book before Mrs. Kennedy's eyes.

"'Chronicles of the Hexagon Club,'" read Mrs. Kennedy. "Oh, a journal!" she smiled.

"Yes, Aunt Julia. Isn't it lovely?"

"Indeed it is! Who will keep it?"

"All of us. We are going to take turns. We shall write a day apiece—we six Happy Hexagons of the Hexagon Club."

"Do the girls know about it?" asked Miss Jane.

"Not yet. I just thought of it yesterday when I saw the book in the store. Father bought it for the club—of course *my* money was gone long ago—at such a time as *this*," she explained with laughing emphasis. "I'm going to show the book to the girls to-morrow. Won't they be tickled—I mean pleased," corrected Genevieve, throwing a hasty glance into Miss Jane's smiling eyes.

"I think they will," agreed that lady, pleasantly. [43]

The girls were pleased, indeed, when Genevieve told of her plan and showed the book the next day. But even so entrancing a subject as a journal kept by each in turn could not hold their attention long; for time was very short now, and in every household there were a dozen-and-one last things to be done before the momentous fifth of July. Even the Fourth, with its fun and its firecrackers had no charms for the Happy Hexagons. Of so little consequence did they consider it, indeed, that at last one small boy quite lost his patience.

"You won't fire my crackers, you won't take me to the picnic, you won't play ball, you won't do anything," he complained to his absorbed sister. "I shall be just glad when this old Texas thing is over!"

CHAPTER IV [44]

ON THE WAY

All the girls' friends came to see them off at the station that fifth of July.

"Mercy! it would never do to spring our Texas yell to-day," chuckled Tilly, eyeing the assembled crowd; "but wouldn't I like to, though!"

"There's nothing dead about Sunbridge now, sure," laughed Genevieve.

"I should say not," declared Harold Day, who had begged the privilege of going to Boston to see them aboard their train for Washington.

"For you see," he had argued, "it's to my state, after all, that you are going, so I ought to be allowed to do the honors at this end of the trip as long as I can't at the other!"

They were off at last, Mrs. Kennedy, Mr. Hartley, the six girls, and Harold. But what a scrambling it was, and what a confusion of chatter, laughter, "good-byes," and "write soons"!

In Boston there was a thirty-minute wait in the South Station before their train was due to leave; but long before the thirty minutes were over, the usually serene face of Mrs. Kennedy [45] began to look flushed and worried.

"Genevieve, my dear," she expostulated at last, "can't you keep those flutterbudget girls somewhere near together? It will be time, soon, to take our train, and only Cordelia is in sight. Not even Harold and your father are here!"

Genevieve laughed soothingly.

"I know, Aunt Julia; but they'll be here, I'm sure. There's still lots of time," she added, glancing proudly at her pretty new watch.

"But where are they all?"

"Tilly and Elsie have gone for some soda water, and Bertha for a sandwich at the lunch counter. She said she just couldn't eat a thing before she left home. Alma Lane has gone to a drug store across the street. I don't know where father and Harold are. They went off together, and—oh, here they are!" she broke off in relief, as the two wanderers appeared.

"And now," summoned Mr. Hartley, "we'll be off to our car! Why, where are the rest of us?"

"Well, they—they aren't all here," frowned Genevieve, a little anxiously.

As at Sunbridge, it was a rush and a scramble at the last. Tilly, Elsie, and Bertha came back, but Genevieve went to look for Alma Lane; and when Alma returned without having seen Genevieve, Harold had to run post-haste for her. [46]

"Sure, dearie," said Mr. Hartley to his daughter, laughingly, when at last he had his charges all in the car, "this is a little worse than trying to corral a bunch of bronchos!"

"Oh, but we won't be so bad again," promised the girl, waving her hand to Harold, who stood alone outside the window, watching them a little wistfully.

They had a merry time getting settled, and more than one tired countenance in the car brightened at sight of the six eager young faces.

"I couldn't get all five sections together," frowned Mr. Hartley. "I got three here, but the other two are down near the end of the car—you know the porter showed you. Do you think we can make them go, some way?" he questioned Mrs. Kennedy, anxiously. "I planned for you to have one of the sections down there by yourself, perhaps, with two of the young ladies in the other. Will that do?"

"Of course it will—and finely, too," declared the lady. "Genevieve, you and I will go down there and take one of the girls with us—perhaps Bertha. That will leave your father for one up here, Elsie and Alma for another, and Tilly and Cordelia for the third."

"I knew she'd put you with Cordelia," chuckled Bertha to Tilly, under cover of their scramble to pick out their suit-cases from the pile in which the porter had left them. "And I'm sure you ought to be," she laughed. "There'll be some hopes then that you'll be kept in order!" [47]

"Just look to yourself," retorted Tilly, serenely. "Mrs. Kennedy put *you* down there near *her*—remember that!"

"I declare, I felt just like an orange," giggled Elsie, "with all that talk about 'sections.'"

"I don't see where the shelves are," whispered Cordelia, craning her short little neck to its full extent.

"You'll see them all right," promised Tilly. "Just wait till it's dark, then—'The goblins'll get ye if ye don't watch out!'" she quoted, with mock impressiveness.

"I feel as if I were ten years old, and playing house," chirped Alma Lane, as she happily frowned over just the proper place for her bag.

"I feel as if it were all a dream, and that I shall wake up right at home," breathed Cordelia. "Seems as if it just couldn't be true—that we're really going to Texas! Oh, Genevieve, we can't ever thank you and your father enough," she finished, as Genevieve came up the aisle.

"As if we wanted thanks, after what you've done for me!" cried Genevieve. "Besides, you girls can't be half so glad to go as I am to have you!"

Some time later the porter began to make up the berths. [48]

Tilly nudged Cordelia violently.

"There's shelf number one, Cordy. How do you think you'll like it?" she asked.

Cordelia was too absorbed even to notice the hated "Cordy." With wide-eyed, breathless interest she was watching the porter.

"I think—it's the most wonderful thing—I ever saw," she breathed in an awestruck voice.

It was after the car was quiet that night that Genevieve, in her upper berth, pulled apart the heavy curtains and peeped out into the long narrow aisle between the swaying draperies.

The train was moving very rapidly. The air was heavy and close. The night was an uncomfortably warm one. Genevieve had been too excited to sleep. Even yet it did not seem quite real—that the Happy Hexagons were all there with her, and that they were going to her far-away Texas home.

With a sigh the girl fell back on her pillow, and tried to coax sleep to come to her. But sleep refused to come. Instead, the whole panorama of her Eastern winter unrolled itself before her, peopled with little fairy sprites, who danced with twinkling feet and smiled at her mockingly.

"Oh, yes, I know you," murmured Genevieve, drowsily. "I know you all. You—you little black one—you're the cake I forgot in the oven, and let burn up. And you're the lessons I didn't learn—there are heaps of you! And you—you're those horrid scales I never could catch up with. My, how you run now! And you—you little shamed one over in the corner—you're the prank I played on Miss Jane. . . . Oh, you can dance now—but you won't, by and by! Next year there won't be any of you—not a one left. I'm going to be so good, so awfully good; and I'm not going to ever forget, or to cause anybody any trouble, or—" [49]

With a start Genevieve sat erect in her berth, fully awake.

"Mercy! What a jounce that was!" she cried, just above her breath. "But we seem to be going all right now."

Cautiously she parted her curtains and peeped out again. The next instant she almost gave a little shriek: she was looking straight into Bertha Brown's upraised, startled eyes, just below her.

"Was that an accident?" chattered Bertha. "I told you there'd be one! I'm all dressed, anyhow—if 'tis!"

"Sh-h! No, goosey," chuckled Genevieve.

She would have said more but, at that moment, from up the aisle sounded a sibilant "S-s-s-s!" They turned to see a somewhat untidy fluff of red hair above a laughing, piquant face.

"It's Tilly! She's motioning to us. Say, let's go," whispered Genevieve. And cautiously she began to let herself down from her perch.

The next moment Bertha, fully dressed, and Genevieve in her long, dark blue kimono, were tripping softly up the aisle. [50]

"Why, you're both down here," exulted Genevieve, as she climbed into the lower berth.

"Yes; Cordelia was afraid," giggled Tilly, "so I came down."

"Tilly!—I was not," disputed Cordelia, in an indignant whisper. "You came of your own accord."

"Pooh! Tilly's fooling, and we know it," soothed Bertha, climbing into the berth after

Genevieve.

"Why, Bertha Brown, you've got your shoes on!" gasped Tilly, forgetting to whisper.

"Of course I have," retorted Bertha. "Do you suppose—sh!"

There was a tug at the curtains, and Elsie Martin's round, good-natured face peered in.

"Well, I like this," she bridled. "A special meeting of the Hexagon Club, and me not notified! I heard Genevieve and Bertha giggling in the aisle. Are you all here?"

"All but Alma," rejoined Tilly, in an exultant whisper. "Say, get her, too!"

"Well, now, if this isn't just a lark," crowed Bertha, gleefully, when the last of the six girls had crowded themselves into the narrow berth.

"Ouch! my head," groaned Genevieve, as a soft thud threw the other girls into stifled laughter. [51]

"Pooh! I've been hitting my head against the up-stairs flat ever since I went to bed," quoth Elsie. "Isn't it fun! Now let's talk."

"What about?"

"Texas, of course," cut in Tilly. "Girls, girls, wouldn't it be glorious to give our Texas yell, though, and see what happened!"

"Tilly!" gasped the shocked Cordelia.

"Oh, I wasn't going to, of course," chuckled Tilly, softly. "I was just imaginin', you know."

"But even this—I'm not sure we ought—" began Cordelia.

"No, of course not; you never are, Cordy," agreed Tilly, smoothly.

"But let's talk Texas—we can whisper, you know. Tell us about Texas, Genevieve," cut in pacifier Alma, hurriedly. "What's it like—the ranch?"

Genevieve drew a happy sigh.

"Why, it's like—it's like nothing in Texas, we think," she breathed. "Of course we don't think any other ranch could come up to the Six Star!"

Tilly gave a sudden cry.

"The what?"

"The Six Star—our ranch, you know."

"You mean it's named the 'Six Star Ranch'?" demanded Tilly.

"Sure! Didn't I ever tell you?" retorted Genevieve in plain surprise. [52]

Tilly clapped her hands softly.

"*Did* you! Well, I should say not! You've always called it just 'the ranch.' And now—why, girls, don't you see?—it's *our* ranch. It couldn't have had a better name if we'd had it built to order. It's the Six Star Ranch—and we're the six star girls—the Happy Hexagons. And to think we never knew it before!"

There was a chorus of half-stifled exclamations of delight; then Cordelia demanded anxiously:

"But, Genevieve, will they be glad to see us, really—all your people out there?"

"Glad! I reckon they will be," averred Genevieve, warmly. "The boys will give us a rousing welcome, and there won't be anything too good for Mr. Tim and Mammy Lindy to do."

"Who are they?" asked Tilly.

"Mr. Tim is the ranch foreman, 'the boss,' the boys call him. He's been with us ever since I can remember, and he's so good to me! Mammy Lindy is—well, Mammy Lindy is a dear! You'll love Ol' Mammy. She's been just a mother to me ever since my own mother died eight years ago." Genevieve's voice faltered a little, then went on more firmly. "She's a negro woman, you know. Her people were slaves, once."

"And—the—boys?" asked Cordelia, dubiously. "Are they your—brothers, Genevieve?" [53]

Genevieve laughed—a little more loudly than perhaps she realized.

"Brothers!—well, hardly! The boys are the cowboys—on the ranch, you know. My, but they'll give us a welcome! I reckon they'll ride into town to give it, too, in all their war paint. Just you wait till you see the boys—and hear them!" And Genevieve laughed again.

All in the dark Cordelia looked distinctly shocked; but, being in the dark, nobody noticed it.

"Well, I for one just can't wait," began Tilly, hugging herself with her arms about her knees. "Only think, it'll be whole days *now* before we get there, and—"

"Young ladies!"

Tilly stopped with a little cry of dismay. A man's voice had spoken close to her ear.

"Young ladies," came the mellow tones again. "I begs yo' pardon, but de lady what belongs down in number ten says maybe you done forgot dat dis am a *sleepin'* car."

"Aunt Julia!" breathed Genevieve. "She's number ten."

"She sent the porter," gasped Cordelia. "How—how awful!—and you're in my house, too," she almost sobbed.

"Now I know we're playing house," tittered Alma Lane, hysterically, as she followed Genevieve out of the berth. [54]

Once more in her own quarters, Genevieve lay back on her pillow with a remorseful sigh.

"I don't see why it's so much easier to *say* you'll never give anybody any trouble than 'tis to *do* it," she lamented, as she turned over with a jerk.

The girls began the "Chronicles of the Hexagon Club" the next morning. Genevieve made the first entry. She dwelt at some length on the confusion of the train-taking, both at Sunbridge and Boston. She also had something to say of Tilly Mack. She gave a full account, too, of the midnight session of the Hexagon Club in Cordelia's berth.

"And I'm ashamed that Aunt Julia had to be ashamed of me so soon," she wrote contritely.

Cordelia Wilson had agreed to make the second entry in the book; but the heat, the loss of sleep, and the strangeness and excitement added to her distress that "her house" should have been made to seem a disgrace in the eyes of the whole car, all conspired to make her feel so ill that she declared she could not think of writing for a day or two.

"Very well, then, you sha'n't write; we'll hand the book to Tilly," said Genevieve, "and then we'll give it to some of the others. But I'll tell you what we will do, Cordelia; you shall make the last entry in the book just before we leave the train at Bolo. And you can make it a sort of retrospect —a 'review lesson' of the whole, you know." [55]

"But I thought the others—won't they each tell their day?"

"That's *just* what they'll tell—their day," retorted Genevieve, whimsically. "You *know* what most of them are. Alma Lane would be all right, and would give a true description of everything; only she would go into particulars so, that she would tell everything she saw from the windows, and just what she had to eat all day, down to the last olive."

"I know," nodded Cordelia, with a faint smile.

"As for Tilly—you can't get real sense, of course, from her part. If there's any nonsense going, Tilly Mack will find it and trot it out. Bertha Brown will take up the most of her space by saying 'I always said that—' etc., etc. Bertha is a dear—but you know she does just love to say 'I told you so.' Elsie will write clothes, of course. We shall find out what everybody has on when Elsie writes."

Cordelia laughed aloud—then clapped her hand to her aching head.

"You poor dear! What a shame," sympathized Genevieve. "But, Cordelia, why does Elsie think so much of clothes? Mercy! for my part I think they're the most tiresome sort of things to bother with; and it's such a waste of time to be having to change your dress always!"

Cordelia smiled; then her face sobered. [56]

"Poor Elsie! I'm sorry for Elsie. She does have such an unhappy time over clothes."

"Why? How?—or isn't it fair to tell?" added Genevieve, with quick loyalty.

"Oh, yes, it's fair. Everybody knows it, 'most, and I supposed you did. Elsie herself tells of it. You know she lives with her aunt, Mrs. Gale. Well, Mrs. Gale has three daughters, Fannie, about twenty-one, I guess, and the twins, nineteen; and she just loves to make over their things for Elsie—so she does it."

"Are they so very—poor, then?"

"Oh, no; they aren't poor at all. I don't think she really has to do it. Aunt Mary says she's just naturally thrifty, and that she loves to make them over. But you see, poor Elsie almost never has a new dress—of new material, I mean. Now Elsie loves red; but Fannie wears blue a lot, and the twins like queer shades like faded-out greens and browns which Elsie abhors. Poor Elsie—no wonder she's always looking at clothes!"

"Hm-m; no wonder," nodded Genevieve, her pitying eyes on Elsie far down the aisle—Elsie, who, in a mustard-colored striped skirt and pongee blouse, was at that moment trying to perk up the loppy blue bows on a somewhat faded tan straw hat. "Well, anyhow," added Genevieve, with a sigh, "just remember, Cordelia, that you're to do the last day of the trip in the Chronicles. Now lie down and give your poor head a rest." [57]

Long before the last day of the journey came, Cordelia had quite recovered from her headache; but, in accordance with Genevieve's plan, she did not add her share to the Chronicles until the appointed time. Then, with almost a reverent air, she accepted the book and pen from Genevieve's hands, and returned to the seclusion of her seat, rejoicing that Tilly was playing checkers with Bertha, and so would not, presumably, disturb her—for a time, at least.

"To-day, at noon, we are to arrive at Bolo," she wrote a little unevenly; then with a firmer hand she went on. "Genevieve says this ought to be a retrospect, and touch lightly upon the whole trip; so I will try to make it so.

"It has been a beautiful journey. Nothing serious has happened, though Bertha has worn her shoes all the time expecting it. The best thing, so far, was our lovely day in Washington that Mr. Hartley gave us, and the President. (I mean, we saw him and he smiled.) And the worst thing (except that first night in my berth that Genevieve wrote of) was the time we lost Tilly for three whole hours, and Mrs. Kennedy got so nervous and white and frightened. We supposed, of course, she had fallen off, or jumped off, or got left off at some station. But just as we were [58] talking with the porter about telegraphing everywhere, she danced in with two very untidy, unclean little Armenian children. It seems she had been in the emigrant car all the time playing with the children and trying to make the men and women talk their queer English. I never knew that gentle Mrs. Kennedy could speak so sharply as she did then to Tilly.

"And now—since Tuesday, some time—we have really been in Texas. Some things look just like Eastern things, but others are so strange and queer. It is very hot—I mean, very warm, too. But then, we have just as warm days in Sunbridge, I guess. The windmills look so queer—there are such a lot of them; but they look pretty, too. Some of the towns are very pretty, also, with their red roofs and blue barns and houses. Genevieve says lots of them are German villages.

"In some places lots of things are growing, but in others it is all just gray and bare-looking with nothing much growing except those queer prairie-dog cities with the funny little creatures sitting on top of their houses, or popping down into their holes only to turn around and look at you out of their bright little eyes. We had a splendid chance to see them once when our train stopped right in the middle of a prairie for a long time. We got off and walked quite a way with Mr. Hartley. I saw a rattlesnake, and I'm afraid I screamed. I screamed again when the horrid thing wiggled [59] into one of the dog houses. Mr. Hartley says they live together sometimes, but if I were that dog he wouldn't live with me!

"We have seen lots of cattle and goats and hogs—though Tilly says she hasn't seen any of the latter under any gate yet. I have seen a mesquite tree (so I have done one of my things), and it *does* have thorns. We are on another prairie now, and oh, how big it is, and such a lot of grass as there is on it—just as far as you can see, grass, grass, grass! I guess there won't be any danger of my not having plenty of that to take home. I have seen lots of men on horseback, but I don't know whether they were cowboys or not. They did not shoot, anyway, but some of them did yell.

"Genevieve says cowboys are to meet us, and that probably they will come away to Bolo in full war paint. I thought it was only Indians who painted—except silly ladies, of course—and I was going to say so; but Tilly was there, so I didn't like to. Of course I ought not to mind the cowboys —if Genevieve likes them, and they are her friends; but I can't help remembering what Mrs. Miller told me about their 'shooting up towns' in a very dreadful way when they were angry. I hope none of the men I want to find will turn out to be cowboys." (Here there were signs of an attempted erasure, but the words still stood, and immediately after them came another [60] sentence.) "That is, I mean I should hate to find that any friends of mine had become cowboys.

"I have just been reading over what I have written, and I am disappointed in it. I am sure I ought to have mentioned a great many things about which I have been silent. But there were so many things, and they all crowded at once before me, so that I had to just touch on the big things and the tall things—like windmills, for instance.

"We are getting nearer Bolo now, and I must stop and eat some luncheon, Genevieve says, as we sha'n't have anything else till supper on the ranch. Oh, I am so excited! Seems as if I couldn't draw a breath deep enough. And the idea of trying to eat when I feel like this!"

CHAPTER V [61]

THE BOYS PREPARE A WELCOME

On the back gallery of the long, low ranch house, the boys were waiting for Teresa to ring the bell for supper. Comfortably they lolled about on hammocks, chairs, and steps, with their shirts open at the neck and plentifully powdered with the dust of the corral.

From the doorway, Tim Nolan, the ranch foreman, spoke to them hurriedly.

"See here, boys, I'm right sorry, but I've got to see Benson to-morrow about those steers. That means that I've got to go as far as Bolo to-night, and that I sha'n't be back in time to start with the rest of you to meet the folks. But I'll see you in Bolo day after to-morrow at noon. The train is due then. Now be on hand, all of you that can. We want Miss Genevieve and her friends to have a

right royal welcome. I reckon now I'd better be off. So long! Now remember—day after to-morrow at noon!" he finished, turning away.

"As if we'd be a-forgettin' it," grinned Long John, a tall, lank fellow sprawled in a hammock, [62] "when the little mistress hain't set her pretty foot on the place since last August!"

"If only she wa'n't bringin' all them others," groaned the short, sandy-haired man on the steps. "I'd just like to rope the whole bunch and send 'em back East again, old lady and all—all but the little mistress, of course. Boys, what are we a-goin' to do with an old lady—even though she ain't so awful old—and five tom-fool girls on the Six Star Ranch?"

"Ees not the Señorita a gurrl, also?" laughed a dark-eyed Mexican from his perch on the gallery railing. "Eh, Reddy?"

"Sure, Pedro," retorted the sandy-haired man, testily. (Pedro was the only Mexican cowboy at the ranch, and even he was barely tolerated.) "But the little mistress ain't no tenderfoot girl. She don't howl at a rattlesnake nor jump at a prairie dog; and she knows how to ride, and which end of a gun goes off!"

There was a general laugh, followed by a long silence—the boys did not usually talk so much together, but to-night a curious restlessness pervaded them all. Suddenly the tall man in the hammock pulled himself erect.

"Look a-here, boys, that's jest it," he began in a worried voice. "What if the little mistress has changed? What if she hain't no use for us and the ranch any more? I never told ye, but at the first, last August, 'fore she went away, I heard the boss and Mr. Hartley a-talkin'. They was sayin' [63] she'd got to go East to learn how to live like a lady should—to know girls, and books, and all that. They said she was runnin' wild here with only us for playmates, and that they had just got ter pasture her out where the grass was finer, and the fences nearer tergether."

"Did they say—that?" gasped half a dozen worried voices.

"They sure did—and more. They said two real ladies was a-goin' ter take her and make her like themselves—a lady. And, boys, I was wonderin'—how is a lady goin' ter like us, and the ranch?"

There was a moment's tense silence. The boys were staring, wide-eyed and appalled, into each other's faces.

From somewhere came a deep sigh.

"Gorry!—she can't, she just can't, after all her book-learnin' and culturin'," groaned a new voice.

For a time no one spoke; then Reddy cleared his throat.

"Look a-here, there ain't but jest one thing to do. If she don't like the ranch—and us—we'll jest have to make the ranch—and us—so she will like 'em."

"How?" demanded a skeptical chorus. [64]

"Slick 'em up—and us," retorted the sandy-haired man, with finality. "I was raised East, and I know the sort of doin's they hanker after. To-morrow mornin' we'll begin. I'll show you; you'll see," he finished in a louder tone, as Teresa's clanging supper bell sent them in a stampede through the long covered way that led to the dining-room which, with the cook room, occupied the large, low building thirty feet to the rear of the ranch house.

When Tim Nolan arrived at the Bolo station a little before noon two days later, he stared in open-mouthed wonder at the sight that greeted his eyes. In a wavering, straggling line stood ten stiff, red-faced, miserable men, dressed in what was, to Tim Nolan, the strangest assortment of garments he had ever seen.

Two of the men were in dead black, from head to foot. Four wore stiff, not over-clean white shirts. Six sported flaming red neckties. One had unearthed from somewhere a frock coat three sizes too small for him, which he wore very proudly, however, over a flannel shirt adorned with a red-and-green silk handkerchief knotted at the throat. Another displayed a somewhat battered silk hat. But, whatever they wore, each showed a face upon which hope, despair, pride, shame, and physical misery were curiously blended.

For an instant Tim Nolan peered at them with unrecognizing eyes; then he gave a low [65] ejaculation.

"Reddy! Carlos! Jim! Boys!" he gasped. "What in the world is the meaning of this?"

"Eet ees that we welcome the little Señorita an' her frien's," bowed Pedro, doffing his sombrero which was the only part of his usual costume that he had retained.

"But—I don't understand," demurred the foreman; "these rigs of yours! Reddy, where in time did you corral that coat?"

Reddy shifted from one uneasy foot to the other.

"Pedro's told you—we're here to welcome the little mistress, of course. We've slicked up. We—we didn't want the shock too sudden—from the East, you know."

For another moment Tim Nolan stared; then he threw back his head and laughed—laughed till the faces of the men before him grew red with something more than discomfort.

At that moment a pretty young girl in khaki and a cowboy hat made her appearance astride a frisky little mustang. She wore a cartridge belt about her waist—though there was no revolver in her holster.

"Is Genevieve coming to-day, sure?" she called out joyfully. "I heard she was, and I've come to meet her."

"There, boys," bantered the ranch foreman, "now here's a young lady who knows how to welcome the mistress of the Six Star Ranch!" Then, to the girl: "Sure, Miss Susie, we do expect [66] Genevieve, and we're here to welcome her, as you see," he finished with a sweep of his broad-brimmed hat.

It looked, for a moment, as if the wavering, straggling men would break ranks and run; but a sudden distant whistle, and a sharp command from Reddy brought them right about face.

"Buck up, boys," he ordered sharply. "I reckon the little mistress ain't a-goin' ter turn us down! She'll like it. You'll see!"

The train had scarcely come to a stop before Genevieve was off the car steps.

"Mr. Tim, Mr. Tim—here I am! Oh, how good you look!" she cried, holding out both her hands. A minute later she turned to introduce the embarrassed foreman to Mrs. Kennedy and the girls, who, with her father, were following close at her heels. This task was not half completed, however, when she spied the red-faced, anxious-eyed men.

As Mr. Tim had done, she stared dumbly for a moment; then, leaving the rest of the introductions to her father, she ran toward them.

"Why, it's the boys—our boys! Carlos, Long John, Reddy! But what *is* the matter? How queer you look! Is anybody sick—or—dead?" she stammered, plainly in doubt what to say.

"Sure, it's for you—we're a-welcomin' you," exploded Long John, jerking at his collar which was [67] obviously too small for him.

Genevieve's face showed a puzzled frown.

"But these clothes!—why are you like this?—and after all I've promised the girls about you, too!"

"You mean—you don't like it—this?" demanded Reddy, incredulous hope in his eyes and voice.

"Of course I don't like it! I've been promising the girls all the way here that you'd give them a welcome that *was* a welcome! And now—but why did you do it, boys?"

Long John drew himself to his full height.

"Why? 'Cause Reddy said to," he answered. "Reddy said we'd better ease up on the shock it would be to you—here, after all you'd been used to back East—fine clothes, fine feed, and fine doin's all around, to say nothin' of books and learnin' in between times; so we—we tried to break ye in easy. That's all," he finished, a little lamely.

"And then these clothes mean—that?" demanded the girl.

Long John nodded dumbly.

Genevieve gave a ringing laugh, but her eyes grew soft as she extended her hand to each man in turn.

"What old dears you are—every one of you!" she exclaimed. "Now go home quick, and get comfortable." She would have said more, but some one called her and she turned abruptly. [68] Cordelia Wilson, looking half frightened, half exultant, but wholly excited, was pulling at her sleeve.

"Genevieve, Genevieve, quick," she was panting; "is that a cowboy—that, over there—talking to your father?"

Genevieve turned with a wondering frown. The next moment she burst into a merry laugh.

"Oh, Cordelia, Cordelia, you will be the death of me, yet! No, that isn't a cowboy. It's Susie Billings. She lives on a ranch near here."

"A girl—dressed like that—and carrying a revolver! Just a common 'Susie!'" gasped Cordelia.

"Yes—just a common 'Susie,'" twinkled Genevieve.

"But I thought she was a—a cowboy," quavered Cordelia. "You *said* they'd be here in—in all their war paint!"

From behind them sounded a muffled snort and a low-voiced:

"Boys, she thinks that's a cowboy! Come on—say we show 'em! Eh?"

Genevieve laughed softly at what Cordelia had said, and at the disappointment in her voice.

"Cowboys? Well, they *are* here," she acknowledged with twitching lips, "and in their war paint, too—of a kind! They're right here—Why, they're *gone*," she broke off. "Never mind," she laughed, [69] as she caught sight of a silk hat and a black coat hurrying toward a group of saddled ponies. "I reckon you'll see all the cowboys you want to before you go back East again. Now come up and meet Susie—and she hasn't, really, any revolver there, Cordelia, in spite of that cartridge belt and holster. She's always rigging up that way. She likes it!"

Susie proved to be "a girl just like us," as Cordelia amazedly expressed it to Alma Lane. She was certainly a very pleasant one, they all decided. But even Susie could not keep their eyes from wandering to the unfamiliar scene around them.

It was a bare little station set in the midst of a bare little prairie town, and quite unlike anything the Easterners had ever seen before. Broad, dusty streets led seemingly nowhere. Low, straggling houses stretched out lazy lengths of untidiness, except where a group of taller, more pretentious buildings indicated the stores, a hotel or two, several boarding houses, and numerous saloons and dance halls.

From the station doorway, a blanketed Indian looked out with stolid, unsmiling face. Leaning against a post a dreamy-eyed Mexican in tight trousers, red sash, and tall peaked hat, smoked a cigarette. Halfway down the platform a tired-looking man in heavy cowhide boots and rough clothes, watched beside a huge canvas-topped wagon beyond which could be seen the switching [70] tails of six great oxen.

"There's Fred's 'boat,'" remarked Bertha, laughingly, to Cordelia.

"Where? What?" Cordelia had been trying to look in all directions at once.

"That prairie schooner down there."

"Now that looks like the pictures," asserted Cordelia. "I wonder if the cowboys will."

"I declare, the whole thing is worse than a three-ring circus," declared Tilly, aggrievedly, to Genevieve. "I simply can't see everything!"

"All aboard for the ranch," called Mr. Hartley, leading the way around to the other side of the station; and like a flock of prairie chickens, as Genevieve put it, they all trooped after him.

"Why, what funny horses!" cried Tilly, as Mr. Hartley stopped before a large, old-fashioned three-seated carriage drawn up to the platform.

At Genevieve's chuckling laugh, Tilly threw a sharper glance toward the two gray creatures attached to the carriage.

"Why, they aren't horses at all—yes, they are—no, they aren't, either!"

"I always heard young ladies were a bit changeable," grinned Tim Nolan, mischievously; "but do they always change their minds as often as that, Miss?"

"Yes, they do—when the occasion demands it," retorted Tilly, with a merry glance; and Tim [71] Nolan laughed appreciatively.

"Well, they aren't horses," smiled Mr. Hartley, as he gave his hand to help Mrs. Kennedy into the carriage. "They happen to be mules. Now, Miss Tilly, if you'll come in here with Mrs. Kennedy, we'll put two other young ladies and myself in the other two seats, and leave Genevieve to do the honors in one of the ranch wagons with the rest of you. The baggage, the boys are already putting in the other wagon, I see," he added, looking back to where two men were busy with a pile of trunks and bags. "They'll come along after us. Mr. Tim is on his horse, of course. We'll let him show us the way. Now stow yourselves comfortably," he admonished his guests. "You know we have an eighteen-mile ride ahead of us!"

CHAPTER VI [72]

CORDELIA SEES A COWBOY

Through the broad, dusty streets, by the straggling houses, and out on to the boundless sea of grass trailed the carriage and the ranch wagons, with Mr. Tim in the lead.

Five pairs of eyes grew wide with wonder and awe.

"I didn't suppose anything in the world could be so—so far," breathed Cordelia, who was with Mr. Hartley on the front seat of the carriage.

"No wonder Genevieve was always talking about 'space, wide, wide space,'" cried Bertha. "Why, it's just like the ocean—only more so, because there aren't any waves."

"As if anything could be more like the ocean than the ocean itself," giggled Tilly.

Mr. Hartley laughed good-naturedly.

"Never mind, Miss Bertha," he nodded. "Just you wait till there's a little more wind, and you'll see some waves, I reckon. It's mighty still just now; and yet—there, look! Over there to the right —see?" [73]

They all looked, and they all saw. They saw far in the distance the green change to gray, and the gray to faint purple, and back again to green, while curious shifting lights and shadows glancing across the waving blades of grass, made them ripple like water in the sunlight. At the same time, from somewhere, came a soft, cool wind.

"Why, it is—it is just like the ocean," exulted Cordelia. "I've seen it look like that down to Nantasket, 'way, 'way off at sea."

"I told you 'twas," triumphed Bertha.

"Well, anyway," observed Tilly, demurely, "they must be awfully dry waves—not much fun to jump!"

"Tilly, how can you?" protested Cordelia. "How you do take the poetry out of anything! I believe you'd take the poetry out of—of Shakespeare himself!"

"Pooh! Never saw much in him to take out," shrugged Tilly.

"Tilly!" gasped Cordelia.

"Tilly can't see poetry in anything that doesn't jingle like 'If you love me as I love you, no knife can cut our love in two,'" chanted Bertha.

"My dears!" remonstrated Mrs. Kennedy, feebly.

Tilly turned with swift pacification.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Kennedy. I'm used to it. They can't trouble me any!" [74]

It was Mr. Hartley who broke the silence that followed.

"Well, Miss Cordelia," he asked laughingly, "what is the matter? You've been peering in all directions, and you look as if you hadn't found what you were hunting for. You weren't expecting to find soda fountains and candy stores on the prairie, were you?"

Cordelia smiled and shook her head.

"Of course not, Mr. Hartley! I was looking for the blue bonnets—the flowers, you know. Genevieve said they grew wild all through the prairie grass."

"And so they do—specially, early in the spring, my dear. I wish you could see them, then."

"I wish I could—Genevieve has told me so much about them. She says they're the state flower. I thought they had such a funny name; I wanted to pick one, if I could. She says they're lovely, too."

"They are, indeed, and I wish you could see them when they are at their best," rejoined Mr. Hartley; then he turned to Bertha, who had been listening with evident interest. "In the spring it's a blue ocean, Miss Bertha—I wish you could see the wind sweep across it then! And I wish you could smell it, too," he added with a laugh. "I reckon you wouldn't think it much like your salty, fishy east wind," he finished, twinkling. [75]

"Oh, but we just love that salty, fishy east wind, every time we go near the shore," retorted a chorus of loyal Eastern voices; and Mr. Hartley laughed again.

In the ranch wagon behind them, Genevieve was doing the honors of the prairie right royally. Here, there, and everywhere she was pointing out something of interest. In the ranch wagon, too, the marvelous hush and charm of limitless distance had wrought its own spell; and all had fallen silent.

It was Alma Lane who broke the pause.

"What are all those deep, narrow paths, such a lot of them, running parallel to the wheel tracks?" she asked curiously. "I've been watching them ever since we left Bolo. They are on both sides, too."

"They're made by the cattle," answered Genevieve; "such a lot of them, you know, traveling single file on their way to Bolo. Bolo is a 'cow town'—that is, they ship cattle to market from there."

"Poor things," sighed Elsie, sympathetically. "I saw some yesterday from the train. I thought then I never wanted to eat another piece of beefsteak—and I adore beefsteak, too."

Genevieve sobered a little.

"I know it; I know just how you feel. I hate that part—but it's business, I suppose. I reckon I hate business, anyhow—but I love the ranch! I can't get used to the branding, either." [76]

"What's that?" asked Elsie.

Genevieve shook her head. A look of pain crossed her face.

"Don't ask me, Elsie, please. You'll find out soon enough. Branding is business, too, I suppose—but it's horrid. Mammy Lindy says that the first time I saw our brand on a calf and realized what it meant and how it got there, I cried for hours—for days, in fact, much of the time."

"Why, Genevieve," cried Elsie, wonderingly. "How dreadful! What is a brand? I thought 'brand' meant the kind of coffee or tea one drank."

Alma frowned and threw a quick look into Genevieve's face.

"What a funny little town Bolo is!" she exclaimed, with a swift change of subject. "I declare, it looked 'most as sleepy as Sunbridge."

"Sleepy!" laughed Genevieve, her face clearing, much to Alma's satisfaction. "You should see Bolo when it's really awake—say when some association of cattlemen meet there. And there's going to be one next month, I think. There's no end of fun and frolic and horse-racing then, with everybody there, from the cowboys and cattle-kings to the trappers and Indians. You wouldn't think there was anything sleepy about Bolo then, I reckon," nodded Genevieve, gayly.

"Genevieve, quick—look!—off there," cried Elsie, excitedly. [77]

"Some more of Fred's 'boats'—three of them this time," laughed Alma, her eyes on the three white-topped wagons glistening in the sunlight.

"Boats?" questioned Genevieve.

"That's what little Fred Wilson told us we were going to ride in," explained Alma. "He said they had prairie schooners here, and schooners were boats, of course."

Genevieve laughed merrily.

"I wish Fred could see these 'boats,'" she said.

"Well, I don't know; I feel as if they were boats," declared Alma, stoutly. "I'm sure I don't think anybody on the ocean could be any more glad to see a sail than I should be to see one of these, if I were a lonely traveler on this sea of grass!"

"But where are they going?" questioned Elsie.

"I don't know—nor do they, probably," rejoined Genevieve, with a quizzical smile. "They're presumably emigrants hunting up cheap land for a new home. There used to be lots of them, Father says; but there aren't so many now. See—they're going to cross our way just ahead of us. We'll get a splendid view of them."

Nearer and nearer came the curiously clumsy, yet curiously airy-looking wagons. Sallow-faced women looked out mournfully, and tow-headed children peeped from every vantage point. Brawny, but weary-looking men stalked beside their teams.

"Look at the men—*walking!*" cried Elsie. [78]

"They're 'bull-whackers,'" nodded Genevieve, mischievously.

"Bull-whackers!"

"Yes, because their teams happen to be oxen; if they were mules, now, they'd be 'mule-skinners.'"

"Is that what you are, then?" asked Elsie, with a demureness that rivaled Tilly's best efforts. "You're driving mules, you know."

"Well, you better not call me that," laughed Genevieve. "See, they've stopped to speak to Father. I reckon we'll have to stop, too."

"I 'reckon' we shall," mimicked Elsie, good-naturedly.

"They've got all their household goods and gods in those wagons," said Genevieve, musingly. "I can see a tin coffeepot hanging straight over one woman's head."

"I shouldn't think they had anything but children," laughed Alma, as from every wagon there tumbled a scrambling, squirming mass of barefoot legs, thin brown arms, and touseled hair above wide, questioning eyes.

Long minutes later, from the carriage, Cordelia Wilson followed with dreamy eyes the slow-receding wagons, now again upon their way.

"I feel just like 'ships that pass in the night,'" she murmured.

"I don't. I feel just like supper," whispered Tilly. Then she laughed at the frightened look [79] Cordelia flung at Mr. Hartley.

On and on through the shimmering heat, under the cloudless sky, trailed the carriage and the ranch wagons. Mr. Tim had long ago galloped out of sight.

It was when they were within five miles of the ranch that Cordelia, looking far ahead, saw against the horizon a rapidly growing black speck. For some time she watched it in silence; then, suddenly, she became aware that, large as was the speck now, it had broken into other specks—bobbing, shifting specks that promptly became not specks at all, but men on horseback.

Spasmodically she clutched Mr. Hartley's arm.

"What—are—those?" she questioned, with dry lips.

Mr. Hartley gave an indifferent glance ahead.

"Cowboys, I should say," he answered.

Cordelia caught her breath. At that moment a shot rang out, then another, and another.

Mr. Hartley looked up now, sharply, a little angrily. The indifference was quite gone from his face.

It was then that Genevieve's voice came clear and strong from the wagon behind.

"It's the boys, Father—our boys!" she called. "I know it's the boys. I told them I'd promised the girls a welcome, and they're giving it to us!" [80]

"By George! it is our boys," breathed Mr. Hartley. And the scowl on his face gave way to a broad smile.

"Is it really all—fun?" quavered Cordelia, breathlessly.

"Every bit," Mr. Hartley assured her. And then—though still breathlessly—Cordelia gave herself up to the excitement of the moment.

They were all about them soon—those lithe, supple figures, swaying lightly, or sitting superbly erect in their saddles. From the top of their broad-brimmed hats to the tips of their high-heeled cowboy boots they were a wonder and a joy to the amazed eyes of Cordelia. With stirrups so long the chains clanked musically, they galloped back and forth, shouting, laughing, and shooting wildly into the air. With their chaparejos, or leather overalls, their big revolvers, their spurs, their bright silk handkerchiefs knotted loosely around their necks over the open collar of their flannel shirts, they made a brave show, indeed. Nor was the least of the wonders about them the graceful swirls of loosely-coiled lariats hanging from the horns of their saddles.

After all, it lasted only a minute before the revolvers were thrust into the waiting holsters, and before the men, bareheaded, were making a sweeping bow from their saddles.

It was Genevieve who led the clapping. [81]

"Oh, boys, thank you! That was fine—just fine!" she crowed. "Now I reckon Cordelia thinks she has seen a cowboy all right!"

And Cordelia did. A little white, but bravely smiling, she was sitting erect, apparently serene. And only Mr. Hartley knew that one of her hands was clutched about his arm in a grasp that actually hurt.

"They did that—all that shooting and yelling—just for a joke, then?" she asked Mr. Hartley, a little later.

"Only that. They were giving you a welcome to the Six Star Ranch."

"Then they don't act like that all the time?"

"Hardly!" laughed the man. "I reckon they wouldn't get much work done if they did."

Cordelia drew a relieved sigh. Her eyes, a little less fearful, rested on the erect figure of the nearest cowboy, just to the right of the carriage.

"I'm so glad," she murmured. "I'll tell Mrs. Miller. She thought they did, you know—yell always without just and due provocation, and shoot at sight."

The man's lips twitched; but the next moment they grew a bit stern at the corners.

"That's exactly it, Miss Cordelia—exactly the idea that some people have of the boys, and I'll grant that when they—they drink too much whiskey, they aren't exactly what you might call [82] peaceable, desirable companions—though three-fourths of their antics then are caused by reckless high spirits rather than by real ugliness—with exceptions, of course. But when sober they are quiet, straightforward, generous-hearted good fellows, hard-working and honest; certainly my boys are."

Mr. Hartley hesitated, then went on, still gravely.

"There's just as much difference in ranches, of course, Miss Cordelia, as there is in folks; and all the ranches are changing fast, anyway, nowadays. Lots of the owners are quitting living on them at all. They've gone into the towns to live. On the Six Star the boys take their meals with the family; and in many places they don't do that, I know, even where the owner lives on the ranch. Our boys are very loyal to us, and very much interested in all that concerns us. They fairly worship Genevieve, and have, all the way up."

"I'm so glad," murmured Cordelia, again; and this time there was a look very much like admiration in the eyes that rested on Long John just ahead.

It was some time later that Mr. Hartley said, half turning around:

"Look straight ahead, a little to the right, young ladies, and you'll get a very good view of the Six Star Ranch."

"Oh, and you've got a windmill," cried Tilly. "I can see it against the sky; I know I can!" [83]

"Yes, we've got a windmill," nodded Mr. Hartley.

"I love windmills," exulted Cordelia.

"So does Genevieve," observed Mr. Hartley, raising his eyebrows a little.

Only Cordelia noticed the odd smile he gave as he spoke, and she did not know what it meant. Later, however, she remembered it. She was too much excited now to think of anything but the fact that the Six Star Ranch was so near.

Bertha craned her neck to look ahead.

"Only think, we haven't passed a house, not a house since we left Bolo," she cried.

Mr. Hartley smiled.

"You see, Miss Bertha, Bolo, eighteen miles away, is our nearest neighbor; and you'll have to go even farther than that in any other direction to strike another neighbor."

"My stars!" gasped Bertha. "How awful lonesome it must be, Mr. Hartley."

"Anyhow, you can't be much bothered with neighbors running in to borrow two eggs and a little soda, can you?" giggled Tilly.

"No; that isn't one of the difficulties we have to deal with," smiled Mr. Hartley; but Bertha bridled visibly.

"Well, really, Tilly Mack," she exclaimed in pretended anger, "I should like to know if you mean anything special! You see," she added laughingly to Mr. Hartley, "I happen to live next to Tilly, myself!" [84]

From both carriage and wagon, now, came a babel of eager chatter. There was so much to be seen on the one hand, so much to be explained on the other. The buildings and corrals were plainly visible by this time, and each minute they became more clearly defined.

"Do you mean that all that belongs to just one ranch?" demanded Tilly.

"Sure!" twinkled Mr. Hartley. "You see, if folks can't borrow of us, we can't borrow of them, either; so it's rather necessary that we have all the comforts of home ourselves."

"Well, I guess you've got them," laughed Tilly, looking wonderingly about her.

"I reckon we have," nodded Mr. Hartley, as he began to point out one and another of the buildings.

There was the long, low ranch house facing the wide reach of the prairie. Behind it, and connected with it by a covered way, were the dining room and the cook room. Beyond that was the long bunk house where the men slept, flanked by another building for the Mexican servants. There were stables, sheds, a storehouse and saddle-room, and a blacksmith's shop. Below the house an oblong bit of fenced ground showed a riot of color—Genevieve's flower garden. Below that was a vegetable garden. There was a large corral for the cattle, and a smaller one, high and circular, for the horses. There were three or four green trees near the house—tall, thin cottonwoods that had grown up along the slender streams of waste water from the windmill. [85]

CHAPTER VII [86]

THE RANCH HOUSE

"And here we are at the Six Star Ranch," cried Mr. Hartley, as he leaped from the carriage before the wide-open door of the ranch house. "Well, Mammy Lindy," he added, as the kindly, wrinkled old face of a colored woman appeared in the doorway, "I've corralled the whole bunch and brought them West with me!"

A little stiffly the girls got down from their seats—all but Genevieve. She, in the space of a breath, seemingly, had leaped to the ground and run up on to the wide gallery where the negress, with adoring eyes, awaited her.

"Laws, chil'e," Tilly, who was nearest, heard a tenderly crooning voice say, "but I am jes' pow'ful glad to see ye, honey!"

"Mammy, you old darling!" cried Genevieve, giving the rotund, gayly-clad figure a bear-like hug. "You look just as good as you used to—and my, my! just see all this new finery to welcome me," she added, holding off her beaming-faced old nurse at arms' length. "I reckon you'll think something has come, Mammy Lindy, when we all get settled," she added laughingly, as she [87] turned to present the old woman to Mrs. Kennedy and the girls.

A little later, Tilly, in the wide, center hallway, was looking wonderingly about her.

"Well, Genevieve Hartley, I didn't think you *could* have room enough for us all," she declared; "but I'll give it up. I should think you might entertain the whole state of Texas in this house!"

"We try to, sometimes," laughed Genevieve. "You know we Texans pride ourselves on always having room for everybody."

"Well, I should think you did—and, only think, all on one floor, too!"

Genevieve did not answer. She was looking around her with a thoughtful little frown between her eyebrows as if she saw something she did not quite understand.

The girls were standing in the wide center hallway that ran straight through the house. On one side, through a wide archway, could be seen a large living-room with piano, bookshelves, comfortable chairs, a couch, and a good-sized table. Beyond that there was a narrow hall with two large rooms leading from it. From the other side of the center hall opened another narrow hall at right angles, from which led the six remaining rooms of the house.

"This is more fun than getting settled in the sleepers," declared Elsie Martin, as Genevieve [88] began to fly about arranging her guests.

The boys made quick work of bringing in the trunks and bags; and then for a brief half-hour there was quiet while eight pairs of hurried hands attempted to remove part of the dust of travel and to unearth fresh blouses and clean linen from long-packed trunks.

It was a hungry, merry crowd, a little later, that trooped through the long covered way leading to the dining-room.

"Now I know why this house has got so much room in it," declared Tilly. "We could have room in the East if we banished our dining-rooms and kitchens and pantries to the neighbors like this!"

Genevieve did not answer. They had reached the long narrow room with the big table running lengthwise of it. Only one end of the table was set with places for eight.

"Why, where are the boys?" questioned Genevieve.

Mammy Lindy shook her head.

"Dey ain't here, chil'e."

"But, Mammy, you are mistaken. They are here. They came home with us."

"Yas'm, dey done come home, sure 'nuf, but dey ain't eatin' now, honey."

"Why not?" [89]

Again the old woman shook her head. She did not answer. She turned troubled eyes first on the two young Mexican maids by the doorway, then on Mr. Hartley.

"Father, do you know what this means?" demanded Genevieve.

"No, dearie, I must say I don't," frowned Mr. Hartley.

"Then I shall find out," avowed the mistress of the Six Star Ranch. "Mammy Lindy, please seat my guests, and have the supper served right away. I'll find Mr. Tim."

"But, my dear," remonstrated Mrs. Kennedy, gently, "wouldn't it be better if you ate your own supper first—with your guests?"

Genevieve shook her head. Her face flushed painfully.

"I know, Aunt Julia, of course, what you mean. You don't think it's civil in me to run off like this. But it's the boys—something is the matter. They always eat with us. Why, they may be thinking we don't *want* them, Aunt Julia. Please, please excuse me, everybody," she entreated, as she ran from the room.

Halfway to the bunk house Genevieve met the ranch foreman.

"Why, Mr. Tim, supper is ready. Didn't you know?" she called, hurrying toward him. "Where are the boys?" [90]

An odd expression crossed the man's kindly, weather-beaten face.

"Oh, they're 'round—in spots."

"Why don't they come to supper?"

Mr. Tim's eyebrows went up.

"Well, as near as I can make out, that's part of the welcome they're giving you."

"Welcome!—to stay away from supper!"

Mr. Tim laughed.

"I reckon maybe I'll have to explain," he replied. "Long John told me they'd got it all fixed up that, after your fine doings back East, you wouldn't take to things on the ranch very well. So for two days the whole bunch has been slicking things up, including themselves. They hunted up every stiff hat and b'iled shirt in this part of Texas, I reckon, for that splurge at Bolo; and Mammy Lindy says they've been pestering the life out of her, slicking up the house."

Genevieve drew in her breath with a little cry.

"There! That's what was the matter with the rooms," she ejaculated. "Nothing looked natural—but some things weren't exactly 'slicked up,' Mr. Tim. I couldn't turn around without finding a book at my elbow. There's scarcely one left on the shelves!"

"Maybe I can explain that," returned the man, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Reddy said the East was mighty strong on books and culturing, so I s'pose he thought he'd have 'em 'round handy. It's [91] lucky your father had all them books come out while you was studying, or else I reckon the boys would have hit the trail for the nearest book-store and roped every book in sight."

Genevieve laughed appreciatively.

"But, the supper?" she frowned again.

"Oh, that's part of the outfit—and Reddy said it was 'dinner,' too. He said that he was raised back East, and that he knew; and that 'twas more seemly that you ate it without their company."

"Humph! Well, it isn't, and I sha'n't," settled Genevieve, emphatically. "Where is Reddy? Go in to supper," she laughed, "and I'll round up the boys—I mean, I'll find them," she corrected demurely. "Miss Jane doesn't like me to say 'round up,' Mr. Tim."

Mr. Tim smiled, but his eyes grew tender—almost anxious.

"I reckon they haven't spoiled you back East, after all, little girl. You're the same true blue, like you was, before."

Genevieve laughed and colored a little.

"Of course I am," she declared. "Now I'm going for the boys."

Mr. Tim laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Not to-night; it's late, and it would make no end of fuss all around. But I'll tell them. They'll be [92] on hand for breakfast, all right. Now go back to your own supper, yourself."

"All right," agreed Genevieve, reluctantly. "But—to-morrow, remember!"

"I ain't forgetting—to-morrow," nodded the man.

In the dining-room Genevieve was greeted with a merry clamor, under cover of which she said hurriedly to her father:

"It's all right. They'll come to-morrow."

"I guess you won't find we've left you much to eat," gurgled Elsie Martin, her mouth full of fried chicken.

"Oh, yes, I shall—in Texas," retorted Genevieve.

"But I'm so ashamed," apologized Cordelia. "I don't think we ought to eat so much."

"I do," disagreed Tilly, "when everything is so perfectly lovely as this is. They are just the nicest things! And just guess how many hot biscuits I've eaten with this delicious plum sauce! Mr. Hartley says they're wild—the plums, I mean, not the biscuits."

"And it's all such a surprise, too," interposed Alma Lane; "milk, and butter, and all."

Genevieve stared frankly.

"Surprise!—*milk and butter!*" she exclaimed. "Didn't you suppose we had milk and butter?"

Alma blushed. [93]

"Why, Genevieve, I—I didn't mean anything, you know, truly I didn't," she stammered. "It's only that—that ranches don't usually have them, you know."

"Don't usually have them!" frowned Genevieve. "Alma Lane, what *are* you talking about?"

"Why, we read it, you know, in a book," explained Cordelia, hastily, coming to the rescue. "They said in spite of there being so many cows all around everywhere, there wasn't any butter or milk, and that the cowboys wouldn't like to be asked to milk, you know."

"You read it? Where?" Genevieve's forehead still wore its frown.

Mr. Hartley gave a chuckling laugh.

"I reckon Genevieve doesn't know much about such ranches," he observed. "As I was telling you, Miss Cordelia, coming out this afternoon, there's just as much difference in ranches as there is in folks; and ours happens to be the kind where we like all the comforts of home pretty well. To be sure, I wouldn't just like to ask Reddy or Long John to milk, maybe," he added, with a whimsical smile; "but I don't have to, you see. I've got Carlos for just such work. He looks after the vegetable garden, too, and Genevieve's flowers. By the way, dearie,"—he turned to his daughter—"Tim says Carlos has been putting in his prettiest work on your garden this summer. [94] Be sure you don't forget to notice it."

"As if I could help noticing it," returned Genevieve. She was about to say more when there came an earnest question from Cordelia.

"Mr. Hartley, please, what did you call those two men?"

"What men?"

"The ones you—you wouldn't wish to ask to milk."

"Oh, the boys? I don't remember—I reckon 'twas Reddy and Long John that I mentioned, maybe."

"Yes, sir; that's the one I mean—the John one. What is his other name, please?"

"His surname? Why, really, Miss Cordelia, I reckon I've forgotten what it is. The boys all go by their first names, mostly, else by a nickname. Why? Found a long-lost friend?"

"Oh, no, sir. Well, I mean—that is—he may be lost, but he isn't mine," stammered Cordelia, who was always very literal.

"Then don't blush so, Cordy," bantered Tilly, wickedly, "else we shall think he is yours."

Cordelia blushed a still deeper pink, but she said nothing; and in the confusion of leaving the dining-room she managed to place herself as far from Tilly as possible. On the back gallery she saw the ranch foreman. As the others went chattering through the hall to the gallery beyond, she [95] lingered timidly.

"Mr. Nolan, would—would you please tell me Mr.—Mr. John's other name?"

"John? Oh, you mean 'Long John,' Miss?"

"Yes; but—'John' what?"

Tim Nolan frowned.

"Why, let me see,"—he bit his lip in thought—"'Pierce'—no, 'Proctor.' Yes, that's it—'John Proctor.'"

A look of mingled disappointment and relief crossed Cordelia's face.

"Thank you, Mr. Nolan, very much," she faltered, as she hurried after her companions.

"I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry," she was thinking. "Of course 'twould have been nice if he'd been John Sanborn, only I'm afraid Hermit Joe wouldn't like a cowboy for a son, specially as there wouldn't be anything for him to do in Sunbridge at his trade."

Mrs. Kennedy announced soon after supper that she should take matters in hand very sternly that night and insist upon an early bedtime hour.

"It has been a long, hot, fatiguing day," she said, "but you are all so excited you'd sit up half the night asking questions and telling stories; so I shall take advantage of my position as chaperon, and send you to bed very soon."

"O dear!" sighed Tilly. "If only it would come morning quick! Just think, we've got to wait a [96] whole night before we can do any of the things we're dying to do!"

"Never mind; there are lots of days coming," laughed Mr. Hartley. "What a fine family of young folks I have, to be sure," he gloried, looking around him contentedly.

They were all about him on the front gallery, in hammocks and chairs, or sitting on the steps; and a very attractive group they made, indeed.

"I think it would help the waiting if Genevieve would go in and sing to us," suggested Bertha, after a moment's silence. "It will be so heavenly to sit out here and listen to it!"

"Oh, sing that lovely Mexican 'Swallow Song,'" coaxed Elsie. "'*La Gol*—' —*Gol*-something, anyhow."

"Don't swear, Elsie," reproved Tilly, with becoming dignity.

"*'La Golondrina'?*" laughed Genevieve.

"Yes, it's a dear," sighed Elsie.

"I'd rather have that Creole Love Song that you say Mammy Lindy taught you," breathed

Cordelia. "That would be perfect for such a scene as this."

"Pooh! I'd rather have one of those tinkly little tunes where you can hear the banjos and the tambourines," averred Tilly.

"Indeed! At this rate I don't see how I'm going to sing at all," laughed Genevieve, "with so many conflicting wishes. Anything different anybody wants?" [97]

"Yes," declared Mr. Hartley, promptly. "I want them all."

"Of course!" cried half a dozen voices.

"All right!" rejoined Genevieve, laughingly, springing to her feet.

And so while everybody watched the stars in the far-reaching sky, Genevieve, in the living room, played and sang till the back gallery and the long covered way at the rear of the house were full of the moving shadows of soft-stepping Mexican servants and cowboys. And everywhere there was the hush of perfect content while from the living room there floated out the clear, sweet tones, the weird, dreamy melodies, and the tinkle of the tambourines.

One by one, an hour later, the lighted windows in the long, low ranch house became dark. The last to change was the one behind which sat Cordelia Wilson in the room she shared with Tilly.

"Cordelia, why don't you put out that light and go to bed?" demanded Tilly at last, drowsily. "Morning will never come at this rate!"

"Yes, Tilly, I'm going to bed in just a minute," promised Cordelia, as carefully she wrote in the space opposite Mrs. Miller's name on her list of "things to do":

"Cowboys are good, kind gentlemen; but they are noisy, and some rough-looking." [98]

Five minutes later, Cordelia, from her little bed on one side of the room called a soft "good night" across to Tilly. But Tilly was already asleep.

CHAPTER VIII [99]

THE MISTRESS OF THE SIX STAR RANCH

Breakfast was an early matter at the Six Star Ranch. It came almost with the sunrise, in fact. Genevieve had assured her guests, on the night of their arrival, however, that their breakfast might be hours later—that it might, indeed, be at any hour they pleased. But on this first morning at the ranch, there was not one guest that did not promptly respond to the breakfast-bell except Mrs. Kennedy. The stir of life out of doors had proved an effectual rising-bell for all; and it was anything but a sleepy-looking crowd of young people that tripped into the dining-room to find the boys already waiting for them—a little quiet and shy, to be sure, but very red and shiny-looking as to face and hands, speaking loudly of a vigorous use of soap and water.

Before the meal was half over, Mrs. Kennedy came in, only to meet a chorus of remonstrances that she should have disturbed herself so early.

Genevieve, however, assumed a look of mock severity.

"Aunt Julia," she began reprovingly in so perfect an imitation of Miss Jane Chick's severest manner that Mrs. Kennedy's lips twitched; "didn't you hear the rising-bell, my dear? How often must I ask you not to be late to your meals?" [100]

For one brief moment there was a dazed hush about the table; then, at sight of Cordelia's horrified face, Genevieve lost her self-control and giggled.

"Oh, but that was such a good chance," she chuckled. "Please, Aunt Julia, I just couldn't help it. I had to!"

"I don't doubt it," smiled back Mrs. Kennedy; and at the meaning emphasis in her voice there was a general laugh.

"Well, what shall we do first?" demanded Tilly, when breakfast was over.

Genevieve put her finger to her lips.

"I wonder, now. Oh, I know! Let's go out and see if they've driven in the saddle band yet; then we'll watch the boys rope them and start to work."

"What's a saddle band?—sounds like a girth," frowned Tilly.

"Humph! I reckon it isn't one, all the same," laughed Genevieve. "It's the horses the boys ride. Each one has his own string, you know."

"No, I don't know," retorted Tilly, aggrievedly. "And you needn't use all those funny words —'string' and 'saddle band' and 'rope them'—without explaining them, either, Genevieve Hartley. [101] You've been talking like that ever since we came. Just as if we knew what all that meant!"

Genevieve laughed again.

"No, you don't, of course," she admitted, "any more than I understood some of your terms back East. But come; let's go out and watch the boys. One of the sheds has a lovely low, flat roof, and we can see right over into the horse corral from there. It's easy; there's a ladder. Come on!"

"Why, what a lot of horses!" cried Tilly, a moment later, as they stepped out of doors. "Do they ride all those?"

"Not this morning," laughed Genevieve. "You see, each man has his own string of horses, and he picks out some one of the bunch, and lets the rest go. That's Reddy, now, driving them into the corral. The other boys will be here pretty quick now, and the fun will begin. You'll see!"

The horse corral was high and circular, and there was a fine view of it from the shed roof. A snubbing post was in the middle of the corral, and a wing was built out at one side from the entrance gate, so that the horses could be driven in more easily; yet Reddy quite had his hands full as it was. At last they were all in, and a merry time they were having of it, racing in a circle about the enclosure, heads up, and tails and manes flying.

"Regular merry-go-round, isn't it?" giggled Tilly. But Cordelia clutched Genevieve's arm. [102]

"Genevieve, look—they've got ropes! Genevieve, what *are* they going to do?" she gasped, her eyes on the boys who were running from all directions now, toward the corral. "Why, Genevieve, they're going *in* there, with all those horses!"

"I reckon they are," rejoined the mistress of the Six Star Ranch. "Now watch, and you'll see. There!—see there?—in the middle by that post! Each man will pick out one of his own horses and rope him; then he'll lead him out and saddle him, and the deed's done."

"I guess that's easier to say than to do," observed Bertha, dryly. "I notice there aren't any of those horses just hanging 'round waiting to be caught!"

"No, there aren't, to-day," laughed Genevieve; "though some of the horses will do just that, at times—specially Long John's. They're pretty lively now, however, and it *does* take some skill to make a nice job of it when they're jamming and jostling like that. But the boys are equal to it. We've got some splendid ropers!" This time there was a note of very evident pride in the voice of the mistress of the Six Star Ranch.

It was a brief but exciting time that followed, filled, as it was, with the shouts of the boys—the jeers at some failure, the cheers at some success—the thud of the horses' hoofs, the swirl of the skillfully flung ropes. It was almost as exciting when the boys, their horses once caught, led out, [103] and saddled, rode off for their morning's work. To Cordelia, especially, it was an experience never to be forgotten.

"Going to turn cowboy, Miss Cordelia?" asked Mr. Hartley, with a smile, as he met the girl coming into the house a little later. Mr. Hartley, in his broad-brimmed hat, and his gray tweed trousers tucked into his high boots, looked the picture of the prosperous ranchman at home.

Cordelia showed a distinctly shocked face.

"Oh, no, sir!" she cried.

"Don't think you could learn to swing the rope—eh?" he teased.

"Mercy, no!"

A half-proud, wholly-gratified smile crossed the man's face.

"It isn't as easy as it looks to be," he said. "Once in a while we get a tenderfoot out here, though, who thinks he's going to learn it all in a minute—or, rather, do it without any learning. But to be a good roper, one has to give it long, hard practice. The best of 'em begin young. Reddy, the crack roper in my outfit, tells me he began with his mother's clothes-line at the age of four years, with his rocking-horse for a victim. It seems there was a picture in one of his books of a cowboy roping a pony, and—" [104]

Mr. Hartley stopped, as if listening. From the rear of the house had sounded the creak of the windmill crank. The man turned, entered the hall, and crossed to the window. Then he shook his head with a smile.

"I'm afraid Genevieve is up to her old tricks," he said. "She's stopping the windmill so she can climb to the top of the tower, I reckon."

"Genevieve!—at the top of that tower!" exclaimed Cordelia.

Mr. Hartley's lips twitched.

"Yes. That used to be a daily stunt of hers, and—I let her," added the man, a little doggedly. "It made her well and strong, anyhow, and helped to develop her muscle. You see, we—we don't have gymnasiums on the ranch," he concluded whimsically, as they stepped together out on to the back gallery.

A babel of gleeful shouts and laughter greeted their ears. A moment later Mr. Hartley and Cordelia came in sight of the windmill. At its base four chattering, shrieking girls were laughing

and clapping their hands. Above their heads, Genevieve, in a dark blue gymnasium suit, was swinging herself gracefully from cross-piece to cross-piece in the tower.

"You see," smiled Mr. Hartley; but he was interrupted by a shocked, frightened voice behind him. [105]

"Genevieve, my dear!" gasped Mrs. Kennedy, hurrying forward.

Genevieve did not hear, apparently. To the girls she waved a free hand, joyously. She was almost at the top.

"It's fine—mighty fine up here," she caroled. "I can see 'way, 'way over the prairie!"

"Genevieve! Genevieve Hartley, come down this instant," commanded Mrs. Kennedy. Then her voice shook, and grew piteously frightened, as she stammered: "No, no—don't come down, dear! Genevieve, how *can* you come down?" Mrs. Kennedy was wringing her hands now.

This time Genevieve heard.

"Why, Aunt Julia, what is it? What is the matter?" The girl's voice expressed only concerned surprise.

"What is the matter?" echoed Mrs. Kennedy, faintly. "Genevieve, how can you come down?"

"Come down? Why, that's easy! But I don't want to come down."

Mrs. Kennedy's lips grew stern.

"Genevieve," she said, with an obvious effort to speak quietly; "if you can come down, I desire you to do so at once."

Genevieve came down. Her eyes flashed a little, and her cheeks were redder than usual. She did not once glance toward the girls, clustered in a silent, frightened little group. She did not [106] appear to notice even her father, standing by. She went straight to Mrs. Kennedy.

"I've come down, Aunt Julia."

Mrs. Kennedy had been seriously disturbed, and genuinely frightened. To her, Genevieve's climb to the top of the windmill tower was very dangerous, as well as very unladylike. Yet it was the fright, even more than the displeasure that made her voice sound so cold now in her effort to steady it.

"Thank you, Genevieve. Please see that there is no occasion for you to *come down* again," she said meaningly. Then she turned and went into the house.

Just how it happened, Genevieve did not know, but almost at once she found herself alone with her father on the back gallery. The girls had disappeared.

Genevieve was very angry now.

"Father, it wasn't fair, to speak like that," she choked, "before the girls and you, when I hadn't done a thing—not a thing! Why, it—it was just like Miss Jane! I never knew Aunt Julia to be like that."

For a moment her father was silent. His face wore a thoughtful frown.

"I know it, dearie," he said at last. "But I don't think Mrs. Kennedy quite realized, quite understood—how *you'd* feel. She didn't think it just right for you to be there." [107]

"But I was in my gym suit, Father. I skipped in and put it on purposely, while the others were doing something else; then I climbed the tower. I'd planned 'way ahead how I'd surprise them."

The man hesitated.

"I know, dearie," he nodded, after a moment; "but I reckon it was just a little too much of a surprise for Mrs. Kennedy. You know she isn't used to the West; and—do Boston young ladies climb windmill towers?"

In spite of her anger, Genevieve laughed. The mention of Boston had put her in mind of some Boston friends of Mrs. Kennedy's, whom she knew. She had a sudden vision of what Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Butterfield's faces would have been, had their stern, sixty-year-old eyes seen what Mrs. Kennedy saw.

"I reckon, too," went on Mr. Hartley, with a sigh, "that I have sort of spoiled you, letting you have your own way. And maybe Mammy Lindy and I, in our anxiety that you should be well and strong, and sit the saddle like a Texas daughter should, haven't taught you always just the dainty little lady ways—that you ought to have been taught."

"You've taught me everything—everything good and lovely," protested the girl, hotly. [108]

He shook his head. A far-away look came into his eyes.

"I haven't, dearie—and that's why I sent you East."

Genevieve flushed.

"But I didn't want to go East, in the first place," she stormed. "I wanted to stay here with you. Besides, Aunt Julia isn't really any relation,—nor Miss Jane, either. They haven't any right to—to speak to me like that."

A dull red stole to John Hartley's cheek.

"Tut, tut, dearie," he demurred, with a shake of the head. "You mustn't forget how good they've been to you. Besides—they have got the right. I gave it to them. I told them to make you like themselves."

There was a long silence. Genevieve's eyes were moodily fixed on the floor. Her father gave her a swift glance, then went on, softly:

"I suspect, too, maybe we're both forgetting, dearie. After all, Mrs. Kennedy did it every bit through—love. She was frightened. She was so scared she just shook, dearie."

"She—was?" Genevieve's voice was amazed.

"Yes. I reckon that's more than half why she spoke so stern, and why she's in her room crying this minute—as I'll warrant she is. I saw her eyes, and I saw how her hands shook. And I saw it was all she could do to keep from falling right on your neck—because she had you back safe and [109] sound. Maybe you didn't see that, dearie."

There was no answer.

"You see, their *ways* back East, and ours, aren't alike," resumed the man, after a time; "but I reckon their—*love* is."

Genevieve drew a long breath. Her brown eyes were not clear.

"I reckon maybe I'll go and find—Aunt Julia," she said in a low voice.

The next moment her father sat alone on the back gallery.

CHAPTER IX [110]

REDDY AND THE BRONCHO

There was no lack of interesting things to do that first day at the ranch. There was one half-hour, to be sure, when five of the Happy Hexagons sat a little quietly on the front gallery and tried to talk as if there were no such thing as a windmill, and no such person as a girl who could climb to the top of it; but after Genevieve and Mrs. Kennedy, arm in arm, came through the front door—with eyes indeed, a little misty, but with lips cheerfully smiling—every vestige of constraint fled. Genevieve, once more in her pretty linen frock, was again the alert little hostess, and very soon they were all off to inspect the flower garden, the vegetable garden, the cow corral, the sheds, the stables, and the blacksmith's shop, not forgetting Teresa, the cook, who was making tamales in the kitchen for them, nor Pepito, Genevieve's own horse that she rode before she went East.

"And we'll have the boys pick out some horses for you, too," cried Genevieve, smoothing Pepito's sleek coat in response to his welcoming whinny of delight. "I'm sure they can find [111] something all right for us."

Tilly's eyes brightened, so, too, did Bertha's; but Cordelia spoke hastily, her eyes bent a bit distrustfully on the spirited little horse Genevieve was petting.

"Oh, but I don't believe they'll have time to hunt up horses for us, Genevieve. Really, I don't think we ought to ask them to."

"Maybe we won't, then—for *you*," teased Tilly, saucily. "We'll just let them take time for ours."

It is a question, however, if that afternoon, even Tilly wanted to ride; for, according to Cordelia's notes that night in "Things to do," they saw a broncho "bursted."

It was Mr. Tim who had said at the dinner table that noon:

"If you young people happen to be on hand, say at about four o'clock, you'll see something doing. Reddy's got a horse or two he's going to put through their paces—and one of 'em's never been saddled."

Privately, to Mr. Hartley, Mrs. Kennedy objected a little.

"Are you sure, Mr. Hartley, the girls ought to witness such a sight?" she asked uneasily. "Of course I don't want to be too strict in my demands," she went on with a little twinkle in her eyes that Mr. Hartley thoroughly understood. "I realize the West isn't the East. But, will this be—all [112] right?"

"I think it will—even in your judgment," he assured her. "It's no professional broncho-buster that they'll see to-day. I seldom hire them, anyway, as I prefer to have our own men break in the

horses—specially as we're lucky enough to have three or four mighty skillful ones right in our own outfit. There'll be nothing brutal or rough to-day, Mrs. Kennedy. Only one beast is entirely wild, and he's not really vicious, Reddy says. Genevieve tells me the girls have heard a lot about broncho-busting, and that they're wild to see it. They wouldn't think they'd been to Texas, I'm afraid, if they didn't see something of the sort."

"Very well," agreed Mrs. Kennedy, with visible reluctance.

"Oh, of course," went on Mr. Hartley, his eyes twinkling, "you mustn't expect that they'll see exactly a pony parade drawing baby carriages down Beacon Street; but they will see some of the best horsemanship that the state of Texas can show. I take it you never saw a little beast whose chief aim in life was to get clear of his rider—eh, Mrs. Kennedy?"

"No, I never did," shuddered the lady; "and I'm not sure that I'd want to," she finished decisively, as she turned away.

The new horse proved to be a fiery little bay mustang, and the fight began from the first moment that the noose settled about his untamed little neck. As Tilly told of the affair in the Chronicles of the Hexagon Club, it was like this: [113]

"We saw a broncho busted this afternoon. Reddy busted it, and he was splendid. Mercy! I shall never think anything my old Beauty does is bad again. Beauty is a snail and a saint beside this jumping, plunging, squealing creature that never by any chance was on his feet properly—except when he came down hard on all four of them at once with his back humped right up in the middle in a perfectly frightful fashion—and I suppose that wasn't 'properly.' Anyhow, I shouldn't have thought it was, if I had had to try to sit on that hump!

"But that wasn't the only thing that he did. Dear me, no! He danced, and rolled, and seesawed up and down—'pitching,' Mr. Hartley called it. And I'm sure it looked like it. First he'd try standing on his two fore feet, then he'd give them a rest, and take the other two. And sometimes he couldn't seem to make up his mind which he wanted to use, or which way he wanted to turn, and he'd change about right up in the air so he'd come down facing the other way. My, he was the most uncertain creature!

"It didn't seem to make a mite of difference where the horse was, or what he did with his feet, though. Reddy was right there every time, and all *ready*, too. (Yes, I know a pun is the lowest order of wit. But I don't care. I couldn't help it, anyway—it was such a *ready* one!) There he sat, so loose and easy, too, with his quirt (that's a whip), and it looked sometimes just as if he wasn't half trying—that he didn't need to. But I'm sure he was trying. Anyhow, I know I couldn't have stayed on that horse five minutes; and I don't believe even Genevieve could. (I said that to Mr. Tim Nolan, and he laughed so hard I thought I'd put it in here, and let somebody else laugh.) [114]

"Of course every one of us was awfully excited, and the boys kept shouting and cheering, and yelling 'Stay with him!' and telling him not to 'go to leather'—whatever that may mean! And Reddy did stay. He stayed till the little horse got tired out; then he got off, and led the horse away, and some of the other boys went through a good deal the same sort of thing with other horses, only these had all been partly broken before, they told us. But, mercy, they were bad enough, anyhow, I thought, to have been brand-new. Reddy did another one, too, and this time he put silver half-dollars under his feet in the stirrups: And when the little beast—the horse, I mean, not Reddy—got through his antics, there the half-dollars were, still there in the same old place. How the boys did yell and cheer then!

"After that, they all just 'showed off' for us, throwing their ropes over anything and everything, and playing like a crowd of little boys on a picnic, only Mr. Hartley said they were doing some 'mighty fine roping' with it all. Their ropes are mostly about forty feet long, and it looked as if they just slung them any old way; but I know they don't, for afterward, just before we went in to supper, Reddy let me take his rope, and I tried to throw it. I aimed for a post a little way ahead of me, but I got Pedro, the Mexican cowboy, behind me, right 'in the neck,' as Mr. Tim said. Pedro grinned, and of course everybody else laughed horribly. [115]

"And thus endeth the account of how the bronchos were busted. (P.S. I hope whoever reads the above will own up that for once Tilly Mack got some sense into her part. So there!) I forgot to say we took a nap after dinner. Everybody does here. 'Siestas' they call them, Genevieve says."

It was after supper that Genevieve said:

"Now let's go out on to the front gallery and watch the sunset. Supper was too late last night for us to see much of it, but to-night it will be fine—and you've no idea what a sunset really can be until you've seen it on the prairie!"

Tilly pursed her lips.

"There, Genevieve Hartley, there's another of those mysterious words of yours; and it isn't the first time I've heard it here, either." [116]

"What word?"

"'Gallery.' What is a gallery? I'm sure I don't see what there can be about a one-story house to

be called a 'gallery'!"

Genevieve laughed.

"You call them 'verandas' or 'piazzas,' back East, Tilly. We call them 'galleries' in Texas."

"Oh, is that it?" frowned Tilly. "But you never called Sunbridge piazzas that."

Genevieve shook her head.

"No; it's only when I get back here that the old names come back to me so naturally. Besides—when I was East, I very soon found out what you called them; so I called them that, too."

"Well, anyhow," retorted Tilly, saucily, "I've got my opinion of folks that will call a one-story piazza a 'gallery.' I should just like to show them what we call a 'gallery' at home—say, the top one in the Boston Theater, you know, where it runs 'way back."

Genevieve only laughed good-naturedly.

On the front gallery all settled themselves comfortably to watch the sunset. Already the sun was low in the west, a huge ball of fire just ready to drop into the sea of prairie grass.

"It doesn't seem nearly so hot here as I thought it would," observed Bertha, after a time. "Oh, it's been warm to-day, of course—part of the time awfully warm," she added hastily. "But I've been just as hot in New Hampshire." [117]

"We think we've got a mighty fine climate," spoke up Mr. Hartley. "Now, last year, you in the East, had heaps of prostrations from the heat. Texas had just three."

"I suppose that was owing to the Northers," murmured Cordelia, interestedly. "Now, feel it!" She put up her hand. "There's a breeze, now. Is that a Norther?"

Mr. Hartley coughed suddenly. Genevieve stared.

"What do you know about Northers?" she demanded.

"Why, I—I read about them. It said you—you had them."

Genevieve broke into a merry laugh.

"I should think, by the way you put it, that they were the measles or the whooping cough! We do have them, Cordelia—in the winter, specially, but not so often in July. Besides, they don't feel much like this little breeze—as you'd soon find out, if you happened to be in one."

For a moment there was silence; then Genevieve spoke again.

"See here, where'd you find out all these things about Texas—that we didn't have butter, and did have Northers?" [118]

Before Cordelia could answer, Tilly interposed with a chuckling laugh:

"I'll tell you, Genevieve, just where they found out," she cut in, utterly ignoring her own share of the "they." "Now, listen! How do you suppose they spent all the time you were in New Jersey? I'll tell you. They were digging up Texas every single minute; and they dug, and dug, and dug, until there wasn't a mean annual temperature, or a mean anything else that they didn't drag from its hiding-place and hold up triumphantly, and shout: 'Behold, this is Texas!'"

"Girls—you didn't!" cried Genevieve, choking with laughter.

"They did!" affirmed Tilly.

"Yes, *we* did—including Tilly," declared Cordelia, with unexpected spirit.

Everybody laughed this time, but it was Alma, the peacemaker, who spoke next.

"Oh, look—look at the sun!" she exclaimed. "Aren't those rose-pink clouds gorgeous?"

"My, wouldn't they make a lovely dress?" sighed Elsie.

"Yes, and see the golden pathway the sun has made, straight down to the prairie," cried Bertha Brown.

"Oh, look, look, Mr. Hartley! Is that grass on fire?" gasped Cordelia.

Mr. Hartley shook his head. [119]

"No—I hope not."

"But you do have prairie fires?"

"Sometimes; but not so often nowadays—though I've seen some bad ones, in my time."

There was a long silence. All eyes were turned toward the west. Above, a riot of rose and gold and purple flamed across the sky. Below, more softly, the colors seemed almost repeated in the waving, shifting, changing expanse of fairylike loveliness that the prairie had become.

"Oh, how beautiful it all is, and how I do love it," breathed Genevieve, after a time, as if to

herself.

Gradually the gorgeous rose and gold and purple changed, softened, and faded quite away. The slender crescent of the moon appeared, and one by one the stars showed in the darkening sky.

"It's all so quiet, so wonderfully quiet," sighed Cordelia; then, abruptly, she cried: "Why, what's that?"

There had sounded a far-away shout, then another, nearer. On the breeze was borne the muffled tread of hundreds of hoofs. A dog began to bark lustily.

Later, they swept into view—a troop of cowboys, and a thronging, jostling mass of cattle.

"On the way to a round-up, probably," explained Mr. Hartley, as he rose to his feet and went to meet the foreman, who was coming toward the house. [120]

Still later, he explained more fully.

"They've put them in our pens for the night. The boys have gone into camp a mile or so away."

Genevieve shuddered.

"I hate round-ups," she cried passionately.

"What are round-ups?" asked Bertha Brown.

"Where they brand the cattle," answered Genevieve, quickly, but in a low voice.

Cordelia, who was near her, shuddered. She seemed now to see before her eyes that seething mass of heads and horns, sweeping on and on unceasingly.

Cordelia had two dreams that night. She wondered, afterward, which was the worse. She dreamed, first, that an endless stream of cattle climbed the windmill tower and jumped clear to the edge of the prairie, where the sun went down. She dreamed, secondly, that she was very hungry, and that twenty feet away stood a table laden with hot biscuits and fried chicken; but that the only way she could obtain any food was to "rope it" with Reddy's lariat. At the time of waking up she had not obtained so much as one biscuit or a chicken wing.

CHAPTER X [121]

CORDELIA GOES TO CHURCH

"We're going to have church to-morrow," Genevieve had announced on the first Saturday night at the ranch. "A minister is coming from Bolo, and he holds the service out of doors. Everybody on the place comes, and we sing, and it's lovely!"

As it happened, Cordelia had not been present when Genevieve made this announcement. It was left for Tilly, therefore, to tell her.

"Oh, Cordelia, I forgot. We're going to have church to-morrow," she said that night, as she was brushing her hair in their room.

Cordelia, who was taking off her shoes, looked up delightedly.

"Oh, Tilly—church? We're going to church?"

Tilly laughed; then an odd little twist came to her mouth.

"Yes, Cordelia; we're—going to church," she answered.

"What time?"

"Eleven o'clock, Genevieve said."

"Oh, won't that be fun—I mean, I'm very glad," corrected Cordelia, hastily, a confused red in her cheeks. [122]

In Cordelia's bed that night, Cordelia thought happily:

"Maybe now I can get some new ideas for Uncle Thomas to put in his services. They do everything so differently here in the West, and Uncle's audiences get so small sometimes, specially Sunday evenings."

In Tilly's bed, Tilly, a little guilty as to conscience, was trying to excuse herself.

"Well, anyhow," she was arguing mentally, "Genevieve said 'everybody comes,' and if they 'come' they must 'go'; so of course we're 'going' to church."

Not until Cordelia was dropping off to sleep did something occur to her. She sat up, then, suddenly.

"Tilly," she called softly, "where is that church? Do we have to ride eighteen miles to Bolo?"

Tilly did not answer. She was asleep, decided Cordelia—it was dark, and Cordelia could not see the pillow Tilly was stuffing into her mouth.

Just after breakfast Sunday morning, Elsie Martin said a low word in Genevieve's ear, and drew her out of earshot of the others. Her eyes were anxious.

"Genevieve, do you have to dress up much for this kind of—of church?" she questioned. [123]

"Not a bit, dear. Don't worry. Anything you have will be lovely."

"I know; but—well, you see, it's just this," she quavered. "Aunt Kate fixed up the girls' green chambray for me just before we came. I saw then it didn't look just right, but we were in such an awful hurry there wasn't time to do anything; and I was so excited, anyway, that I didn't seem to mind, much. But out here, in the bright light, it looks awfully!"

"Nonsense! That's all your own notion, Elsie," rejoined Genevieve, comfortingly. "I'm sure it looks lovely. Anyhow, it wouldn't matter if it didn't—here."

Elsie shook her head despondently.

"But you don't understand," she said. "You know the twins dress alike, and this was their green chambray. Aunt Kate always likes to use their things, she says, because there's always double quantity; but this time it didn't work so well. You see, Cora was sick a lot last summer, when they had this dress, and she didn't wear hers half so much as Clara did, so hers wasn't faded hardly any. It was an awful funny color to begin with; but it's worse now, with part of it one shade, and part another. You see, one sleeve's made of Cora's, and one of Clara's; and the front breadth is Cora's and the back is Clara's. Of course Aunt Kate cut it out where she could do it best, and didn't think but what they were alike; but you don't know what a funny-looking thing that dress [124] is! I—I don't know whether to turn Clara toward folks, or Cora," she finished with a little laugh.

Genevieve heard the laugh—but she saw that it came through trembling lips.

"Well, I just wouldn't fret," she declared, with an affectionate little hug. "If you don't want to wear it, wear something else. What a nuisance clothes are, anyhow! I've always said I wished we didn't have to change our dress every time we turned around!"

Elsie's eyes became wistful. She shook her head sadly.

"You don't know anything about it, Genevieve. Your clothes *haven't* been a nuisance to you—even if you think they have. You see, you don't realize how nice it is to have such a lot of pretty things—and all new," she sighed as she turned away.

When Genevieve went to her room to dress for "church" that morning, she looked a little thoughtfully at the array of pretty frocks hanging in her closet.

"I wish I could give some to Elsie," she sighed; "but Elsie isn't poor, of course, and I suppose she—she wouldn't take them. But I suspect I don't half appreciate them myself—just as Elsie said," she finished, as she took down a fresh, white linen.

At quarter before eleven Cordelia Wilson knocked at Genevieve's door. Genevieve opened it to [125] find Cordelia in a neat jacket suit, hat on, and gloves in hand.

"Am I all right, Genevieve?" she asked. "I wasn't quite sure just what to wear."

"Why, y-yes—only you don't need the hat, nor the gloves, dear; and I shouldn't think you'd want that coat, it's so warm!"

"Not want a hat, or gloves," burst out Cordelia, looking distinctly shocked. "Why, Genevieve Hartley! I know you do very strange things here in the West, but I did suppose you—you dressed properly to go to church!"

"But it isn't really church, Cordelia," smiled Genevieve. "I only call it so, you know. And of course we don't 'go' at all—only as far as the back gallery."

Cordelia stared, frowningly.

"You mean you don't drive off—anywhere?" she demanded. "That you have a service right here?"

"Yes. I thought you knew."

"But Tilly said—why, I don't know what she did say, exactly, but she let me think we were going to drive off somewhere. And look at me—rigged out like this! You know how she'll tease me!" There were almost tears in Cordelia's sensitive eyes.

"Has she seen you—in this?"

"No; but she will when I go back. I saw her whisk through the hall to our room just as I crossed through to come in here." [126]

"Then we won't let her see you," chuckled Genevieve. "Here, let's have your hat and gloves and coat. I'll hide them in my closet. You can get them later when Tilly isn't around. Now run back and put a serene face on it. Just don't let her suspect you ever thought of your hat and gloves."

"But, do you think I ought to do—that? Won't it be—deceit?"

"No, dear, it won't," declared Genevieve, emphatically; "not any sort of deceit that's any harm. It will just be depriving Miss Tilly of the naughty fun she expected to have with you. You *know* how Tilly loves to tease folks. Well, she'll just find the tables turned, this time. Now run back quick, or she'll suspect things!" And, a little doubtfully, Cordelia went.

As she had expected, she found Tilly in their room.

"Why don't you get ready for church, Cordy?" demanded Tilly, promptly.

"I am ready. I dressed early, before you came in," returned Cordelia, trying to speak very unconcernedly. "Why? Don't you think this will do?"

"Oh, yes, of course. You look very nice," murmured Tilly, a little hastily, sending a furtive glance into Cordelia's face. There was nothing, apparently, about Cordelia to indicate that anything unexpected had occurred, or was about to occur; and she herself could not, of course, [127] ask why no preparations for an eighteen-mile journey were being made, specially when she had pretended to be asleep the night before when Cordelia asked her question about that same journey. "You look very nice, I'm sure," murmured Tilly, again. And Cordelia, hearing the vague disappointment in Tilly's voice, was filled with joy—that yet carried a pang of remorse.

It was a little later, just as Tilly was leaving the room, that Cordelia turned abruptly.

"Tilly, I did have on my hat and coat," she burst out hurriedly. "I did think we were going to drive 'way off somewhere to church. But I found out and hid them in Genevieve's room, so you would not know and—and tease me," she finished breathlessly.

Tilly turned back with a laugh.

"You little rogue!" she began; then she stopped short. Her face changed. "But—why in the world did you tell me now?" she demanded curiously.

"I thought I ought to."

"Ought to!—ought to let me tease you!" echoed the dumfounded Tilly.

Cordelia stirred restlessly.

"Not that, of course, exactly," she stammered. "It's only that—that it seemed somehow like—deceiving you." [128]

For a moment Tilly stared; then, suddenly, she darted across the room and put both arms around the minister's niece. Cordelia was not quite sure whether she was hugging her, or shaking her.

"Oh, you—you—I don't know *what* you are!" Tilly was exclaiming. "But you're a dear, anyhow!" And it was actually a sob that the astounded Cordelia heard as Tilly turned and fled from the room.

To Sunbridge eyes, "church" that morning was something very new and novel. At eleven o'clock Genevieve and her father piloted their guests to the back gallery where seats had been reserved for them. The minister, a dark-haired, tired-looking man with kind eyes, had arrived some time before on horseback. To Mrs. Kennedy, especially, he looked a little too unconventional in his heavy boots and coarse garments which, though plainly recently brushed, still showed the dust of the prairie in spots. He sat now at one side talking with Mr. Tim while his "congregation" was gathering.

And what a congregation it was! As Genevieve had said, everybody on the ranch came, except those whose duties prohibited them from coming. Singly, or in picturesque groups, they settled themselves comfortably on the back gallery, or along the covered way leading to the dining-room. Even Teresa, in a huge fresh apron that made her great bulk look even greater, sat just outside [129] the dining-room door, where she could easily run in from time to time, to see that the roast chickens in the oven were not burning, nor the beets on the stove boiling dry.

The "pulpit" was a little stand placed at the house-end of the covered way. The "choir" was the piano in the living-room drawn up close to the window, with Genevieve herself seated at it. Nor was the "church" itself devoid of beauty, with its growing vines and flowers, and its shifting lights and shadows as the soft clouds sailed slowly through the blue sky overhead. As to the audience—no scholarly orator in a Fifth Avenue cathedral found that day more attentive listeners than did that tired-looking minister find in the curiously-assorted groups before him—the swarthy Mexicans, the picturesque cowboys, the eager-eyed, fresh-faced young girls from a far-away town

in the East.

They sang first, Genevieve's own clear voice leading; and even Tilly, who seldom sang in church at home, found herself joining heartily in "Nearer my God to Thee," and "Bringing in the Sheaves." There was something so free, so whole-souled about the music in that soft outdoor air, that she, as well as some of the others, decided that never before had any music sounded so inspiring.

For the first two minutes after the preacher arose to begin his sermon, Mrs. Kennedy saw nothing but the dust on the right shoulder of his coat. But after that she saw nothing but his [130] earnest eyes. She had fallen then quite under the sway of his clear, ringing voice.

"'While Josiah was yet young, in the sixteenth year of his age, he began to seek the God of his fathers,'" announced the clear, ringing voice as the text; and Genevieve, hearing it, wondered if the minister could have known that at least a part of his audience that day would be so exactly, or so very nearly, "in the sixteenth year" of their own age.

It was a good sermon, and it was well preached. The time, the place, the occasion, the atmosphere all helped, too. All the Happy Hexagons paid reverent attention. Tilly, fresh from her somewhat amazing experience with Cordelia, made many and stern resolutions to be everything that was good and helpful, nothing that was bad and hateful. Genevieve, who had slipped off her piano stool to an easier chair, sat with dreamy, tender eyes. She was thinking of the dear mother, who, as she could so well remember, had told her that she must always be good and brave and true first, before anything else.

"Good and brave and true!" She wondered if she could—always. It seemed so easy to do it now, with this good man's earnest voice in her ears. But it was so hard, so strangely hard, at other times. And there were so many things—so many, many *little* things—that to Aunt Julia and Miss [131] Jane looked so big!—things, too, that to her seemed eminently all right.

"'When Josiah was yet young, in the sixteenth year of his age, he began to seek the God of his fathers,'" quoted the minister again, impressively; and Genevieve realized then, with misty eyes, that the sermon was done.

The minister stayed to dinner, of course; and, in spite of her interest in the sermon, Teresa had seen to it that the dinner was everything that one could ask of it. The minister had the place of honor at the table, and proved to be a most agreeable talker. Genevieve had not caught his name distinctly, but she thought it was "Jones." He lived in Bolo, he said, having recently moved there from a distant part of the state. He hoped that he might be able to do good work there. Certainly there was need that somebody do something. In response to Mr. Hartley's cordial invitation to stay a few days at the ranch, he answered with visible regret:

"Thank you, sir. Nothing would please me more, but it is quite out of the question. I must go back this afternoon. I have a service in Bolo this evening."

"You must be a busy man," observed Mr. Hartley, genially. [132]

The minister sighed.

"I am—yet I can't do half that I want to. This outside work among the ranches I shall try to carry on as best I can. But you're all so afraid you'll have a neighbor nearer than a score of miles," he added with a whimsical smile, "that I can't get among you very often."

It was after dinner that the minister chanced to hear Genevieve speak of herself as a Happy Hexagon.

"Hexagon?—Hexagon?" he echoed smilingly. "And are you, too, a Happy Hexagon?" he asked, turning to the mistress of the Six Star Ranch.

"Why, yes. Do you mean you know another one?" questioned the girl, all interest immediately. "It's the name of our girls' club—the Hexagon Club."

"No, but I heard of one, once," rejoined the man. "And it isn't usual, you know, so it attracted my attention."

"But where was it? When was it? We supposed we were the only Happy Hexagons in the world," cried Genevieve.

The minister smiled.

"I found my Happy Hexagons at the bottom of a letter from the East."

"A letter from the East?" Genevieve's voice held now a curious note of wild unbelief.

"Yes. It came before we moved to Bolo. My elder daughter was teaching in the East, and was [133] taken ill. Some of her girls wrote to us."

Genevieve sprang to her feet.

"Are you—you can't be—the Rev. Luke Jones!" she cried.

"That is my name."

"And is Quentina your daughter?"

It was the minister's turn to look amazed.

"Why, yes; but—how do you know? Are you—you can't be—*my* Happy Hexagons!" he ejaculated.

She nodded laughingly. She spoke, too; but what she said was not heard. All of the Happy Hexagons were talking by that time. The Rev. Mr. Jones, indeed, found himself besieged on all sides with eager questions and amazed comments.

Under cover of the confusion, Mr. Hartley turned in puzzled wonder to Mrs. Kennedy.

"*Will* you tell me what all this is about?" he begged.

Mrs. Kennedy smiled.

"Of course! I think perhaps it is all new to you. Last winter Miss Alice Jones, a Texas lady and the girls' Latin teacher, was taken ill. The girls were very attentive, and did lots of little things for her; but she grew worse and had to leave. Just before she went, the mother wrote a letter thanking the girls, and in the letter was a note signed 'Quentina Jones.' Quentina was a younger sister, it seemed, and she, too, wished to thank the girls. Of course the girls were delighted, and [134] immediately answered it, signing themselves 'The Happy Hexagons.' The teacher went away then, and the girls heard nothing more. But they have talked of Quentina Jones ever since."

"But it's all so wonderful," cried Genevieve, her voice rising dominant at last. "Where is Miss Alice Jones, and how is she?"

"She is better, thank you, though not very strong yet. She is teaching in Colorado."

"Oh, I'm so glad," cried Genevieve, "but I wish we could see her, too. Only think, girls, of Quentina Jones being right here, only eighteen miles away!"

"One would think eighteen miles were a mere step!" laughed Tilly.

"They are—in Texas," retorted Genevieve. Then, to the minister she said: "Now tell us, please, Mr. Jones, what we can do. We want to see Quentina right away, quick. We can't wait! Can she come over? *Can't* she? We'd love to have her!"

The minister shook his head slowly.

"I'm afraid not, Miss Genevieve—thank you just the same. I'd love to have her. It would do her such a world of good, poor little girl, to have one happy time with all you young people! But my wife has a lame foot just now, and Quentina simply cannot be spared. You know she has several [135] brothers, so we have quite a family. But, I'll tell you what—you young ladies must all come to see us."

"Oh, thank you! We'd love to—and we will, too." (Back in her ranch home, it was easy for Genevieve to slip into her old independent way of consulting no one's will but her own.) "When do you want us?"

"But, my dear," interposed Mrs. Kennedy, hastily, "if Mrs. Jones is not well, surely we cannot ask her to take in six noisy girls as guests!"

"Why, no—of course not," stammered Genevieve. The rest of the Happy Hexagons looked suddenly heartbroken. But the minister smiled reassuringly.

"My wife isn't ill—only lame; and she loves young people. She'll be just as eager for you to come as Quentina will be—and Quentina just simply won't take 'no' for an answer, I'm sure. She talked for days of the Happy Hexagons, after your letter came. You must come, only—" he hesitated, "only I'm afraid you'll be a little cramped for room. A village parsonage isn't a ranch, you know. But, if you don't mind sort of—picnicking, and having to stand up in the corner to sleep —" he paused quizzically.

"We adore standing up and sleeping in corners," declared Genevieve, promptly. [136]

"Then shall we call it Tuesday?" smiled Mr. Jones.

"But how can they go?" questioned Mrs. Kennedy, in an anxious voice.

"Why, they might ride it," began Mr. Hartley, slowly; "still, that would hardly do—even should the ponies come in time—such a long trip when they haven't ridden any here, yet. I'll tell you. We'll let Carlos drive them over in the carriage early Tuesday morning. I reckon the seven of them can stow themselves away, somehow—it holds six with room to spare on every seat. Then, Wednesday afternoon, he can drive them back. Meanwhile, he can stay himself in the town and get some supplies that I'm needing."

"But seems to me that gives us a very short visit," demurred Mr. Jones, as he rose to take his leave.

"Quite long enough—for the good wife," declared Mrs. Kennedy, decisively. And thus the matter was settled.

CHAPTER XI [137]

QUENTINA

Quite the most absorbing topic of conversation Monday was, of course, the coming visit to Quentina Jones.

"But what *is* her name?" demanded Mr. Hartley at last, almost impatiently. "It isn't 'Quentina,' of course. I *know* that man who was here Sunday would never have named a daughter of his 'Quentina.'"

"Her name is 'Clorinda Dorinda,'" replied Genevieve. "She told us so in her letter; but she said she was always called 'Quentina.' I don't know why."

"Whew! I should think she would be," laughed Mr. Hartley. "Only fancy having to be called 'Clorinda Dorinda' whenever you were wanted!"

"Sounds like a rhyming dictionary to me," chuckled Tilly. "'Clorinda, Dorinda, Lucinda, Miranda,'" she chanted.

Mr. Hartley laughed, and walked off.

"Well, I'll leave her to you, anyhow, whatever she is," he called back. [138]

"I'll bet he's just dying to go with us, all the same," whispered Tilly, saucily.

Cordelia frowned, hesitated, then spoke.

"Auntie says ladies don't bet," she observed, in her severest manner.

"Oh, don't they?" snapped Tilly; then she, too, frowned, and hesitated. "All right, Cordy—Cordelia; see that you don't do it, then," she concluded good-naturedly.

Monday was a very quiet day for the girls at the ranch. Mrs. Kennedy had insisted from the first upon this. She said that the next two days would be quite exciting enough to call for all the rest possible beforehand. So, except for the usual watching of the boys' morning start to work, there was little but music, books, and letter-writing allowed.

Tuesday dawned clear, but very warm. The girls were all awake at sunrise, and were soon ready for the early breakfast. Almost at once, afterward, they stowed themselves—with little crowding but much giggling—in the carriage, and called gayly to Carlos: "We're all ready!"

"Yes, we're all aboard, Carlos," cried Genevieve.

"Good, Señorita! It is ver' glad I am to see you so prompt to the halter," grinned Carlos. "*Quien sabe?*—mebbe I didn't reckon on corrallin' the whole bunch of you so soon!"

Genevieve laughed, even while she made a wry face. [139]

"I'm afraid Carlos remembers that I was never on time, girls," she pouted. "But you don't know, Carlos, what a marvel of promptness I've become back East—specially since somebody gave me a watch," she finished, smiling into the old man's face.

"All ready!" grinned Carlos, climbing into his seat.

"Let's give our Texas yell," proposed Tilly, softly, as she looked back to see Mrs. Kennedy, Mr. Hartley, and Mammy Lindy on the gallery steps. "Now count, Cordelia!"

And Cordelia did count. Once again her face expressed a tragedy of responsibility, and once again the resulting

"Texas, Texas, Tex—Tex—Texas!
Texas, Texas, Rah! Rah! Rah!
GENEVIEVE!"

was the glorious success it ought to have been. So to a responsive chorus of shouts, laughter, and hand-clapping, the Happy Hexagons drove away from the ranch house.

It was a pleasant drive, though a warm one. It did seem a little long, too, so anxious were they to reach their goal. The prairie sights and sounds, though interesting, were not so new, now. Even the two or three herds of cattle they met, and the groups of cowboys they saw galloping [140] across the prairies, did not create quite the excitement they always had created heretofore. Quentina and the minister's home were so much more interesting to think of!

"What do you suppose she'll be like?" asked Elsie.

"*Quien sabe?*" laughed Genevieve.

"There! what does that mean?" demanded Tilly. "I've heard it lots of times since I've been here."

"'Who knows?'" translated Genevieve, smilingly.

"Yes, who does know?" retorted Tilly, not understanding. "But what does it mean?"

Genevieve laughed outright.

"That's just what it means—'Who knows?' The Mexicans and the cowboys use it a lot here, and when I come back I get to saying it, too."

"I should think you did," shrugged Tilly. "Well, anyhow, let's talk straight English for a while. Let's talk of Quentina. What do you suppose she's like, girls?"

"Let's guess," proposed Genevieve. "We can, you know, for Miss Jones was too sick to tell us anything, and we haven't a thing to go by but Quentina's letter, and that didn't tell much."

"All right, let's guess. Let's make a game of it," cried Tilly. "We'll each tell what we think, and then see who comes the nearest. You begin, Genevieve." [141]

"All right. I think she's quiet and tall, and very dark like a Spaniard," announced Genevieve, weighing her words carefully.

"I think she's bookish, and maybe stupid," declared Tilly. "Her letter sounded queer."

"I think she's little, and got yellow hair and light-blue eyes," said Bertha.

"I think she's got curls—black ones—and looks lovely in red," declared Elsie Martin.

"We can trust you, Elsie, to get in something about her clothes," chuckled Tilly.

"Well, I think she's got brown eyes like Genevieve's, and brown hair like hers, too," asserted Alma Lane.

"Now, Cordelia," smiled Genevieve, "it's your turn. You haven't said, yet."

"There isn't anything left for me to say," replied Cordelia, in a slightly worried voice. "You've got all the pretty things used up. I should just have to say I think she's fat and homely—and I don't think I ought to say that, for it would be a downright fib. I don't think she's that at all!"

There was a general laugh at this; then, for a time, there was silence while the carriage rolled along the prairie road.

Carlos had no difficulty in finding the home of the Rev. Mr. Jones in Bolo. It proved to be a little house, unattractive, and very plain. It looked particularly forlorn with its bare little front yard, in which some one had made an attempt to raise nasturtiums and petunias. [142]

"Mercy! I guess we'll *have* to stand up in corners to sleep," gurgled Tilly, as the carriage stopped before the side door.

"Sh-h!" warned Genevieve. "Tilly, isn't it awful? Only think of our Quentina's living here!"

At that moment the door of the little house opened, and Mr. Jones appeared. From around his feet there seemed literally to tumble out upon the steps several boys of "assorted sizes," as Tilly expressed it afterward. Then the girls saw her in the doorway—Quentina. She was slender, not very tall, but very pretty, with large, dark eyes, and fine yellow hair that fluffed and curled all about her forehead and ears and neck.

"O Happy Hexagons, Happy Hexagons, welcome, welcome, Happy Hexagons!" breathed the girl in the doorway ecstatically, clasping her hands.

"Sounds almost like our Texas yell," giggled Tilly, under her breath.

Genevieve was the first to reach the ground.

"Quentina—I know you're Quentina; and I'm Genevieve Hartley," she cried, before Mr. Jones had a chance to speak.

"Yes, this is Quentina," he said then, cordially shaking Genevieve's hand. "And now I'll let you present her to your young friends, please, because you can do it so much better than I." [143]

They were all out now, on the ground, hanging back a little diffidently. It was this, perhaps, that made Cordelia think that something ought to be said or done. She came hurriedly forward as she caught Genevieve's eye and heard her own name called.

"Yes, I'm Cordelia, and I'm so glad to see you," she stammered; "and I'm so glad you're not fat and homely, too—er—that is," she corrected feverishly, "I mean—we didn't any of us get you right, you know."

"Get me—right?" Quentina opened her dark eyes to their fullest extent.

Cordelia blushed, and tried to back away. With her eyes she implored Tilly or Elsie to take her place.

It was Genevieve who came to the rescue.

"We'll have to own up, Quentina," she laughed. "On the way here we were trying to picture how you look; and of course we each had to guess a different thing, so we got all kinds of combinations."

"Yes, but we didn't get yours," chuckled Tilly, coming easily forward, with outstretched hand.

"Indeed we didn't," echoed Elsie, admiringly.

"Why, of course we couldn't," stammered Cordelia, still red of face. "We never, never *could* think of anything so pretty as you really are!" [144]

Quentina laughed now, and raised hurried hands to hide the pretty red that had flown to her cheeks.

"Oh, you funny, funny Happy Hexagons!" she cried, in her sweet, Southern drawl.

Naturally there could be nothing stiff about the introductions, after that, and they were dispatched in short order, even to Mr. Jones's pulling the boys into line, and announcing:

"This is Paul, with the solemn face. And this grinning little chap is Edward—Ned, for short; and these are the twins, Bob and Rob."

"Are they both 'Robert'?" questioned Tilly, interestedly.

Mr. Jones smiled.

"Oh, no. Bob is Bolton, and Rob is Robert. The 'Rob and Bob' is Quentina's idea—she likes the sound of it."

"I told you!—she *is* a rhyming dictionary," whispered Tilly, in an aside that nearly convulsed the two girls that heard her.

Inside the house they all met "mother."

Mother, in spite of her lame foot, was a very forceful personality. She was bright and cheery, too, and she made the girls feel welcome and at home immediately.

"It's so good of you to come!" she exclaimed. "Poor Quentina has been shut up with me for weeks. But I'm better, now—lots better; and I shall soon be about again." [145]

"I think it was very good of you to let us come," returned Genevieve, politely, "specially when you aren't well yourself. But we'll try not to make you any more trouble than we can't help."

"Trouble, dear child! I reckon we don't call *you* trouble," declared the minister's wife, fervently, "after all your kindness to my daughter, Alice." Genevieve raised a protesting hand, but Mrs. Jones went on smilingly. "And then that letter to Quentina—she's never ceased to talk and dream of the girls who sent it to her."

"Oh, I did like it so much—indeed I did," chimed in Quentina. "Why, Genevieve, I made a poem on it—a lovely poem just like Tennyson's 'Margaret,' you know; only I put in 'Hexagons,' and changed the words to fit, of course."

Tilly nudged Elsie violently, and Elsie choked a spasmodic giggle into a cough; but Quentina unhesitatingly went on.

"It began:

"'O sweet pale Hexagons,
O rare pale Hexagons,
What lit your eyes with tearful power,
Like moonlight on a falling shower?
Why sent you, loves, so full and free,
Your letter sweet to little me?'

That's just the first, you know," smiled Quentina, engagingly, "and of course when I wrote it I didn't know you weren't really 'pale,' at all; but then, we can just call that part poetic license." [146]

Genevieve laughed frankly. Tilly giggled. Cordelia looked nervously from them to Quentina.

"I'm sure, that—that's very pretty," she faltered.

Mrs. Jones smiled.

"I'm afraid, for a little, you won't know just what to make of Quentina," she explained laughingly. "We're used to her turning everything into jingles, but strangers are not."

"Oh, mother, I don't," cried Quentina, reproachfully. "There's heaps and heaps of things that I never wrote a line of poetry about. But how could I help it?—that beautiful letter, and the Happy Hexagons, and all! It just wrote itself. I sent it East, too, to a magazine, two or three times—but they didn't put it in," she added, as an afterthought.

"Why, what a shame!" murmured Tilly.

Genevieve looked up quickly. Tilly was wearing her most innocent, most angelic expression, but Genevieve knew very well the naughtiness behind it. Quentina, however, accepted it as pure gold.

"Yes, wasn't it?" she rejoined cheerfully. "I felt right bad, particularly as I was going to send you all a copy when it was published."

"You can give us a manuscript copy, Quentina. We would love that," interposed Genevieve, hurriedly. Behind Quentina's back she gave Tilly then a frowning shake of the head—though it must be confessed that her dancing eyes rather spoiled the effect of it. [147]

"Maybe it's because her name rhymes—'Clorinda Dorinda,'" suggested Tilly, interestedly; "maybe that's why she likes to write poetry so well."

Mrs. Jones laughed.

"That's what her father says. But Clorinda herself changed her own name about as soon as she could talk. She couldn't manage the hard 'Clorinda' very well, and I had a Mexican nurse girl, Quentina, whose name she much preferred. So very soon she was calling herself 'Quentina,' and insisting that every one else should do the same."

"But it's so much prettier," declared the minister's daughter, fervently. "Of course 'Clorinda Dorinda' are some pretty, because they rhyme so, but I like 'Quentina' better. Besides, there are lots more pretty words to make that rhyme with—Florena, Dulcina, Rowena, and verbena, you know."

"And 'you've seen her,'" suggested Tilly, gravely.

Quentina frowned a moment in thought.

"Y-yes," she admitted; "but I don't think that's a very pretty one."

It was Genevieve this time who choked a giggle into a cough, and who, a moment later, turned very eagerly to welcome an interruption in the person of the Rev. Mr. Jones. [148]

Soon after this Quentina suggested a trip through the house.

"You see I want to show you where you're going to sleep," she explained.

"Oh, Mr. Jones told us that," observed Tilly, as the seven girls trooped up the narrow stairway. "He said we were to stand up in the corners." Tilly spoke with the utmost gravity.

Quentina turned, wide-eyed.

"Why, you couldn't! You'd never sleep a bit," she demurred concernedly. "Besides, it isn't necessary."

All but Tilly and Genevieve tittered audibly. Tilly still looked the picture of innocence. Genevieve frowned at her sternly, then stepped forward and put her arm around Quentina's waist.

"Tilly was only joking, Quentina," she explained. "When you know Tilly better you'll find she never by any chance talks sense—but always nonsense," she finished, looking at Tilly severely.

Tilly wrinkled up her nose and pouted; but her eyes laughed.

"There, here's my room," announced Quentina, a moment later. "We've put a couch in it, and if you don't mind my sleeping with you, three can be here. Then across the hall here is the twins' room, and two more can sleep in this; and Paul and Ned's room down there at the end of the hall will take the other two. There! You see we've got it fixed right well." [149]

"Oh, yes—well for us; but how about the boys?" cried Genevieve. "Where will they sleep?"

Quentina's lips parted, but before the words were uttered, a new thought seemed to have come to her. With an odd little glance at Tilly, she drawled demurely:

"Oh, they are going to sleep in the corners."

They all laughed this time.

"Well, now we've done the whole house, and we'll take the yard," proposed Quentina, as, a little later, she led the way down-stairs and out of doors. "There! aren't my nasturtiums beautiful?" she exulted, with the air of a fond mother displaying her first-born. She was pointing to a bed of straggling, puny plants, beautifully free from weeds, and showing here and there a few brilliant blossoms.

Tilly turned her back suddenly. Cordelia looked distressed. Bertha cried thoughtlessly:

"Oh, but you ought to see Genevieve's, Quentina, if you want to see nasturtiums!"

"Oh, but I have Carlos," cut in Genevieve, hurriedly, "and Carlos can make anything grow. What a pretty dark one this is," she finished, bending over one of the plants.

Quentina's face clouded.

"I don't suppose they are much, really," she admitted. "But I've worked so hard over them! Father says the earth isn't good at all. I was so pleased when that big red one came out! I made a poem on it right off: [150]

"'O nasturtium, sweet nasturtium,
Did you blossom just for me?
Where, oh, where did you unearth 'em—

All those colors that I see?'

That's the way it began. Wasn't I lucky to think of that 'unearth 'em?' Besides, it's really true, you know. They do unearth 'em, and 'twas such a nice rhyme for nasturtium. Now there's petunia; I think that's a perfectly beautiful sounding word, but I've never been able to find a single thing that rhymed with it. I do love flowers so," she added, after a moment; "but we've never had many. They always burn up, or dry up, or get eaten up, or just don't come up at all. Of course we've never had a really pretty place. Ministers like us don't, you know," she finished cheerfully.

There was no reply to this. Not one of the Happy Hexagons could think of anything to say. For once even Tilly was at a loss for words. It was Quentina herself who broke the silence.

"Now tell me all about the East. Let's go up on the gallery and sit down. I do so want to go East to school; but of course I can't." [151]

"Why not?" asked Bertha.

"Oh, it costs too much," returned Quentina. "You know ministers don't have money for such things." Her voice was still impersonally cheerful.

"How old are you?" asked Elsie, as they seated themselves on chairs and steps.

"Sixteen last month."

"Oh, I wish you could go," cried Genevieve. "Wouldn't it be just lovely if you could come to Sunbridge and go to school with us!"

"Where is Sunbridge? I always thought of it as just 'East,' you know."

"In New Hampshire."

"Oh," said Quentina, with a sigh of disappointment. "I hoped it was in Massachusetts, near Boston, you know. I thought Alice said it was near Boston."

"Well, we aren't so awfully far from Boston," bridled Tilly. "It only takes an hour and a half or less to go there. I go with mother every little while when I'm home."

Quentina sprang to her feet.

"Boston! Oh, girls, you don't know how I want to see Boston, and Paul Revere's grave, and the Common, and the old State House, and Bunker Hill, and that lovely North Church where they hung the lantern, you know.

'Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,'"

she began to chant impressively. "Oh, don't you just love that poem?" [152]

"Who was Paul Revere?" asked Tilly, pleasantly.

"Paul Revere!" exclaimed Quentina, plainly shocked. "Who was *Paul Revere!*"

"Tilly!" scolded Genevieve, as soon as she could command her voice. "Quentina, that's only some of Tilly's nonsense. Tilly knows very well who Paul Revere was."

"Yes, of course she does; and we all do," interposed Elsie Martin. "But I'll own right up, I don't know half as much about all those historical things and places as I ought to."

"Neither do I," chimed in Bertha. "Just because they're right there handy, and we can go any time, we—"

"We *don't* go any time," laughed Alma Lane, finishing the sentence for her.

"I know it," said Elsie. "We had a cousin with us for two weeks last summer, and she just doted on old relics and graveyards. She made us take her into Boston 'most every day, and she asked all sorts of questions which I couldn't answer."

"Yes, I know; but excuse me, please," put in Tilly, flippantly. "I don't want any graveyards and relics in mine."

"That's slang, Tilly," reproved Cordelia.

"Is it?" murmured Tilly, serenely. [153]

"Besides, people come from miles and miles just to see those things that we neglect, right at our doors, almost."

"But how can you neglect them?" remonstrated Quentina. "Why, if I ever go to Boston, I sha'n't sleep nor eat till I've seen Paul Revere's grave!"

"Well, I shouldn't sleep nor eat if I did," shuddered Tilly.

"You mean you've *never* seen it?" gasped Quentina, unbelievingly.

"Guilty!" Tilly held up her hand unblushingly.

"Never you mind, Quentina," soothed Genevieve. "We are interested in those things, really."

"Then you have seen it?"

"Er—n-no, not that one," confessed Genevieve, coloring. "But I've seen heaps of other graves there," she assured her hopefully, as if graves were the only open door to Quentina's favor.

"Oh, you've had such chances," envied Quentina. "Just think—Boston! You *said* you were near Boston?"

"Oh, yes."

"Less than two hours away?"

"Why, yes," exclaimed Tilly, "I told you. We're less than an hour and a half away."

"And are you a D. A. R., and Colonial Dames, and Mayflower Society members, and all that?" [154]

"Dear me! I don't know," laughed Genevieve. "Why?"

"And do you read the *Atlantic Monthly*, and eat beans Saturday night, and fishballs Sunday morning?" still hurried on Quentina. "You don't any of you wear glasses, and I don't think you speak very low."

"Anything else?" asked Tilly politely.

"Oh, yes, lots of things," answered Quentina, "but I've forgotten most of them."

"Quentina, what *are* you talking about?" laughed Genevieve.

Quentina smiled oddly, then she sighed.

"It wasn't true, of course. I knew it couldn't be."

"What wasn't true?"

"Something I found in one of father's church papers about Rules for Living in New England. I cut it out. Wait a minute—it's here, somewhere!" And, to the girls' amazement, she dived into a pocket at the side of her dress, pulling out several clippings which seemed, mostly, to be verse. One was prose, and it was on this she pounced. "Here it is. Listen." And she read:

"'Rules for Living in New England. You must be descended from the Puritans, and should belong to the Mayflower Society, or be a D. A. R., a Colonial Dame, or an S. A. R. You must graduate from Harvard, or Radcliffe, and must disdain all other colleges. You must quote [155] Emerson, read the *Atlantic Monthly*, and swear by the *Transcript*. You must wear glasses, speak in a low voice, eat beans on Saturday night, and fishballs on Sunday morning. Always you must carry with you a green bag, and you should be a professional man, or woman, preferably of the literary variety. You should live not farther away from Boston than two hours' ride, and of course you will be devoted to tombstones, relics, and antiques. You may tolerate Europe, but you must ignore the West. You must be slow of speech, dignified of conduct, and serene of temper. You must never be surprised, nor display undue emotion. Above all, you must be *cultured*.'

"Now you see you haven't done all those things," she declared, as she finished the article.

"I reckon there are a few omissions—specially on my part," laughed Genevieve.

"But you are happy there?"

"Indeed I am!"

"How I do wish I could go," sighed Quentina. "I should love Boston, I know. Alice did—though she still liked Texas better."

"Well, I know Boston would love you," chuckled Tilly, unexpectedly. "Girls, wouldn't she be a picnic in Sunbridge? She'd be more of a circus than you were, Genevieve!"

"Thank you," bowed Genevieve, with mock stiffness. [156]

"Oh, we loved you right away—and we should Quentina, of course."

"Thank you," bowed Quentina, in her turn, laughingly.

CHAPTER XII [157]

THE OPENING OF A BARREL

It was a merry afternoon and evening that the Happy Hexagons spent at Quentina's home, and it was still a merrier time that they had getting settled for the night. Even Tilly said at last:

"Well, Quentina, it's lucky a lame foot doesn't have ears. I don't know what your mother will say to us!"

"Only fancy if Miss Jane were here," shivered Genevieve.

It was just as the family were finishing breakfast the next morning that there came a knock at the door, and a man rolled in a large barrel.

"Oh, it's the missionary barrel—our barrel from the East!" cried Quentina. "I wonder now—what do you suppose there is in it?"

"There isn't anything, I reckon, except old things," piped up Rob, shrilly.

Mrs. Jones colored painfully.

"Robert, my son!" she remonstrated, in evident distress.

"Well, mother, you *know* there isn't—most generally," defended Robert. [158]

"And if they *are* new, they're the sort of things we couldn't ever use," added Ned.

"Boys, boys, that will do," commanded the minister, quickly.

The minister, with Paul's help, had the barrel nearly open by this time.

"It isn't from Sunbridge, is it?" asked Genevieve.

"No—though we get them from there sometimes; but this is from a little town in Vermont," replied Mrs. Jones. "We had a letter last week from the minister. He—he apologized a little; said that times had been hard, and that they'd had trouble to fill it. As if it wasn't hard enough for us to take it, without that!" she finished bitterly, with almost a sob.

"Rita, my dear!" murmured her husband, in a low, distressed voice.

Mrs. Jones dashed quick tears from her eyes.

"I know; I don't mean to be ungrateful. But—times have been a little hard—with *us!*"

Silent, and a little awed, the Happy Hexagons stood at one side. Genevieve, especially, looked out from troubled eyes. Very slowly Genevieve was waking up to the fact that not every one in the world had luxuries, or even what she would call ordinary comforts of living. Mrs. Jones, seeing her face, spoke hurriedly.

"There, there, girls, please forget what I said! It was very kind of those good people to send the barrel—very kind; and I am sure we shall find in it just what we want." [159]

"I know what you hope will be there," cried Bob, "a new coat for Father, and a dress for you, and some underclothes for us boys. I heard you say so last night."

"Yes; and Quentina wants a ribbon—not dirty ones," observed Rob.

"Robert!" cried Quentina, very red of face. "You know I don't *expect* anything of the sort."

The barrel was open now, and eagerly the family gathered around it. Even Mrs. Jones's chair was drawn forward so that she, too, might peep into it.

First there was a great quantity of newspapers—the people had, indeed, found trouble to fill it, evidently. Next came a pincushion—faded pink satin, frilled with not over-clean white lace.

"I can use the lace for a collar," cried Quentina, taking prompt possession of the cushion. "I'm right glad of this!"

A picture came next in a tarnished gilt frame—evidently somebody's early attempts to paint nasturtiums in oil.

"There's a rival for your posies out in the yard," murmured Tilly in Quentina's ear.

A pair of skates was pulled out next, then three dolls, one minus an arm. [160]

"These might be good—on ice," remarked Paul, who had picked up the skates.

"Do you ever have any ice to skate on, here?" asked Bertha.

"Not in the part of Texas I've ever been in," he sighed.

Mrs. Jones was ruefully smoothing the one-armed doll's flimsy dress.

"I—I *told* them there were no little girls in the family," she said, her worried eyes seeking her husband's face. "It—it's all right, of course; only—only these dolls did take space."

Some magazines came next, and a few old books, upon which the boys fell greedily—though the books they soon threw to one side as if they were of little interest.

Undergarments appeared then, plainly much worn and patched. To Genevieve they looked quite impossible. She almost cried when she saw how eagerly Mrs. Jones gathered the motley pile into her arms and began to sort them out with little exclamations of satisfaction.

Next in the barrel were found an ink-stained apron, a bath-robe, nearly new—which plainly owed its presence to its hideous colors—two or three tin dishes (not new), a harmonica, a box containing a straw hat trimmed with drooping blue bows, several fans, a box of dominoes, a

pocket-knife with a broken blade, several pairs of new hose, marked plainly "seconds," some sheets and pillow-cases (half-worn, but hailed with joy by Mrs. Jones), a kimono, an assortment of men's half-worn shoes—pounced upon at once by Paul and his father, and not abandoned until it was found that only two were mates, and only one of these good for much wear. [161]

It was at this point that there came a muffled shout from Ned, whose head was far down in the barrel.

"Here's a package—a big one—and it's marked 'dress for Mrs. Jones.' Mother, you did get it, after all!" he cried, tumbling the package into his mother's lap.

Tremblingly half a dozen pairs of hands attempted to untie the strings and to unwrap the coverings; then, across Mrs. Jones's lap there lay a tawdry dress of pale-blue silk, spotted and soiled. Pinned to it was a note in a scrawling feminine hand: "This will wash and make over nicely, I think, if you can't wear it just as it is."

"We have so many chances to wear light-blue silk, too," was all that Mrs. Jones said.

In the bottom of the barrel were a few new towels, very coarse, and some tablecloths and small, fringed napkins, also very coarse.

"Well, I'm sure, these are handy," stammered the minister, who had not found his coat.

"Oh, yes," answered his wife, wearily; "only—well, it so happens that every box for the last five years has held tea-napkins—and I don't give many teas, you know, dear." [162]

Genevieve choked back a sob.

"I—I never saw such a—a horrid thing in all my life, as that barrel was," she stormed hotly. "I don't see what folks were thinking of—to send such things!"

"They weren't thinking, my dear, and that's just what the trouble was," answered Mrs. Jones, gently. "They didn't think, nor understand. Besides, there are very many nice things here that we can use beautifully. There always are, in every box, only—of course, some things *aren't* so useful."

"I should say not!" snapped Genevieve.

"Well, I didn't suppose anything could make me glad because Aunt Kate makes over the girls' things for me," spoke up Elsie Martin; "but something has now. She can't send them in any missionary boxes, anyhow!"

Mrs. Jones laughed, though she looked still more disturbed.

"But, girls, dear girls, please don't say such things," she expostulated. "We are very, very grateful—indeed we are; and it is right kind of them to remember us far-away missionaries with boxes and barrels!"

"'Missionary'!" sputtered Genevieve. "'Missionary'! I should think somebody had better be missionary to them, and teach them what to send. Dolls and skates, indeed!" [163]

"But, my dear," smiled Mrs. Jones, "those might have been just the things—in some places; and besides, some of the boxes are—are better than this. Indeed they are!"

It was at this point that Cordelia came forward hurriedly, and touched Mrs. Jones's arm. Her face was a little white and strained looking.

"Mrs. Jones," she faltered, "I think I ought to tell you. I'm a minister's niece, and I've seen lots of missionary boxes packed. I know just how they do it, too. I know just how thoughtless they—I mean we—are; and I just wanted to say that I'm very, very sure the next time we pack a box for any missionary, we'll—we'll see that our old shoes are mates, and that we don't send dolls to boys!"

There was a shout of gleeful appreciation from the boys, but there were only troubled sighs and frowns on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Jones.

"Dear me! I—I wish the barrel hadn't come when you were here," regretted the minister's wife; "for indeed the things are all very, very nice. Indeed they are!"

"And now let's go out to the flowers," proposed Quentina. "Maybe a new nasturtium has blossomed."

All but one of the girls had left the room when Mr. Jones felt a timid touch on his arm. [164]

"Mr. Jones, could I speak to you—just a minute, please?" asked a low voice. "I'm Cordelia Wilson, you know."

"Why, certainly, Miss Cordelia! What can I do for you?" he answered genially, leading the way to the tiny study off the sitting room.

"Well, I'm not sure you can do anything," replied Cordelia, with hesitating truthfulness. "But I wanted to ask: *do* you know anybody in Texas by the name of Mr. John Sanborn, or Mrs. Lizzie Higgins, or Mr. Lester Goodwin, or Mr. James Hunt?"

The minister looked a little surprised.

"N-no, I can't say that I do," he said, slowly.

Cordelia's countenance fell.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! You see I thought—being a minister out here, so,—you might know them."

"But—Texas is quite a large state," he reminded her, with a smile.

"I know," sighed the girl. "I've found that out."

"Are these people friends of yours?"

"Oh, no; they're just a son, and a brother, and a cousin, and a runaway daughter that I'm looking up for Sunbridge people."

"Oh, indeed!" The minister hoped his voice was politely steady.

"Yes, sir. Of course I haven't had a chance to ask many people, yet—only one or two of the cowboys. One of them was named 'John,' but he wasn't my John—I mean, he wasn't the right John," corrected Cordelia with a pink blush. [165]

The minister coughed a little spasmodically behind his hand. As he did not speak Cordelia went on, her eyes a little wistful.

"Would you be willing, please, to take those names down on paper, Mr. Jones?"

"Why, certainly, Miss Cordelia," agreed the man, reaching for his notebook.

"You see you *are* a minister, and you do meet people, so you might find them. I'd be so glad if you could, or if I could. They're all needed very much—indeed they are. You see, Hermit Joe is so lonesome for his son, and Mrs. Snow so worried about Lizzie, and Mrs. Granger has lost her husband, so she hasn't anybody left but her cousin, now, and Miss Sally is so very poor and needs her brother so much."

"Of course, of course," murmured the minister.

A few moments later his notebook bore this entry, which had been made under Cordelia's careful direction:

"Wanted:—Information about—
John Sanborn whose father is lonesome,
Mrs. Lizzie Higgins " mother " worried,
Lester Goodwin " cousin " a widow,
and
James Hunt " sister " very poor."

"If I find any of these people I'll convey all your messages to the best of my ability," promised the minister. [166]

"Thank you. Then I'll go out now to the nasturtiums," sighed the girl, contentedly.

All too soon the visit came to a close, and all too soon Carlos appeared with the carriage. Then came hurried good-byes, full of laughter, tears, and promises, with all the Jones family except the mother, grouped upon the steps—and the mother's chair was close to the window.

"Oh, Happy Hexagons, Happy Hexagons,
Come again another day.
Oh, don't forget me, Happy Hexagons,
When you are so far away!"

chanted Quentina, waving one handkerchief, and wiping her eyes with another.

"Girls, quick!—give her the Texas yell," cried Genevieve in a low voice; "only say 'Quentina' at the end instead of my name. Now, remember—'Quentina'!" she finished excitedly.

"Good!" exulted Tilly. "Of course we will! Now count, Cordelia."

A moment later, Quentina's amazed, delighted ears heard:

"Texas, Texas, Tex—Tex—Texas!
Texas, Texas, Rah! Rah! Rah!
Quentina!"

Then, amidst a chorus of shouts and laughter, the carriage drove away. [167]

"Well, young ladies," demanded Mr. Hartley, when the tired but happy Hexagon Club trooped up the front steps of the ranch house late that afternoon, "how about it? What did you think of the fair Quentina?"

"Think of her! O Quentina, you should 'seen her!" sang Tilly, in so perfect an imitation of the minister's daughter that the girls broke into peals of laughter.

"She's lovely, Father—honestly, she is," declared Genevieve, as soon as she could speak.

"And so pretty!" added Cordelia, "and has such a sweet, slow way of speaking!"

"Such lovely dark eyes!"—this from Alma.

"And such glorious hair—all golden and kinky!" breathed Bertha.

"And she looks just as pretty in her high-necked apron as she does in her white dress," cried Elsie.

"Well, well, upon my soul! What is this young lady—a paragon?" laughed Mr. Hartley, raising his eyebrows.

"I'll tell you just what she is, sir," vouchsafed Tilly, confidentially. "She *is* a rhyming dictionary, Mr. Hartley, just as I said in the first place; and I'd be willing to guarantee any time that she'd find a rhyme for any word in this or any other language within two seconds after the gun is fired. [168] If you don't believe it, you should hear her 'unearth 'em' on the 'nasturtium.'"

"Tilly, Tilly!" choked Genevieve, convulsively.

"Oh, but she *said* she couldn't find one for petunia," broke in the exact Cordelia.

"You don't mean she actually writes—*poetry!*" ejaculated Mrs. Kennedy.

"Writes it!—my dear lady!" (Tilly had assumed her most superior air.) "If that were all! But she talks it, day in and day out. Everything is a poem, from a letter to a scraggly nasturtium. She carries an unfailing supply of her own verses in her head, and of other people's in her pocket. If you ask for the butter at the table, you're never sure she won't strike an attitude, and chant:

"'Butter, Butter, Oh, good-by!
Better butter ne'er did—er—fly.'"

"I think I should like to see this young person," observed Mrs. Kennedy, when the laughter at Tilly's sally had subsided.

"Maybe you will sometime. She wants to go East," rejoined Tilly.

"She does? What for?"

"Principally to see Paul Revere's grave, I believe; incidentally to go to school." [169]

"Oh, I wish she could come East to school!" exclaimed Genevieve.

"So do I—if she'd come to Sunbridge," laughed Tilly. "She takes things even more literally than Cordelia does. Sometime I'm going to tell her the moon *is* made of green cheese, and ask her if she doesn't want a piece. Ten to one if she won't answer that she doesn't care for cheese, thank you. Oh, I wouldn't ask to go to *another* show for a whole year if she should come to Sunbridge!"

"Tilly! I don't think you ought to talk like that," remonstrated Cordelia. "One would think that Quentina was a—a vaudeville show."

Tilly considered this gravely.

"Why, Cordelia, do you know?—I believe that is *just* what she is. Thank you so much for thinking of it."

"Tilly!" gasped Cordelia, horrified.

Genevieve frowned.

"Honestly, Tilly, I don't think you are quite fair," she demurred. "Quentina isn't one bit of a show. She's sweet and dear and lovely, with just some funny ways to make her specially interesting."

"All right; we'll let it go at that, then," retorted Tilly, merrily. "She's just specially interesting."

"She must be," smiled Mrs. Kennedy. "In fact, I should very much like to see her, and—I don't [170] believe Tilly means her comments to be quite so unkind as perhaps they sound," she finished with a gentle emphasis that was not lost on her young audience.

CHAPTER XIII [171]

THE PRAIRIE—AND MOONLIGHT

One by one the long, happy July days slipped away. There was no lack of amusement, no time that hung heavy—there was so much to be seen, so much to be done!

Very soon after the trip to Quentina's home, Mr. Tim produced from somewhere five stout little ponies, warranted to be broken to "skirts"—which Genevieve had said would be absolutely necessary, as the girls would never consent to ride astride.

It was a nervous morning, however, for five of the Happy Hexagons when the horses were led up to the door. Cordelia was frankly white-faced and trembling. Even Tilly looked a little doubtful, as she said, trying to speak with her usual lightness:

"Oh, we *know*, of course, Genevieve, that these little beasts won't teeter up and down like Reddy's broncho; and we hope they'll bear in mind that Westerners ought to be politely gentle with Easterners, who aren't brought up to ride jumping jacks. But still, we can't help wondering."

"Genevieve, I—I really think I won't ride at all to-day," stammered Cordelia, faintly; "that is, if you don't mind." [172]

"But I do mind," rejoined Genevieve, looking much distressed. "Of course, girls, I wouldn't urge you against your will, for the world; but we can't have half the fun here unless you ride, for we go everywhere, 'most, in the saddle. And, honestly, Mr. Tim says these horses are regular cows. Father told him he must get steady ones. Won't you please—try it? It will break my heart, if you don't. You see I've said so much to the boys, since I came, about your riding! They were so surprised to think you could ride, and I was so proud to say you did!"

"You—you were?" stammered Cordelia.

"Yes."

"Well, young ladies," called Mr. Tim, at that moment, "here's the steadiest little string of horses going! Who'll have the first pick?"

"I will," cried Cordelia, wetting her dry lips, and speaking with a stern determination that yet did not quite hide the shake in her voice. "That is—I don't care about my pick, but I'm going to ride—right away—quick!" she finished, determined that at least Genevieve should not be ashamed—of her.

After all, it was only the first five minutes that were hard. The little horses were politeness itself, and seemed fully to realize the responsibilities of their position. The girls, determined not to shame Genevieve, acquitted themselves with a grace and ease that brought forth an appreciative cheer from the boys as the young people rode away. [173]

"Now I feel as if I were in Texas," exulted Tilly, drawing in a full breath of the fresh, early morning air.

"I'm so glad—so glad we're all in Texas," cried Genevieve, looking about her with shining eyes.

According to Tilly, there was always "something doing" at the ranch house. The boys—much to their own surprise, it must be confessed—had adopted "the whole bunch" (as Long John called the young people), and were never too busy or too tired to display their skill as ropers or riders. Always there was the fascinating morning start to work to watch, and frequently there was in the afternoon some wild little broncho that needed to be broken to the saddle, or to be trained to stop, wheel instantly, stand motionless, or to start at top speed, according to his master's wishes; all of which was a never-ending source of delight to unaccustomed Eastern eyes.

For pleasant days there were, too, rides, drives to Bolo, picnic luncheons, and frolics of every sort. For rainy days there were games and music in the living room, to say nothing of letters from home to be read and answered. Most of the twilights—if fair—were spent by everybody on the front gallery watching the golden ball in the west set the whole prairie, as well as the sky itself, on fire. In the early afternoon, of course, there was the inevitable siesta—Tilly's abhorred "naps." [174]

There were callers at the ranch house, too. Sometimes a cowboy from a neighboring ranch came to look after a lost pony, or to see if his cattle had strayed off the range through a broken fence. Sometimes a hunter or trapper would stop for a chat on his way to or from Bolo. Once Susie Billings in her khaki suit and cowboy hat came to spend the day; and once, on Sunday, Mr. Jones came to hold service again. Much to the girls' disappointment, Quentina did not come with him. The mother's foot was better, Mr. Jones said, but the twins had come down with the whooping cough, and poor Quentina could not be spared to leave home.

Sometimes a score of men and teams and cowboys with their strings of horses would pass on their way to a round-up; and once two huge prairie schooners "docked in the yard," as Tilly termed it; and their weary owners, at Mr. Hartley's invitation, stopped for a night's rest.

That was, indeed, a time of great excitement for the Happy Hexagons, for under Genevieve's fearless leadership they promptly made friends with the sallow-faced women and the forlorn children, and soon were shown the mysteries of the inside of the wagon-homes. [175]

"Mercy! it looks just like play housekeeping; doesn't it?" gurgled Tilly.

"But it isn't play at all, my dear," replied one of the women, a little sadly. "Seems now like as if I ever had a home again what stayed put, that I'd be happy, no matter where 'twas. Ain't that the

way you feel, Mis' Higgins?"

"Yes," nodded the other woman, dully, from her perch on the driver's seat. "But I reckon my man ain't never goin' ter quit wheelin', now."

Even Genevieve seemed scarcely to know what to reply to this; but a few minutes later she had succeeded in gaining the confidence of the several children hanging about their mothers' skirts. Laughingly, then, the young people trooped away together to look at the flowers—all but Cordelia Wilson. Cordelia remained behind with the two women.

"Please—I beg your pardon—but did you say your name was 'Mrs. Higgins'?" she asked eagerly, turning to the woman on the driver's seat.

"Why, no—I didn't, Miss. But that's my name."

"Yes, I know; 'twas the other lady who called you that, of course; but it doesn't matter, so long as I know 'tis that." [176]

"Oh, don't it?" murmured the woman, a little curiously.

"No; and—you came from New Hampshire, once, didn't you?"

An odd look crossed the woman's face.

"Well, I ain't sayin' that."

"But you did—please say that you did," begged Cordelia. "You see, I'm so anxious to find you!"

A look that was almost terror came to the woman's eyes now.

"I don't know nothin' what you're talkin' about, and I don't want to know, neither," she finished coldly, turning squarely around in her seat.

Cordelia hesitated; then she stammered:

"If—if you think it's because your mother will scold you, I can assure you that she will not. She is very anxious to hear from you—that's all. She's been so worried! She wants to know if you're doing well, and all that."

"What *are* you talking about?" demanded the woman, turning sharply back to Cordelia.

"Your—mother."

"My mother is—dead, Miss."

"Oh-h!" gasped Cordelia. "You mean you *aren't* Mrs. Lizzie Higgins—she that was Lizzie Snow of Sunbridge, New Hampshire, who eloped with Mr. Higgins and ran away to Texas years ago?"

The woman laughed. Her face cleared. Whatever it was that she had feared—she evidently feared it no longer. [177]

"No, Miss. My name isn't 'Lizzie,' and it wa'n't 'Snow,' and I never heard of Sunbridge, New Hampshire."

"O dear!" quavered Cordelia. "Mrs. Snow will be so sorry—that is, of course she'll be glad, too; for you aren't—" With a little gasp of dismay Cordelia pulled herself up before the words were uttered, but not before their meaning was quite clear to the woman.

"Oh, yes, she'll be glad, too, no doubt," she cut in bitterly; "because I'm not exactly what a woman would want for a lost daughter, now, am I?"

Cordelia blushed painfully.

"Oh, please, please don't talk like that! I am sure Mrs. Snow would be glad to find any one for a daughter—she wants her so! And she's her—mother, you know."

The woman's face softened.

"All right," she smiled, a little bitterly. "If I find her I'll send her to you."

"Oh, will you? Thank you so much," cried Cordelia. "And there are some others, too, that I'm hunting for. Maybe you can find them—traveling around so much as you do. If you've got a little piece of paper and a pencil, I'll just write them down, please."

Thus it happened that when the prairie schooners "sailed away" (again to quote Tilly), one of them carried a bit of paper on which had been written full instructions how to proceed should the wife of its owner ever run across John Sanborn, Lizzie Higgins, Lester Goodwin, or James Hunt. [178]

It was soon after this that the Happy Hexagons and Mr. Tim, returning on horseback from a long day on the range, met with a delay that would prevent their reaching the ranch house until some time after dark.

"Oh, goody! I don't care a bit," chuckled Genevieve, when she realized the facts of the case.

"There is a perfectly glorious moon, and now you can see the prairie by moonlight. And you never really have seen the prairie until you do see it by moonlight, you know!"

"But we have seen it by moonlight—right from your steps," cried Tilly.

"Oh, but not the same as it will be out here—away from the ranch house," cried Genevieve. "You just wait! You'll see."

And they did wait. And they did see.

It did seem, indeed, that they never before had really seen the prairie; they all agreed to that, as they gazed in awed delight at the vast, silvery wonder all about them, some time later.

"Why, it looks more than ever like the ocean," cried Bertha. [179]

"That grass over there actually ripples like water in the moonlight," declared Elsie.

"I didn't suppose anything could be so beautiful," breathed Cordelia. "But, Genevieve, won't Mrs. Kennedy be dreadfully worried, at our being so late?"

Genevieve gave a sigh.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," she admitted. "Still, she has Father to comfort her, and he'll remind her that Mr. Tim is with us, and that delays are always happening on a day's run like ours."

"I wish she could see this beautiful sight herself," cried Alma. "She wouldn't blame us, then, for going wild over it and not minding if we are a little hungry."

Tilly, for once, was silent.

"Well?" questioned Genevieve, after a time, riding up to her side.

"I don't know any one—only Quentina—who could do justice to it," breathed Tilly. And, to Genevieve's amazement, the moonlight showed a tear on Tilly's cheek.

There was a long minute of silence. The moon was very bright, yet the many swift-flying clouds brought moments of soft darkness, and cast weird shadows across the far-reaching prairie.

"I think I smell a storm coming—sometime," sniffed Mr. Tim, his face to the wind. [180]

"Wouldn't it be lovely to have it come while we were out here," gurgled Tilly.

"Hardly!" rejoined Mr. Tim with emphasis. "I reckon you needn't worry about that storm for some hours yet. I'll have you all safely corralled long before it breaks—never fear."

"I wasn't fearing. I was hoping," retorted Tilly in a voice that brought a chuckle to the man's lips.

A moment later Mr. Tim stopped his horse and pointed to the right.

"Do you see that black shadow over there?" he asked Bertha Brown, who was nearest him.

"Yes. From a cloud, isn't it?" Bertha, too, stopped to look.

"I think not. It's a bunch of cattle, I reckon. I think I make out the guards riding round them."

"What is it, Mr. Tim?" Genevieve and the other girls had caught up with them now.

"Cattle—over there. See?" explained Mr. Tim, briefly.

At that moment the moon came out unusually clear.

"I can see two men on horseback, passing each other," cried Bertha.

Mr. Tim nodded.

"Yes—the guard. They ride around the bunch in opposite ways, you know."

"Let's go nearer! I want to see," proposed Tilly, trying to quiet the restless movements of her pony.

The man shook his head. [181]

"I reckon not, Miss Tilly. A stampede ain't what I'm looking for to amuse you all to-night."

"What's a stampede?" asked Tilly.

"Mr. Tim, look—quick!" Genevieve's voice was urgent, a little frightened. But the man had not needed that. With a sharp word behind his teeth, he spurred his horse.

"Follow me—quick!" he ordered. And with a frightened cry they obeyed.

Genevieve obeyed, too—but she looked back over her shoulder.

The moon was very bright now. The black shadow to the right had become a wedge-shaped, compact, seething mass, sweeping rapidly toward them. There was a rushing swish in the air, and the sound of hoarse shouts. A few moments later the maddened beasts swept across their path, well to the rear.

"'FOLLOW ME—QUICK!' HE ORDERED"

"I'll answer your question, now, Miss Tilly," said Mr. Tim, as they reined in their horses and looked backward at the shadowy mass. "That was a stampede."

"But what will they do with them?" chattered Cordelia, with white lips. "How can they ever stop them?"

"Oh, they'll head them off—get them to running in a circle, probably, till they can quiet them and make them lie down again." [182]

"And will they be all right—then?" shivered Elsie.

"Hm-m; yes," nodded Mr. Tim, "—till the next thing sets them going. Then they'll be again on their feet, every last one of them—heads and tails erect. Oh, they're a pretty sight then—they are!"

"They must be," remarked Tilly. "Still—well, I sha'n't ask you again what a stampede is—not to-night."

Mr. Tim laughed.

"Well, Miss Tilly, 'tain't likely I could show you one if you did. I don't always keep 'em so handy! And now I reckon we'd better hit the trail for the Six Star, and be right lively about it, too," he added, "or we'll be having Mis' Kennedy out here herself on a broncho after ye!"

Half an hour later a white-faced, teary-eyed little woman at the Six Star Ranch was trying to get her joyful arms around six girls at once.

It was the next morning, and just before Mr. Tim's predicted storm broke, that the girls found the injured man almost hidden in the tall grass near the ranch house. They had gone out for a short ride, but had kept near shelter owing to the threatening sky. Tilly saw the man first.

"Genevieve, there's a man down there," she cried softly. "He's hurt, I think."

Genevieve was off her horse at once. The man was found to be breathing, but apparently unconscious. He lay twisted in a little huddled heap, with one of his legs bent under him. He groaned faintly when Genevieve spoke to him. [183]

Genevieve was a little white when she straightened up.

"I think we'll have to get a wagon, or something, and two of the boys," she said. "I'll ride back to the house if some of you girls will stay here."

"We'll all stay," promised Cordelia; "only be quick," she added, slipping from her pony's back, and giving the reins to Bertha. "Maybe if I could hold his poor head he'd be more comfortable."

Cautiously she sat down on the ground and lifted the man's head to her lap. He groaned again faintly, and opened his eyes. They were large and dark. For a moment there was only pain in their depths; then, gradually, there came a look of profound amazement.

"Where am I?" he asked feebly.

"Sh! Don't talk. You are on the prairie. You must have got hurt, some way."

He tried to move, and groaned again.

"Please be still," begged Cordelia. "You'll make things worse. We've sent for help, and they'll be here right away."

The man closed his eyes now. He did not speak again. [184]

It seemed a long time, but it was really a very short one, before Genevieve came with Carlos and Pedro and one of the ranch wagons. The man groaned again, and grew frightfully white when they lifted him carefully into the wagon. Then he fainted. He was still unconscious when they reached the ranch house.

CHAPTER XIV [185]

A MAN AND A MYSTERY

August came. The first few days of the month were particularly busy ones as some of the boys were off to a round-up on the fifth, and Mr. Hartley was going with them for a week. To the girls the big four-horse wagon for the food and bedding—the "wheeled house" that was to be home for the boys—was always an object of great interest. Then there was the excitement of the start on the day itself, which this time was made particularly momentous by the going of Mr. Hartley.

The ranch house seemed very lonely without its genial, generous-hearted owner, and everybody was glad that he had promised to come back in a week. Meanwhile, of course, there was "the man."

The man was he who had been found by the girls in the prairie grass. He was still almost as much of a mystery as ever. Mr. Hartley had insisted upon his staying—and, indeed (though no bones were broken), he was quite too badly injured to be moved for a time. He was able now to sit in the big comfortable chairs on the back gallery; and he spent hours there every day, sometimes reading, more often sitting motionless, with his dark eyes closed, and his hands [186] resting on his crutches by his side.

He had not seemed to care to talk of himself. He had merely said that his horse had thrown him, and that he had lain in the grass for some time before he was found. He was quiet, had good manners, and used good language. He said that his name was John Edwards. He seemed deeply grateful for all kindness shown him, but was plainly anxious to be well enough to be on his way again. Mr. Hartley, however, had won his promise to remain till he himself returned from the round-up.

All the young people did their best to make the injured man's time pass as pleasantly as possible; and very often one or another of them might be found reading to him, or playing a game of checkers or chess with him.

It was on such an occasion that Cordelia Wilson, at the conclusion of a game of checkers, found the courage to say something that had long been on her mind.

"Mr. Edwards, do—do you know Texas very well?"

The man smiled a little.

"Well, Miss Cordelia, Texas is rather large, you know."

Cordelia sighed almost impatiently.

"Dear me! I—I wish every one wouldn't always say that," she lamented. "It's so discouraging!" [187]

"Dis—couraging?"

"Yes—when you're trying to find some one."

"Oh! And are you trying to find some one?"

"Yes, sir; four some ones."

"Well, I should think that might be difficult—in Texas, unless you know where they are," smiled the man.

"I don't; and that's what's the matter," sighed Cordelia. "That's why I was going to ask you, to see if you didn't know, perhaps."

"Ask *me?*"

"Yes. That is, if you had been around any—in Texas. You see I ask everybody, almost. I have to," she apologized a little wistfully. "And even then it looks as if I should have to go back to Sunbridge without finding one of them. And I'd so hate to do that!"

The man started visibly.

"Go back—where?"

"To Sunbridge."

"Sunbridge—?"

"Sunbridge, New Hampshire; home, you know."

An odd expression crossed the man's face.

"No—I didn't know," he said, after a moment.

"Why, didn't any of us ever tell you we were from the East?" cried Cordelia. [188]

"Oh, yes, lots of times. But you never happened to mention the town before, I think."

"Why, how funny!" murmured Cordelia.

The man did not speak. He seemed to have fallen into a reverie. Cordelia stirred restlessly in her seat.

"Did you say you would help me?" she asked at last, timidly.

"Help you?" The man seemed to have forgotten what she had been speaking of.

"Help me to find them, you know—those people I'm looking for."

"Why, of course," laughed the man, easily. "Who are—" He stopped abruptly. For the second time an odd expression crossed his face. "Are they—Sunbridge people?" he asked, stooping to

pick up a dried leaf from the gallery floor.

"Yes, Mr. Edwards. There are four of them—three men and one woman. They are John Sanborn, Lester Goodwin, James Hunt, and Mrs. Lizzie Higgins. Maybe you know some of them. Do you?"

"Well, Miss Cordelia,"—the man stopped a minute, as he reached for a leaf still farther away—"is that quite to be expected?" he asked then, lightly.

"No, I suppose not," she sighed; "for, of course, Texas *is* big. But if you would please just put their names down on paper same as the others have, that would help a great deal." [189]

"Why, certainly," agreed the man, reaching into his pocket and bringing out a little notebook not unlike the minister's. "Now suppose you—you give me those names again, Miss Cordelia."

"John Sanborn, Lester Goodwin, James Hunt, and Mrs. Lizzie Higgins. And I am Cordelia Wilson, you know. Just 'Sunbridge, New Hampshire,' would reach me—if you found any of them."

"I'll remember—if I find any of them," murmured the man, as he wrote the last name.

"And thank you so much!" beamed Cordelia.

There was a moment's silence. The man was playing with his pencil.

"Did you say you were *asked* to find these people?" he inquired at last, examining the lead of his pencil intently.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Indeed! And may I inquire who asked you?"

"Why, of course! The people who belong to them—who are so anxious for them to come back, you know."

"Oh, then they want them?" The man was still examining the point of his pencil.

"Indeed they do, Mr. Edwards," cried Cordelia, glad to find her new audience so interested. "Mrs. Lizzie Higgins eloped years ago, and her mother, Mrs. Snow, is terribly worried. She's [190] never heard a word from her. Mrs. Granger is a widow, and very poor. Her husband died last year. She hasn't any one left but her cousin, Lester Goodwin, now, and she so wishes she could find him. Lester's had some money left him, but if he isn't found this year, it'll go to some one else."

"Oh!" The man gave a short little laugh that sounded not quite pleasant, as he lifted his head suddenly. "I begin to see. Mrs. Granger thinks if she had Lester, and Lester had the money, why she'd get the money, too, eh?"

"Oh, no, sir—not exactly," objected Cordelia. "You see, if he *isn't* found the money goes to *her*, so she thinks she ought to make a special effort to find him. She says she wouldn't sleep a wink if she took all that money *without* trying to find him; so she asked me. Of course the lawyers are hunting, anyway."

"Oh-h!" said the man again; but this time he did not laugh. "Hm-m; well—are there any fortunes left the other two?" he asked, after a moment's silence. He had gone back to his pencil point.

"Oh, no, sir," laughed Cordelia, a little ruefully. "I'm afraid they won't think so. *They're* wanted to *help* folks."

"To help folks!"

"Yes, sir. You see John Sanborn's father is very poor, and he lives all alone in a little bit of a [191] house in the woods. He's called 'Hermit Joe.'"

"Yes—go on," bade the man, as Cordelia stopped for breath. The man's voice was husky—perhaps because he had stooped to pick up another dried leaf.

"There isn't much more about him, only he's terribly lonesome and wants his boy, he says. You see, the boy ran away years and years ago. I don't think that was very nice of him. Do you?"

There was no answer. The man sat now with his hand over his eyes. Cordelia wondered if perhaps she had tired him.

"And that's all," she said hurriedly; "only Sally Hunt's brother, James. If he isn't found she'll have to go to the Poor Farm, I'm afraid."

"What?"

Cordelia started nervously. The man had turned upon her so sharply that his crutches fell to the floor with a crash.

"Oh, sir, I beg your pardon," she apologized, springing to her feet. "I'm so afraid you were asleep, and I startled you. I—I will go now. And—and thank you ever so much for writing down those names!"

The man shook his head decidedly.

"Don't go," he begged. "You have not tired me, and I like to hear you talk. Now sit down, please, and tell me all about these people—this James Hunt's sister, and all the rest." [192]

"Oh, do you really want to know about them?" cried Cordelia, joyfully. "Then I will tell you; for maybe it would help you find them, you know."

"Yes, maybe it would," agreed the man, in a curiously vibrant voice, as Cordelia seated herself again at his side. "Now talk."

And Cordelia talked. She talked not only then, but several times after that, and she talked always of Sunbridge. Mr. Edwards seemed so interested in everything and everybody there, though specially, of course, in the relatives of the four lost people she was trying to find—which was natural, certainly, thought Cordelia, inasmuch as he, too, was going to search for them in the weeks to come.

Mr. Edwards improved in health very rapidly these days. He discarded his crutches, and seemed feverishly anxious to test his strength on every occasion. Upon Mr. Hartley's return from the round-up, the injured man insisted that he was quite well enough to go away; and, in spite of the kind ranchman's protests, he did go the next day after Mr. Hartley's return. Carlos drove him to Bolo, and the Happy Hexagons stood on the ranch-house steps and gave him their Texas yell as a send-off, substituting a lusty "MR. EDWARDS" for Genevieve's name at the end.

"That is the most convenient yell," chuckled Tilly, as the ranch wagon with Carlos and Mr. Edwards drove away. "It'll do for anything and anybody. And didn't Mr. Edwards like it!" [193]

"Of course he did! He couldn't help it," cried Genevieve.

"I think Mr. Edwards is a very nice man," observed Cordelia, with emphasis, "and I wish he could have stayed for the party."

"Why, of course he's a nice man," chimed in the other girls, eyeing her earnest face a little curiously.

"Who said he wasn't?" laughed Tilly. "My! but it is hot, isn't it?" she added, dropping into one of the big wicker chairs near her.

"Oh, of course we have to have some warm weather," bridled Genevieve, "else you'd be homesick for New Hampshire!"

"The mean annual temperature of the country near—" began Tilly, mischievously; but Genevieve put her hands to her ears and fled.

The fourteenth of August was to be a gala occasion at the Six Star Ranch, for there was to be a supper and dance to entertain the friends from the East.

"But where'll you get your guests?" demanded Tilly, when she first heard of the plan. "Whom can you have, 'way off here like this?—all will please take notice that I said '*whom*'!" [194]

Genevieve laughed and tossed her head a little.

"Well, we'll have the boys here on the ranch, of course, and Susie Billings, and some of the other Bolo girls. We can't have Quentina, of course—Poor thing! Isn't it a shame about that whooping cough?—and Ned's got it, too, now, you know!—but I think the Boyntons will come. Their ranch is only thirty-five miles away, and they could stay all night, of course."

"Only thirty-five miles away," repeated Tilly, airily. "Of course nobody'd mind a little thing like that, for a party!"

"No, they wouldn't—in Texas," retorted Genevieve. "There's the Wetherbys, too. They live five miles out from Bolo on the other side. Maybe they'll come. We'll ask them, anyhow. Oh, we'll have a party—never you fear!"

When the night of the fourteenth arrived, things looked, indeed, very like "a party." Everywhere were confusion and excitement, even to the saddle room and blacksmith's shop, and to the two big tents that were being put up for extra sleeping quarters. Everywhere, too (Mrs. Kennedy declared), were dishes heaped with chocolate candies. Mr. Edwards, who had left the ranch only the day before, had sent back by Carlos twenty-five pounds of the best candy Bolo could supply; and the girls had been lavish in its disposal.

Five Wetherbys and six Boyntons had arrived together with a dozen cowboys on horseback. Susie Billings, minus her khaki and cartridges, looked the picture of demureness in white muslin and baby-blue ribbons. There were other pretty girls, too, from Bolo, in white, and in pale pink and yellow. And everywhere were the Happy Hexagons, wildly excited, and delighted with it all. [195]

The big hall and the living-room had been cleared for dancing. The galleries and the long covered way leading to the dining room had been decorated with flowers and lanterns. The long table in the dining-room was decorated, too, and would later be loaded with all sorts of good

things: sandwiches, hot biscuits, tamales, cakes, and black coffee without sugar. In the center of the table already there was a huge round white something that called forth delighted clappings from the Happy Hexagons as they flocked in at seven o'clock to look at the table decorations.

"Oh, what a lovely cake," gurgled Tilly, "and such a big one!"

Genevieve laughed mischievously.

"I'll give you the whole cake—if you'll cut it," she proposed.

With manifest alacrity Tilly reached for a knife.

"Done!" she cried.

Before the knife descended, Genevieve caught her hand.

"Wait! Look here," she parleyed. Taking the knife, she thrust its point through the elaborate [196] white frosting, with two or three gentle taps.

"Why, it's hard!—hard as stone," ejaculated Tilly, trying for herself.

"It *is* stone," laughed Genevieve.

"Stone!" cried a chorus of unbelieving voices.

"Yes, stone—frosted with sugar and the whites of eggs. Oh, if you'd lived in Texas as long as I have you'd have seen them before," nodded Genevieve.

"Well, I've got my opinion of Texas cakes, then," pouted Tilly, with saucy impertinence.

"Oh, you'll change it later, I reckon—when you see the real ones," rejoined Genevieve, comfortably, as they left the dining-room.

There never had been, surely, such a party. All the Happy Hexagons agreed to that. So, too, did all the guests. Perhaps on no one's face was there a look of anxious care except on Cordelia's. Possibly Mr. Hartley noticed this look. At all events he watched Cordelia rather closely, as the evening advanced, particularly after he chanced to overhear some of her remarks to his guests. Then he sought his daughter.

"Dearie," he began in a low voice, leading her a little to one side, "what in the world ails that little Miss Cordelia?"

"Ails her! What do you mean? Is she sick?"

"No, I don't think so; but she looks as if she'd got the weight of the whole outfit on her [197] shoulders, and she seems to be going 'round asking everybody if they knew John somebody, or Lizzie somebody else."

Genevieve laughed merrily; but almost at once she frowned and shook her head.

"No, I don't know, Father, what is the matter. But Cordelia is capable of—anything, if once her conscience is stirred. Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"I believe I will, dearie," he asserted at last.

Five minutes later he chanced to find Cordelia without a partner.

"Miss Cordelia, will you accept an old man for this dance?" he asked genially. "And shall we sit it out, perhaps?"

"Oh, thank you! I'd love to," cried Cordelia in a relieved voice. "And I shall be so glad to rest!"

"Tired—dancing?" he asked.

"Oh, no, not dancing; that is—well—" She stopped, and colored painfully.

Mr. Hartley waited a moment, then observed with a smile:

"You seem to be looking for some one to-night, Miss Cordelia. Didn't I hear you asking Mr. Boynton and Joe Wetherby if they knew John somebody or other?"

Again a pink flush spread over Cordelia's face, "Yes, sir; I am looking for somebody—four [198] somebodies."

"You don't say! Found them yet?"

She shook her head. To the man's surprise and distress, her eyes filled with tears.

"No, Mr. Hartley, and that's what's the trouble. That's why I'm trying so hard to-night to ask all these people—there's such a little time left!"

"Time—left?"

"Yes. I'd like to tell you about it, please. I think I may tell you. Of course I haven't said a word to the girls, because the people—back in Sunbridge—didn't want me to talk about it. I'm looking for John Sanborn, Lester Goodwin, James Hunt, and Mrs. Lizzie Higgins. They're all Sunbridge people who came to Texas years ago, and are lost."

Mr. Hartley gave a sudden exclamation.

"Did you say—Lester Goodwin was one?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Who wants him, and what for?"

Patiently Cordelia told him. She wore a hopeless air. She had ceased, evidently, to expect anything that was good.

Mr. Hartley gave a low whistle. For a moment he was silent, then he chuckled unexpectedly.

"Well, Miss Cordelia, if you hadn't looked so far away for your pony you might have seen his tracks nearer home, perhaps. As it happens, Lester Goodwin is right here on the ranch." [199]

"Here? Lester Goodwin?" gasped Cordelia.

"Yes. Oh, he isn't known by that name—he preferred not to be. He came to me fourteen years ago, and he's been here ever since. He said he wanted to be a cowboy; that he'd always wanted to be one ever since when, as a little boy, he used to rope his rocking-horse with his mother's clothes-line. His uncle had wanted him to be a teacher, but he hated the sight of books; so when his uncle died, he ran away and came here. He said there wasn't anybody to care where he was, or what he did; so I let him stay."

"And to think he's here now!"

"He certainly is. You see he came here because he knew me once a little when I was in Sunbridge visiting relatives, years ago, and he knew I had become a ranchman in Texas. He begged so hard that I should keep his secret that I've always kept it. Besides, there was nothing to keep. Nobody ever asked me, or suspected he was here."

"Why, how strange!" breathed Cordelia, with shining eyes. "And only think how I've asked everybody but you—and now I've found one of them right here!"

"Yes—though we mustn't be too sure, of course. We'll tell him; but maybe he won't want to go back, even now. I reckon, however, that when he hears of the money, Reddy won't mind his real name being known." [200]

"Reddy!" cried Cordelia.

"Oh!—I didn't tell you, did I?" smiled Mr. Hartley. "Yes, Reddy is Lester Goodwin."

"Why, Mr. Hartley! And I never thought of such a thing as asking *him!* I only looked for the cowboys who were called 'John' or 'James' or 'Lester'—and there weren't many of those. And so it's Reddy—why, I just can't believe it's true!"

"I reckon Reddy can't, either," laughed Mr. Hartley. "And now we'll let you go back to your dancing, my dear. I've already encountered at least four pairs of glowering eyes unpleasantly pointed in my direction. I'll go and find Reddy—or rather, Mr. Lester Goodwin," he finished impressively, as he rose to his feet.

CHAPTER XV [201]

THE ALAMO

Two days after the party at the ranch house, Mr. Hartley made a wonderful announcement at the dinner table.

"What do you say, young ladies, to a visit to San Antonio?" he began.

"Father, could we? Do you mean we can?" cried Genevieve.

"Yes, dear, that's just what I mean. It so happens I've got business there, so I'm going to take you home 'round by that way. We'll have maybe a couple of days there, and we'll see something of the surrounding country, besides. You know Texas is quite a state—and you've seen mighty little of it, as yet."

"Oh, girls, we'll see the Alamo!" cried Genevieve. "Did you realize that?"

"Will we, truly?" chorused several rapturous voices.

"Yes."

"And what do you know about the Alamo, young ladies?" smiled Mr. Hartley.

"We know everything," answered Tilly, cheerfully. "Mr. Jones's daughter, you know, was our Latin teacher, and she had the History class, too. Well, we couldn't even *think* Bunker Hill but what she'd pipe up about the Alamo. Now I think Bunker Hill is pretty good!" [202]

"Oh, but we want to see the Alamo, just the same," interposed Bertha, anxiously.

"Of course!" cried five emphatic girlish voices.

"All right," laughed Mr. Hartley. "You shall see it, all of you—if the train will take us there; and you'll see—well, you'll see a lot of other things, too."

Cordelia stirred uneasily. The old anxious look came back to her eyes. When dinner was over she stole to Mr. Hartley's side.

"Mr. Hartley, please, shall we see an oil well?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Bless you, little lady, what do you know about oil wells?" smiled the man, good-naturedly. "You haven't got any of those to look up, have you?"

To his dumbfounded amazement, she answered simply:

"Yes, sir—one."

"Well, I'll be—well, just what is this proposition?" he broke off whimsically.

"If you'll wait—just a minute—I'll get the paper," panted Cordelia. "Mr. Hodges wrote down the name." [203]

Very soon she had returned with the paper, and Mr. Hartley saw the name. His face hardened, yet his eyes were curiously tender.

"I'm afraid, little girl, that this won't come out quite so well as the Reddy affair—by the way, Reddy left an extra good-by for you this morning. He went away before you were up, you know. He feels pretty grateful to you, Miss Cordelia."

"But I didn't do anything, Mr. Hartley. I do wish I could see Mrs. Granger when he gets there, though. I—I'm afraid she doesn't like cowboys much better than Mrs. Miller does."

There was a moment's silence. Mr. Hartley was scowling at the bit of paper in his hand.

"Did you say you *didn't* know where that oil well was, Mr. Hartley?" asked Cordelia, timidly.

"Yes. I don't know where it is—and I reckon there doesn't anybody else know, either," he answered slowly. "I know where it *claims* to be, and I know it is just one big swindle from beginning to end."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," sighed the girl.

"So am I, my dear. I'm sorry for Mr. Hodges, and lots of others that I know lost money in the same thing. But it can't be helped now."

"Then there aren't any oil wells here at all in Texas?" asked Cordelia, tearfully.

"Bless you, yes, child—heaps of them! You'll see them, too, probably, before you leave the state. But—you won't see this one." [204]

"Oh, I'm so sorry," mourned Cordelia, again, as sadly she took the bit of paper back to her room.

It was not many days before the Happy Hexagons said good-by to the ranch—a most reluctant good-by. It was a question, however, which felt the worst: Mammy Lindy, weeping on the gallery steps, Mr. Tim and the boys, waving a noisy good-by from their saddles, or Mrs. Kennedy and the Happy Hexagons—the latter tearfully giving their Texas yell with "THE RANCH" for the final word to-day.

"I think I never had such a good time in all my life," breathed Cordelia.

"I know I never did," choked Tilly. "Genevieve, we can't ever begin to thank you for it all!"

"I—I don't want you to," wailed Genevieve, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "I reckon you haven't had any better time than I have!"

Quentina was at the Bolo station; so, too, was Susie Billings.

"O Happy Hexagons, Happy Hexagons, I just had to come," chanted Quentina, standing some distance away, and extending two restraining hands, palms outward. "Don't kiss me—don't come near me! I don't think I've got any whooping germs about me, but we want to be on the safe side." [205]

"But, Quentina, how are you? How are all of you?" cried Genevieve, plainly distressed. "I think it's just horrid—staying off at arm's length like this!"

"But you must, dear," almost sobbed Quentina. "I wouldn't have you go through what we are going through with at home for anything. Such a whoop—whoop—whooping time!"

"Couldn't you make a poem on it?" bantered Tilly. "I should think 'twould make a splendid subject—you could use such sonorous, resounding words."

Quentina shook her head dismally.

"I couldn't. I tried it once or twice; but all I could think of was 'Hark, from the tombs a doleful sound'; then somebody would cough, and I just couldn't get any further." Her voice was tragic in spite of its drawl.

"You poor thing," sympathized Genevieve. "But we—we're glad to *see* you, even for this little, and even if we can't *feel* you! But, Quentina, you'll write—sure?"

"Yes, I'll write," nodded Quentina, backing sorrowfully away. "Good-by, Happy Hexagons, good-by!"

"So that is your Quentina?" said Mr. Hartley in a low voice, as the girls were waving their [206] hands and handkerchiefs. "Well, she *is* pretty."

"Oh, but she wasn't half so pretty to-day," regretted Genevieve. "She looked so thin and tired. I wanted to introduce you, Father, but I didn't know how to—so far away."

"I should say not," laughed Mr. Hartley. "'Twould have been worse than your high handshake back East," he added, as he turned to speak to Susie Billings, who had come up at that moment.

Susie Billings was in her khaki suit and cowboy hat to-day, with the cartridge belt and holster; so, as it happened, the last glimpse the girls had of Bolo station was made picturesque by a vision of "Cordelia's cowboy" (as Tilly always called Susie) waving her broad-brimmed hat.

The trip to San Antonio was practically uneventful, though it was certainly one long delight to the Happy Hexagons, who never wearied of talking about the sights and sounds of the wonderful country through which they were passing.

"Well, this isn't much like Bolo; is it?" cried Tilly, when at last they found themselves in the handsome railroad station of the city itself. "I shouldn't think Texas would know its own self half the time—it's so different from itself all the time!"

"That's all right, Tilly, and I think I know what you mean," [207] laughed Genevieve; "but I wouldn't advise you to give that sentence to Miss Hart as your best example of logic."

"Well, I was talking about Texas," retorted Tilly, saucily, "and there isn't anything logical about Texas, that I can see. There, now—look!" she added, as they reached the street. "Just tell me if there's anything logical in that scene!" she finished, with a wave of her hand toward the passing throng.

Genevieve laughed, but her eyes, too, widened a little as she stepped one side with the others, for a moment, to watch the curious conglomeration of humanity and vehicles before them.

"'THERE, NOW—LOOK!' SHE ADDED"

In the street a luxurious limousine was tooting for a ramshackle prairie schooner to turn to one side. Behind the automobile plodded a forlorn mule dragging a wagon-load of empty boxes. Behind that came an army ambulance followed by an electric truck. A handsome soldier on a restive bay mare came next, and behind him a huge touring car with a pompous black chauffeur. On either side of the touring car rode a grinning boy on a mustang, plainly to the discomfort of the pompous negro and the delight of two pretty girls in white who were in the low phaeton that followed. A bicycle bell jangled sharply for a swarthy Mexican in a tall peaked hat to get out of the way, and farther down the street two solid-looking men in business suits were waiting for a pretty Mexican woman with a rebosa- [208] draped head to precede them into a car. Behind them a huge negro woman wearing a red bandana about her head, waited her turn. And still behind her a severe-faced young woman in a tailored suit was drawing her skirts away from two almost naked pickaninnies.

"Well, no; perhaps it isn't really logical," laughed Genevieve. "But it's awfully interesting!"

"I chose one of the older hotels," said Mr. Hartley, a little later, as he piloted his party through the doorway of a fine old building.

"You couldn't have chosen a lovelier one, I'm sure, Father," declared Genevieve, as she looked about her with shining eyes.

Genevieve was even more convinced of this when, just before dinner, in response to a summons from Tilly's voice she stepped out on to the little balcony leading from her room. The balcony overlooked an inner court, and was hung with riotous moon-vines. Down in the court a silvery fountain played among palms and banana trees. Here and there a cactus plant thrust spiny arms into the air. Somewhere else queen's wreath and devil's ivy made a tiny bower of

loveliness. While everywhere were electric lights and roses, matching one against the other their brilliant hues.

"Genevieve, I—I think I'm going to c-cry," wailed Tilly's sobbing voice from the adjoining balcony. [209]

"Cry!—when it's all so lovely!" exclaimed Genevieve.

Tilly nodded.

"Yes. That's why I want to," she quavered. "Honestly, Genevieve, if I stay here long I shall be writing poetry like Quentina—I know I shall!"

"If you do, just let me read it, that's all," retorted Genevieve, saucily. "Where's Cordelia?"

"Off somewhere with Elsie and Bertha. She got dressed early—but I sha'n't get dressed at all if I don't go about it."

At that moment there was the sound of a scream, then the patter of running feet in the court below.

"Why, there they are now," cried Genevieve, leaning over the railing. "Girls, girls!" she called, regardless of others in the court. "Look up here! What's the matter?"

The girls stopped, and looked up. Cordelia, only, cast an apprehensive glance over her shoulder.

"It's an alligator in the fountain in the other court," explained Elsie. "Bertha said she heard there was one there, and so we went to see—and we found out."

"I should say we did," shuddered Cordelia, still with her head turned backward. "I sha'n't sleep a wink to-night—I know I sha'n't!"

"An alligator—really?" cried Tilly. "Then I'm going to hurry and get ready so I can see him before dinner," she finished, as she whisked into her room. [210]

Dinner that night, in the brilliantly lighted, flower-decked dining-room was an experience never to be forgotten by the girls.

"I didn't suppose there were such bea-*u*-tiful dresses in the world," sighed Elsie, looking about her.

Mr. Hartley smiled.

"I reckon you'd think so, Miss Elsie," he said, "if you could see the place when it's in full swing. It's too early yet for the real tourist season, I imagine. Anyhow, there aren't so many people here as I've always seen before."

"Well, I shouldn't ask it to be any nicer, anyway," declared Bertha; and the rest certainly agreed with her.

Bright and early the next morning the Happy Hexagons and Mr. Hartley started out sight-seeing. Mrs. Kennedy was too tired to go, she said.

"I'll let business slip for an hour or two," Mr. Hartley remarked as they left the hotel; "at all events, until I get you young people started."

"Hm-m; you mean, to—the Alamo?" hinted Genevieve, with merry eyes.

"Sure, dearie! The Alamo it shall be," smiled her father. "Then to-morrow I'll take you to Fort Sam Houston where there are *live* soldiers." [211]

"Oh, is there an army post here, truly?" cried Tilly.

"Only the largest in the country," answered the Texan, proudly.

"Really? Oh, how splendid! I just love soldiers!"

"Really?" mimicked Mr. Hartley, mischievously. "They'll be pleased to know it, I'm sure, Miss Tilly."

The others laughed. Tilly blushed and shrugged her shoulders; but she asked no more questions about Fort Sam Houston for at least five minutes.

"Now where's the place—the really, truly place?" demanded Cordelia, in an awed voice, when the party had reached the Alamo Plaza.

"The place—the real place, Miss Cordelia," replied Mr. Hartley, "where the fight occurred, was in a court over there; and the walls were pulled down years ago. But this little chapel was part of it, and this is what everybody always looks at and talks about. The relics are inside. We'll go in and see them, if you like."

"If we like!" cried Genevieve, fervently. "Just as if we didn't want to see everything—every single thing there is to see!" she finished, as her father led the way into the dim interior under the watchful eyes of the caretaker.

Even Tilly, for a moment, was silenced in the hush and somberness of the place. Genevieve stole to her father's side. Mr. Hartley, with bared head, was wearing a look of grave reverence. [212]

"You appreciate it, don't you, Father?" she said softly. "You have always talked such a lot about it."

He nodded.

"I don't see how any one can help appreciating it," he rejoined, after a moment, looking up at the narrow, iron-barred windows. "Why, Genevieve, this is our Bunker Hill, you know."

"I know," she said soberly. "How many was it? I've forgotten."

"About one hundred and eighty on the inside—here; and all the way from two to six thousand on the outside—accounts differ. But it was thousands, anyway, against one hundred and eighty—and it lasted ten days or more."

Genevieve shuddered.

"And they all—died?"

"Every one—of the soldiers. There was a woman and a young child and a negro servant left to tell the tale."

"That's what it means on the monument, isn't it?" murmured Genevieve. "'Thermopylæ had its messenger of defeat: the Alamo had none.'"

"Yes," said her father. "I've always wondered what Davy Crockett would have said to that. You know he was here." [213]

"Wasn't he the one who said, 'Be sure you are right, then go ahead'?"

"Yes. And he went ahead—straight to his death, here."

Genevieve's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Oh, it does make one want to be good and brave and true, doesn't it, Father?"

"I reckon it ought to, little girl," he smiled gently.

"It does," breathed Genevieve. A moment later she crossed to Tilly's side.

Tilly welcomed her with subdued joyousness.

"Genevieve, please, *please* mayn't we get out of this?" she begged. "Honestly, I feel as if I were besieged myself in this horrid tomb-like place. And—and I like live soldiers so much better!"

Genevieve gave her a reproachful glance, but in a moment she suggested that perhaps they had better go.

"Oh, but that was lovely," she sighed, as they came out into the bright sunshine. "The caretaker told me they call it the 'Cradle of Liberty,' here; and I don't wonder."

Tilly uptilted her chin—already the sunshine had brought back her usual gayety of spirits.

"Dear me! what a lot of cradles Liberty must have had! You know Faneuil Hall in Boston is *one*. Only think how far the poor thing must have traveled between naps if she tried to sleep in all her cradles!" [214]

Even Genevieve laughed—but she sighed reproachfully, too.

"Oh, Tilly, how you can turn poetry into prose—sometimes!" Then she added wistfully: "How I wish I could see this Plaza on San Jacinto Day!"

"What is that?" demanded Tilly.

"The twenty-third of April. They have the Battle of the Flowers in the Plaza here, in front of the Alamo. I've always wanted to see that."

"Hm-m; well, I might not mind that kind of a battle myself," laughed Tilly.

CHAPTER XVI [215]

TILLY CROSSES BRIDGES

In the afternoon the young people again started out to explore the town. This time Mr. Hartley was not with them.

"But are you quite sure you won't get lost?" Mrs. Kennedy demurred anxiously, as Genevieve was putting on her hat.

"No, ma'am," returned Genevieve, with calm truthfulness and a merry smile. "But, dearie, it's

daylight and there are six of us. What if we do get lost? We've got tongues in our heads, and we know the name of our hotel and of the street it's on."

"Very well," sighed Mrs. Kennedy. Then, with sudden spirit she added: "Dear me, Genevieve! I shall be glad if ever we get back to Sunbridge and I have you to myself all quiet again. I'm afraid you'll never, never settle down to just plain living after these irresponsible weeks of one long playday."

It was Genevieve's turn now to sigh.

"I know, Aunt Julia. It will be hard, won't it?" she admitted. Then, with a quick change of manner, she observed airily: "As if anything could be nicer than learning to cook, and keeping my [216] stockings mended! Why, Aunt Julia!" The next moment, with a breezy kiss, she was gone.

It was a delightful afternoon that the girls spent rambling about the curiously interesting old town, which—Cordelia impressively informed them—was the third oldest in the United States. They tried to see it all, but they did not succeed in this, of course. They did stand in delighted wonder before the San Fernando Cathedral with its square, cross-tipped towers; and they did wander for an entrancing hour in the old Mexican Quarter, with its picturesque houses and people, its fascinating chili and tamale stands, and its narrow, twisting streets, which Genevieve declared were almost as bad as Boston.

"Boston!" bridled Tilly, instantly. "Why, Boston's tiniest, crookedest streets are great wide boulevards compared to these! Besides, when we are in Boston we don't have to cross a river every time we turn around."

"I don't know about that," retorted Genevieve, warmly. "Just try to go over to Cambridge or Charlestown and see. I'm sure I think Boston's got lots of bridges."

Tilly sniffed her disdain.

"Pooh! You're *leaving* Boston when you cross those bridges, Genevieve Hartley, and you know it. But just look at them here! We haven't stirred once out of San Antonio, and I think I've crossed [217] five bridges in the last seven minutes. I can imagine those old fellows who built this town getting tired of building houses, and saying: 'And now let's stop and build a bridge for the fun of it!'"

Genevieve laughed heartily.

"You've won, Tilly. I'll give up," she chuckled. "I hadn't meant to tell you; but there *are* thirteen miles of river twisting in and out through the city, and—there *are* seventeen bridges."

"Where did you find out all that?" demanded Tilly, suspiciously.

"In a guidebook that I saw last night at the hotel. It's the same one, I reckon, that Cordelia's been giving all her information from," said Genevieve.

"Hm-m;" commented Tilly. "Now I *know* I've crossed five bridges in the last seven minutes!"

"Well, I wouldn't care if there were forty miles of river and fifty bridges," retorted Genevieve, "if they'd all have such lovely green banks and dear little boats!"

"Nor I," agreed two or three emphatic voices.

Everywhere and at every turn the girls found something of interest, something to marvel at. When tired of walking they boarded a car; and when tired of riding, they got off and walked.

"Well, anyhow, folks seem to have a choice of houses to live in," observed Tilly, her eyes on a [218] quaint little white bungalow surrounded by heuisach and mesquite trees.

"Yes, they do," laughed Genevieve—Genevieve was looking at the next one to it: an old-fashioned colonial mansion set far back from the street, with a huge pecan tree standing guard on each side.

"Well, seems to me just now a hotel would look the nicest of anything," moaned Cordelia, wearily. "Girls, I just can't go another step—unless it's toward home," she finished despairingly.

"Me, too," declared Tilly. "I'm just plum locoed, I'm that tired! Say we hit the trail for the hotel right now. Come on; I'm ready!"

Genevieve laughed, but she eyed Tilly a little curiously.

"What do you suppose Sunbridge will say to your new expressions à la the wild and woolly West?" she queried.

"Just exactly what they said to you, Miss Genevieve," bantered Tilly.

"Oh, but Genevieve's were *natural*," cut in Bertha, with meaning emphasis.

"All the more reason why mine should be more interesting, then," retorted Tilly, imperturbably. And with a laugh Bertha and Genevieve gave it up, as with tired but happy faces, they set out for the hotel. [219]

At breakfast the next morning, Mr. Hartley announced cheerily:

"We'll do the parks, to-day, and the Hot Sulphur Well and Hotel; and finish with dress parade

at Fort Sam Houston."

"But—what about your business?" asked Genevieve.

Mr. Hartley laughed.

"Oh, that's all—done," he answered; then, as the puzzled questioning still remained in her eyes, he added, a little shamefacedly: "You see, there wasn't much business, to tell the truth, dearie. I reckon my real business was to show off the state of Texas to our young Easterners here."

"You darling!" cried Genevieve, rapturously, while all the rest of the Happy Hexagons stumbled and stuttered over their vain attempts at thanking him.

"I declare! I wish we could give him our Texas yell, right here," chuckled Tilly, turning longing eyes about the dining-room. "We would end with 'Mr. Hartley,' of course."

"Tilly!" gasped Cordelia, in open horror.

"What is the Hot Sulphur Well, Mr. Hartley, please?" asked Elsie, who had not heard Tilly's remark.

"You'll have to ask some one who's been cured by it," laughed the man. "They say there are plenty that have been." [220]

"Do you suppose it looks any like an oil well?" ventured Cordelia.

"Sounds a bit hot, seems to me, for to-day," giggled Tilly. "I think I shall like the parks better."

"All right; we'll let you do the parks—*all* of them," cooed Genevieve, wickedly. "There are only twenty-one, you know, my dear."

"Genevieve Hartley, if you remember your lessons next year one half as well as you have that abominable guidebook, you'll be at the head of your class!" remarked Tilly, severely, as the others rose from the table, with a laugh.

It was another long, happy day. The parks, as Tilly had predicted, proved to be cooler than the Hot Sulphur Well, and they certainly were more enjoyable, even though only two of Genevieve's announced twenty-one were visited—Brackenridge Park, and San Pedro Park. It was the former that Cordelia enjoyed the most, perhaps, for it was there that she saw her much-longed-for buffalo. Tired, but still enthusiastic, they reached the hotel in time to dress for the visit to Fort Sam Houston, upon which Mrs. Kennedy was to accompany them.

Getting dressed was, however, a grand flurry of excitement, for time and space were limited; and there was not one of the Happy Hexagons who did not feel that on this occasion, at least, every curl and ribbon and shoe-tie must display a neatness that was military in its precision. [221]

Perhaps only Elsie of all the girls wept over the matter. Her eyes were red when she knocked at Genevieve's door.

"Why, Elsie!"

"Genevieve, I've come to say—I can't go," choked Elsie.

"Why, Elsie, are you sick?"

"Oh, no; it's—clothes. Genevieve, I simply haven't anything to wear."

"Nonsense, dear, of course you have! We don't have to dress much for this thing. Where's your white linen or your tan or your blue?"

"The white is too soiled, and the other two have worn places that show."

"But there's your chambray—that isn't worn."

Elsie shook her head.

"But I can't—that, truly, Genevieve. It's got worse and worse every day, until now *anybody* can tell Cora and Clara apart!"

Genevieve choked back a laugh. She was frowning prodigiously when Elsie looked up.

"I'll tell you, Elsie, I've got just the thing," she cried. "Wear my white linen—it's perfectly fresh, and 'twill fit you, I'm sure."

Elsie's face turned scarlet.

"Oh, Genevieve! I wouldn't—I couldn't! I'd never, never do such an awful thing," she gasped. [222] "Why, what *would* Aunt Kate say?—my wearing your clothes like that! Oh, I never thought of your taking it that way! Never mind—I'll fix something," she choked, as she turned and fled down the hall, leaving a distressed and almost an angry Genevieve behind her.

For some minutes Genevieve busied herself with her own toilet, jerking hooks and ribbons into place with unnecessary force; then she turned despairingly to Mrs. Kennedy, whose room she was sharing.

"Aunt Julia, what's the use of having anything to give, if folks won't take it when you give it?"

she demanded, irritably.

"Not having followed your thoughts for the last five minutes, my dear, I fear I'm unable to give you a very helpful answer," smiled Mrs. Kennedy, serenely. And Genevieve, remembering Elsie's shamed, red face, decided suddenly that Elsie's secret was not hers to tell.

Half an hour later Mr. Hartley marshaled his party for the start.

"You're a brave sight," he declared, smiling into the bright faces about him. "You're a mighty brave sight; and I'll leave it to anybody if even the boys in line to-day will make a finer show!"

The Happy Hexagons laughed and blushed and courtesied prettily; and only Genevieve knew that the smile on Elsie's face was a little forced—Elsie was wearing the green chambray. [223]

There was an awed "Oh-h!" of wonder and admiration when Mr. Hartley's party came in sight of the great parade grounds at Fort Sam Houston. There was a still deeper, longer, louder "Oh-h-h!" when, sitting at one end of the grounds, the girls heard the first stirring notes of the band.

To the Hexagon Club it was a most wonderful sight—those long lines of men moving with such perfect precision. Fresh from the Alamo as the girls were, with the story of that dreadful slaughter in their ears—to them it almost seemed that there before them marched the brave men who years ago had given up their lives so heroically in the little chapel.

It was Tilly who broke the silence.

"Oh, I do just love soldiers," she cried, with a hurried glance sideways to make sure that Mr. Hartley in the next carriage could not hear her. "Don't you, Genevieve?" But Genevieve was too absorbed to answer.

A little later the band played "The Star-spangled Banner," and there sounded the signal gun for the lowering of the colors. In the glorious excitement of all this, even Tilly herself forgot to talk.

After dress parade a certain Major Drew, who knew Mr. Hartley, came up and was duly presented to the ladies. He in turn presented the officer of the day, who looked, to the Happy Hexagons, very handsome and imposing in sword and spurs. After this, at Major Drew's [224] invitation, there was a visit to the officers' quarters, and on the Major's broad gallery there was a cooling refreshment of lemonade and root beer before the drive back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XVII [225]

"BERTHA'S ACCIDENT"

It had been decided that the party would go to New Orleans from San Antonio, and then from there by boat to New York.

"It'll make a change from car-riding, and a very pleasant one, I'm thinking," Mr. Hartley had said; and the others had enthusiastically agreed with him.

It was on the five-hundred-and-seventy-two mile journey from San Antonio to New Orleans that something happened. In the Chronicles of the Hexagon Club it fell to Genevieve to tell the story; and this is what she wrote:

"It seems so strange to me that we should have traveled so many thousands of miles on the railroad without anything happening; and then, just on the last five hundred (we are going to take the boat at New Orleans)—to have it happen.

"We have had all sorts of amusing experiences, of course, losing trains, and missing connections; but nothing like this. Even when we had to take that little bumpy accommodation for a few hours, and it was so accommodating it stopped every few minutes 'to water the horses,' [226] as dear Tilly said, nothing happened—though, to be sure, we almost did get left that time we all (except Aunt Julia) got off and went to pick flowers while our train waited for a freight to go by. But we didn't get quite left, and we did catch it. (Dear Tilly says we could have caught it, anyway, even if it had started, and that we shouldn't have had to walk very fast, at that! Tilly does make heaps of fun of all our trains except the fast ones on the main lines. And I don't know as I wonder, only I'd never tell her that, of course—that is, I *wouldn't* have told her before, perhaps.)

"Well, where was I? Oh, I know—on the sidetrack. (I had to laugh here, for it occurred to me that that was just where I was in the story—on a sidetrack! I'm not telling what I started out to tell at all. It's lucky we can each take all the room we want, though, in these Chronicles.)

"Well, I'll tell it now, really, though I'm still so shaky and excited my hand trembles awfully. It was in the night, a little past twelve o'clock that it happened. I was lying in my berth above Elsie's, and was wide-awake. I had been thinking about Father. He has been such a dear all the way. I was thinking what a big, big dear he was, when IT happened.

"Yes, I put IT in capitals on purpose, and I reckon you would, if suddenly the car you were [227] riding in began to sway horribly and bump up and down, and then stop right off short with a bang that flung you into the middle of the aisle! And that's what ours did.

"For a minute, of course, I was too dazed to know what had happened. But the next moment I heard a scared voice wail right in my ear:

"'Girls, it's an accident—I know it's an accident! I told you we should have an accident—and to think I took off my shoes to-night for the very first time!'

"I knew then. It was Bertha, and it was an accident. And, do you know? I'm ashamed to tell it, but the first thing I did right there and then was to laugh—it seemed so funny about Bertha's shoes, and to hear her say her usual 'I told you so!' But the next minute I began to realize what it all really meant, and I didn't laugh any more.

"All around me, by that time, were frightened cries and shouts, and I was so worried for Father and all the rest. I struggled, and tried to get up; and then I heard Father's voice call: 'Genevieve, Genevieve, where are you? Are you all right?' Oh, nobody will ever know how good that dear voice sounded to me!

"We called for Aunt Julia, then, and for the girls; but it was ever so long before we could find them. We weren't all together, anyway, and the crash had separated us more than ever. Besides, [228] everybody everywhere all over the car was crying out by that time, and trying to find folks, all in the dark.

"We found Aunt Julia. She was almost under the berth near me; but she was so faint and dazed she could not answer when we first called. I was all right, and so were Cordelia and Bertha, only Bertha bumped her head pretty hard afterwards, looking for her shoes. Elsie Martin and Alma Lane were a little bruised and bumped, too; but they declared they could move all their legs and arms.

"We hadn't any of us found Tilly up to that time; but when Elsie said that (about being able to move all her legs and arms), I heard a little faint voice say 'You talk as if you were a centipede, Elsie Martin!'

"'Tilly!' I cried then. 'Where are you?' The others called, too, until we were all shouting frantically for Tilly. We knew it must be Tilly for nobody but Tilly Mack could have made that speech!

"At last we found her. She was wedged in under a broken seat almost at our feet. It was at the forward end of the car—the only part that seemed to be really smashed. She could not crawl out, and we could not pull her out. She gave a moaning little cry when Father tried to.

"'I guess—some of my legs and arms don't go,' she called out to us with a little sob in her voice. [229]

"We were crazy then, of course—all of us; and we all talked at once, and tried to find out just where she was hurt. The trainmen had come by this time with lanterns, and were helping every one out of the car. Then they came to us and Tilly.

"And we were so proud of Tilly—she was so brave and cheery! I never found out before what her nonsense was for, but I did find it out then. It was the only thing that kept us all from going just wild. She said such queer little things when they were trying to get her out, and she told them if there was any one hurt worse than she to get them out first. She told Father that she knew now just how Reddy felt when his broncho went see-saw up in the air, because that was what her berth did.

"Well, they got the poor dear out at last, and a doctor from the rear car examined her at once. Her left arm was broken, and she had two or three painful bruises. Of course that was bad—but not anywhere near so bad as it might have been, and we were all so relieved. The doctor did what he could for her, then we all made ourselves as comfortable as possible while we waited for the relief train.

"We found out then about the wreck, and the chief thing we could find out anywhere was what a 'fortunate' wreck it was! The engine and six cars went off the track on a curve. Just ahead was a [230] steep bank with a river below it, and of course it *was* fortunate that we did not go down that. No one was killed, and only a few much injured. The car ahead and ours were the only ones that were smashed any. Yes, I suppose it was a 'fortunate wreck'—but I never want to see an unfortunate one. Certainly we all felt pretty thankful that we had come out of it as well as we did.

"The relief train came at last, and took us to the next city, and to-day we are started on our journey once again. We expect to reach New Orleans to-night, and take the boat for New York Saturday. We all feel a little stiff and sore, but of course dear Tilly feels the worst. But she tries to be just as bright and smiling as ever. She looks pretty white, though, and what the storybooks call 'wan,' I reckon. She says, anyhow, she wishes she *were* a centipede—in *arms*—because perhaps then she wouldn't miss her left one so much, if she had plenty more of them. There seems to be such a lot of things she wants her left arm to do. The doctor says it wasn't a *bad* break—as if any break could be *good!*

"And here endeth my record of 'Bertha's accident'—as Tilly insists upon calling it, until she's made Bertha almost ready to cry over it."

Owing to the delay of the accident, Mr. Hartley and his party had only one day in New Orleans

before the boat sailed; but they made the most of that, for they wanted to see what they could of the quaint, picturesque city. [231]

"We'll take carriages, dearie. We won't walk anywhere," said Mr. Hartley to Genevieve that morning. "In the first place, Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Tilly couldn't, and the rest of us don't want to. We can see more, too, in the short space of time we have."

So in carriages, bright and early Friday morning, the party started out to "do" New Orleans, as Genevieve termed it. Leaving the "American portion," where were situated their hotel and most of the other big hotels and business houses of American type, they trailed happily along through Prytania Street and St. Charles Avenue to the beautiful "Garden District" which they had been warned not to miss. They found, indeed, much to delight them in the stately, palatial homes set in the midst of exquisitely kept lawns and wonderful groves of magnolia and oak. Quite as interesting to them all, however, was the old French or Latin Quarter below Canal Street, where were the Creole homes and business houses. Here they ate their luncheon, too, in one of the curious French restaurants, famous the world over for its delicious dishes.

With the disappearance of the last mouthful on her plate, Tilly drew a long breath.

"I've always heard Creoles were awfully interesting," she sighed. "Do you know—I don't think I'd mind much being a Creole myself!" [232]

"You look so much like one, too," laughed Genevieve, affectionately, patting the soft, fluffy red hair above the piquant, freckled little face.

At five o'clock that afternoon a tired but happy party reached the hotel in time to rest and dress for dinner.

"Well," sighed Genevieve, "I'd have liked a week here, but a day has been pretty good. We've seen enough 'Quarters' to make a 'whole,' and the Cathedral, and dozens of other churches, and we've driven along those lovely lakes with the unpronounceable names; and now I'm ready for dinner."

"And we saw a statue—the Margaret Statue," cut in Cordelia, anxiously. "You know it's the *first* statue ever erected to a woman's memory in the United States. We wouldn't want to forget that!"

"Well, I should like to," retorted Genevieve, perversely. "It's only so much the worse for the United States—that it wasn't done before!"

"I think Genevieve is going to be a suffragette," observed Tilly, cheerfully, as they trooped into the hotel together.

It was from New Orleans that Cordelia Wilson wrote a letter to Mr. William Hodges. She had decided that it would be easier to write her bad news than to tell it. Then, too, she disliked to keep the old man any longer in suspense. She made her letter as comforting as she could. [233]

"Mr. William Hodges, Sir:—" she wrote. "I am very sorry to have to tell you that I have looked, but cannot find your oil well anywhere. I did find a man who had heard about it, but he said there wasn't any well at all like what the Boston man told you there was. He said it was a bad swindle and he knew many others who had lost their money, too, which I thought would please you. O dear, no, I don't mean that, of course. I only mean that you might like to know that others besides you hadn't known any more than to put money in it, too. (That doesn't sound quite right yet, but perhaps you know what I mean.)

"I hope you won't feel too bad about it, Mr. Hodges. I saw some oil wells when we came through Beaumont, and I am quite sure you would not like them at all. They are not one bit like Bertha's aunt's well on her farm, with the bucket. In fact, they don't look like wells at all, and I never should have known what they were if Mr. Hartley had not told me. They are tall towers *standing up* out of the ground instead of stone holes sunk down in the ground. (It is just as if you should call the cupola on your house your cellar—and you know how queer that would be!) I saw a lot of them—oil wells, not cupolas, I mean—and they looked more like a whole lot [234] of little Eiffel Towers than anything else I can think of. (If you will get your grandson, Tony, to show you the Eiffel Tower in his geography, you will see what I mean.) Mr. Hartley says they *do* bore for them—wells, I mean, not Eiffel Towers—and so I suppose they do go down before they go up.

"I saw the wells on the way between San Antonio and New Orleans. One was on fire. (Just think of a well being on fire!) Of course we were riding through a most wonderful country, anyway. We saw a great many things growing besides oil wells, too, as you must know—rice, and cotton, and tobacco, and sugar cane, and onions, and quantities of other things. I picked some cotton bolls. (I spelt that right. This kind isn't b-a-ll.) I am sending you a few in a little box. It takes 75,000 of them to make one bale of cotton, so I'm afraid you couldn't make even a handkerchief out of these.

"I am so sorry about the oil well, but I did the best that I could to find it.

"Respectfully yours,

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GOLDEN HOURS

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Long before ten o'clock Saturday morning—the hour for sailing—Mr. Hartley and his party were on board the big steamship which was to take them to New York. Here, again, new sensations and new experiences awaited the Happy Hexagons, not one of whom had ever been on so large a boat.

"I declare, I do just feel as if I was going abroad," breathed Cordelia, in an awestruck voice, as she crossed the gangplank.

"Well, I'm sure we *are*, almost," exulted Genevieve. "We're going to have a hundred hours of it. You know that little pamphlet that told about it called it 'a hundred golden hours at sea.' Oh, Cordelia, only think—one hundred golden hours!"

"You'll think it's a thousand, if you happen to be seasick," groaned Tilly. (Tilly was looking rather white to-day.) "And they won't be golden ones, either—they'll be *lead* ones. I know because I've been to Portland when it's rough."

"Well, we aren't going to be seasick," retorted Genevieve, with conviction. "We're just going to have the best time ever. See if we don't!"

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"Now, dearie," said Mr. Hartley, hurrying up at that moment, "I engaged one of the suites for Mrs. Kennedy, and I think Miss Tilly had better be with her. The bed will be much more comfortable for her poor arm than a berth would be, and Mrs. Kennedy can look after her better, too, in that way. The little parlor of the suite will give us all a cozy place to meet together. There are two berths there which they turn into a lounge in the daytime. I thought perhaps you and Miss Cordelia could sleep there. Then I have staterooms for the rest of us—I engaged them all a week ago, of course. Now if you'll come with me I reckon we can set up housekeeping right away," he finished with a smile.

"Setting up housekeeping" proved to be an absorbing task, indeed. It included not only bestowing their belongings in the chosen places, but interviewing purser and stewards in regard to rugs, steamer chairs, and other delightfully exciting matters. Then there was the joy of exploring the great ship that was to be their home for so many days. The luxurious Ladies' Parlor, the Library with its alluring books and magazines, the Dining Saloon with its prettily-laid tables and its revolving chairs (like piano stools, Tilly said), the decks with their long, airy promenades, all came in for delighted exclamations of satisfaction which increased to a chorus of oh's and ah's when the trip really began, and the stately ship was wending its way down the Great River to the Gulf of Mexico.

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First there was to be seen the city itself, nestled beyond its barricade of levees.

"Dear me!" shuddered Cordelia. "I don't believe I'd have slept a wink last night if I'd realized how *much* below the river we were. Only fancy if one of those levees had sprung a leak!"

"Why, they'd have sent for the plumber, of course," observed Tilly, gravely.

"Of course! Still—they don't look very leaky, to me," laughed Genevieve.

"Was it here, or somewhere else, that a man (or was it a child?) put his arm (or was it a finger?) in a little hole in the wall and stopped the leak, and so saved the town?" mused Bertha aloud dreamily.

"Of course it was," answered Tilly with grave emphasis; and not until the others laughed did Bertha wake up enough to turn her back with a shrug.

"Well, it was somewhere, anyhow," she pouted.

"As if we could doubt that—after what you said," murmured Tilly.

"But they have had floods here, haven't they?" questioned Alma Lane.

Genevieve gave a sudden laugh. At the others' surprised look she explained:

"Oh, I'm not laughing at the real floods, the *water* floods they've had, of course. It's just that I happened to think of something I read some time ago. They had one flood here of—molasses."

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"Mo—lass—es!" chorused several voices.

"Yes. A big tank that the city used to have for a reservoir had been bought by a sugar company and turned into a storage for molasses. Well, it burst one day, and a little matter of a million gallons of molasses went exploring through the streets. They say some poor mortals had actually to wade to dry land."

"Genevieve! what a story," cried Elsie.

"But it's true," declared Genevieve. "A whole half-mile square of the city was flooded, honestly. At least, the newspapers said it was."

"How the pickaninnies must have gloried in it," giggled Tilly, "—if they liked 'bread and perlashes' as well as I used to. Only think of having such a *big* saucerful to dip your bread into!"

"Tilly!" groaned Genevieve.

They were at Port Chalmette, now. The Crescent City lay behind them, and beyond lay the shining river-roadway, with its fertile, highly-cultivated plantations bordering each side, green and beautiful.

"How perfectly, perfectly lovely!" cried Elsie. "And I'm not sick one bit."

"Naturally not—yet," laughed Tilly. "But you just wait. We don't sail the Mississippi all the way to New York, you know." [239]

"I wish we did," said Genevieve, her eyes dreamily following the shore line. "But we're only on it for a hundred miles."

"I don't," disagreed Elsie. "I want to see the Gulf Stream. They say it's a deep indigo blue, and that you can see it plainly. I think a blue river in a green sea must be lovely—like a blue ribbon trailing down a light green gown, you know."

"Well, I want to see the real ocean, 'way out—out. I want to see nothing but water, water everywhere," declared Alma Lane.

"'And not a drop to drink,'" quoted Tilly. "Well, young lady, you may see the time when you'd give your eyes for a bit of land—and just any old land would do, too, so long as it *stayed put!*"

"What does it feel like to be seasick?" asked Cordelia, interestedly.

"It feels as if the bottom had dropped out of everything, and you didn't much care, only you wished you'd gone with it," laughed Tilly.

"Who was it?—wasn't it Mark Twain who said that the first half-hour you were awfully afraid you would die, and the next you were awfully afraid you wouldn't?" questioned Elsie.

"I don't know; but whoever said it knew what he was talking about," declared Tilly. "You just wait!" [240]

"We're waiting," murmured Genevieve, demurely.

"You young ladies don't want to forget your exercise," said Mr. Hartley smilingly, coming up at that moment with Mrs. Kennedy. "We've just been five times around the deck."

"It's eleven laps to the mile," supplemented Mrs. Kennedy with a smile.

"What's a lap?" asked Cordelia.

"Sounds like a kitten on a wager with a saucer of milk," laughed Tilly, frowning a little as she tried to adjust her sling more comfortably.

"Well, young ladies, we'll show you just what a lap is, if you'll come with us," promised Mr. Hartley; and with alacrity the girls expressed themselves as being quite ready to be shown.

On and on, mile after mile, down the great river swept the great ship until Forts Jackson and St. Philip were reached and left behind; then on and on for other miles to the narrow South Pass where on either side the Eads Jetties called forth exclamations of wonder.

"Well, you'd better 'ah' and 'um,'" laughed Genevieve. "They happen to be one of the greatest engineering feats in the world; that's all."

"How do you know that?" demanded Bertha.

"Don't worry her," cut in Tilly, with mock sympathy. "Poor thing! it's only a case of another guidebook, of course." [241]

"Well, all is, just keep your weather eye open," laughed Genevieve, "for when we make the South Pass Lightship, then ho! for the—"

"Broad Atlantic," interposed Tilly.

"Well, not until you've passed through the little matter of the Gulf of Mexico," rejoined Genevieve; while a chorus of laughing voices jeered:

"Why, Tilly Mack, where's your geography?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," returned Tilly, imperturbably. "Haven't seen it since I studied up Texas," she finished as she turned away.

The first night aboard ship was another experience never to be forgotten by the Happy Hexagons. In the parlor of the suite Genevieve and Cordelia kept up such an incessant buzz of husky whispering and tittering that Mrs. Kennedy came out from the bedroom to remonstrate.

"My dears, you mean to be quiet, I know; but I'm sure you don't realize how it sounds from our

room. Tilly is nervous and feverish to-night—the day has been very exciting for her."

"And she has tried so hard to keep up, and seem as usual, too," cried Genevieve, contritely. "Of course we'll keep still! Cordelia, I'm ashamed of you," she finished severely. Then, at Cordelia's amazed look of shocked distress, she hugged her spasmodically. "As if it wasn't all my fault," she chuckled.

In other parts of the boat the rest of the party explored their strange quarters to the last corner; then made themselves ready to be "laid on the shelf," as Elsie termed going to bed in the narrow berth. [242]

"I shall take off my shoes to-night," announced Bertha with dignity, after a long moment of silence. "If anything happens here we'll get into the water, of course, and I think shoes would only be a nuisance."

For a moment Elsie did not answer; then, almost hopefully she asked,

"I suppose if anything did happen we'd lose our clothes—even if we ourselves were saved, wouldn't we?"

"Why, I—I suppose so."

"Yes, that's what I thought," nodded Elsie, happily. Elsie, at the moment, was engaged in taking off a somewhat unevenly faded green chambray frock.

It was on the second day of the trip that Cordelia took from her suit-case a sheet of paper, worn with much folding and refolding, and marked plainly, "Things to do in Texas."

"I suppose I might as well finish this up now," she sighed. "I'm out of Texas, and what is done is done; and what is undone can't ever be done, now." And carefully she spread the paper out and reached into her bag for her pencil. [243]

When she had finished her work, the paper read as follows:

See the blue bonnet—the Texas state flower. Find out if it really is shaped like a bonnet. Didn't.

Bring home a piece of prairie grass. Did.

See a real buffalo. Did. (But it was in a park.)

Find Hermit Joe Sanborn's son, John, who ran away to Texas twenty years ago. Didn't.

See an Osage orange hedge. Did.

See a broncho bursted (obviously changed over from "busted"). Did.

Find out for Mrs. Miller if cowboys do shoot at sight, and yell always without just and due provocation. Did. They do not. Cowboys are good, kind gentlemen; but they are noisy, and some rough-looking.

See a mesquite tree. Did.

Inquire if any one has seen Mrs. Snow's daughter, Lizzie, who ran away with a Texas man named Higgins. Did. (But could not find any one who had.)

Pick a fig. Didn't.

See a rice canal. Did.

Find out what has become of Mrs. Granger's cousin, Lester Goodwin, who went to Texas fourteen years ago. Did.

See cotton growing, and pick a cotton boll, called "Texas Roses." Did.

See peanuts growing. Did. [244]

Inquire for James Hunt, brother of Miss Sally Hunt. Did. (But could not find him.)

See a real Indian. Did.

Look at oil well for Mr. Hodges, and see if there is any there. Did. (But there wasn't any there like the one he wanted.)

The paper completed, Cordelia looked at it with troubled eyes.

"It doesn't sound quite right," she thought. "Somehow, the things *I* wanted to do are 'most all done, but I didn't find but just one of those people, and seems as if I ought to have done better than that. Besides, I'm not at all sure Mrs. Granger will be satisfied with what I did find for her—a cowboy, so!" And she sighed as she put the paper away.

The trip across the Gulf of Mexico to Dry Tortugas Light was nothing but a rest and a joy to everybody. It was still delightful and wonderfully interesting all the way around the City of Key West and up by the southeastern coast of Florida with its many lights and coral reefs.

Here Genevieve's guidebook came again into prominence.

"The Sand Key Light 'way back there is our most southern possession, and only fifty-seven miles from the line of the Tropics," she announced glibly one day. "We're coming to the American Shoals Light, the Sombrero Light, Alligator Light, Carysfort Light and Fowey Rock Light." [245]

"Mercy! Didn't you sleep *any* last night?" inquired Tilly, sympathetically.

"I suppose you mean you think it must have taken all night to learn all that," laughed Genevieve. "But it didn't."

"Maybe you know some more, now," hazarded Tilly.

"Certainly. After we strike Jupiter Light, we veer off into the Atlantic out of sight of land."

"I thought lighthouses were put up so you wouldn't 'strike' them," observed Tilly, with smooth politeness; "but then, of course if you do strike them, it is quite to be expected that you veer off into the Atlantic, and never see land again. Besides, I found all those lighthouses and things on a paper last night, but it was the southern trip that did all that. Maybe we, going north, don't do the same things at all. I sha'n't swallow all you say, anyhow, till I know for sure."

"Children, stop your quarreling," commanded Bertha Brown, sternly. "Now I've been learning something worth while. *I* know the saloon deck from the promenade deck, and I can rattle off 'fore' and 'aft' and 'port' and 'starboard' as if I'd been born on shipboard!"

"Pooh! You wait," teased Tilly. "There'll come a time when you won't think you're born on [246] shipboard, and you won't know or care which is fore or aft—any of you. And it will come soon, too. Those were porpoises playing this morning—when Cordelia thought she saw the sea serpent, you know. I heard a man say he thought it meant a storm was coming. And if it does—you just wait," she finished laughingly.

"Oh, I'm waiting," retorted Bertha. "I like waiting. Besides, I don't think it's coming, anyhow!"

But it did come. Off the coast of South Carolina they ran into a heavy storm, and the great ship creaked and groaned as it buffeted wind and wave.

In the little parlor of the suite the entire party, banished from wet, slippery decks, made merry together, and declared it was all fun, anyway. But gradually the ranks thinned. First Mrs. Kennedy asked to be excused, and went into the bedroom. Alma Lane went away next. She said she wanted a drink of water—but she did not return, and very soon Elsie Martin, looking suspiciously white about the lips, said she guessed she would go and find Alma. She, too, did not return.

Tilly went next. Tilly, naturally, had not been her usual self since the accident, in spite of her brave attempts to hide her suffering. She slipped away now without a word; though just before she had made them all laugh by saying a little shakily: [247]

"I declare, I wish Reddy were here! He'd think he was riding his broncho, sure."

Just when Mr. Hartley disappeared, no one seemed to know. One moment he had been singing lustily "Pull for the Shore"; the next moment he was gone. There was left then only Bertha with Genevieve and Cordelia in the little parlor; and certainly the last two were anything but sorry when Bertha rose a little precipitately to go, too, saying:

"I—I think, Genevieve, if you don't mind, I'll go and take off my shoes. They sort of—hurt me."

"Honestly, Cordelia," moaned Genevieve, when they had the room to themselves, "I reckon we're not caring just now, whether we're fore or aft!"

It was not really a serious storm, after all, and not any of the party was seriously ill. They were all on deck again, indeed, smiling and happy, even if a little white-faced, long before the journey was ended.

It was during the very last of the "golden hours" that Tilly, her eyes on Bartholdi's wonderful Statue of Liberty just ahead of them, in the New York Bay, choked:

"I declare, I'd just like to give that lady our Texas yell. Only think, girls, our Texas trip is almost over!"

CHAPTER XIX [248]

HERMIT JOE

There was not quite so large a crowd at the Sunbridge station to welcome the Texas travelers as there had been to see them off; but it was fully large enough to give a merry cheer of greeting,

as the train pulled into the little station.

"They're all here, with their 'sisters and their cousins and their aunts,'" laughed Tilly, stooping to look through the window as she passed down the narrow aisle behind Genevieve.

"I should say they were," answered Genevieve a little wistfully. "We haven't got any one, I'm afraid, though. Miss Jane's been 'down in Maine,' as you call it, visiting, and she doesn't come till next week."

"Oh, yes, you have," chuckled Tilly, as she caught sight of an eager face in the crowd. "There's Harold Day."

"Pooh! He didn't come to welcome me any more than he did the rest of you," retorted Genevieve severely, as she neared the door.

And what a confusion and chatter it all was, when "their sisters and their cousins and their aunts"—to say nothing of their fathers and mothers and brothers—all talked and laughed at once, [249] each trying to be first to kiss and hug the *one* returning traveler, before bestowing almost as cordial a welcome on all the others. At last, however, in little family groups, afoot or in carriages, the crowd began to leave the station, and Genevieve found herself with Mrs. Kennedy in the family carriage with the old coachman sitting sedately up in front. Mr. Hartley had left the party in New York, after seeing them safely aboard their Boston train.

"Well, it's all over," sighed Genevieve, happily, "and hasn't it been just lovely—with nothing but poor Tilly's arm to regret!"

"Yes, it certainly has been a beautiful trip, my dear, and I know every one has enjoyed it very much. And now comes—school."

Genevieve made a wry face; then, meeting Mrs. Kennedy's reproving eye, she colored.

"There, forgive me, Aunt Julia, please. That wasn't nice of me, of course, when you're so good as to let me come another year. But school is so tiresome!"

"Tiresome! Oh, my dear!"

"Well, it is, Aunt Julia," sighed the girl.

"But I thought you liked it now, dear. You took hold of it so bravely at the last." Mrs. Kennedy's eyes were wistful.

"Oh, of course I wanted to pass and go on with the rest of the girls, Aunt Julia. I couldn't help [250] wanting that. But as for really *liking* it—I couldn't like it, you know; just study, study, study all day in hot, poky rooms, when it's so much nicer out of doors!"

Mrs. Kennedy shook her head. Her eyes were troubled.

"I'm afraid, my dear, that this trip *hasn't* helped any. I was fearful that it wouldn't be easy for you to settle down after such a prolonged playday."

"Oh, but I shall settle, Aunt Julia, I shall settle," promised Genevieve with a merry smile. "I know I've got to settle—but I can't say yet I shall like it," she finished, as the carriage turned in at the broad driveway, and Nancy and Bridget were seen to be waiting in respectful excitement to welcome them.

There would be five days to "get used to it"—as Genevieve expressed it—before school began; but long before noon of the first of those five days, Genevieve had planned in her mind enough delightful things to occupy twice that number of days. Immediately after dinner, too, came something quite unexpected in the shape of a call from Cordelia.

Cordelia looked worried.

"Genevieve, I've come to ask a favor, please. I'm sure I don't know as you'll want to do it, but—but I want you to go with me to see Hermit Joe."

"To see—*Hermit Joe!*" [251]

"O dear, I knew you'd exclaim out," sighed Cordelia; "but it's just got to be done. I suppose I ought not to have told you, anyway, but I couldn't bear to go up to that dismal place alone," she finished, tearfully.

"Why, of course not, dear; and I'm sure you did just right to tell me," soothed Genevieve, in quick response to the tears in Cordelia's eyes. "Now wait while I get my hat and ask Aunt Julia. She'll let me go, I know;—she'd let me go to—to London, with *you*."

"Just please say it's an errand—an important one," begged Cordelia, nervously, as Genevieve darted into the house.

In two minutes the girl had returned, hat in hand.

"Now tell me all about it," she commanded, "and don't look so frightened. Hermit Joe isn't cross. He's only solemn and queer. He won't hurt us."

"Oh, no, he won't hurt us," sighed the other. "He'll only look more solemn and queer."

"Why?"

"Because of what I've got to tell him. I—I suppose I ought to have written it, but I just couldn't. Besides, I hadn't found out anything, and so I didn't want to write until I was sure I couldn't find anything. Now it's done, and I haven't found out anything. So I've got to tell him."

"Tell him what, Cordelia?" demanded Genevieve, a little impatiently. "How do you suppose I can make anything out of that kind of talk?" [252]

"O dear! you can't, of course," sighed Cordelia; "and, of course, if I've told you so much I must tell the rest. It's Hermit Joe's son. I can't find him."

"His son! I didn't know he had a son."

"He has. His name is John. He ran away to Texas twenty years ago."

"And you've been hunting for *him*, too—besides that Lester Goodwin who turned out to be Reddy?"

Cordelia nodded. She did not speak.

Genevieve laughed unexpectedly.

"Of all the funny things I ever heard of! Pray, how many more lost people have you been looking for in the little state of Texas?"

Cordelia moved her shoulders uneasily.

"I—I'd rather not tell that, please, Genevieve," she stammered, with a painful blush.

Genevieve stared dumbly. She had not supposed for a moment that Cordelia had been looking for any more lost people. She had asked the question merely as an absurdity. To have it taken now in this literal fashion, and evidently with good reason—Genevieve could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses. Another laugh was almost on her lips, but the real distress in Cordelia's face stopped it in time.

"You poor dear little thing," she cried sympathetically. "What a shame to bother you so! I wonder you had any fun at all on the trip." [253]

"Oh, but I did, Genevieve! You don't know how beautiful it all was to me—only of course I felt sorry to be such a failure in what folks wanted me to do. You see, Reddy was the only one I found, and I'm very much worried for fear he won't be satisfactory."

Genevieve did laugh this time.

"Well, if he isn't, I don't see how that can be your fault," she retorted. "Come, now let's forget all this, and just talk Texas instead."

"Aunt Mary says I do do that—all the time," rejoined Cordelia, with a wistful smile. "Aunt Sophronia is there, too, and *she* says I do. Still, she likes to hear it, I verily believe, else she wouldn't ask me so many questions," concluded Cordelia, lifting her chin a little.

"I'd like to take Miss Jane there sometime," observed Genevieve, with a gravity that was a little unnatural.

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed Cordelia—then she stopped short with a hot blush. "I—I beg your pardon, I'm sure, Genevieve," she went on stammeringly. "I ought not to have spoken that way, of course. I was only thinking of Miss Jane and—and the cowboys that day they welcomed us."

"Yes, I know," rejoined Genevieve, her lips puckered into a curious little smile. [254]

"I don't believe I'm doing any more talking, anyway, than Tilly is," remarked Cordelia, after a moment's silence. "Of course, Tilly, with her poor arm, would make a lot of questions, anyway; but she *is* talking a great deal."

"I suppose she is," chuckled Genevieve, "and we all know what *she'll* say."

"But she says such absurd things, Genevieve. Why, Charlie Brown—you know he calls us the 'Happy *Tex*agons' now—well, he told me that Tilly'd been bragging so terribly about Texas, and all the fine things there were there, that he asked her this morning real soberly—you know how Charlie Brown *can* ask questions, sometimes—"

"I know," nodded Genevieve.

"Well, he asked her, solemn as a judge, 'Do these wondrous tamales of yours grow on trees down there?'

"'Oh, yes,' Tilly assured him serenely. And when Charlie, of course, declared that couldn't be, she just shrugged her shoulders and answered: 'Well, of course, Charlie, I'll own I didn't *see* tamales growing on trees, but Texas is a very large state, and while I didn't, of course, see anywhere near all of it, yet I saw so much, and it was all so different from each other, that I'm sure I shouldn't want to say that I *knew* they didn't have tamale trees somewhere in Texas!' And then she marched off in that stately way of hers, and Charlie declared he began to feel as if tamale trees did grow in Texas, and that he ought to go around telling folks so." [255]

"What a girl she is!" laughed Genevieve. "But, Cordelia, she isn't all nonsense. We found that out that dreadful night of the accident."

"Indeed we did," agreed Cordelia, loyally; then, with a profound sigh she added: "O dear! for a minute I'd actually forgotten—Hermit Joe."

Hermit Joe lived far up the hillside in a little hut surrounded by thick woods. A tiny path led to his door, but it was seldom trodden by the foot of anybody but of Hermit Joe himself—Hermit Joe did not encourage visitors, and visitors certainly were not attracted by Hermit Joe's stern reticence on all matters concerning himself and every one else.

To-day, as the girls entered the path at the edge of the woods, the sun went behind a passing cloud, and the gloom was even more noticeable than usual.

"Mercy! I'm glad Hermit Joe *isn't* dangerous and *doesn't* bite," whispered Genevieve, peering into the woods on either side. "Aunt Julia says he is really a very estimable man—Cordelia, if I was a man I just wouldn't be an 'estimable' one."

"Genevieve!" gasped the shocked Cordelia.

Genevieve laughed.

"Oh, I'd *be* it, of course, my dear, only I wouldn't want to be *called* it. It's the word—it always makes me think of side whiskers and stupidity." [256]

"Oh, Genevieve!" cried Cordelia, again.

"Well, as I was saying, Aunt Julia told me that Hermit Joe was really a very nice man. She used to know him well before a great sorrow drove him into the woods to live all by himself."

Cordelia nodded sadly.

"That was his son that ran away. Aunt Mary told me that long ago. She told us children never to tease him, or worry him, but that we needn't be afraid of him, either. He wouldn't hurt us. I heard once that he was always stern and sober, and that that was why his son ran away. But that it 'most killed him—the father—when he did go. And now I couldn't find him! Isn't it terrible, Genevieve?" Cordelia's eyes were full of tears.

"Yes," sighed Genevieve. "But you aren't to blame, dear."

It was very beautiful in the hushed green light of the woods, with now and then a bird-call, or the swift scampering of a squirrel's feet to break the silence. But the girls were not noticing birds or squirrels to-day, and they became more and more silent as they neared the end of their journey. The little cabin was almost in sight when Genevieve caught Cordelia's arm convulsively.

"Cordelia, sh-h-h! Isn't that some one—talking?" she whispered.

Cordelia held her right foot suspended in the air for a brief half minute. [257]

"Yes. That's Hermit Joe's voice. He *is* talking to some one."

"Then there must be somebody there with him."

"Yes. Genevieve, I—I *guess* I won't tell him to-day," faltered Cordelia. "Let's go back. I'll come again to-morrow."

"Nonsense! Go back, and have you worrying about this thing another twenty-four hours? No, indeed! Come, Cordelia, we must tell him now. I think we ought to do it, really."

"All right," sighed the other despairingly. "Come, then." The next minute she gave a sharp cry. "Why, Mr. *Edwards!*" she breathed.

They had come to the turn which brought the cabin into plain sight; and on the stone step with Hermit Joe sat the man Cordelia had last seen driving away from the Six Star Ranch in Texas.

Both men rose abruptly. The younger stepped forward. There was a whimsical smile on his lips, but his eyes were wonderfully tender.

"Yes, 'Mr. Edwards,' Miss Cordelia—but Mr. 'Jonathan Edwards *Sanborn*.' You see, you didn't know all my name, perhaps."

To every one's surprise and consternation Cordelia sat down exactly where she was, and began to cry softly.

"Why, Cordelia!"

Genevieve was at her friend's side at once. Hermit Joe looked plainly distressed. Mr. Jonathan Edwards Sanborn hurried forward in frightened dismay. [258]

"Oh, but Miss Cordelia, don't, please don't—I beg of you! Don't you understand? I am John Sanborn, Hermit Joe's son; and 'twas all through you that I came home again."

Cordelia only sobbed the harder.

Genevieve dropped on her knees at the girl's side, and put her arms about her.

"Cordelia, Cordelia, dear—don't you see?—it's all come out right. You did find him, after all! Why are you crying so?"

"T-that's why," stuttered Cordelia, smiling through tear-wet eyes. "It's because I d-did find him, and I'm so glad, and everything!"

"But, if you're glad, why cry?" began Hermit Joe's son, in puzzled wonder, but Genevieve patted Cordelia's back, and smiled cheerily.

"That's all right, Cordelia," she declared. "I know just how you feel. *Now* you know what was the matter with me when you girls gave me the Texas yell at the station. Just cry all you like!"

As if permission, only, were all she wanted, Cordelia wiped her eyes and smiled shyly into Mr. Jonathan Edwards Sanborn's face.

"It is really you, isn't it?" she murmured.

"It certainly is, Miss Cordelia."

"And you wouldn't have come if it hadn't been for what I said?" [259]

"No. You set me to thinking, and when I got to thinking I couldn't stop. And, of course, when I couldn't stop thinking I had to come; that's all."

"I'm so glad," sighed Cordelia; then, interestedly: "How long have you been here?"

"Only since day before yesterday. No one in the village knows I'm here, I suspect. We've been talking over our plans—father and I. I want him to come West with me."

Cordelia got up from the ground.

"I'm so glad," she said again, simply. "Genevieve, I think we ought to be going."

As she turned toward the path, Hermit Joe advanced so that he intercepted her.

"Miss Cordelia, I would like to tell how—but I can't. Still—I wish you could know how happy you've made me."

Hermit Joe spoke with evident difficulty. His lips, so long unused to speaking, stumbled over the words; but his eyes glowed as with hidden fires, and his whole face was alight with joy.

CHAPTER XX [260]

THE NEW BOY

The first day of school, for Genevieve, was not a success. Before two hours of it had passed, indeed, she declared to herself that Miss Hart, her new teacher, was not at all promising, and that she did not like her nearly so well as she had liked Miss Palmer the year before. Making the final arrangements as to her studies and recitations, too, Genevieve privately voted a bore; and more than once her eyes turned longingly to the beautiful September sunshine out of doors.

At recess time the Happy Hexagons met in the corridor and held what proved to be an indignation meeting.

"Well, I for one don't like her a bit," declared Tilly, perking up the bow ends of the black sling that hung about her neck.

"Nor I," echoed Genevieve.

"Not much like Miss Palmer last year, nor Miss Jones," said Bertha. "I told you we wouldn't get such a good one this term."

"But, girls, I think we ought to try to like her," ventured Cordelia, in a voice that told very plainly how she expected her remark to be received. [261]

"Of course," sniffed Tilly, disdainfully.

"Oh, but I'm sure she won't be half bad when we come to know her," cried Alma Lane. "She was so nervous this morning, and I think acted troubled over something."

Tilly tossed her head.

"Troubled! I should think we were the ones that were troubled. Did you ever see such a lot of rules and regulations about what not to do? She's scarcely left a thing we *can* do."

"Oh, yes, she has," groaned Genevieve. "We can sit still and look pleasant, and study, study, study! I reckon I shall have to, all right, too, this term, at the rate my studies and recitation hours are piling up," she finished, as the bell rang for them to go to their seats.

All days—even the worst of them—come to an end sometime; and at last Genevieve was free to go home. Half-way to the Kennedy house a soft whistle of the Happy Hexagons' Club song

sounded behind her; and a moment later Harold Day caught up with her.

"Well?" he queried.

"But it isn't 'well' at all," wailed Genevieve, with a shake of her head.

"So I judged from your face."

"But—have *you* ever had Miss Hart for a teacher?"

"No; she's new this year. We had Miss Holbrook in her place last year, and she was fine; but she got married, you know. She herself recommended Miss Hart for the position, I believe." [262]

"Did she?" sighed Genevieve.

"What a lugubrious face!" laughed Harold. "Suppose you tell me what is the matter with Miss Hart, eh?"

"I can't. It's just an intangible, indefinable 'don't-like-her' feeling. She doesn't sit still a minute, and she's awful on rules. Tilly calls her 'Miss Hartless.'"

Harold laughed.

"Trust Tilly to call her something!" he rejoined. "But I don't believe the lady will be half bad when you get used to her."

"That's what your cousin Alma says."

"Well, I believe she's right," declared Harold. "It sounds to me as if Miss Hart were nervous and afraid."

Genevieve opened her eyes.

"Afraid! A *teacher afraid!*"

"Wouldn't you be afraid if you had to follow where you know there had been such favorites as Miss Holbrook and Miss Palmer were?"

"Why, I never thought of it that way," frowned Genevieve. "I didn't suppose teachers ever had—er—feelings like that."

"Well, I suppose teachers are—folks, like the rest of us," hazarded the youth, as he stopped a minute at the foot of the Kennedys' front walk. [263]

Genevieve shook her head mischievously.

"I don't," she protested. "They always seem to me like things you buy for school, just like you do the books and chalk, and that they come in boxes all graded and sorted—primary, grammar, high school, French, German, and all that," she flashed over her shoulder, as she skipped up the walk toward the house.

"There!" sighed Genevieve, bounding up on to the veranda, and dropping her books into a chair. "I'm going for a ride with Tilly, Aunt Julia, please, if you don't mind."

"Very well, dear; but don't stay too long. There's your practicing, you know."

Genevieve scowled, and made an impatient gesture—neither of which Mrs. Kennedy seemed to notice.

"You have your watch, I see," she went on serenely; "so I don't think you'll forget."

Genevieve bit her lip. She threw a hurried glance into Mrs. Kennedy's face; but that, too, Mrs. Kennedy did not appear to notice.

"No, Aunt Julia," said Genevieve, a little constrainedly, as she went to saddle her horse, "I sha'n't—forget."

When quite by herself around the corner of the house, she drew a long breath. [264]

"Sometimes," she muttered fiercely behind her teeth, "sometimes I—I just wish folks *weren't* so good to me! Seems to me I just *can't* waste a whole hour of this tiny little bit of glorious day that is left, practising a stupid old 'one, two—one, two—one, two!'" Then, with apparent irrelevance, she patted her blue-and-gold chatelaine watch remorsefully—and it may be noted right here that she came back in ample time for her hour of practising before supper.

There was a new boy at school the next morning. This fact in itself did not particularly interest the Happy Hexagons until they learned his name. It was "O. B. J. Holmes." When the initials did not seem quite to satisfy Miss Hart, he hesitated visibly, then said, with a very painful blush, that the "O" might be put down "Oliver." It was plainly on the teacher's tongue to ask about the other letters; but, after a moment's hesitation, she passed over the matter, and turned to something else.

As usual the Happy Hexagons found themselves together at recess time, and as was natural, perhaps, the subject of the new boy came up for discussion.

"I don't believe 'Oliver' is ever his name," declared Tilly, stoutly. "No sane youth in his right

mind would blush so beautifully over just 'Oliver.' Besides, he didn't *say* it was Oliver."

"'HOW DO YOU DO, MR. OLIVER HOLMES,' SHE BEGAN"

"I saw Miss Hart talking to him as I came out just now," [265] announced Bertha, "and his face was even redder than ever. Hers was getting red, too."

"Then there *is* something," cried Genevieve, excitedly, "and it's a mystery. I love mysteries! 'O. B. J.'—what a really funny set of letters!"

"Must be 'Oliver Ben Johnson,'" laughed Bertha.

"Sounds to me like 'O Be Joyful,'" giggled Tilly.

"Sh-h!—Tilly!" warned Cordelia, in a horrified whisper. "He's coming. He'll hear you!"

But Tilly was not to be silenced. Tilly, for some reason, felt recklessly mischievous that morning.

"Why, of course his, name is 'O Be Joyful,'" she cried in gay, shrill tones that carried the words straight to the ears of a rather awkward-appearing boy coming toward them. "How could it be anything else?"

The boy blushed hotly. For a moment it seemed as if he would stop and speak; but the next minute he had turned away his face, and was passing them hurriedly.

It was then that the unexpected happened. With a quick little impulsive movement, Genevieve stepped to the new boy's side, and held out a frankly cordial hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Oliver Holmes," she began breathlessly, but with hurried determination. "I am Genevieve Hartley, and I'd like to welcome you to our school. These are my friends: [266] Cordelia Wilson, Alma Lane, Bertha Brown, Elsie Martin, and Tilly Mack. We hope you'll soon get acquainted and feel at home here," she finished, her face almost as painful a red as was the boy's.

O. B. J. Holmes clutched Genevieve's hand, stammered a confused something in response to the introductions, and flung a terrifiedly uncertain bow in the direction of the wide-eyed girls; then he turned and fled precipitately.

Behind him he left, for one brief minute, a dazed silence before Tilly lifted her chin disagreeably and spoke.

"Well, dear me! For so *marked* a bid for his favor, seems to me our young friend doesn't show proper appreciation—to run away like that!"

Genevieve colored angrily.

"That was no bid for his favor, and you know it, Tilly Mack!"

"No?" teased Tilly, hatefully. "Well, I'm sure I should have thought it was if a perfect stranger flung herself in my way like that."

"Tilly, Tilly—don't!" begged Cordelia, almost tearfully.

It was Genevieve's turn to lift a disdainful chin. She eyed Tilly scornfully.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't—not if some other perfect stranger had just called out a particularly hateful, horrid joke about something you were not in the least to blame for! If you hadn't said [267] what you did, I shouldn't have said what I did, Tilly Mack. As it was, I—I just couldn't help it; I was so sorry for him!"

"Oh, it was just being sorry, then! Oh, excuse me; I didn't know," cooed Tilly, smoothly. "You see, it looked so—different!"

"Tilly!" gasped Cordelia. "Genevieve, don't you mind one bit what she says!" But Genevieve, without a word, had turned and was walking swiftly away.

"Well, Tilly Mack," chorused several indignant voices; and Elsie Martin added severely: "I've got my opinion of *you*—after all Genevieve has just done for us! I'm sure, I think it was lovely of her to speak to that boy like that!"

Tilly flushed uncomfortably. Her tongue had gone much farther than she had intended it to go. She did not like to think, either, of that Texas trip just then. But the very shame that she felt made her only the more determined not to show it—then.

"Pooh! there wasn't a thing I said that anybody need to make such a fuss about," she declared loftily; then, as she spied Harold Day coming toward them, she called in a merry voice: "Seen the new boy, Harold? His name is 'O. B. J. Holmes.' *I* say his name is 'O Be Joyful,' and the girls are shocked at my disrespect." [268]

"Is that so?" laughed Harold. "Well, I'm not sure I'd like that name myself very well—even if 'tis

a cheerful one! Where's Genevieve? One doesn't often see one of you without all of you."

"Oh, she was here, but she's gone. She was the most shocked of all," answered Tilly, with mock humility. "Probably she's gone to tell him so. You see, she shook hands with him and introduced us all around, and said she'd like to welcome him and that she hoped he'd enjoy it here."

"Oh, Tilly!" remonstrated Cordelia.

"Why, Cordelia, didn't she?" asked Tilly, in a particularly innocent tone of voice.

"Y-yes," admitted Cordelia, reluctantly, "only—" The bell rang and the group broke up, with Cordelia's sentence still unfinished.

The rest of the day for the Happy Hexagons was not an easy one. Tilly looked rebellious—and ashamed. Cordelia looked ready to cry. Genevieve kept her eyes on her books and seemed unaware that there was such a thing in the world as a girls' club, of which she was a prominent member. Bertha, Elsie, and Alma divided their time between scowling at Tilly and trying to attract Genevieve's attention.

It was during the Latin recitation, which came just before closing time at noon, that Cordelia's perturbation culminated in a blunder that sent most of the class into convulsive giggles, and even [269] brought a twitching smile to Genevieve's tense lips.

Cordelia, rising to translate in her turn, hurried blindly through a paragraph until she came to the words "sub jugum". Now Cordelia very well knew what "sub jugum" meant; but her eyes, at the moment, were divided between her book and Genevieve's flushed cheeks, and so saw, apparently, but half of the word "jugum". At all events, the next moment the class were amazed to learn from Cordelia's lips that Cæsar sent the army—not "under the yoke" as was expected—but "under the jug."

Cordelia knew, before the titters of the class told her, what she had said; and with hot blushes she made a hasty correction. But to Cordelia, usually so conscientiously accurate and circumspect, the thing was a tragedy, and, as such, would not soon be forgotten by her. She knew, too, that the class would not let her forget it even could she herself do so. If she had doubted this, she did not doubt it longer, after school was dismissed, for she was assailed on all sides by a merry bombardment of gibes and questions as to just what sort of jug it was, anyhow, under which Cæsar sent his army.

Genevieve, only, had nothing to say. She did not, indeed, even glance toward Cordelia. With averted face she hurried through the corridor and out the street door alone. In the yard a quick step behind her overtook her, and she found herself looking into the flushed, agitated face of the [270] new boy.

O. B. J. Holmes would not, at first sight, be called a good-looking youth. His face was freckled, and his nose was rather large. But his mouth was well-shaped, and his eyes were large and expressive. They looked into Genevieve's now with a gaze that was clear and honest and manly.

"Miss Genevieve, may I walk with you a little way, please?" he asked with disarming directness. "I want to speak to you."

"Why, of—of course," stammered Genevieve. Then she colored painfully: behind her she heard Tilly's laughing voice, followed by Alma's lower one, and Harold's.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did this morning," began O. B. J. Holmes, falling into step with her.

"Oh, that wasn't—wasn't anything," stammered Genevieve, nervously, still acutely conscious of the eyes that she knew were behind her.

The boy smiled a little wistfully.

"Perhaps not, to you," he answered; "but if you'd been named 'O Be Joyful' and had had to suffer for it as I have, you'd think it was something."

"You don't mean to say your name *is* 'O Be Joyful'!" gasped Genevieve. [271]

He nodded, his face showing a deeper red.

"Yes, that's what I wanted to tell you. I didn't feel square not to have you know it, after you stood up so bravely for 'Oliver'. Of course, if you like, you may tell the rest. I suppose I was foolish to try to keep it to myself, anyway," he sighed moodily.

"Tell it! Of course I sha'n't tell it," declared Genevieve, warmly. She had forgotten all about those watching eyes behind her, now.

"Thank you," smiled the boy again, a little wistfully. "Miss Hart knows it, of course. I told her at recess; and the principal, Mr. Jackson, knows it. He agreed to letting me be called 'Oliver,' and so does Miss Hart. Still, I don't suppose I can keep it, and it will get out. I—I supposed it had got out when I heard your friend this morning."

"Well, it isn't out, and nobody knows it—but me," declared Genevieve, with more warmth than grammar. "That was only some of Tilly Mack's nonsense; and when you know her better, you'll know that nobody pays any attention to what Tilly says." Genevieve stopped abruptly, and bit her

lip. She was thinking that not so very long before, she herself *had* paid attention to something Tilly Mack said.

"I don't think mother ever realized just what such a name would be for a fellow to carry through life," said the boy, after a moment's silence. "There were five of us children, and she gave us all queer names—names that expressed something that had just been happening in the [272] family, you understand. For instance, my oldest brother was born in a year when the crops failed, and they called him 'Tribulation.' Crops were good, you see, when I came," he added, with a rueful smile.

"Why, how—how funny and—and terrible," breathed Genevieve.

"Yes, it was terrible—but mother never thought of it that way, I'm sure. I'm glad she can't know—now—just how hard it's been for me. When I came here, I knew I was a perfect stranger and I determined folks shouldn't know. I'd be 'Oliver B. J. Holmes.'"

"And you shall be 'Oliver B. J. Holmes,'" averred Genevieve, lifting her chin. "Oh, of course Tilly will call you the other, and maybe some of the rest will, sometimes; but don't let that fret you for a moment. Just remember that *no one knows*—for I sha'n't tell it. And now good-by. This is my street," she finished, with a cheery nod.

It was not easy for Genevieve to go back to the short session of school that afternoon; but she went—and she tried to appear as if everything was as usual when she met Cordelia and Elsie at the corner. Cordelia and Elsie were only too glad to follow her lead. Not until they met Tilly in the school yard—and saw her turn hastily away without speaking—did they show how really constrained they felt. [273]

Genevieve, apparently, saw and felt nothing of this—but she never looked toward Tilly that afternoon; and when school was dismissed she hurried cheerfully away with only a smiling nod toward Cordelia and Alma, whom she passed in the corridor.

At home Genevieve went immediately to her practising—somewhat to Mrs. Kennedy's surprise. She practised, too, quite fifteen minutes over her hour—still more to Mrs. Kennedy's surprise. There was, also, a certain unsympathetic hardness in the chords and runs that puzzled the lady not a little; but in the face of their obvious accuracy, and of Genevieve's apparent faithfulness, Mrs. Kennedy did not like to find fault.

Just how long Genevieve would have practised is doubtful, perhaps, had there not sounded an insistently repeated whistle of the Hexagon Club song from the garden. The girl went to the open window then.

"Did you whistle, Harold?" she asked, not too graciously.

"Did I whistle?" retorted the boy, testily. "Oh, no, I never whistled *once*—but I did four times! See here, I thought your practice-hour was an *hour*."

"It is."

"Well, you've been working fifteen minutes over-time already." [274]

"Have I?"

"Yes, you have; and your constitution positively needs a walk. Come, it's your plain duty to your health. Will you go?"

Genevieve dimpled into a laugh.

"All right," she cried more naturally. "Then I'll come. I'll be out in a jiffy."

"Let's go up through the pasture to the woods," proposed Harold, when Genevieve appeared, swinging her hat.

"All right," nodded Genevieve, somewhat listlessly. "Anywhere."

In the woods, some time later, Genevieve and Harold dropped themselves down to rest. It was then that Harold cleared his throat a little nervously.

"You have a new boy in school, I hear," he said.

Genevieve turned quickly. For a moment she looked almost angry. Then, unexpectedly, she laughed.

"You've been talking with Tilly, I perceive," she remarked.

"Oh, no; Tilly has only been talking with me," retorted Harold, laughing in his turn—though a little constrainedly.

Genevieve grew suddenly sober.

"I don't care; I'm glad I did it," she declared. "You know *what* Tilly can be when she wants to [275] be—and she evidently wanted to be, this morning. Just because a boy is new and has got freckles and a queer name, is no reason why he should be made fun of like that."

"Of course not!" Then, still a little constrainedly, Harold asked: "How do you like him? I saw

you talking with him afterward."

Genevieve frowned thoughtfully.

"Why, I don't know—I hadn't thought," she answered. "But I reckon perhaps I like him. He talked quite a little, and he seemed rather nice, I think—just frank and folksy, you know. Yes, I think I like him. I think we'll all like him."

"Oh, of course," agreed Harold without enthusiasm, getting suddenly to his feet. "Well, I suppose we must be going."

"Yes, of course," sighed Genevieve, glancing down at her little blue-enamel watch; "but it *is* nice here!"

The homeward walk was somewhat of a silent one. Harold was unusually quiet, and Genevieve was wondering just how and when peace and happiness were to reign once more in the Hexagon Club. She was wondering, too, if ever she could be just the same to Tilly—unless Tilly had first something to say to her.

As it happened, Genevieve's questions were answered, in a way, before she slept; for, after she had gone up to bed that night, there came a ring at the doorbell, followed, a moment later, by a [276] tap at her door.

"It do be a note for you, Miss Genevieve," explained Nancy.

"A note—for me?"

"Yes, Miss; from Miss Tilly, I think. She's down at the door with her brother."

Genevieve did not answer. Her eyes were devouring the note.

> "Dear Genevieve:—" Tilly had written. "I'm so ashamed I just can't live till you tell me you forgive me. I have begged Howard to take me down there. I know I never, never can sleep till I've asked your pardon for being so perfectly horrid this morning. Will you ever, ever forgive and love me again?
>
> "Your miserable, remorseful
> "Tilly.
>
> "P. S. I think what you did was just the bravest, loveliest thing I ever saw a girl do.
>
> "T. M.
>
> "P. S. again. I'm so late I'm afraid you've gone to bed; but if you haven't, and if you do forgive me, come to your window and wave to me. I shall watch with what Quentina would call soulful, hungry eyes.
>
> "T."

"That's all right; thank you, Nancy. There isn't any answer," smiled Genevieve as she closed [277] the door. The next moment she darted across the room, plucked a great pink aster from the vase on the table, hurried to the window and threw up the screen.

Below she saw the automobile and the two figures therein. Faintly visible, too, was the upturned face of the girl, containing, presumably, the "hungry, soulful eyes."

The next moment, plump into Tilly's lap, fell a huge pink aster.

CHAPTER XXI [278]

GENEVIEVE LEARNS SOMETHING NOT IN BOOKS

School, in an amazingly short time, fell into its customary routine. Genevieve, it is true, did not cease to pine for long, free hours out of doors; but with as good grace as she could muster she submitted to the inevitable.

Miss Hart was still not a favorite in the school, and no one seemed to realize this more keenly than did Miss Hart herself. At all events, as the days passed, she grew thinner and paler looking, and more nervous and worried in her manner. While none of the Happy Hexagons deliberately set herself to making trouble, certainly none of them tried to cause matters to be any easier for her. The girls themselves had long since forgotten their brief day of unpleasantness regarding O. B. J. Holmes, and were more devoted than ever, after this, their first quarrel.

In the Kennedy home, too, matters had settled into their usual routine. Miss Jane had returned, and the days, for Genevieve, were full of study, practice, and the usual number of lessons in cooking and sewing. [279]

As the crisp October days came, every pleasant Saturday afternoon found the Hexagon Club

off for a long walk or ride, sometimes by themselves, sometimes with Harold, Charlie, O. B. J. Holmes, or some of the other boys and girls as invited guests.

O. B. J. Holmes had long since ceased to be the "new boy." He was not, indeed, exactly a favorite with some of the young people, but he was included frequently in their merrymakings—chiefly because Genevieve declared openly that she thought he ought to be. He was not called "Oliver" except in the classroom. Outside he was known usually as "O. B. J." slurred into "Obejay." Sometimes, it is true, Tilly's old "O Be Joyful" was heard, but not often—perhaps because the lad appeared not to care if they did call him that, specially if Genevieve were near to join in the good-natured laugh with which he greeted it.

Undeniably, this frank friendliness of the most popular girl in school had much to do with the way the others regarded him; though they were at a loss, sometimes, to account for a certain quality in that friendship, which they could not fathom.

"It's for all the world as if you'd known each other before," Harold explained it a little aggrievedly one day to Genevieve, when O. B. J. Holmes had just thrown her one of his merry glances at a sudden revival of Tilly's "O Be Joyful" name. "Say, *have* you known him before?" [280]

Genevieve laughed—but she shook her head.

"No; but maybe I do know him now—a little better than you do," she answered demurely, thinking of the name that Harold did not even suspect.

School this year, for Genevieve, was meaning two new experiences. One was that for the first time class officers were elected; the other, that a school magazine was started. In both of these she bore a prominent part. In the one she was unanimously elected president; in the other she was appointed correspondent for her class by the Editor-in-Chief. By each, however, she was quite overwhelmed.

"But I don't think I can do them—not either of them," she declared to Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Jane Chick when she had brought home the news. "To be Class President you have to be awfully dignified and conduct meetings and know parliamentary law, and all that."

"I'm not afraid of anything *there* hurting you," smiled Miss Jane. "In fact, it strikes me that it will do you a great deal of good."

"Y-yes, I suppose you would think so," smiled Genevieve, a little dubiously.

"And I'm sure it's an honor," Mrs. Kennedy reminded her.

Genevieve flushed.

"I *am* glad they wanted me," she admitted frankly. [281]

"And what is this magazine affair?" asked Miss Jane.

"Yes, and that's another thing," sighed Genevieve. "I can't write things. If it were only Quentina, now—she could do it!"

"But you have written for the Chronicles, my dear," observed Mrs. Kennedy. "Have you given those up?"

"Oh, no; we still keep them, only we have entries once a week now instead of every day. There isn't so much doing here as there was in Texas, you know."

"Then you do write for that," said Miss Jane.

"Oh, but *that's* just for us," argued Genevieve. "I don't mind that. But this has got to be printed, Miss Jane—printed right out for everybody to read! If it were only Quentina, now—she'd glory in it. And—oh, Miss Jane, how I wish you could see Quentina," broke off Genevieve, suddenly. "Dear me! wouldn't she just hit on your name, though! She'd be rhyming it in no time, and have 'Miss Jane at the window-pane,' before you could turn around!"

"Quite an inducement for me to know her, I'm sure," observed Miss Jane, dryly.

Genevieve laughed, but she sighed again, too.

"Well, anyhow, she would do it lovely—this correspondence business; but I can't, I'm sure."

"What are you supposed to do?" [282]

"Why, just hand in things—anything that's of interest in my class; but I don't know *what* to say."

"Perhaps the others can help you," suggested Aunt Julia.

Genevieve gave a sudden laugh.

"They'd like to—some of them. Tilly's tried already. She gave me two items this noon, all written down. One was that O. B. J. had a new freckle on the left side of his nose, and the other that Bertha hadn't said 'I told you so' to-day."

"Genevieve!" protested the shocked Miss Jane. "You wouldn't—" She stopped helplessly.

"Oh, no, Miss Jane, I wouldn't," laughed Genevieve, merrily, as she rose from the dinner-table.

Perhaps it was her duties as president, and her new task as correspondent, or perhaps it was just the allurement of the beautiful out-of-doors that made it so hard for Genevieve to spend time on her lessons that autumn. Perhaps, too, her lack of enthusiasm for Miss Hart had something to do with it. Whatever it was, to concentrate her attention on Latin verbs and French nouns grew harder and harder as the days passed, until at last—in the frenzied rush of a study-hour one day—she did what she had never done before: wrote the meaning of some of the words under the Latin version in her book.

It was, apparently, a great success. Her work in class was so unusually good that Miss Hart's [283]
tired eyes brightened, and her lips spoke a word of high praise—praise that sent to Genevieve's cheek a flush that Genevieve herself tried to think was all gratification. But—the next day she did not write any words in the book. The out-of-doors, however, was just as alluring, and the outside duties were just as pressing; so there was just as little time as ever for the Latin verbs. They suffered, too, in consequence. So, also, did Genevieve; for this time, Miss Hart, stung into irritation by this apparently unnecessary falling back into carelessness, said a few particularly sharp words that sent Genevieve out of the class with very red cheeks and very angry eyes.

"I just hate Miss Hart and school, and—and everything," stormed Genevieve hotly, five minutes later, as she met Cordelia and Tilly in the corridor after school was dismissed.

"Oh, Genevieve," remonstrated Cordelia, faintly.

"Well, I do. I didn't have time to get that lesson—but a lot Miss Hart cared for that!"

"Why don't you use a pony?" twittered Tilly, cheerfully.

"A—pony?" Genevieve's eyes were puzzled.

Tilly laughed.

"Oh, it isn't one of your bronchos," she giggled, "and it's easier to ride than they are! It's just a
nice little book that you buy—a Latin translation, you know, all done by somebody else—and no [284]
bother to you."

"But—is that quite—fair?" frowned Genevieve.

"Hm-m; well, I presume Miss Hartless wouldn't call it—good form," she shrugged.

"Why, Tilly Mack! of course it isn't fair, and you know it," cried Cordelia. "It's worse than cribbing."

"What's cribbing?" demanded Genevieve.

"It's the only way out when you haven't got your lesson," answered Tilly, promptly.

"It's writing the translation under the words in the book," explained Elsie Martin, who, coming up at the moment, had heard Genevieve's question.

"It's just plain cheating—and it's horrid," declared Cordelia, with emphasis.

Genevieve's face turned a sudden, painful red, for some unapparent reason.

"Y-yes, it must be," she murmured faintly, as she turned to go.

On the walk home that noon, Harold, as was frequently the case, overtook her.

"Well, what part of the world would you like changed to-day?" he asked, with a smiling glance at her frowning face.

"Chiefly, I reckon I'd like no school," sighed Genevieve; "but if I can't have that, I'd like another [285]
box of teachers opened so we could have a new one."

"What's the trouble now?"

"Oh, I reckon the trouble is with me," admitted Genevieve, ruefully. "Anyhow, Miss Jane would say it was. I flunked in Cæsar—but that's no reason why Miss Hart should have been so disagreeable! But then, I suppose she has to be. She came out of that kind of a box, you know."

Harold laughed, though a little gravely.

"You still think they come all boxed, sorted, and labeled, do you?" he said. "And that they aren't 'just folks' at all?"

"Yes, I still think so. They never seem a bit like 'folks' to me. It's their business to sit up there stiff and solemn and stern, and see that you behave and learn your lessons. I never saw one that I liked, except Miss Palmer and Miss Jones—but then, they came out of a jolly box, anyhow."

"Lucky ladies!"

Genevieve laughed rebelliously.

"Oh, I know I'm horrid," she admitted; "but—well, I went off for a ride with Tilly yesterday after school, instead of paying attention to his Imperial Highness, Cæsar; and that's what was the

trouble. But, Harold, it was so perfectly glorious out I had to—I just had to! I tell you, every bit of me was tingling to go! Now what do you suppose Miss Hart knows of a feeling like that? She simply couldn't understand it." [286]

"But—Miss Hart doesn't look very old—to me."

Genevieve stopped short, and turned half around.

"Old! Why, she's a *teacher*, Harold!"

Harold chuckled, as they started forward again.

"I should like to see some teachers' faces if they could hear you say 'teacher' in that tone of voice, young lady!"

"Pooh! I reckon it would take considerable to make me think of any teacher as *young*," retorted Genevieve, with emphasis.

"All right; but—aren't you coming out, later, for a walk or—or something?" asked Harold, a little anxiously, as they reached the Kennedy driveway.

She shook her head.

"No, little boy," she answered, with mock cheerfulness. "I'm going to practise, then I'm going to study my algebra, then I'm going to study my Latin, then I'm going to study my French, then I'm going to study my English history, then—"

"*Good-by!*" laughed Harold, clapping his hands to his ears, and hurrying away.

Unhesitating as was Genevieve's assertion of her intentions, those intentions were not carried out, even to the practising, first on the list; for, in putting down her books, Genevieve dropped some loose papers to the floor. The papers were some that had that day been returned by Miss Hart; and, as the girl gathered them up now, a sheet of note paper, covered with handwriting entirely different from her own, attracted her attention. [287]

She recognized the writing at once as that of Miss Hart, and she supposed at first that the paper must contain some special suggestions or criticisms in regard to her own work. With a quick frown, therefore, she began to read it.

She had not read five lines before she knew that the paper did not contain criticism or suggestions. But so dazed, so surprised, and so absorbed was she, by that time, that she quite forgot that she was reading something most certainly never meant for her eyes to see.

The paper was evidently the second sheet of a letter. The writing—fine, but plain—began close to the top of the first page, in what was apparently the middle of a sentence.

> "speak freely, I am sure.
>
> "Things are not getting any better, but rather worse. I cannot seem to win them. Of course I understood that my task would be difficult, following, as I did, two such popular teachers. I think, perhaps, that this very fact has made me nervous; and so —I have not appeared even at my best. But, oh, I have tried!—you cannot know how I have tried! [288]
>
> "I am nearly sick with terror for fear I shall lose my position—and of course *that* doesn't help me to be the cool, calm, judicious person in the chair I ought to be. But it means so much to me—this place—and if I should lose it, there would be poor Annie deprived of her comforts again; for, of course, a failure here would mean that not for a long time (if ever!) could I get another like it.
>
> "Forgive me for burdening you with all this, but it had got to the point where I must speak to some one. Then, too, I did not know but you could perhaps tell me why I have failed—I have tried so hard myself to understand!
>
> "Sometimes I think I'm too lenient. Sometimes I think I'm too strict. Sometimes I'm so worried for fear they'll think me too young and inexperienced, that I don't dare to act myself at all—then I'm stiffly dignified in a way that I know must be horrid.
>
> "After all, I think the whole secret of the matter is—that I'm afraid. If once I could have a confident assurance that I *am* doing well, and that I *am* winning out—I think I should win out. I do, truly!
>
> "And now I must stop and go to work. I'm in the grove, back of the schoolhouse. I often bring my papers here to correct. I have them with me to-night; but—I've been writing to you instead of working. I'll finish this later. But, really, already I feel a little better. It's done me good, just to say things to you. Of course, to no one else could I—" [289]

There was a little more, but Genevieve stopped here. Not until she read that last sentence did she realize in the least what she was doing. Then, hurriedly, with flushed cheeks and shamed eyes, she thrust the letter out of sight under the papers. But there was something besides shame in her eyes; there was a very real, and a very tender sympathy for—folks.

"And to think that I—read it," she breathed. Then, suddenly, she snatched up the papers again. "But she mustn't know—she *mustn't* know," choked the girl. "Maybe, if I run, I can get there in time and tuck it into her desk. I *must* get there in time," she declared aloud, darting out of the house and up the street without once looking back toward an amazed Miss Jane, watching her from the window.

As Genevieve hoped would be the case, the janitor had not finished his nightly duties. The great front door stood wide open, and Genevieve made short work of reaching her own room. As she opened that door, however, she paused in dismay.

Miss Hart was in her chair. Her arms lay folded on the desk before her, and her face was [290] hidden in them.

The knob under Genevieve's nerveless fingers clicked sharply, and Miss Hart raised her head with a start.

During the one brief moment that Genevieve gazed into her teacher's startled eyes, wild plans raced through her mind: she would run; she would go to her own desk and leave the papers, then destroy the fateful letter to-morrow; she would walk up and hand the letter to Miss Hart now, and confess that she had read it; she would—

"Why, Genevieve!" cried Miss Hart, a little huskily. "Did you—forget something?"

"No, Miss Hart; yes—well, I mean—it isn't that I *forgot* exactly. I—I didn't know," she faltered, realizing more than ever the meaning of the letter she had just read, now that the wistful-eyed writer of it sat before her, bearing plain evidence of tears.

"Can I do anything for you?" Miss Hart asked.

Genevieve went, then, straight to the desk. The papers—with the letter—were rolled tightly in one hand.

"No, Miss Hart, thank you; but—isn't there something that—that I can do for—you?" she faltered.

What happened next was, to Genevieve, certainly, most disconcerting. Miss Hart gave one look [291] into Genevieve's eyes, then dropped her face into her hands and burst into tears. At Genevieve's aghast exclamation, however, she raised her head determinedly and began to wipe her eyes.

"There, there, my dear," she smiled brightly, winking off the tears. "That was very foolish and very silly of me, and you must forget all about it. I was a little homesick, I'm afraid, and perhaps a bit blue; and your eyes looked into mine so frankly and honestly, and with such a courageous 'I'll-try-to-help-you' look, that—that—well, you know what I did. But come—let us talk no more of this, my dear! Let us get out of this stifling room, and into the blessed out-of-doors. We'll go into the grove for a little walk. These four walls have been just smothering me all day!"

Genevieve opened wide her eyes.

"Why, do *you* feel that way—too?" she asked incredulously.

Miss Hart colored a little.

"I'm afraid I do, my dear—though probably I ought not to have said just that—to you," she sighed constrainedly. "But—to tell the truth, I've never been able quite to see what houses were made for, I suspect, since I used to ask that question as a little girl. I imagine 'twas in summer, however, not winter, when I asked it," she finished a little tremulously, as they passed through the hall to the outer door. [292]

Once again Genevieve opened wide her eyes.

"Did you ask that—really? Why, Father says that was one of *my* questions, too," she breathed rapturously. "Why, you are—you are just like—" with a little cough Genevieve choked off the "folks" before it was spoken. The word was "me" when it finally left her lips.

It was a wonderful half-hour that Genevieve spent then in the grove. Over in the west the sun was low, and the shadows were long under the trees. The air was crisp, but not too crisp, if one were walking—and she and Miss Hart were walking. They were talking, too.

They talked of birds and beasts and flowers. They talked of school and study, and Latin lessons that were so hard to learn when the out-of-doors called. They talked of the days and lessons to come; and they spoke—at least, Miss Hart did—of what fine work Genevieve was sure to do before the year was through. They did not talk, however, of Miss Hart's tears in the classroom, nor of Miss Hart's letter still tightly clutched in Genevieve's hand.

Genevieve, however, had not forgotten the letter; and when she walked alone toward home, a little later, she wondered what she should do with it. To give it openly back to Miss Hart, she felt was not to be thought of; at the same time she doubted if in any other way she could return it to her now. The letter certainly had already accomplished two things: never again would she so [293] misjudge Miss Hart; never again, too, would she let the others so misjudge her, if she could help it—and she believed she could help it. She should try, certainly. As for the letter—

"Well, Miss," broke in Harold's slightly aggrieved voice behind her, "is *this* the way you

practise, and study your Latin and your French and your algebra and your English history?"

Genevieve was too absorbed even to notice the taunt, much less to reply to it.

"Harold," she sighed, "I wish you'd tell me something."

"Certainly! You have only to command me," bowed the lad, with mock pomposity, as he fell into step with her.

Genevieve was frowning. She did not even smile.

"Harold, if you had something that belonged to somebody else, and they didn't know you had it and would feel dreadfully if they found out you had it, do you think you ought to give it back to them, and so let them know you had it, when all the time if they *didn't* know you had it, they wouldn't care at all?"

"W-w-well!" whistled Harold. "Do you mind—er—giving me that again, now—say, in pieces a foot long this time? If I were Cordelia I might give you my answer right off the handle, but—I'm not Cordelia, you see." [294]

Genevieve laughed a little ruefully.

"There wouldn't anybody know, of course, unless I told the rest; and I can't tell the rest."

"Maybe not," smiled Harold, oddly; "but I'll wager you'll have to be telling something to Miss Jane pretty quick now. I saw you when you flew out of the yard an hour ago, and I fancy Miss Jane must have seen you, too. At any rate, she's been to the door three times since, to my knowledge, to look for you."

Genevieve clapped her hand to her lips.

"Mercy! I never thought to tell them a word. I just ran."

"Yes, I noticed you—ran," observed Harold, dryly.

"And they always want to know just where I am," sighed Genevieve. "O dear! if you do something bad in order to do something good, which is it—bad or good?"

Harold shook his head.

"That's not in mine, either," he retorted whimsically. "Really, Miss, your questions on ethics this afternoon do you credit—but they're too much for me."

"Well, I reckon this one is for me," sighed Genevieve again, as she came in sight of the house and saw Miss Jane Chick at the window. "But the other one—I know the answer to that. I shall burn it up," she said decisively, clutching even more tightly the roll of papers in her hand, as she turned in at the Kennedys' front walk. [295]

CHAPTER XXII [296]

A TEXAS "MISSIONARY"

October passed and November came. School was decidedly more bearable now, in the opinion of Genevieve, perhaps because it was a rainy month; but Genevieve preferred to think it was because of Miss Hart. It was strange, really, how much Miss Hart had improved as a teacher!—all the school agreed to that. Even Tilly ceased to call her "Hartless."

"Maybe she came in a jolly box, after all," Harold said one day to Genevieve; but Genevieve tossed her head.

"Pooh! She wasn't in any box at all, Harold. She's—*folks!*" And Harold saw that, in spite of the lightness of her words, there were almost tears in Genevieve's eyes.

Presidential duties, too, were easier for Genevieve now. They proved to be, in fact, very far from arduous; and, as Tilly declared, they were, indeed, "dreadfully honorable."

As correspondent for the school magazine Genevieve did not feel herself to be a success. She wrote few items, and sent in even fewer. [297]

Those she did write represented hours of labor, however; for she felt that the weight of nations lay on every word, and she wrote and rewrote the poor little sentences until every vestige of naturalness and of spontaneity were taken out of them. Such information as she could gather seemed always, in her eyes, either too frivolous to be worth notice, or too serious to be of interest. And ever before her frightened eyes loomed the bugbear of PRINT.

It was during the short vacation of three days at Thanksgiving time that Nancy, the second girl at the Kennedys', came to the parlor door one afternoon and interrupted Genevieve's practising.

"Miss Genevieve, I do be hatin' ter tell ye," she began indignantly, "but there's a man at the side door on horseback what is insistin' on seein' of ye; and Mis' Kennedy and Miss Jane ain't home from town yet."

"Why, Nancy, who is the man?"

"I ain't sayin' that I know, Miss, but I do say that he is powerful rough-lookin' to come to the likes o' this house a-claimin' he's Mis' Granger's cousin, as he does."

"Reddy! Why, of course I'll see Reddy," cried Genevieve, springing to her feet.

A minute later, to Nancy's vast displeasure, Genevieve was ushering into the sitting room a sandy-haired man in full cowboy costume from broad-brimmed hat and flannel shirt to chaparejos [298] and high-heeled boots.

Reddy evidently saw the surprise in Genevieve's face.

"Yes, I know," he smiled sheepishly, as Nancy left the room with slow reluctance, "I reckon you're surprised to see me in this rig, and I'll own I hain't wore 'em much since I came; but to-day, to come to see you, I just had to. You see, Miss Genevieve, it's what this 'ere rig stands for that I want to see you about, anyhow."

"About—this—rig?"

"Well, yes—in a way. It's about the West."

"What is it?"

"It's Martha—Mis' Granger, my cousin. I want her to go back with me. She's all alone, and so am I. And she'd come in a minute, but she's—afraid."

"What of?"

Reddy's lips twitched.

"Indians and prairie fires and bucking bronchos and buffaloes. She thinks all of 'em run 'round loose all the time—in Texas."

Genevieve laughed merrily.

"The idea! Haven't you told her they don't?"

"Oh, yes; and I've come to see if *you* won't tell her."

"I!" [299]

"Yes. She thinks I'm a man and rough anyhow, so I don't count. *Would* you be willing to come and talk Texas to her?"

"Why, of course I will," cried Genevieve. "I'll come right away to-day, after I've finished my hour."

"Thank you," sighed Reddy, rising to his feet. "Now I'll hit the trail for Texas inside of a month—you see if I don't! What *you* say will go."

"Oh, but don't be too sure of that, Reddy," frowned Genevieve, anxiously.

"I ain't. I'm just *sure*—and that's all right," retorted Reddy, cheerfully. "And mighty glad I shall be to get there, too! I'd be plum locoed here in another month. You see, I've got some money now, and I know a nice little place I can buy cheap, to start in for myself. Martha'll take Jim Small's girl, 'Mandy, for company and to help. You see we've got her already roped."

"She wants to go, then?"

"Dyin' to. It all depends on you now, Miss Genevieve."

"All right; I'll be there," promised the girl, laughingly, as Reddy, watched by Nancy's disapproving eyes from the kitchen window, swung himself into the saddle and galloped down the driveway.

A little later Genevieve met Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Chick at the foot of the front walk. [300]

"I've taken my music lesson and done my hour, and I'm off on missionary work now," she beamed brightly. "I knew you'd let me go, so I didn't wait till you came home."

"Missionary work?" frowned Miss Chick.

"Why, what do you mean?" questioned Mrs. Kennedy.

Genevieve chuckled.

"It's to teach Mrs. Granger that Texas has something besides bucking bronchos and prairie fires. You see, Reddy wants to take her West, and she's afraid. She thinks those things, and Indians and buffaloes, are all that grow there. So I'm going to tell her a thing or two," she finished with a nod and a smile.

Just how successful Genevieve was with her missionary work perhaps she herself did not realize until nearly a fortnight later, when Cordelia Wilson overtook her on the way to school one morning.

"Genevieve, Genevieve, please," panted Cordelia. "I want you to do some missionary work for me! Will you?"

Genevieve turned in surprise.

"'Missionary work!' What *do* you mean?"

Cordelia laughed and colored.

"Well, it's what you did for Mrs. Granger. Reddy told me. He said you called it missionary work —and that *'twas* missionary work, too. You know they're to start next week, and they're all so [301] happy over it!"

"Yes, I know," nodded Genevieve; "and I'm so glad!"

"So am I," sighed the other, fervently. "You see, Reddy being my find, so, I felt responsible; and of course I ought to feel that way, too. Just think—what if they weren't happy over it!"

"But they are," smiled Genevieve. "What's the use of 'if-ing' a thing when it just *is* already?"

"What?" Cordelia's eyes were slightly puzzled. "Oh, I see," she laughed. "What a funny way you do have of putting things, Genevieve Hartley! Why don't you say such things as that in your notes for the magazine?"

"In the magazine?—mercy! Why, Cordelia, they're *printed!*"

"Well, what of it?" maintained Cordelia.

"What of what?" chirped a new voice; and Tilly Mack hurried up from behind them.

Cordelia looked plainly disappointed; but Genevieve turned with a light laugh.

"My magazine notes, Tilly. Cordelia doesn't like them," she explained.

"Oh, but Genevieve, it's only that I want you to write as you talk," supplemented Cordelia, in distress.

"Well, I don't know. I'm sure—aren't they true?" bridled Genevieve. [302]

"True!" giggled Tilly, suddenly. "Oh, yes, they're true, just as 'c-a-t spells cat' is true—and they sound just about like that, too, Genevieve Hartley, and you know it."

"Humph! I like that," bridled Genevieve, again.

"Oh, Tilly, she writes lovely notes—you know she does," championed Cordelia, almost tearfully.

"No, I don't write lovely notes," disputed Genevieve, with unexpected frankness. "They're just like Tilly says they are, and they're horrid. I *do* say 'c-a-t spells cat' every time—but I simply can't seem to say anything else!"

"But why don't you write as you talk?" argued Tilly.

"Or as you do in the Chronicles?" added Cordelia. "You write just beautifully there."

"But, Cordelia, that isn't *printed,*" cried Genevieve, again, as they came in sight of the school building and saw Elsie Martin coming to meet them.

At the doorway of the classroom Cordelia whispered to Genevieve:

"Please wait after school for me. I'll tell you then—about the missionary work, you know." And Genevieve nodded assent.

Once or twice during the day, Genevieve wondered what Cordelia's missionary work could be; but for the most part study and recitation filled her thoughts and time. Mid-year examinations were approaching, and, in spite of the fact that she had been doing much better work for the last [303] month, she felt by no means sure of herself for the dreaded ordeal. It was of this she was thinking when she met Cordelia according to agreement at the close of the short afternoon session.

"Here I am, dear," she sighed; "but, really, I reckon *I'm* the one that needs the missionary work if any one does—with those horrid exams looming up before me."

"Oh, but you've been doing such splendid work—lately!" cried Cordelia.

"Thank you," retorted Genevieve, wrinkling up her nose saucily at the pause before the "lately." "I perceive you still know how to tell the truth, Miss!"

"Genevieve!" protested Cordelia.

"Oh, then you mean it wasn't the truth," bantered her friend.

"Genevieve!" groaned Cordelia, hopelessly.

"There, there, never mind," laughed the other. "Come, we must be running along; then you

shall tell me all about this wonderful missionary work of yours. What is it?"

"Well, it—it's about another of my—my finds."

"Oh, your lost people?"

"Yes. It's John Sanborn, Hermit Joe's son, you know. He wants to go West and take his father." [304]

"Well, can't he? Or doesn't his father want to? Maybe you want me to go and tell Hermit Joe not to be afraid of bronchos and buffaloes," laughed Genevieve.

A swift color stole into Cordelia's face.

"No; Hermit Joe wants to go."

"Then what is it?"

Cordelia laughed shyly.

"Well, it—it's a lady, Genevieve."

"A lady! Why, Hermit Joe and his son haven't any—any women or cousins, have they?"

"No; but—but they want one," admitted Cordelia, a little breathlessly.

Genevieve stopped short.

"Cordelia, what *are* you talking about?" she demanded.

Cordelia laughed softly, but she grew suddenly very pink indeed, and she clasped her hands rapturously.

"I'll tell you, Genevieve. I've been just longing to tell you, every minute. It's the loveliest thing—just like a book! It seems Hermit Joe's son, years ago, before he ran away, had a sweetheart, Miss Sally Hunt."

"That little old maid on Hunt's Hill? She's a dear, I think!"

"Yes; but she wasn't old then, you know. She was young, and so pretty! She showed me her picture, once—how she looked then." [305]

"Yes, yes—go on!"

"Well, they were sweethearts, but they had a quarrel or something, and—anyhow, Mr. John Sanborn ran away."

"How long ago?"

"Twenty years; and now he's back, and they've made everything all up lovely, and he wants to marry her and take her West."

"Oh-h!" breathed Genevieve. "It *is* just like a story; isn't it? And didn't it turn out lovely!"

"Y-yes, only it hasn't turned out yet."

"What's the matter? I thought you said they'd made it all up!"

"They have. She'll marry him; but she—she's afraid of Texas, too, just as Mrs. Granger was, I guess."

"Oh, I see," cried Genevieve. "Pooh! We'll fix that in no time," finished the Texas "missionary," with confidence.

"There, I knew you would," sighed her friend, blissfully. "You see, I specially wanted Miss Sally to be happy, because I couldn't find—" Cordelia caught herself up in time. She must not, of course, tell Genevieve about Sally Hunt's lost brother whom she had failed to find. "Well, you know, anyway, Sally Hunt is very poor," she explained hastily; "and everybody said, when we went to Texas last summer, that she'd have to go to the Poor Farm soon, if something wasn't done. So I'm specially glad to have her happy, and—" Cordelia stopped, and turned to Genevieve [306] with a new look in her eyes.

"Genevieve, I've just remembered," she cried. "At the ranch last summer, when I was talking to Mr. Jonathan Edwards and didn't know his name was 'Sanborn'—I've just remembered that I told him about Miss Sally, and how she'd have to go to the Poor Farm. Genevieve, I'm sure—I just know that's one reason why he came home!"

"Of course it was," agreed Genevieve, excitedly; "and we'll go straight up there now, if Aunt Julia'll let us; only—" her face fell—"Cordelia, when *shall* I get in my studying?"

"To-night, Genevieve; you must study to-night," answered Cordelia, firmly. "You mustn't sacrifice your studies, even for missionary work. Uncle always says it isn't right to send money to the heathen when your own child is hungry; and I'm sure this is the same thing. Maybe we can go Saturday morning, though," she finished hopefully.

"I'm sure we can," declared Genevieve; "and I'm just as excited as I can be. I just love missionary work," she exulted, as she waved her hand in farewell, at her street corner.

CHAPTER XXIII

[307]

GENEVIEVE GOES TO BOSTON

December was a busy month, indeed. To Genevieve it seemed actually to be one whirl of study, lessons, practice, and examinations, leaving oh, so little time for Christmas gifts and plans.

A big box was to go to the Six Star Ranch, and a smaller one to Quentina. But, better than all, Mr. Jones was to have a letter from Mrs. Kennedy which would—Genevieve was sure—carry a wonderful happiness to Quentina. Mrs. Kennedy was to ask Mr. Jones to let Quentina come to Sunbridge to school the next winter, and share Genevieve's room, as Mrs. Kennedy's guest. All other expenses, railroad fare, school supplies, and any special instruction, were to be met by Mr. Hartley through Genevieve herself.

All this, of course, Genevieve had not brought about without many letters to Mr. Hartley, and many talks with Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Chick, wherein all sorts of pleadings and promises had a part. But it had been done at last, and the letter was to go in the Christmas box—but of all this the Happy Hexagons were not to know until the answer from Mr. Jones came. Naturally, [308] however, Genevieve could not keep all her attention on her studies that month, in spite of the coming examinations.

There was, too, more than one visit to the gentle spinster on Hunt's Hill before Genevieve quite succeeded in convincing Miss Sally that there *were* places in Texas where wild Indians did not prowl, nor wild horses race neck and neck across vast deserts of loneliness. At last, however, she had the satisfaction of hearing from John Sanborn's own grateful lips that everything was all right, and that the wedding day was set for April the tenth.

In the midst of all this came the dreaded examinations, then the fearful waiting till the last day of school when the decision would be announced. The winter before, at these mid-year examinations, Genevieve had not passed. She had not forgotten the mortification of that tragedy, nor the weary weeks of study that had been necessary to enable her to go on with her class. So she, of all the girls now, was awaiting the verdict with special anxiety. Meanwhile, all the Happy Hexagons were spending every available minute on Christmas gifts.

It was just a week before Christmas Day that Genevieve was surprised to receive a hurried after-school call from Cordelia.

"Genevieve—quick!" panted Cordelia, dropping herself into the first chair she came to. "Can't [309] we do something? We *must* do something!"

"Of course we can," laughed Genevieve, promptly; "but—what about?"

Cordelia gave a faint smile.

"Yes, I know; I wasn't very explicit," she sighed. "But, listen. You know—or maybe you didn't know—but the Missionary Society have been packing a barrel to go West. They're at the church this afternoon, packing it; but they didn't have half enough, and they sent down to the parsonage to know if Aunt Mary hadn't something more—some old clothes of the children's, or old magazines, or anything. Auntie's sick to-day with an awful cold, but she went up attic and hunted up all she could; then after I got home from school she asked me to take them down to the church."

"Yes, go on," prompted Genevieve, as Cordelia paused for breath.

"Well, I took them; and, Genevieve, what do you think?"—Cordelia's voice was tragic—"that missionary barrel was going to the Rev. Luke Jones, Bolo, Texas. *Our* Mr. Jones,—Quentina!"

"Cordelia! Really?"

"Yes. You know they told us they got them from our church sometimes. And, Genevieve, it was awful—that barrel! It looked just like the other one, the one they got while we were there that [310] day—old shoes and dolls, and *homely* things!"

"Oh, Cordelia! What did you do?"

Cordelia drew in her breath with a little gasp.

"I don't know. I talked. I said things—awful things. I know they were awful things from the looks of some of their faces. And at the last Mrs. Johnson—you *know* how she can be sometimes!—she—she just snapped out: 'Very well, Miss Cordelia, if you are not satisfied with what we have been able to procure after weeks of hard work, suppose you go out yourself and solicit gifts for your friends!' And, Genevieve, I said I would. And I turned 'round and marched out. And now—now—what *shall* we do?"

Genevieve sprang to her feet.

"Do? Why, we'll do it, of course," she cried.

"But, Genevieve, I'm so scared. What if folks won't give—anything? Those women worked

weeks—they said they did—for what they've got!"

"But folks *will* give," declared Genevieve, with prompt confidence. "Now wait. I'll have to tell Aunt Julia where I'm going, then I'll be back ready to start," she finished, as she whisked out of the room.

"Oh, Genevieve, you're always so comfortingly *sure*," sighed Cordelia to the door through which her friend had just sped. [311]

During the next two hours Sunbridge, as represented by many of its most staid and stately homes, received the surprise of its life—a surprise that sent hitherto complacently contented women scurrying into attics and closets, and stirred reputedly miserly men into thrusting hands into inside pockets for spare bills.

Perhaps it was the sight of the eager young faces, alight with generous enthusiasm. Perhaps it was the pathos of the story of one missionary barrel as told by girlish lips trembling with feeling. Perhaps it was just the novelty of receiving so direct, and so confident an appeal for "something you'd like to have given to you, you know." Perhaps it was a little of all three that worked the miracle. At all events, in the church parlor some time later, a little band of excited, marveling women worked until far into the evening packing a missionary barrel for the Rev. Luke Jones. And when it left their hands, there was in it the pretty dress for the minister's wife, the unworn underclothing for the minister's boys, the fresh hair-ribbons for the minister's daughter, and the serviceable coat for the minister himself, to say nothing of uncounted books, games, and household articles of a worth and desirability likely to make a missionary minister's family exclaim with surprise and delight—until they found the generous roll of bills in the minister's coat pocket, when they would be dumb with a great wave of reverent gratitude to a God who could [312] make human hearts so kind.

"There!" sighed Genevieve, when she and Cordelia had left their last parcels at the church door. "I reckon we've got something different for that barrel now—but we'll never let Quentina know, *never*—that we had a thing to do with packing it."

"No; but I guess she'll suspect it, though," returned Cordelia, with a teary smile. "But, oh, Genevieve, didn't they give just splendidly!"

"I knew they would," declared Genevieve, "if they just understood."

"Well, then, I wish they'd—understand oftener," sighed Cordelia, as she turned down her street.

Two days later the Happy Hexagons were holding a hurried meeting at the parsonage after school. It was the night before the last day of the term, and they were all trying to work at once on the sofa pillow they had planned to give Miss Hart. Cordelia was making the tassel for one corner, and Alma Lane one for another. The other two tassels were being sewed on by Elsie and Bertha. Tilly was writing the card to go with it, and Genevieve was holding the paper and ribbon with which to do it up.

"I'm going to do as Miss Jane does, next year," sighed Genevieve, at last.

"And what does Miss Jane do?" asked Tilly. [313]

"Begins in January to get ready for Christmas. Now I've got exactly seventy-nine and one things to do before next Tuesday—and to-day is Thursday."

"You must have spent part of your valuable time counting them," teased Tilly, "to have figured them down so fine as that."

"Seventy-nine and one are eighty," observed Cordelia, with a little frown. "Why didn't you say eighty to begin with, Genevieve?"

"Because she wanted to give your brain something to do, too," explained Tilly, wearing an exaggeratedly innocent air.

"Tilly!" scolded Genevieve. But Tilly only laughed, and Cordelia forgot her question with the last stitch she put into her tassel.

The pillow was given to Miss Hart the next day, and, apparently, made the lady very happy. Nor was Miss Hart the only one that was made happy that day. Genevieve, and in fact, all the Happy Hexagons, together with O. B. J. Holmes and nearly all the rest of the class, knew before night that they had "passed"—which is no small thing to know, when for days you have worried and for nights you have dreamed about the dreadful alternative of a contrary verdict.

With Miss Jane Chick, Genevieve went to Boston shopping, Saturday, coming back tired, but happy, and all aglow with the holiday rush and color of the crowded streets and stores. On [314] Sunday came the beautiful Christmas service, which Mr. Wilson made very impressive. Certainly it touched Genevieve's heart deeply, as she sat by Mrs. Kennedy's side and listened to it. It seemed so easy to Genevieve, at that moment, always to be good and brave and true—always to be thoughtful of others' wishes—never to be heedless, careless, or impulsively reckless of consequences!

It was snowing when she left the church, and it snowed hard all the afternoon and until far into the night. Genevieve awoke to look out on a spotlessly white, crystal-pure world, with every ugly

line and dreary prospect changed into fairylike beauty.

"Oh—oh—oh, isn't it lovely!" she exclaimed, as she came into the dining-room that morning. "Don't I wish Quentina were here to see it—and to talk about it!"

"We'll hope she will be some day," smiled Mrs. Kennedy.

"Anyhow, 'Here's Miss Jane at the window-pane' all ready for her," chanted Genevieve, merrily, her eyes on the tall figure in the bay window.

Miss Jane turned with a sigh.

"Yes, it's very lovely, of course, Genevieve—but I must confess it isn't lovely to me this morning."

"Why, Miss Jane!"

"I had planned to go to Boston. In fact it seems as if I must go. But I have waked up with a sore [315]
throat and every evidence of a bad cold; and I'm afraid I don't dare to go—not with all this new snow on the ground and dampness in the air."

"Couldn't I go, Miss Jane? I was going to ask to go, anyway. I find there are three more things I want to get, and I know I can't find them here."

"But you have never been to Boston alone, my dear."

"I suppose everybody has to have a first time," laughed Genevieve; "and I'm not a mite afraid. Besides, I know the way perfectly, all through the shopping district; and all I have to do then is just to take the car for the North Station and the train home. I reckon I know how to do *that* all right!"

Miss Jane frowned and shook her head slowly.

"I know; but—I hate to let you do it, Genevieve, only I—it seems as if I *must* go myself!"

Mrs. Kennedy looked up reassuringly.

"Indeed, Jane, I am inclined to think Genevieve can go all right," she smiled. "She has been to Boston now many times, you know."

"There, Miss Jane!" crowed Genevieve, triumphantly. "You see! Please, now," she begged.

Miss Jane still frowned—but a look of almost reluctant relief came to her eyes.

"Very well," she conceded slowly. "Perhaps, my dear, I will let you go for me, then." [316]

"Oh, thank you, Miss Jane—besides, there are several things I want for myself."

"Very well, dear. I have three things that must be changed, and there are two that I want you to buy. It seems so absurd—when I began last January—that there should be anything to be done to-day; but, unfortunately, some of my plans had to be changed at the last moment. You may get ready at once after breakfast, please, then come to my room. I'll have the list all made out for you. You'll have to bring everything home, of course, but they are not very heavy, and you can carry them all in the large hand bag, I think. You'd better take the nine-four train."

It was not quite half-past ten when Genevieve arrived in the great Boston station that morning. She glanced importantly at her pretty little watch, took a firmer hold on the large leather bag she carried, and stepped briskly off toward her car.

It was delightful—this independent feeling of freedom. Even to pay her fare and to signal the conductor to stop were Events. Shopping, all by herself, was even more delightful; so she dallied over every purchase and every exchange as long as she could—and it was not hard to dally, with the crowds, the long waits, and the delays for change.

At one o'clock, when in state she ate her luncheon at a pretty white table in a large department-store dining-room, she had not half finished her task. She was so glad there was still [317]
so much to do! But at four o'clock, when she did finish, she looked at her watch with faintly troubled eyes. She had not, indeed, realized that it was quite so late. She remembered, too, suddenly, for the first time, that Miss Chick had told her to come back early. She wondered—could she catch the four-twenty train?

Stores and sidewalks were a mass of surging, thronging humanity now, and progress was slow and uncertain. When, at ten minutes past four, she had not succeeded even in reaching her car for the station, she gave up the four-twenty train. Well, there was one at five-fifteen, she comforted herself. She could surely get that.

The streets were darkening fast, and lights were beginning to flash here and there, finding a brilliant response in tinsel stars and crystal pendants. With the Christmas red and green, and the thronging crowds, it made a pretty sight; and Genevieve stopped more than once just to look about her with a deep breath of delight. It was at such a time that she saw the small ragged boy, and the still smaller, still more ragged girl wistfully gazing into the fairyland of a toyshop

window.

"I choose the fire engine, the big red one," she heard a shrill voice pipe; and she looked down to see that it was the boy's blue lips that had uttered the words. [318]

"I d-druther have that d-doll," chattered the mite of a girl; "an' that teeny little bedstead an' the chair what rocks, an' the baby trunk, an' the doll with curly hair, an'—"

"Gee! look at the autymobile," cut in the boy, excitedly. "Say, if I had that—"

"Well, you shall have it, you poor little mite,—or one just like it," cried Genevieve impulsively, sweeping the astonished children into the circle of her arm, and hurrying them into the store.

They did not get the "autymobile" nor yet the engine nor the big doll. Genevieve selected them, to be sure, with blithe promptness; but when she took out her purse, she found she had not half money enough to pay for them, which mortified and disappointed her greatly.

"Dear, dear!" she laughed, blushing painfully. "I'm afraid I can't manage it, after all, chickabiddies. That horrid money of mine has given out! I bought more things than I meant to, anyhow. Never mind, we'll get all we can," she cried, emptying her little purse on the counter, even shaking it to make sure no lurking penny stayed behind. "There, you'll have to make that do," she said to the amazed clerk behind the counter. "Just please give them whatever you can for that." And the clerk, counting out one dollar and eighty-three cents, obeyed her literally.

A few minutes later, two dazed, but blissfully happy children clasping in their arms a motley [319] array of toys, and a laughing, bright-faced girl with a tan leather bag, joined the hurrying throng on the street.

"Good-by, chickabiddies, and good luck to you," called Genevieve, waving her hand in farewell to the children, as she spied her car in the distance.

"Poor little midgets!" thought Genevieve, as she stepped on to the car; "I don't think now they really believe they've got those things. But I do wish I could have bought all those first things they selected!" A moment later she took out her purse to pay her fare.

The conductor, coming toward her just then, saw her face turn red, then white. The next minute she was on her feet, hurrying toward him.

"Fare, please," he said mechanically, holding out his hand.

She shook her head.

"I—I don't want this car," she stammered faintly. "If you'll—stop, please." A moment later she rushed blindly through the door and down the steps to the street.

Genevieve was thoroughly angry, and very much ashamed.

"Now I reckon I've done it," she muttered half aloud. "No wonder they say I never stop to think! Seems to me I might have thought to save a nickel for my car-fare, though! Never mind, I'll walk it. Serves me right, anyhow, I reckon!" And determinedly she turned toward a woman near her and asked the way to the North Station. [320]

"IT WOULD BE SOMETHING OF A WALK, THE WOMAN SAID, AS SHE GAVE DIRECTIONS"

It would be something of a walk, the woman said, as she gave directions; but Genevieve declared she did not mind that. Very courageously, therefore, she turned a corner and began to thread her way among the crowd.

She was laughing now. This thing was something of a joke, after all. Still, she was rather sorry it had happened —on Miss Jane's errand. She would be late home, too. (She pulled aside the lapel of her coat and glanced at her watch.) Five o'clock, already! It would be late, indeed, if she could not catch the five-fifteen! Still, there must be other trains, of course, and it took only an hour and twenty minutes to go—

Genevieve stopped with a little cry of dismay. She remembered now that she had used the last of the commutation tickets. Miss Jane had told her to get a single-fare ticket for the return trip. And now—pray, how was one to buy any sort of fare without any money?

A hurrying man jostled her, and Genevieve stepped into a doorway to think. Across the street a blue-bell-sign caught her attention, and sent a swift light to her eye.

Why, of course! She would telephone for Aunt Julia to send Nancy or somebody in with some [321] money. Why had she not thought of it before?

She had pushed her way half across the crowded street when it occurred to her that she

needed money to pay the telephone toll.

"I never saw such a place! It takes money to do everything! I just hate cities," she stormed hotly—then jumped just in time to escape the wheels of a swiftly-moving automobile.

Safely back in the doorway, she tried to think once more. Then, slowly, she began to retrace her steps toward the corner from which she had started.

The crowds were just as gay, the Christmas reds and greens just as brilliant, and the tinsel stars and crystal pendants were just as sparkling; but Genevieve did not even look at them now. She was tired, ashamed, and thoroughly frightened. The bag, too, began to seem woefully full, and her stomach correspondingly empty.

Curiously enough, after a time, the Christmas service of the day before rang in her ears. It seemed so far away now. And yet—it was only yesterday that she had been promising herself never again to be thoughtless, heedless, or impulsively reckless of consequences. And now—

Suddenly she almost smiled. She was thinking of her question to Harold:

"If you do something bad to do something good, which is it, good or bad?" [322]

One by one the minutes passed. It grew darker and colder. At times Genevieve walked on aimlessly. At others, she stood one side, watching the crowds, hoping to find some man or woman whom she could dare to ask for money. But her cheeks burned at the thought, and she never saw the man or woman whom she wanted to ask—for money. That the blue-coated man at the street-crossing might help her, never occurred to Genevieve. Genevieve knew policemen only as vaguely dreadful creatures connected with jails and arrests.

In time it came to be quite dark. Genevieve wondered what would become of her—by midnight. People did not starve or die, she supposed, in Boston streets—not when the streets were as bright as these. But she *must* get to Sunbridge. *Sunbridge!* How worried they must be about her now in Sunbridge, and how she wished she were there! She would be glad to see even Miss Jane's severest frown—if she could see Miss Jane, too!

It was six o'clock when Genevieve suddenly remembered Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Butterfield. She wondered then how it was possible that she had forgotten them so long.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Butterfield were two friends of Mrs. Kennedy's not very far from sixty years old. They lived in a quaint old house on Mt. Vernon Street, on top of Beacon Hill—Genevieve thought she remembered the number. She remembered the house very well, for she [323] had called there twice with Mrs. Kennedy the winter before.

It was with a glad little cry that Genevieve now turned to the first woman she met and asked the way to Mt. Vernon Street.

In the somber Butterfield dining-room on Mt. Vernon Street, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Butterfield had almost finished dinner, when their pompous, plainly scandalized butler, standing beneath the severest of the severe Butterfield portraits, announced stiffly:

"There's a young person at the door, ma'am, with a bag. She says she knows you, if you'll see her, please."

One minute later, the astonished Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Butterfield caught in their arms a white-faced, almost fainting girl, who had sobbed out:

"Please, won't you give me a little money and some supper, and telephone to Aunt Julia!"

Seven minutes later Mr. Thomas Butterfield had Mrs. Kennedy at the other end of the wire.

CHAPTER XXIV [324]

A BROWN DRESS FOR ELSIE

Christmas, for Genevieve, was not a happy time that year; and when the day was over she tried to forget it as soon as possible.

She had stayed all night with the Butterfields—which had not been unalloyed joy; for, though they obviously tried to be kind to her, yet they could not help showing that they regarded her sudden appearance among them, dinnerless and moneyless, as most extraordinary, and certainly very upsetting to the equanimity of a well-ordered household.

In the morning she went back to Sunbridge. At the house she found Miss Chick ill. Her cold, and her fright over Genevieve, had sent her into a high fever; and Mrs. Kennedy was scarcely less ill herself.

Certainly it was not exactly a cheerful Christmas Day for the one whose heedlessness had brought it all about. But Genevieve mourned so bitterly, and blamed herself so strongly, that at last, out of sheer pity, Mrs. Kennedy, and even Miss Jane Chick, had to turn comforter; for—as Mrs. Kennedy reminded her sister—it was, after all, aside from her thoughtless lack of haste, only [325] Genevieve's unselfish forgetfulness of her own possible wants that led to the whole thing. Then, and not until then, did Genevieve bestow some attention upon her Christmas presents, of which there were a generous number.

Fortunately no one outside the house had known of Genevieve's nonappearance that Christmas Eve, so she was spared any curious questions and interested comments from others of the Happy Hexagons.

The short Christmas vacation sped rapidly. The young people spent much of it on the river, skating, when the ice was good. Genevieve, it is true, was not often seen there. Genevieve was playing nurse these days, and so devotedly attentive to Miss Jane Chick was she, that both the ladies had almost to scold her, in order to make her take needed exercise. Even Harold Day reproached her one morning, when he met her coming from the post-office.

"You don't let any of us see anything of you—not anything," he complained. "And you look as if you were doing penance, or something—you've got such a superior expression!"

Genevieve dimpled into a sudden laugh.

"Maybe I am," she retorted. "Maybe I did something bad so I could do something good; and now I'm trying to do enough good to take out all the taste of the bad." [326]

"Well, what do you mean by that, Miss Mystery?"

She would not tell him. She only shook her head saucily, and ran into the house.

By New Year's Day Miss Jane seemed almost like her old self, and Genevieve was specially happy, for on that night Harold Day gave the first dance of the season; and, with Miss Jane better, and her own heart lighter once more, she could give herself up to full enjoyment of the music, fun, and laughter.

All the Happy Hexagons were there, together with O. B. J. Holmes, Charlie Brown, and many other of the young people, including even Tilly Mack's big brother, Howard, who—though quite twenty-one—was a prime favorite with the Happy Hexagons.

Genevieve was wonderfully happy that evening. Never had the music sounded so entrancing; never had her own feet felt so light. With Harold she "opened the ball," as Tilly airily termed it; then Charlie and O. B. J. had their turn.

"Oh, Genevieve, you do look just too sweet for anything in that pale pink," panted Elsie, stopping at her side between dances.

"Not any sweeter than you do in that white," tossed back Genevieve, affectionately.

Elsie sighed.

"I love this white, too, but it's got kind of frazzled now. Aunt Kate says she is going to make [327] over Fannie's brown silk for Miss Sally's wedding," she went on, sighing again.

"I'm sure that will be nice," rejoined Genevieve, with hasty politeness.

"Y-yes," admitted Elsie; "only brown sounds kind of hot for April. Still, I suppose I ought not to mind. Just one girl wore it, anyhow, so it'll be faded even, and I sha'n't look like two folks in it," she finished wistfully, as Howard Mack came up to claim his dance with Genevieve.

It was three days after the party that there came a letter from Mr. Jones in reply to Mrs. Kennedy's Christmas note. It was a very grateful letter, but it was a disappointing one. It said that Mr. Jones did not see how he could let Quentina accept the kind invitation of Mrs. Kennedy and Genevieve. All the way through it, very plainly was shown the longing of a man who desires advantages for his daughter, and the pride of one who cannot bear that outsiders should give them to her.

Mrs. Kennedy saw this—and wrote another letter. In due time came the answer; and again Genevieve almost cried with disappointment. But Mrs. Kennedy smiled and comforted her.

"Yes, he says 'no,' I'll admit, Genevieve; but I don't think it's quite so strong a 'no' as it was before. One of these days I think I'll write Mr. Jones another letter, my dear—but not just now. [328] We'll let him think a little—of how good it would have been for Quentina if he'd said 'yes.'"

Genevieve gave Mrs. Kennedy a big hug.

"Aunt Julia, you're a dear, and a veritable Solomon for wisdom. I'm going to write at once to the President, too. Your place is in the diplomatic service, I'm sure," she finished, as she danced from the room.

As January passed and February came, a new subject came uppermost in the thoughts of the Hexagon Club. For the first time in years there was to be a prize contest in the Sunbridge High School. The principal, Mr. Jackson, was to give a five-dollar gold piece to the writer of the best essay, subject to be chosen by the author.

"Well, I sha'n't try for it," announced Tilly on a Saturday afternoon late in February, as the Hexagon Club were holding their regular meeting at the parsonage.

"Why not?" asked Elsie.

"Because I don't like defeat well enough," retorted Tilly. "Imagine *me* winning a prize contest!"

"Oh, I shall try," almost groaned Cordelia. "I shall always try for things, I suppose, till I die. I think I ought to; but of course I sha'n't win it. Dear me! How I would love to, though," she cried, almost under her breath.

Genevieve, looking at her momentarily illumined face, was conscious of a sudden fierce wish that Cordelia might win that prize. [329]

"Genevieve, of course, will try," she heard Tilly's teasing voice say, then. "Genevieve loves to write, so!"

Genevieve turned with a laugh, and an uptilted chin.

"I take it, Miss Mack, that your very complimentary remarks refer to my magazine notes; but just let me assure you that this prize essay is quite another matter. *That* isn't *printed!*"

"Then you *are* going to try?—of course you are," interposed Bertha.

Genevieve laughed lightly as she reached for a piece of fudge.

"I suppose so. I'm afraid everybody will expect me to. Aunt Julia has already expressed her opinion of the matter."

February passed, and March came. A new topic of conversation now arose, specially of interest to the Hexagon Club. Miss Sally was to be married early in April, and the Happy Hexagons were to be bridesmaids. Naturally, even the new prize contest had to step one side for that month, in the minds of the six joyously excited girls.

It was on a particularly windy Saturday toward the end of the month, that Cordelia literally blew up to the Kennedys' front door and rang the bell. [330]

Genevieve herself, passing through the hall, opened the door.

"Br-r-r!" she laughed, as she banged the door shut after admitting the whirling draperies from which Cordelia's anxious little face finally emerged. "Why, Cordelia!"

"Yes, I know; I'm going to be at the club this afternoon, of course," panted Cordelia; "but this is for something I wanted to say to you—and I knew there wouldn't be a chance this afternoon. It—it's private, Genevieve."

"Good! I love secrets. Come into the sitting room. There's no one there this morning. Now, what is it?" she demanded, as soon as Cordelia's coat was off, and they were comfortably seated.

"It—I suppose you might call it missionary work, Genevieve," smiled Cordelia, wistfully.

"*More* missionary work? Who in the world wants to go to Texas now?" laughed Genevieve.

"Nobody. It isn't Texas at all. It's—Elsie."

"Elsie!"

"Yes. Of course, dear, I don't know as you can do anything; but you've done so many things, and I'm sure if you could, it *would* be missionary work of the very nicest kind."

"What *are* you talking about?"

Cordelia drew a long sigh.

"I'll tell you. You know the rest of us bridesmaids are all going to wear white, but—but Elsie's got to wear Fannie's brown silk." [331]

"I know," nodded Genevieve. "Elsie told me."

"But, Genevieve, just think—brown silk for a bridesmaid at a wedding, when all the rest of us wear white! Besides, Elsie says brown is so hot-looking for April. She feels awfully about it."

"Can't she do something? I should think she'd tell her aunt."

"She has. But her aunt doesn't seem to understand. She says that the brown silk is whole and good, and far too valuable to throw away; and that it's all just Elsie's notion that she'd rather wear white."

"Oh, but if she'd only understand!"

"But that's just it—she doesn't understand. And it isn't as if they were poor," argued Cordelia, earnestly. "Now auntie has to make over things, of course, for me and for Edith and Rachel, and we expect it, and don't mind. We're all glad to be economical and help out, for we know it's

necessary. But it's different with Elsie. She *says* she wouldn't mind so, if they were poor and had to. But the Gales are real well off—Fannie and the twins have lots of new clothes. Poor Elsie says sometimes it seems as if her aunt actually bought things for them, so she *could* make them over for her. Elsie says she's never so happy as when she's doing it, and that she makes a regular game of it—cutting them out and putting them together—like picture puzzles, you know." [332]

Genevieve laughed, though she frowned, too.

"But what can I do?" she demanded. "I tried, once, to—to lend Elsie a dress; but she was horrified."

"Mercy! Of course she was," shuddered Cordelia. "I don't know *what* Mrs. Gale would do if she knew that! They're fearfully—er—er—proud, I suppose you call it," hesitated the conscientious Cordelia.

"But what *can* I do?"

"I don't know; but don't you suppose you could—could say something, somehow, to Mrs. Gale that—that would make her understand?"

"Why, Cordelia Wilson, of course I couldn't," gasped Genevieve, indignantly. "A pretty picture I'd make going to Mrs. Gale and saying: 'Madam, why don't you give your niece a new dress when you know she wants one?'"

"N-no, I suppose you couldn't do that, of course," sighed the other. "Very likely you couldn't do anything, anyway. It's only that I thought—well, I knew you were going home with Elsie after school Monday night to study; and I didn't know but you'd get a chance to say something. But I suppose, after all, there won't be anything you could say."

"No, I suppose there won't," echoed Genevieve, still plainly appalled at the task Cordelia had set for her. [333]

"Well, it's only that I was so sorry for Elsie," sighed Cordelia, as she rose to go.

"Of course! I reckon we're all sorry for Elsie," sighed Genevieve in her turn.

And she was sorry. All the rest of the morning she kept thinking how very sorry she was; and when afternoon came, and when she saw Elsie's lips quiver and her eyes fill with tears, as the others happily discussed whether they would wear colored sashes or white belts with their white dresses, Genevieve's heart quite overflowed with sympathy for Elsie. And she wondered if, after all, it were possible to make Elsie's aunt—understand. Determinedly, then, she declared to herself that, regardless of consequences, she would try—if she had the opportunity.

Genevieve's opportunity came very soon after she arrived at Elsie's home Monday afternoon. Even Genevieve herself had to admit that she could not have had a better one. But so frightened was she that she wished—for a moment—that there were none. Then before her rose a vision of Elsie's tear-dimmed eyes and quivering lips—and with a quick-drawn breath Genevieve rose and followed Mrs. Gale to the sewing-room.

"Come with me," Mrs. Gale had said to Genevieve—Genevieve had picked up a scrap of brown silk from the floor. "That's a piece of the dress I'm making for Elsie to wear to the wedding. The silly child has got a notion she wants white, but you'll think this is pretty, I'm sure." And it was then that Genevieve knew her opportunity had come. [334]

In the sewing-room Mrs. Gale proudly spread the silk dress over a chair-back.

"There! What do you think of that?" she demanded.

Genevieve's heart beat so loudly she thought Mrs. Gale must hear it.

"It—it's very pretty, isn't it?" she stammered, wetting her dry lips and wondering what good it did to say that.

"Pretty? Of course it is. It's silk, and a fine piece—I thought when I got it how splendidly it would make over. I'm sure any girl ought to be proud to wear it!"

Genevieve caught her breath sharply. "Proud"—Mrs. Gale had said "proud"; and Cordelia had said, that morning, that Mrs. Gale herself was very proud, and that she would be very angry if she knew that Genevieve had offered Elsie a dress to wear. In a flash of inspiration, then, came a wild plan to Genevieve's mind. If only she had the audacity to carry it out!

She wet her lips again, and took desperate hold of her courage. Even as she did so, she almost smiled—she was thinking: was this another case when she was doing something bad to do something good? Never mind; she must go through with it now. She *must!* [335]

"Yes, it is a very pretty dress, indeed," she stammered; "and it was Fannie's, too, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Gale beamed.

"Yes!—and didn't I get it out finely? You know sleeves are smaller, so that helped, and the breadths were so full last year! I think I never got a dress out better," she finished proudly.

Genevieve touched the folds lightly.

"And this isn't faded at all, is it?" she murmured pleasantly.

"What?" Mrs. Gale's voice was a little sharp.

Genevieve wet her lips twice this time before she could speak.

"I say, isn't it nice that this one isn't faded? You know Elsie had such a time with that chambray last summer!"

"What do you mean, please?" There was no doubt now about the sharpness in Mrs. Gale's voice.

Genevieve managed a laugh—but it was not a very mirthful one.

"Why, 'twas so funny, you know; it was made from the twins' dresses, and they weren't faded alike. It was just as Elsie said—she didn't know whether to turn Cora or Clara toward folks. It *was* [336] funny; only, of course it did plague poor Elsie awfully, and I felt so sorry for her."

"You felt sorry—*sorry* for *my niece?*" The voice was so very angry this time that Genevieve trembled. She was sure now that it was bad—this thing she was doing—that good might come. But she kept bravely on.

"Why, yes, of course; all of us girls were sorry for her. You know Elsie does so love new dresses, and of course she doesn't have them very often. Last summer, when she was feeling so bad over her chambray, I—I offered her one of mine, but—"

"You—you offered my niece one of *your* dresses?" gasped Mrs. Gale.

"Yes, but she wouldn't take it; and, of course, *that* wasn't *new*, either," finished Genevieve, with what she hoped would pass for a light laugh as she turned away.

Behind her, for a moment, there was an ominous silence. Then a very quiet voice said:

"Thank you; but I hardly think my niece needs one of your dresses—yet, Miss Genevieve."

Genevieve fled then, ashamed, and very near to crying.

"I wouldn't have said it, of course," she whispered to herself as she stumbled back to the sitting-room; "I wouldn't have said it if the Gales had been poor and *couldn't* have given Elsie new things to wear once in a while!" [337]

In the Chronicles of the Hexagon Club a fortnight later, it was Elsie Martin who wrote the account of Miss Sally's wedding. She wrote as follows:

"I had a beautiful white dress for Miss Sally's wedding—a brand-new one. All of us girls wore white and looked so pretty—I mean, the rest looked pretty, of course. Miss Sally was married the tenth of April. It was quite a warm day, and I was so glad I did not have to wear my brown silk. Aunt Kate says I needn't wear it anywhere if I don't want to—and after all her work, too! I don't know what has got into Aunt Kate, anyway, lately. She doesn't seem half so interested in making over things, and I have three other brand-new dresses, a pink-sprigged muslin, and—but, dear me! This isn't telling about Miss Sally's wedding one bit.

"She was married at four o'clock, and looked too sweet for anything in light gray silk with a pink carnation in her hair. Everybody went, and wore their best things and looked very nice. We had sandwiches and chicken salad and olives and three kinds of cake and ice cream for refreshments. The ice cream was the brick kind, different colors, like lovely striped ribbon.

"At six o'clock they started for Boston to begin their journey West, and we all stood on the steps and gave them a lovely send-off with rice and old shoes. Just at the last minute Tilly says, [338] 'Let's give her our Texas yell, and end with "Miss Sally,"' and we did. And everybody laughed and clapped. But not until the carriage drove off did we suddenly remember that she wasn't 'Miss Sally' at all any more, and we felt ashamed.

"And that's all—except that Miss Sally's going-away gown was gray, too."

CHAPTER XXV [339]

"WHEN SUNBRIDGE WENT TO TEXAS"

By the first of May many of the papers for the new prize contest had been turned in. Genevieve's, however, had not. Genevieve was working very hard on her essay now. For some time she had not found a subject that suited her. Good subjects were not very plentiful, she decided. At last she had thought of the Texas trip, and had wondered if she could not compare Sunbridge with Texas. Aunt Julia and Miss Jane had thought decidedly that she could. So for some days now, she had been hard at work upon the paper, and was getting enthusiastically interested.

All papers must be in by the sixteenth. It was on the tenth that Cordelia, during a recess meeting of the Hexagon Club, drew a long breath and turned upon her fellow members a

beaming countenance.

"Girls, I can't keep it a minute longer. I've got to tell you!"

"Tell us what?" asked Tilly. "It must be something pretty fine to bring that look to your face!" [340]

Cordelia laughed and blushed; but she sighed, too.

"Oh, it isn't 'fine,' Tilly, at all. I wish it were, though—but really, I do think it's the best thing I ever did, anyway."

"What are you talking about, Cordelia Wilson?" demanded Genevieve.

"Mercy! It must be pretty good if it's the *best* thing Cordelia ever did," teased Bertha.

"Girls, stop," begged Cordelia, in real distress. "I—I hate to tell you now; it sounds so foolish. It's only—my prize paper. It's all done. I'm going to hand it in Monday, and—and I was so pleased with the subject!"

"Oh, Cordelia, what is it? You know what mine is," cried Elsie.

"It's—'When Sunbridge went to Texas,'" announced Cordelia, breathlessly.

"When—what?" cried Genevieve, almost sharply.

Cordelia turned a happy face.

"I knew *you'd* like it, Genevieve," she nodded. "It's our trip, you know. I've told all about it—comparing things here to things there, you see."

"Why—but, Cordelia, that's—" Genevieve paused abruptly. The pause in her sentence was not noticed. The girls were all talking now, begging Cordelia to tell them if they were "in it."

"When—when did you choose your subject, Cordelia?" asked Genevieve, very quietly, when she could be heard. [341]

"Not until the first of May. I just couldn't seem to get anything. Then this came all of a sudden, and—and it just seemed to write itself, it was done so quickly. You see I didn't have to look up this subject."

Genevieve's face cleared. It was all right, after all. *She* had selected the subject a whole week before Cordelia—and of course Cordelia would understand.

"Oh, but Cordelia, that isn't quite fair," she began impulsively; but for once Cordelia forgot her politeness and interrupted.

"Don't you worry, Genevieve," she laughed gayly. "I've said lovely things of Texas. You'd know I'd do that, Genevieve, even if I do love Sunbridge. I did worry at first for fear somebody else had taken the same subject—some of you girls—you know we can't have two about the same thing."

"But—" The bell rang for the close of recess, and again one of Genevieve's sentences remained unfinished.

Genevieve did not stop even to speak to any of the girls after school that day. She went home at once. Even Harold Day, who overtook her, found her so absorbed in her own thoughts that she was anything but her usual talkative self. [342]

Once in the house, Genevieve went straight to Mrs. Kennedy.

"Aunt Julia, if you get a prize subject first, it's yours, isn't it?" she asked tremulously.

"Why, y-yes, dear; I should think so."

"Well, Aunt Julia, something perfectly awful has happened. Cordelia has got my subject."

"Oh, Genevieve, I'm so sorry!" Mrs. Kennedy's face showed more than ordinary distress—Mrs. Kennedy had had high hopes of this prize paper. "Why, how did it happen?"

"I don't know. I suppose it was just in the air. But *I* got it first. She says she didn't think of it till May first. So of course it's—it's mine, Aunt Julia."

Mrs. Kennedy looked very grave.

"I think the rules of the contest would give it to you, Genevieve," she said.

The girl stirred restlessly.

"Of course I'm awfully sorry. She—she was going to hand it in Monday."

"Oh, that is too bad!"

There was a long silence.

"I suppose I—I'll have to tell her," murmured Genevieve, at last. "The club have a ride to-morrow. There'll be time—then."

"Yes—if you decide to do it."

Genevieve turned quickly.

"But, Aunt Julia, I'll have to," she cried. "Just think of all my work! Mine's all done but copying, you know. And I *was* the first to get it. There's no time to get another now." [343]

"No, there's no time to get another—now." Aunt Julia looked even more sorrowful than Genevieve just then—Aunt Julia *had* wanted Genevieve to take that prize.

"I'm sure that Cordelia—when she knows—" Genevieve did not finish her sentence.

"No, indeed! Of course, if Cordelia should know—" Aunt Julia did not finish *her* sentence.

"But, Aunt Julia, she'll have to know," almost sobbed Genevieve.

There was a long silence. Genevieve's eyes were out the window. Mrs. Kennedy, watching her, suddenly spoke up with careless briskness:

"Of course you'll tell Cordelia that 'twas *your* subject, that *you* got it first, and that *you* want it. Very likely she won't care much, anyway."

"Why, Aunt Julia, she will! If you could have seen her face when she talked of it—" Genevieve stopped abruptly. Genevieve *did* suddenly see Cordelia's face as it had been that afternoon, all aglow with happiness. She heard her eager voice say, too: "I think it's the best thing I ever did!"

"Oh, well, but maybe she doesn't care for the prize," observed Mrs. Kennedy, still carelessly.

"But, Aunt Julia, she does; she—" Again Genevieve stopped abruptly. She was remembering now how Cordelia's face had looked that February afternoon at the parsonage when she had said: "Of course I sha'n't win it—dear me, how I would love to, though!" [344]

"But she'll understand, of course, when you tell her it's *your* subject and that *you* want it," went on Mrs. Kennedy, smoothly. Genevieve did not see the keen, almost fearful glances, that Mrs. Kennedy was giving her between the light words.

"I know; but that sounds so—so—" There was a long pause; then Genevieve, with a quivering sigh, rose slowly and left the room.

Mrs. Kennedy, for some unapparent reason, smiled—but there were tears in her eyes.

The Hexagon Club took a long ride the next day. Five of them talked again of Cordelia's paper, and four begged Cordelia to tell what she had said about them. If Genevieve, alone, was unusually silent, nobody, apparently, noticed it. They were riding by themselves to-day. They had invited none of the boys or other girls to join them.

It was when the ride was over, and when Genevieve had almost reached the Kennedy driveway, that she said wistfully, stroking the mare's neck:

"Topsy, I just couldn't. I just couldn't! It sounded so—so—And, Topsy, *you* couldn't, if you'd seen how awfully happy she looked!"

"What did Cordelia say?" asked Mrs. Kennedy, when Genevieve came into the house a little later. There was no hint in the lady's voice of the hope that was in her heart. [345]

"I—I didn't tell her, Aunt Julia," stammered Genevieve. Then, with a playful whimsicality that did not in the least deceive Aunt Julia's ears, she added: "Who wants that old prize, anyhow?"

It was a beautiful smile, then, that illumined Aunt Julia's face, and it was a very tender kiss that fell on Genevieve's forehead.

"That's my brave Genevieve—and I'm sure you'll never regret it, my dear!" she said.

May passed, and June came, bringing warm, sunny days that were very tempting to feet that were longing to be tramping through green woods and fields. Examinations, however, were coming soon, and Genevieve knew that, tempting as was the beautiful out-of-doors, studies must come first. Every possible minute, however, she spent in rides, walks, and tennis playing—even Miss Jane insisted that she must have exercise.

June brought not only alluring days, however, but a letter from Quentina, which sent Genevieve flying into Mrs. Kennedy's room.

"Aunt Julia, did you write again to Mr. Jones?"

"I did," smiled Mrs. Kennedy, "and I have a letter from him to-day."

"You darling! Then you know, of course! Oh, Aunt Julia, isn't it lovely! I just can't wait till to-morrow to tell the girls." [346]

Genevieve did wait, however—she waited even till the morning recess. She wanted all the Happy Hexagons together; and when she had them together she told them the astounding news in one breathless rush of words.

"Girls, Quentina's coming next year to school. She's going to room with me. Isn't it lovely!"

There was a chorus of delighted questions and exclamations; but Genevieve lifted her hand.

"Sh-h! Listen. I've got her letter here. You must hear it!" and she whipped open the letter and began to read:

"Oh—oh—It isn't true—it can't be true! But father says it is, and father doesn't lie. I'm to go to Sunbridge. Sunbridge! I think Sunbridge is the loveliest name in the world—for a town, I mean, of course.

"Dear Genevieve:—There! this is actually the first minute I could bring myself to begin this letter properly. Really, a thing like this can't just begin, you know! And to think that I'm going to see Paul Revere's grave and Bunker Hill and you just next September! Oh, how can I ever thank you and dear Mrs. Kennedy? I love her, love her, love her—right now! And all the Happy Hexagons—I love them, too. I love [347]
everybody and everything—I'm going to Sunbridge!

"All day I've been saying over and over to myself that song in the 'Lady of the Lake,' only I've changed the words a little to fit my case; like this:

"'Quentina, rest! thy longing o'er,
Sleep the sleep that knows no breaking;
Dream of Texas schools no more,
Days of longing, nights of sighing
For Paul Revere's enchanted land.
Hands unseen thy days are planning,
Fairy strains of music falling
Every sense is up and calling,
Quentina, rest! thy longing o'er,
East thy steps will turn once more.'

"That 'more' is poetry, but a fib; for of course I haven't been East at all yet. But that's just poetic license, you know—fibs like that.

"Oh, I just can't wait for September!

"Your happy, happy
"Quentina."

"My, but won't she be a picnic when she gets here?" chuckled Tilly, as soon as she could stop laughing long enough to find her voice.

"What in the world is the matter with you girls?" demanded Charlie Brown, sauntering up to them, arm in arm with O. B. J. Holmes. [348]

Tilly turned merrily.

"Matter! I guess you'll think something is the matter when Quentina Jones gets here," she laughed.

"Who is Quentina Jones?"

"She is a new girl who is coming to school next year," explained Elsie.

"She's from Texas, and she's never been East before," chimed in Bertha.

"Yes, and as for you, Mr. Obejay Holmes," teased Tilly, "just you wait! There's no telling what she will do with your name!"

"What do you mean?"

O. B. J. spoke to Tilly, but he threw a merry glance into Genevieve's understanding eyes.

"Nothing, only she's a regular walking rhyming dictionary, and I can just fancy how those mysterious initials of yours will fire her up. My poor little 'O Be Joyful' won't be in it, then. You'll see!"

"I don't worry any," laughed O. B. J. Holmes, with another merry glance at Genevieve.

"You don't have to," interposed Genevieve, promptly. "Quentina is everything that is sweet and lovely, and you'll all like her; I know you will," she finished, as the bell rang and the boys turned laughingly away.

CHAPTER XXVI [349]

A GOOD-BY PARTY

The June days sped so rapidly that Genevieve wondered where they went, sometimes. School was to close the twenty-third. Mr. Hartley was to arrive on the twentieth. Meanwhile examinations and the prize contest were uppermost in every one's thoughts. Graduation

exercises were to come in the evening. The winner of the prize was to be announced at that time, also.

"And really, you know, the announcement of the prize-winner is all we care about specially," Elsie said one day, in the presence of a group of her friends on the schoolhouse steps.

"Just you wait till you graduate," laughed back Bertha's brother, Charlie, "and then I guess the *evening* exercises will be of some consequence."

"Of course—but that won't be till two years from now," cried Genevieve.

"Then you girls will be thinking more of frills and furbelows than you will of prizes," laughed Harold Day.

"I've got a new white dress for Graduation night," said Elsie in a low voice to Genevieve, "and I don't believe I could have a prettier one, even then." [350]

"Another new white dress?" demanded Tilly, who had heard the aside. "Why, Elsie Martin, you had one for Miss Sally's wedding!"

Elsie laughed happily.

"I know—but this is a muslin. Aunt Kate seemed to want me to have it—and of course I'd love to have it, myself!"

Genevieve, for some reason, looked suddenly very happy, so much so that Harold, watching her, said quietly a minute later:

"Well, young lady, what's gone specially right with your world to-day?"

Genevieve laughed and blushed. She shook her head roguishly. Then suddenly she rejoined:

"I reckon one of my awfully bad things has turned out all good—that's all!"

True to his word, Mr. Hartley came on the twentieth. He was to be Mrs. Kennedy's guest until the start for Texas after school had closed.

"My, dearie! how fine and tall we are growing," he greeted his daughter affectionately. "Looks like Mr. Tim and the boys won't know you, I'm thinking!"

"Nonsense! Of course they will—and I can't hardly wait to see them, either," cried Genevieve. [351]

It is doubtful if, on Graduation night, Cordelia Wilson herself listened to the announcement of the prize-winner any more anxiously than did Genevieve. It seemed as if she could not bear it—after what had happened—if Cordelia did not get the prize. And Cordelia got it.

"'When Sunbridge went to Texas,'" read Mr. Jackson, "Cordelia Wilson." And it was Genevieve who clapped the loudest.

Cordelia, certainly, was beatifically happy. And when Genevieve saw her amazed, but joyously happy face, she wondered why she should suddenly want to cry—for, surely, she had never felt happier in her life.

Graduation day, for the Happy Hexagons, was not, after all, quite the last meeting together; for Mrs. Kennedy gave Genevieve a porch party the night before she was to start back to Texas with Mr. Hartley.

A very merry crowd of boys and girls it was that sang college songs and told stories that night on the Kennedys' roomy, electric-lighted veranda.

"It seems just as if I couldn't have you go away," sighed Cordelia, at last, to Genevieve.

"But I'm coming back next year."

"Mercy! We couldn't stand it if you weren't," cried Tilly.

"And just think—last year we all went back with you," murmured Elsie. [352]

"I wish you were going this year," declared Genevieve.

"I guess you aren't the only one that wishes that," cut in several longing voices.

"Well, we'll take you all now—if you'll go," retorted Genevieve, merrily.

"*All*—did you say?" challenged Harold Day.

"Yes, all," nodded Genevieve, emphatically. "We'd be glad to have you, every one of you."

"Well, I begin to think you would—now that I've seen Texas," sighed Tilly. "But I suppose we shall have to content ourselves till you come back this time."

"And this wonderful little rhyming dictionary, as Miss Tilly calls her—does she come back with you?" asked O. B. J. Holmes.

"Maybe. She comes next fall, anyway, before school begins," smiled Genevieve.

"Well, what I want to know is, if you are going to do any more Texas missionary work," suggested Charlie Brown.

"Pooh! She doesn't do that there—she does that here," cut in Tilly.

"There isn't any more to do, anyway," declared the exact Cordelia, happily. "She's got everything fixed even down to Elsie's—" She stopped just in time, but already Genevieve had interposed hurriedly:

"Oh, but it wasn't I that did anything. It was Cordelia. She found them to begin with, you know —Reddy, and Hermit Joe's son." [353]

Mrs. Kennedy and Miss Jane, together with Nancy appeared just then with great plates of ice cream and delicious cake; and after that, all too soon, came the time for good-nights. The good-nights were not quite finished, however, until at the foot of the walk, five members of the Hexagon Club turned, and all together gave their Texas yell with a lusty "Genevieve" at the end that brought the tears to the real Genevieve's eyes.

"Texas, Texas, Tex—Tex—Texas!
Texas, Texas, Rah! Rah! Rah!
GENEVIEVE!"

"Mercy! What will the neighbors say—at this time of night!" protested Miss Jane Chick, feebly; but her eyes, too, were moist.

THE END.

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