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The little Blossoms were enthralled by the antics of the clever beasts and performers. (Page 119).

FOUR LITTLE BLOSSOMS AT OAK HILL SCHOOL

BY
MABEL C. HAWLEY

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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE THAT BOBBY BUILT

“Let’s make a bay window for the front,” suggested Bobby, dragging up a rocking-chair and tumbling his younger brother, Twaddles, out of the way.

“How do you make a bay window?” demanded Twaddles, whom no amount of pushing out of the way could subdue for long; he simply came in again.

“This way,” said Bobby.

He tipped the rocking-chair over on its side and turned the curved back so that it fenced in a space between two straight chairs. Looking through the carved rounds, if you had a very good imagination, it really did seem something like a bay window.

“Now, see?” said Bobby, proud as an architect should be.

“But every house has a chimney,” protested Twaddles. “Where’s the chimney?”

Before Bobby could possibly invent a chimney, Meg and Dot, the two boys’ sisters, came into the room, each carrying a doll.

“Wait till Norah sees you!” announced Meg severely. “My goodness, piling up the furniture like this! Mother will scold if you scratch that rocking-chair.”

“What you making?” asked Dot, her dark eyes beginning to dance. “Let me help, Bobby?”

Bobby sat down gloomily on the edge of the rocking-chair.

“I was building a house,” he answered. “Mother said we could ’muse ourselves quietly in the house. This is quiet, isn’t it? What’s the use of having furniture if a fellow can’t make something with it?”

“Well, I s’pose if you put it all back before supper, it’s all right,” admitted Meg, rather dubiously. “Only you know sometimes you do scratch things, Bobby.”

Bobby waived this aside. He had other, more important thoughts.

“I was just going to fix the chimney,” he explained. “See, this is the door, Meg, an’ over here’s the bay window. But we have to have people. People always live in houses. Don’t you want to put Geraldine and what’s-her-name in ’fore I put the chimney on?”

Dot, who was the doll Geraldine’s mother, clutched her closely, while Meg quickly picked up her doll from the couch where she had laid her.

“There won’t anything hurt ’em,” protested Bobby earnestly. “Go on, put ’em in––please, Meg.”

Meg seldom could resist anything Bobby asked of her, and Dot was always ready to follow her older sister’s lead. So Geraldine and Mary Maud were placed inside the tower of chairs and stools and rugs that Bobby and Twaddles called their house, and the architect set himself to work to construct the chimney.

The children who were so busily employed in the pleasant living-room this rainy September afternoon were known to all their friends as “the four little Blossoms.”

There was a Father Blossom and a Mother Blossom, of course, and when you were introduced to the children separately––though the four were usually to be found, as Norah, the good-natured maid, said, “right in a bunch”––you met Robert Hayward Blossom, always known as Bobby, seven years old and as devoted a brother to six-year-old Margaret Alice as you would ever find. Margaret was much better known as Meg.

Then came the twins, Dot and Twaddles. And a pair they were, into everything and remarkable for the ease with which they managed to get out of scrapes for which they were generally responsible. The twins were four years old, dark-haired and dark-eyed, while Bobby and Meg had blue eyes and yellow hair.

The Blossoms lived in the pretty town of Oak Hill, and they knew nearly every one. Indeed the children had never been away from Oak Hill till the visit they had made to their Aunt Polly, about which you may have read in the book called “Four Little Blossoms at Brookside Farm.” They had spent the summer with Aunt Polly, and had made many new friends and learned a great deal about animals. Meg, especially, loved all dumb creatures. And now that you are acquainted with the four little Blossoms, we must get back to that chimney.

“The umbrella rack will do,” suggested Twaddles suddenly.

He ran out into the hall and dragged the rack in.

“That’s fine,” said Bobby enthusiastically. “Come on, Twaddles, help me lift it up.”

Strangers always thought that Twaddles was such an odd name. Perhaps it was; and certainly no one knew how the small boy had acquired it. “Twaddles” he was though, and he himself almost forgot that he had a “real” name, which was Arthur Gifford. His twin was never called Dorothy, either, but always “Dot.” Dorothy Anna Blossom was the whole of Dot’s name.

Twaddles now heaved and tugged, trying to help Bobby lift the heavy umbrella rack. He was elated that he had thought of it, and not for worlds would he have admitted that it was exceedingly heavy to lift.

“There!” said Bobby, when they had it finally in place. “How’s that for a house?”

“It’s perfectly–––” Meg began.

She meant to say “perfectly wonderful,” but just then Twaddles jumped down to the floor from the pile. In doing this he jarred the wonderful structure, and with a crash that could be heard all over the house, umbrella rack, stools, chairs and rugs slithered together in a complete wreck.

“Geraldine!” shrieked Dot. “She’ll be smashed and killed!”

“For the love of mercy, what are ye doing now?” The long-suffering but not always patient Norah stood in the doorway. “Bobby, what are ye up to the minute your mother turns her back? Is Dot hurt? What’s she crying for?”

Norah always asked a great many questions, and it was of no use, as the children had learned from experience, to try to answer her till she had had her say.

“What are ye trying to do?” asked Norah again. “’Tis fine and peaceful the summer has been with ye all at Brookside. And now the minute you’re home again, the house must be torn down about our ears.”

“We were building a house, Norah,” explained Bobby. “We’re going to put everything back when we’re through. Oh, hush, Dot, Geraldine isn’t hurt.”

To prove it, Bobby crawled in under the wreckage and dragged out the smiling Geraldine apparently uninjured. But as Dot took the doll in her arms a dreadful thing happened.

Geraldine’s head tumbled off!

The four little Blossoms gasped with horror, and even Norah was startled. Then, as Dot’s mouth opened for a loud wail, Meg came to the relief of every one.

“Daddy can mend it, Dot,” she urged earnestly. “See, it is cracked right across and there aren’t any chips out. ’Member how he mended Mother’s china cup and she can wash it in hot water and everything? Can’t she, Norah?”

“Sure then, she can,” said Norah heartily. “Don’t go crying now, Dot; the doll can be mended as fine as ever. Put up the furniture like good children, do. Your mother will be coming home any minute.”

Poor little Dot tried to stop crying, and the four youngsters rather solemnly set about the task of leaving things as they had found them, which, as you know yourself, isn’t half as much fun as getting them out to play with. However, everything was in its place before Mother Blossom came home, and after supper that night Father Blossom put some of his wonderful cement on Geraldine’s neck, and over night her head, as Dot said, “grew on beautifully and tight.”

“I wish we had a cat,” said Meg the next morning, as she and Bobby went out to the garage to carry their dog’s breakfast to him.

Meg had made the same wish nearly every morning for the last year.

“Well, we have a dog,” Bobby pointed out reasonably. “And you know Norah can’t bear cats.”

Philip, the dog, came leaping to meet them, and he was followed by Sam Layton, the man who ran the automobile for the Blossoms and cut the lawn and did all the hundred and one useful jobs that are always waiting to be done.

“Why, Sam!” Meg’s voice rose in a surprised cry. “Why, Sam, what a perfectly lovely cat! Whose is it, and where did it come from? Let me hold her.”

Sam put the soft bundle of gray fur into Meg’s arms, and Philip sat down on the grass and tried to look patient. He foresaw that he would have to wait for his breakfast.

“She’s your cat,” Sam announced. “Leastways, I told Norah when you got home you were to have her. Her name is Annabel Lee.”

“Annabel Lee!” repeated the astonished Meg. “Did you name her, Sam?”

“I certainly did,” answered Sam proudly. “Your father read me one of your letters where you said your Aunt Polly’s cat was named ‘Poots’; and I said then and there our cat was going to have a poetry name. And she’s got it.”

“It’s a very nice name,” said Bobby. “But does Norah know we have a cat?”

Whenever the four little Blossoms had teased for a cat, Norah had always flatly declared she wouldn’t have one within a mile of her kitchen; and the children knew that a cat that was never allowed in a kitchen could not expect to be happy. So they had managed to get along without such a pet.

“This cat,” announced Sam mysteriously, “was sent for by Norah. She wants it. In fact, she as much as said she wouldn’t stay if your father didn’t get a cat.”

CHAPTER II

SCHOOL SUPPLIES

“Norah wanted a cat!” repeated Meg unbelievingly. “But why? I thought she hated cats, Sam.”

“Mice,” said Sam. “Traps no good. But Annabel Lee is clearing ’em out, all right. She’s a fine mouser. And the prettiest manners! You put the dish down and watch her and Fill-Up eat together.”

Meg found it rather trying that Sam would insist on calling the dog she had named Philip by such an impolite title, but Sam always had his way about such things. Meg put down the dish with Philip’s breakfast in it, and he and the cat ate together as though they had been friends all their lives.

“Meg, Meg!” called Dot, running toward them. “Miss Florence is here, and Mother says you must come in right away and try on. Oh, whose cat?”

“That’s Annabel Lee,” said Meg. “She’s our cat. Sam got her ’cause mice were in the kitchen. I’m going to take her in and show her to Miss Florence.”

“Let me hold her,” begged Dot. “You have to try on. Look, Twaddles, bet you didn’t know we had a cat.”

Twaddles stopped short on his kiddie-car.

“Don’t tell Norah,” he whispered cautiously. “Take her in the front door and she won’t know. Did Mother say we could have a cat?”

Bobby laughed.

“Norah asked for a cat,” he said. “Come on, Twaddles, let’s teach Philip to jump through a hoop. The girls are going to fuss with clothes.”

Meg tossed her yellow hair out of her eyes importantly.

“I have to have the hems of some dresses let down,” she declared. “I grew in the country. Mother says so. ’Sides when you go to school you have to be neat.”

“Nina Mills isn’t neat,” argued Dot, toiling upstairs after Meg, and holding Annabel Lee’s long tail so that she might feel she was having a share in carrying her. “She goes to school, Meg.”

“Well, she’s a sight,” pronounced Meg. “Mother wouldn’t let me look the way Nina Mills does. Look, Miss Florence, we got a cat.”

“If you say ‘got a cat’ in school, Meg, I’m sure something will happen to you,” warned Mother Blossom, bending over the sewing machine. “Miss Florence wants to try the green dress on you, dear.”

Miss Florence Davis was the little dressmaker who went about making clothes for many of the people who lived in Oak Hill. Every one liked her, and she was always as happy as busy folk usually are.

“What a beautiful cat,” she said, stroking Annabel Lee’s fur. “Now I’m sure you’re contented, Meg, with a cat and a dog. Aren’t you?”

“And she’s going to school, too,” announced Dot enviously, sitting down on the floor to watch Meg as she put on the new green dress. “Here, Annabel, come sit in my lap.”

The cat curled up in Dot’s lap and purred loudly.

“Do you want to go to school?” asked Miss Florence sympathetically, taking a mouthful of pins and kneeling down to pin up the hem of Meg’s frock.

“Twaddles and I both want to go,” answered Dot. “But that mean old school won’t let you come till you’re five––not even to kindergarten. Did you swallow any?”

“Any what?” asked Miss Florence absently, still pinning the hem.

“Pins,” said Dot interestedly. “I counted three I thought you did. Will they hurt?”

Meg looked down at Miss Florence anxiously.

“Bless your heart, I didn’t swallow any pins!” declared the little dressmaker, smiling. “It’s a bad trick, though, and I always mean to break myself of it. There, Dot, I’ve taken every one out of my mouth. And now walk over by the door, Meg, and let your mother see if that is the right length.”

“Turn ’round slowly,” ordered Dot, as Meg reached the door. Dot had watched a great many dresses being fitted and she knew exactly what one should do.

Meg laughed, and began to revolve slowly.

“I think that is a very good length,” said Mother Blossom. “We shan’t need her again till after lunch, shall we, Miss Florence? I want her to go uptown and get some elastic for her hat.”

“And the school things, Mother?” urged Meg. “Can Bobby and I buy our school things this morning?”

“Do you know what you want?” asked Mother Blossom. “I saw Miss Mason yesterday, and she said you don’t need very many things, Meg.”

“Oh, Mother, Twaddles and I need some crayons,” said Dot, tumbling Annabel Lee out of her lap, much to that sleepy animal’s surprise and disapproval. “And a pencil box with a lock, Mother.”

“You’re not going to school,” retorted Meg. “Is she, Mother?”

Mother Blossom put down her sewing.

“I don’t see why my twinnies are so eager to go to school,” she said sadly. “What in the wide world should I do if all my children went off to school and left me alone? Perhaps, Dot, you and Twaddles and I can have our own kindergarten after Meg and Bobby get nicely started.”

“With a blackboard?” demanded Dot. “And inkwells and a cloak room, Mother?”

Mother Blossom and Miss Florence laughed.

“I begin to think the other children are the attraction, not school,” said Mother Blossom. “However, Meg must run along if she is to be back by lunch time. I’ll give you and Bobby each fifty cents, dear. And suppose Dot and Twaddles have a quarter each to spend? Going to school without a shiny new pencil box isn’t to be thought of, I’m sure.”

Meg and Dot ran downstairs and found Twaddles and Bobby had tired of teaching Philip to jump through a hoop, and were busily cracking stones in the driveway.

“Some of ’em might be valuable,” said Bobby, when Meg asked him why he was doing that. “I heard a boy talking about it once. Might have gold or iron ore in.”

“Well, we’re going uptown to buy elastic and school things,” said Meg. “Mother gave me the money in this purse. Fifty cents is for you, and the twins can spend a quarter.”

The four little Blossoms set off on their errand, and Philip tagged along after them. He wasn’t interested in school supplies, but he dearly loved a walk.

“I’ll get the ’lastic first,” decided Meg, when they reached the street where most of the Oak Hill stores were. “Don’t buy anything till I get that.”

The others waited while the elastic was measured and wrapped, and after Meg had paid for it they went over to the fascinating counter where all the things one needs in school were displayed.

“Hello!” said a girl who was looking at a blank book when the four little Blossoms came up. “You been away?”

This was Nina Mills. She was an untidy looking child and her hands were not very clean. But she smiled pleasantly enough.

“We’ve been in the country,” Meg informed her, as Bobby and Twaddles and Dot apparently couldn’t find anything to say. “We went to see our Aunt Polly.”

“Oh,” said Nina Mills. “That’s nice. I wish I could go off on visits. You coming to school Monday?”

“Bobby and I are,” Meg answered. “The twins are too little.”

The twins frankly scowled. How they did hate being “too young” to do so many things they wished to do.

“Yes, they’re too little,” agreed Nina Mills. “You’ll be in Miss Mason’s room. So’m I. I’m in Bobby’s class. Well, I guess I have to go now. Good-by.”

“Good-by,” said the four little Blossoms awkwardly.

“Now hurry up and let’s get our things ’fore any one else comes,” proposed Bobby, who did not like to talk to people he did not know very well. “I’m going to buy this ruler that folds up, Meg.”

Meg was busy trying a key in a pencil box.

“It’s fifty cents and I can’t get anything else, but look at all the things in it,” she said. “Pencils and rubbers and pens. I guess I’ll take this one.”

The twins were examining a box of crayons and Dot was sure that she could learn to write only with the box that held the most colors.

“An’ I want two blotting papers, pink and blue,” she told the good-natured saleswoman. “An’ a pencil with a blue stone in it.”

“I’ll take these chalk ones,” decided Twaddles, choosing a box of soft, chalky crayons. “I’d like a bottle of glue, too, and a red book.”

The red book was a little cash account book such as Twaddles had seen Father Blossom use.

With their parcels neatly tied up, the four little Blossoms started back home, Philip trotting on ahead.

“Let’s walk around by the school,” suggested Meg. “It’s only the next block and we’ve plenty of time.”

“All right, let’s,” assented Bobby. “I’ll show you Miss Mason’s room.”

CHAPTER III

STARTING SCHOOL

“You see,” explained Bobby, as the children turned down the street that led past the schoolhouse, “primary school isn’t so awfully important. That’s why the grammar and high school got the new building; I heard old Hornbeck say so.”

“You shouldn’t call him old Hornbeck,” said Meg reprovingly. “Mother says it isn’t respectful.”

Bobby didn’t answer, for they had reached the primary school building and he was busy counting windows to find Miss Mason’s room. The Oak Hill primary grades occupied an old building on a corner lot, while the grammar and high schools were housed in a handsome modern building a few blocks away, with a playground and even an extra lot for the school gardens. But the primary children really had a better time by themselves, and were certainly spared a great amount of teasing.

“–––Five, six,” finished Bobby. “There––see the sixth window on the second floor? That’s our room, Meg.”

Meg gazed interestedly at the window that looked exactly like all the other windows and yet was different to her because it was a part of the schoolroom she had never seen.

“Is Miss Mason cross, Bobby?” she asked timidly.

“Not always,” said Bobby encouragingly. “Course if you whisper or giggle, or chew chewing gum–––My! how she does hate chewing gum,” he added. “But most times she is nice. And you ought to hear her read stories!”

Miss Mason taught two sections of the first and second years, and so it happened that Meg would be in the same room with Bobby, although this was her first year at school and his second. Last year Meg had gone to a small private kindergarten, but she was very eager to go to what she called a “real school.”

“I think it’s mean we can’t go,” complained Twaddles, scuffing his feet moodily as Bobby and Meg went on ahead. “We wouldn’t hurt their old school!”

“Maybe they’ll be sorry,” said Dot. “Some day they’ll want us to go to school and we won’t!”

Lunch was ready when the four little Blossoms reached home, and after lunch more dresses were waiting for Meg to try on. Miss Florence came and sewed another day, and then, finally, the first morning of the school term arrived.

“I hear this is a very important day,” announced Father Blossom smilingly at breakfast. “Don’t tell me it is a birthday, and I’ve forgotten all about it!”

Meg dimpled.

“’Tisn’t a birthday, Daddy,” she declared.

Father Blossom pretended to be very much worried.

“I know it isn’t Christmas,” he said anxiously, “because it isn’t cold enough. And it can’t be the Fourth of July. What day is it, Meg?”

“The first day of school!” pronounced Meg triumphantly. “And I’m going. See, I have on a new dress, and here’s my pencil case, and my hat has new elastic–––”

“Well! well! well!” exclaimed Father Blossom, “is it possible? My eldest daughter old enough to go to school! I suppose in another year or so the twins will be clamoring for pencil cases and we won’t have any children who have time to play.”

“I could go to school now,” scolded Twaddles, “only everybody says I’m too young.”

“Never mind,” said Father Blossom comfortably. “You’ve years of school ahead of you, Son. Does Mother have to go this morning?”

“No indeed,” answered Mother Blossom cheerfully. “I’ve already seen Miss Mason about Meg, and as she is going to be in the same room with Bobby, he will look after her. And if you don’t want to be late the first morning, children, I think you should start in a few minutes.”

The whole family followed Meg and Bobby to the door to see them off, and even Norah left her morning work to wave good-by to them. Philip and Annabel Lee and Sam were standing in the garage door to see them go, and altogether the two scholars felt rather important.

“There’s Fred Baldwin,” said Bobby, spying a boy just ahead of them. “He’s in my grade. Hey, Fred!”

The boy turned and waited for them to come up with him.

“Hello,” he said shyly, “going to school, Bobby?”

“Sure,” replied Bobby. “Here is my sister Meg.”

Fred and Meg said “Hello,” and the three walked along rapidly toward the schoolhouse.

“Did you have Miss Mason last year?” Fred asked.

“Yes. You had Miss Watts, didn’t you?” said Bobby. “Is she cross?”

“Awful,” confided Fred sadly. “I’ll bet I stayed in three nights a week regular.”

His dancing black eyes seemed to say that he had had a good time in school, no matter if he had been kept in; indeed Fred was a mischievous-looking child, and his own mother was inclined to think, as she often told him, that Miss Watts probably could tell another story.

“I have to take Meg up and let her get her seat,” announced Bobby when they reached the school yard. “You coming?”

Fred thought he would stay down and see some of the boys.

“I don’t care where I sit,” he explained. “And if you go in late most all the front seats have been given out. I’d rather sit in the back of the room.”

So you see Fred did have a choice, though he said, and probably honestly thought, he did not.

Meg followed Bobby upstairs and into a large square room half filled with chattering children. A gray-haired lady was speaking to the young woman who stood near a desk on a small platform.

“That’s Miss Wright, the vice-principal,” whispered Bobby, indicating the gray-haired woman. “Mr. Carter, over at the grammar school, is the real principal. If you’re real bad, Miss Wright sends for him. But she opens assembly and like-a-that.”

Presently Miss Wright went out, and Bobby led Meg up to the teacher.

“This is my sister Meg,” he said politely. “She hasn’t any seat yet.”

“How do you do, Margaret?” said Miss Mason, smiling. “Your name is really Margaret, isn’t it? I like to use my pupils’ full names. I’m sorry your sister can’t sit with you, Robert, but I can’t mix the grades. You may have any seat on this aisle, Margaret.”

Poor Meg found it most confusing to be called Margaret, and was almost startled to hear Bobby addressed as “Robert.” Father Blossom occasionally called him that, but only when he meant to scold him. But Meg sensibly supposed that when one went to school there were a number of new things to get used to, and it seemed that names were to be among them.

She chose a seat half-way down the aisle and in a direct row with Bobby’s, which was on the other side of the room. And by the time she had made her choice and put away her pencil box, Miss Mason announced that it was five minutes of nine and that no child should leave the room.

Clang! A harsh gong rang through the halls. Clang! Clang!

The noise in the school yard ceased with a suddenness that was surprising. The gong rang again and a trampling and scuffling through the halls announced that the boys and girls were marching up to their classrooms. Miss Mason took her place at the door, and as a long line marched into her room she directed them where to sit. Meg wondered what she was to do with her hat.

“Beginning with the first aisle, the girls may go to the cloak room and hang up their hats,” announced Miss Mason, just as if Meg had spoken aloud. “Then after all the girls have returned, the boys may go, aisle by aisle. And I want no whispering or unnecessary delay.”

Before the last of the boys had found a hook for his cap, clang! went the gong again and a piano some distance away sounded a lively march.

“Stand!” said Miss Mason. “Margaret, you may lead the line. Come here.” Meg stood quietly.

“Margaret Blossom!” and this time Miss Mason’s voice sounded impatient. “Is the child dreaming? You’re holding back the whole room.”

Meg blushed and came forward hastily. To tell the truth, she had not realized that Miss Mason was speaking to her––the unfamiliar “Margaret” bewildered her.

“Take your place here,” commanded Miss Mason, pushing her gently into a place in the doorway. “And when you see the last child leave that room opposite, wheel in after her and follow to the auditorium.”

Meg looked around for Bobby. He was near the end of the long line that had formed around the sides of the room, and when he caught his sister’s eye he grinned and nodded encouragingly to her.

“You’ll do all right,” he seemed to say.

CHAPTER IV

A little girl in a checked gingham dress was at the end of the line of children who marched out from the room across the hall, and, obedient to a look from Miss Mason, Meg followed her. Down the corridor, up three steps and into a round, light room they marched, the piano tinkling steadily. Meg saw now that it was on the platform, and, goodness! the player was a small girl who didn't look much older than Meg herself.

"Do you take music lessons?" whispered a girl next to Meg, as they turned down a row of seats facing the platform and other children rapidly filled up the rows back of them. "You do? Well, when you get in the third grade you'll have to play for 'em to march. Miss Wright makes all the third and fourth graders who can play anything learn an assembly march."

Meg was glad that she was only in the first grade, and yet she thought that it must be exciting to sit at a piano away up on a high platform and play for the whole school. She wondered if, by practicing faithfully, she could learn an assembly march by the time she reached the third grade.

The girl at the piano played a crashing chord, and the children dropped into their seats with a concerted fervor that shook the walls. Miss Wright, the gray-haired vice-principal Meg had seen in her room talking to Miss Mason, opened the large Bible that lay on the desk, and, facing the children, read a few verses. Then the little piano girl played for the hymn they sang, finding the books in racks on the backs of the seats. Next Miss Wright made them a little speech, in which she said she hoped they were all rested from the long vacation and would work hard so that every one might be promoted at the end of the term.

"She always says that," whispered the girl next to Meg.

"How do you know?" asked Meg, whispering, too.

"Why, I've been to school for most three years," said the other girl proudly. "You first grade? Do you have Miss Mason or Miss Watts? Miss Mason! Oh, gee, she's as cross as anything. I had her my first year."

Meg opened her mouth to say that she liked Miss Mason, but the bell rang again and the children rose and turned toward the aisles. The small girl at the piano rattled another lively march, and in orderly lines the children marched back to their classrooms. Assembly was over for that morning.

"Just a minute, before we begin our writing lesson," announced Miss Mason when, with some noise and fluttering, her classes had found their seats. "I believe in trusting my pupils to a great extent; I can not watch you every minute. Besides, you know as well as I do when you do wrong. I want to know how many of you whispered in the auditorium this morning. Raise your hands, please."

Poor Meg's eyes widened in horror. For a moment she was furious at the girl who had spoken to her and so tempted her to whisper. But if Meg was only six years old she was an honest little girl and she knew that in any case she might have whispered. The third-grade girl was probably trying to be friendly, too.

Meg raised her hand. There were half a dozen other hands in the air.

"Tim Roon and Charlie Black. I might have known you would talk," said Miss Mason severely. "I remember you last term. You may each stay after school this afternoon for twenty minutes. You, too, Alice Cray. I'm surprised at you. And Margaret Blossom––a first-grader, whispering her very first morning. Don't you know it is against the rules to whisper in assembly, Margaret?"

Meg hesitated.

"Stand when you speak," said Miss Mason, who certainly was rather severe in her manner. "Did you or didn't you know you were breaking the rules?"

"I––I––didn't think about the rules," stammered Meg, rising and holding on to her desk with both small hands. "But I didn't know you were going to ask us if we whispered!"

Miss Mason's eyes suddenly crinkled. She was laughing! When she laughed you saw that she really wasn't cross.

"Very well," she said, "we'll forgive you this time. But I will ask this question every morning, so don't whisper again unless you are prepared to take the consequences. Now first-graders, take your copy books."

Meg found her copy book already on her desk, and she was so interested in trying to make a page of letters that would look exactly like those already drawn on the top line that she never looked up when the second grade had their arithmetic lesson at the blackboard. And when the bell rang for recess, she jumped.

"Now don't stay in here, go down and out into the fresh air," directed Miss Mason, busily putting up all the windows as high as they would go. "Out with you, every one!"

It was warm and sunny on the playground, and Meg was soon drawn into a game of jack-stones with Nina Mills and a little girl from her own class. Bobby wandered off to a corner where a group of boys were gathered.

Tim Roon and Charlie Black were bending over something on the ground.

“Don’t be mean,” a boy just back of them said as Bobby came up.

Tim Roon and Charlie Black were chums and older than the majority of children in Miss Mason’s room. They had taken two years for the first grade, and gave every evidence of spending two years in the second grade. It wasn’t that they found their lessons difficult, but rather that they didn’t try, and sometimes it almost seemed that they preferred to be bad. They played hooky, and broke all the rules they could, and when they were in school idled their time away, played tricks on the other boys, or else spent hours in the office of the vice-principal awaiting the attention of Mr. Carter, the real principal, of whom even Tim Roon was secretly afraid.

“You keep out of this,” said Tim rudely, as Bobby tried to look over his shoulder.

But Bobby had already seen, and with a quick shove of his foot he kicked away a stone. A small green snake glided rapidly off into the grass. Another snake, mashed and dead, lay in the dust.

“You keep your hands off my things!” shouted Tim Roon. “I got that snake, and if you think you can go round interfering–––”

“Like as not you’ll be bit when that snake grows up; and it’ll serve you right, too,” chimed in Charlie Black, who had red hair and freckles oddly at variance with his name.

Bobby was angry, too, and his small face was as red as the old turkey’s that lived at Brookside Farm.

“If you want to kill a snake, you don’t have to mash it and hurt it,” he told Tim heatedly. “You like to kill things. Water snakes are harmless––Sam Layton says so. You cut up that other snake ’fore you killed it; and you let me find you doing that to a live snake, or anything else that can feel, and I’ll, I’ll–––”

The bell rang then and Bobby didn’t have time to say what he would do. Tim Roon and Charlie Black walked off toward the school building ignoring Bobby, and the other boys followed, looking a little ashamed. They had watched Tim torture the snake without thinking much about it. If a snake had feelings they had never considered them. And yet they did not mean to be cruel.

Bobby stayed to bury the dead snake. This made him late, and Miss Mason scolded him roundly. Bobby took his seat wishing that he could get even with Tim Roon. That is not a sensible feeling for any one to have, and it never yet made the boy or girl, or grown-up for that matter, who had it, either happy or comfortable.

“I know it is a warm afternoon, and I suppose you find it hard to settle down to work after a summer of play,” said Miss Mason, suddenly looking up from the list of spelling words she was dictating to the second grade that afternoon, “but I do not see any excuse for this incessant noise. James Willard, what have you in that bag?”

“Nothing,” answered James stolidly.

“Nothing! Nonsense, you couldn’t be rattling an empty bag,” snapped Miss Mason. “Bring it to me instantly.”

James tramped heavily up the aisle and handed the teacher the bag. It was empty.

“Then you’ve eaten the candy,” said Miss Mason suspiciously. “You may stay after school and fill all the inkwells. Now go to your seat.”

Meg watched James as he took his seat. While he had been at the desk she had seen Charlie Black lean over––he sat directly behind James––and take something from James’ seat. It was a large lump of yellow taffy.

“He can’t eat it,” thought Meg. “He’ll have to wait till after school. Poor James won’t dare say a word.”

And James didn’t. When he found his candy gone he looked around at Charlie and scowled, for he guessed Charlie had stolen it, but he did not dare complain. Charlie grinned pleasantly at him.

“Charles Black, go to the board,” directed Miss Mason half an hour later. “We have just time to go over to-morrow’s lesson in multiplication. Take the figures I give you.”

Miss Mason looked impatiently at Charlie. He remained in his seat.

“I can’t go,” he objected when she continued to stare at him. “Can’t I do it from here?”

“Certainly not. Go to the board this instant,” retorted Miss Mason. “Charles, do you hear me?”

“I tell you, I can’t go,” wailed Charlie Black. “I––I won’t go!”

Meg gasped. Even Miss Mason looked surprised.

Then she walked over to the door and opened it.

“You may go down to the principal’s office,” she said coldly. “No boy can remain in my room who refuses to obey me.”

Charlie’s face was red, and he refused to meet the teacher’s eyes.

“I tell you I can’t go,” he muttered again.

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER SCHOOLROOM

“Charles Black!” ejaculated Miss Mason, “what do you mean by this nonsense? You can’t go to the blackboard, and you can’t go downstairs. Are you sick? Why can’t you go?”

Charlie half rose from his seat, then sank back.

“I’m stuck fast!” he wailed. “It’s the taffy.”

The class began to laugh.

“That will do,” Miss Mason checked them. “Where did you get this taffy, Charles?”

“I took it,” admitted Charlie sullenly. “I was sitting on it to keep till after school, and it’s melted.”

Miss Mason sat down at her desk.

“The dismissal bell will ring in a few minutes,” she observed. “As usual, we shall have no afternoon school the first day. All those I have asked to remain will stay of course. I won’t have to ask you to stay after the session, Charles. You haven’t much choice in the matter. We’ll discuss this more fully later.”

“My, I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes!” said Bobby, as he and Meg walked home. “Aren’t you hungry, Meg?”

“Starved,” agreed Meg. “What do you suppose the twins have been doing all the morning?”

As a matter of fact, the twins had been busy. The moment Bobby and Meg left they began to play school.

“I’ll be the teacher,” declared Twaddles, “and I want a lot of scholars. Get the dolls, Dot, and Philip and Annabel Lee.”

“And the crayons,” suggested Dot. “Where’ll we play?”

“In the sitting room,” decided Twaddles. “There’s more chairs.”

Dot collected Geraldine and another of her dolls, Totty-Fay, and Meg’s doll, Mary Maud, and trotted out to the garage to get Philip and the cat, Annabel Lee. When she returned with these pets, Twaddles had the chairs drawn up in two rows and the dolls already in their places.

“You and Philip and Annabel Lee can sit up in front,” he said generously. “This piano bench is my desk. Want to come to school, Mother?”

Mother Blossom, who had stopped in to see what they were doing, shook her head.

“Haven’t time to go to school this morning,” she said. “Twaddles, if you are the schoolmaster, wouldn’t you like these old rims to play with? I always used to want to wear glasses when I played school as a little girl.”

Twaddles took the horn-rimmed spectacles joyfully. There was no glass in them, but they gave him a very learned, important look. Indeed, Philip stared at him perfectly fascinated.

“The class in reading will now recite,” announced Teacher Twaddles in his severest voice. “Come up to the platform, little girl.”

Dot obediently rose and went up to the piano bench.

“Read the first page of this,” commanded Twaddles, handing her a book. “Make a bow first.”

Dot ducked stiffly. The dolls watched her unwinkingly and the dog and cat apparently wondered what would happen next.

“Now begin,” said Twaddles.

Neither he nor Dot could read, but they knew a number of poems by heart, and when they pretended to read they always held a book and repeated some of their favorite rhymes. So now Dot recited as much of “The Night Before Christmas” as she could remember.

“Very good,” said the teacher graciously. “Take your seat. The class in geography will please recite.”

Geraldine and Mary Maud obligingly moved forward and told the capital city of the United States, and which state was the nicest to live in and where the Atlantic Ocean was. They spoke in high, squeaky voices that made Philip prick up his ears suspiciously, but they received a “perfect” mark in the teacher’s book.

“I wish we could go to regular school,” mourned Dot suddenly. “Do you s’pose Meg and Bobby are having a good time?”

“Let’s ask Mother if we can go to meet ’em,” proposed Twaddles. “Come on.”

Mother Blossom, when they asked her, said that school would be out in ten or fifteen minutes and that she had no objection if they wanted to walk up town and meet the others.

Twaddles and Dot put the chairs back where they belonged and carried the dolls upstairs to the

bedroom Meg and Dot shared together.

“We’ll take Philip and Annabel Lee,” said Dot. “I guess Meg will be glad to see them, she’s been gone so long.”

So as Meg and Bobby turned into their street, they saw the twins coming to meet them.

“How do you like school?” shouted Twaddles. “Is it fun? Did you have to recite? Look how glad Philip is to see you.”

Indeed the dog was leaping and barking about Meg as though she had been gone all summer instead of one morning.

“My goodness, what did you lug that cat for?” demanded Bobby, big-brother fashion. “You’ve torn some of the gathers in your dress, too, Dot.”

“Don’t care,” said Dot, giving Annabel Lee over to Meg with a sigh of relief, for the cat was heavy. “I caught it on a nail coming down the steps. Twaddles and I played school.”

“I led the line, going in to assembly,” reported Meg importantly. “Where’s Mother? I want to tell her.”

They had reached the house by this time, and the little Blossoms dashed up the stairs to find their mother and tell her all the news. The twins listened eagerly, for the slightest word about school never failed to enthrall them.

“So I think Tim Roon is hateful,” concluded Bobby, when he had finished telling Mother Blossom about the unfortunate snake. “And Charlie Black is just like him.”

“Now, children,” said Mother Blossom firmly, “you needn’t tell me any child is hateful, I don’t care who he is or what he does. You may think this Tim Roon hasn’t a single pleasant trait, but that doesn’t prove that he has none, only that you are not able to find it. Don’t let’s have talk like this. If you find your other classmates friendly and pleasant, think as little about the disagreeable ones as you can. There’s the lunch gong.”

After the meal the four children went out to the garage to find out what Sam Layton was going to do that afternoon, because he often had interesting plans.

“Thought you had to go to school,” Sam greeted Meg and Bobby. “Aren’t in the kindergarten, are you?”

“You know we’re not,” answered Bobby indignantly. “First day they always have one session, so’s the teachers can get their records fixed up. Are you going to take the car out, Sam?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Sam. “I’ve got orders to meet your father at the foundry at two o’clock.”

“Take us?” begged Meg. “Daddy won’t care. Dot, you run and ask Mother.”

“Can’t take you,” Sam informed her regretfully. “Your father’s going on to Clayton for a meeting. Maybe we won’t get back till eight or nine o’clock to-night.”

Meg thought this over.

“Take us as far as the foundry,” she suggested. “We can walk home.”

“Yes, and maybe I’ll find some specimens,” said Bobby. “I’ll go and get my bag and hammer.”

Bobby meant the little hammer he used to crack stones with and the bag he kept to put the cracked bits in. Bobby was very much interested in pebbles and stones. He thought some day he might succeed in finding a valuable piece of mineral.

“You ask your mother if it’s all right,” insisted Sam, beginning to brush his suit and getting out his cap and gloves from the wall closet. “You’re going to be on hand, Dot, aren’t you?”

Dot had already climbed into the car and was sitting on the front seat smiling serenely at the others. She looked very pretty in a fresh pink frock that had replaced the torn dress before lunch, and her cheeks were pink, too.

“Mother says all right, but we mustn’t go a bit further than the foundry,” reported Bobby, coming back in a few minutes with his precious hammer and little white canvas bag. “Let me drive, Sam?”

“I should say not,” responded Sam promptly. “I’ll teach you to drive, Bobby, the day you’re old enough to run a car and not one minute before. In with you now, Meg?”

Meg shook her head. It was impossible to induce her to get in the car and be comfortable while Sam was backing it down the long driveway into the street. The other children never thought anything about it, but Meg was always afraid that the car would tip over, and no amount of persuasion or reasoning could change her.

She ran down to the curb now, and waited till the car rolled out. Sam stopped and she jumped in. Sam was very fond of Meg and never made fun of her, as the twins often did, because she was afraid to trust him to get out of the driveway safely.

“It’s a fine day for a drive,” commented Sam, as the car moved off smoothly. “Mercy on us, what’s that under the seat?”

CHAPTER VI

AN UNPLEASANT MEETING

It proved to be Philip under the seat, and he rolled his eyes beseechingly at Sam as Bobby pulled him out by his collar.

“Which one of you kids hid him under the seat?” demanded Sam sternly.

“I didn’t, honestly, Sam,” said Meg.

Bobby and the twins denied that they had had anything to do with Philip and his appearance.

“I did see him under the seat asleep this morning when we were out in the garage,” admitted Twaddles. “I guess he didn’t wake up till now.”

“Well, he’ll have to walk back with you, that’s all,” grumbled Sam. “Your father doesn’t want a dog around when he’s thinking about business. What is it, Bobby?”

“There’s a queer looking stone,” said Bobby, who had been pulling at Sam’s sleeve to attract his attention. “See it down there? Slow up, and you will. There! Let me get out and get it for my collection?”

Sam slowed down the car, and looked with interest at the spot to which Bobby pointed. Then he laughed.

“That’s a lump of coal,” he announced. “Fell off a heavy load, I guess, on its way to the foundry. Collecting stones, are you, Bobby?”

“Not exactly,” said Bobby. “You see I heard about a boy who went around cracking pebbles and stones and sometimes he found very valuable ones. Maybe I will, too. Anyway I like to crack ’em.”

“I see,” said Sam, looking at his watch. “Well, we’ll have to hustle a little to make it by two o’clock. Hold your hats, youngsters.”

Sam delighted to let the car out occasionally, and for the next few minutes they whirled steadily through a cloud of dust. Then the iron gates of the foundry, of which Father Blossom was the owner and where he had his office, loomed up ahead of them, and Sam put on the brakes.

“Coming right away,” called Father Blossom, as the car rolled past the office window, where he was working at a roll-top desk, and stopped before the door.

In just a moment he came out, buckling his brief case as he came down the steps.

“They wanted to come,” said Sam apologetically, indicating his passengers. “I told ’em they’d have to walk home, because you were going over to Clayton.”

“Yes, can’t have you along this trip,” declared Father Blossom regretfully. “Where are you going, Sam?”

Sam was driving further into the foundry yard. He turned with a half-sheepish grin to answer his employer.

“Going to drive in around the pump and make a turn,” he said. “Meg doesn’t like to be in the car when it’s backing, so I thought I wouldn’t worry her.”

So Sam drove carefully around the piles of iron and scraps and, making a wide detour at the pump, drove out of the yard again. Meg smiled her thanks. She wished she didn’t feel that a car was likely to tip over when it was backed, but she was sure she couldn’t help that feeling.

“Now I s’pose we’ll have to get out,” murmured Bobby, as they came to the sign-post with a finger pointing to “Oak Hill, 2 miles,” in one direction, and another finger reading, “Clayton, 8 miles,” pointing another way.

“Yes, and don’t loiter,” directed Father Blossom. “Go straight home and tell Mother if I can I’ll be back for supper, but not to wait for me.”

Philip was glad to be out of the car, and he frisked ahead, barking and trying to tempt some one to run a race with him.

“This looks valuable,” said Bobby, picking up a pebble he found at one side of the road. “Wait a minute, Meg, till I see.”

The twins watched with interest while Bobby smashed the pebble with his hammer.

“Is it valuable?” demanded Twaddles.

Bobby brushed away the dust and gathered up the fragments. It was a white pebble, and the broken bits were white, faintly veined with yellow.

“I shouldn’t wonder if it’s very rare,” hazarded the collector. “Anyway, I’m going to take it and keep it.”

He scooped the pieces into his bag, and then the four trotted briskly along toward home.

“Well, goodness, this is luck!” cried a hearty voice, and an automobile that had come up behind them stopped. It was the Oak Hill grocery-store car, and kind, stout Mr. Hambert, one of the

clerks, was out making deliveries.

“I’m going over to Riceville,” he said, leaning out to talk to the children. “Don’t you want to go along? Room for everybody, and I’ll have you home by supper time.”

“Oh, Meg, let’s,” teased Dot, who dearly loved to go anywhere. “Mother won’t care. Come on.”

“I have to practice,” said Meg soberly. “But the rest of you can go. I’ll tell Mother so she won’t worry.”

“I’ll go with you,” declared Bobby. “It’s my turn to fix up the rabbit pen. Twaddles didn’t half do it last week.”

“Did too,” retorted Twaddles, already scrambling into the seat beside Mr. Hambert. “Guess I keep those rabbits as good as you do, Bobby. You’re always fussing.”

Mr. Hambert held out a hand to Dot and pulled her into place beside him.

“All right,” he nodded kindly to Meg and Bobby. “You won’t be sorry if you do the work first and play afterward. Tell your mother I’ll see these youngsters safe home by half-past five.”

“Do you suppose Dot looked clean enough to go to Riceville?” worried Meg, after the fashion of older sisters, as the grocery car shot up the road and took the turn to the right. “Like as not they’ll go to the hotel and all the boarders will see her.”

“She’s all right,” said Bobby carelessly, “Here’s the spring lot, Meg. See how muddy the path is.”

The children had been following a narrow path that ran through the grass at the side of the road and which would presently meet the concrete walk that marked the beginning of the town. The “spring lot” was a marshy piece of land that was full of springs which fed and kept puddles of mud moist through the dryest season. To-day, although everywhere else the dust was fine and white, the path along the spring lot was oozy and soft.

“Who’s coming?” said Meg, looking up the road suddenly. “Look, Bobby, isn’t that Tim Roon?”

Bobby glanced up from his favorite occupation of cracking stones.

“Yes, it is,” he replied. “Wonder where he’s going?”

His hands in his pockets, his cap on the back of his head, Tim Roon came toward them, whistling loudly. When he was near enough to see the two children, he stopped.

“Hello, smarties!” was his greeting. “How’s teacher’s pet?”

“I’m not teacher’s pet,” retorted Bobby indignantly.

“Nobody said you were,” answered Tim Roon. “Can’t a person speak to your sister, without you taking it all on yourself?”

Bobby flushed angrily.

“You needn’t speak to my sister unless you can talk right,” he said rapidly. “Come on, Meg, call Philip, and we’ll go.”

The dog was hunting in the marsh and came bounding out at Meg’s first call.

“Just a mutt.” Tim Roon summed up poor Philip disagreeably. “You ought to see the dog my father’s got. What’s your hurry, anyway? You can’t go till I’m ready to let you.”

He stood directly in the path, on the only dry spot. If Meg or Bobby tried to go around him, they must step into thick, black mud.

“Teacher’s pet!” mocked Tim Roon, pointing a dirty forefinger at Meg. “She didn’t know she had to tell she whispered! But I notice you could laugh at Charlie Black when he sat on the candy.”

Meg did not see what that had to do with her whispering, and perhaps Tim Roon couldn’t have told either. He was merely doing his best to be unkind and unpleasant, and succeeding as well as such ill-natured folk usually do.

“You get out of the way, Tim Roon!” cried Bobby. “Go ahead, Meg, I’ll punch him if he touches you.”

Tim was older and larger than Bobby, but the latter had no intention of allowing him to annoy his sister.

Meg tried to push her way past the short, sturdy body of Tim, who blocked her path. A quick twist of a vicious, sharp, little elbow jostled her into the mud, and she stepped in over one of her low shoes.

“You will, will you,” snarled Bobby, angrier than he had ever been in his life. “You just wait–– knocking a girl like that!”

Tim squared off, as he had seen fighters in pictures do, and Bobby lowered his head for a rush. But Philip, who had been an interested spectator, decided that the time had come for him to be of use. With a sharp bark, he lunged straight for Tim’s legs, his sharp, even teeth showing on either side of his red tongue. Tim saw him coming, jumped to avoid him, lost his footing, and slipped. He fell into the thickest part of the mud, his foot doubled under him.

“Run, Meg!” shouted Bobby, who wisely decided that it was the better part of valor to take advantage of Tim’s plight. “Come, Philip, run! run!”

Pell-mell, the stones clattering in the bag Bobby still clutched, Philip racing ahead and barking

like a mad dog, the two children ran down the road and did not stop till they reached the broad band of cement walk where the east boundaries of Oak Hill were drawn.

Then they stopped and looked back, Philip panting and growling a little as if he only wanted a word to go back and repeat his good work.

CHAPTER VII

A HARD LESSON

“My, I’ll bet he’s mad!” said Bobby. Tim was standing in the mud, trying to scrape some of it off his clothes. His cap was gone and great patches of mud clung to his face and hair. He was a distressed looking object indeed. While they watched, he glanced up and saw them standing there. He shook a fist at Bobby, and began to limp slowly off down the road.

“Do you suppose he is hurt?” asked Meg anxiously. “Maybe he ought to go to see Doctor Maynard.”

“He isn’t hurt,” Bobby assured her confidently. “That mud is as soft as––as anything! Wasn’t Philip fine to think of scaring him like that?”

Indeed, Philip had an extra good supper that night, after Bobby and Meg had told Mother and Norah all about the help he had given them, and the twins, when they came in from their drive, were filled with admiration for such an intelligent dog.

“My practicing’s all done,” announced Meg happily. “I don’t mind it so much now, ’cause I want to be ready to play assembly marches when I’m in the third grade.”

“If you want to see how rabbit pens ought to look,” Bobby told Twaddles confidentially, “just go out and see those I fixed this afternoon.”

“Huh,” sniffed Twaddles with withering indifference, “I guess the rabbits don’t know they’re any better off!”

The first week of school went very smoothly, and both Bobby and Meg began to look forward to their reports at the end of the month. These reports were immensely important, according to Bobby, who was, of course, experienced in such matters.

“If Bert Figger gets eight in spelling, his father’s going to give him fifty cents,” Bobby told Meg.

“You’ll get nine in ’rithmetic, I know you will,” said Meg admiringly. “You’re awfully good in that, Bobby.”

“Yes, I think I am,” agreed Bobby. “I haven’t missed one so far. Every answer I’ve worked out has been right.”

He repeated this assertion at the supper table that night, and Father Blossom shook his head.

“Don’t be too sure of that nine,” he said warningly. “The work is going to get harder the further you go, you know. Trying for a nine is all right, but I don’t like to hear you speak as though you didn’t have to make any effort to reach it.”

The next morning in school Miss Mason had something interesting to show her first grade pupils. It was a very beautifully illustrated book of verses for children. The poems were written by famous poets, and each poet had signed his name to his own verse. The pictures were in colors and had been painted by well-known artists, who had signed their work with a pen after the pictures had been printed. So it was really a picture book, a poem book, and an autograph album all in one.

“There are only three like it in the world,” explained Miss Mason. “They were raffled off at a fair for a children’s hospital, and a friend of mine, one of the artists, won a copy. She sent it to me.”

Miss Mason said the second grade might examine the book at recess or at noon, because they had been busy with their writing lesson while she was showing it to the younger children. Then, while the first grade was set to work to make a page of “S’s,” Miss Mason called the second grade to order for their arithmetic lesson.

“You will not need pencils and paper this morning,” she announced. “We are going to have a little mental arithmetic.”

Charlie Black groaned.

“That will do,” said the teacher sharply. “Tim Roon, are you chewing gum again? Come and put it in the waste basket.”

Tim gulped hastily.

“I’ve swallowed it,” he declared.

Miss Mason frowned.

“I hope that some day you will do as I tell you,” she said impatiently. “Now ready. Robert

Blossom, if I go down to Mr. Dryburg's shop and buy two yards of percale at sixteen cents a yard, how much must I pay?"

Bobby hastily counted on his fingers.

"Thirty-two cents," he answered.

"Stand up straight," commanded Miss Mason. "And if I buy three yards of braid at ten cents a yard, how much will that be?"

Meg looked up from her writing lesson to watch Bobby's hands, though she knew that if Miss Mason saw her she would be scolded severely. He held them behind him and his fingers fairly galloped as he used them for an adding machine.

"Thirty cents for braid," stammered Bobby.

"And if I give Mr. Dryburg a dollar bill, how much change shall I have?" asked Miss Mason, switching from multiplication to subtraction so quickly that the startled Bobby lost his count.

"Well?" urged the teacher. "What are you doing with your hands, Robert? Bring them out where I can see them. Now then, how much change is coming to me?"

Bobby was hopelessly bewildered now, and he had forgotten the cost of both percale and braid. He managed to stutter, "I––I––don't know," and sat down thankfully.

Tim Roon scraped his feet noisily, intending to annoy Bobby, but unfortunately he drew the attention of Miss Mason to himself.

"Stand up, Tim," she commanded sharply. "How much change should I have from that dollar bill?"

"Don't know," muttered Tim.

"How much did the braid cost?" demanded Miss Mason.

"I've forgotten," said Tim.

"You mean you didn't listen," retorted Miss Mason. "Sit down. If this class can't do any better with a simple test like this, I'm afraid you'll make a poor showing with your cards this month. Marion Green, perhaps you can tell me how much change I should have?"

Marion Green was a little girl ordinarily very good in arithmetic. But she was frightened now and plainly showed it. She wouldn't even get out of her seat and try to answer.

Palmer Davis was no better, and Hester Scott frankly burst into tears when called upon. By this time most of the class had forgotten what the problem was, but Miss Mason refused to repeat it. She said they should be able to remember it.

"Well, Bertrand?" Miss Mason spoke to Bertrand Ashe, a rather dull boy, and one who habitually made mistakes when sent to the blackboard to work out examples.

Bertrand stood up, his sleepy eyes fixed earnestly on his teacher.

"The percale and the braid came to sixty-two cents altogether," he announced, "so if you gave Mr. Dryburg a dollar, you would have thirty-eight cents in change."

Bertrand sat down.

"Right," said Miss Mason. "I'm glad I have one pupil who knows how to use his brain. Some of those who might have had eight on their cards this month needn't be surprised to find a six. Robert, how much is seven times six?"

"I don't know," muttered Bobby ungraciously.

He did know, but he was miffed to think he had missed a problem that Bertrand Ashe had been able to solve.

"That isn't the kind of spirit to show," said Miss Mason sharply. "Instead of being resentful, you should resolve to keep your head next time. Nothing in the world but panic made you miss that question, Robert. Now go to the board and take the example I read you."

Bobby sat still, his feet locked rebelliously in the iron framework of his desk.

Miss Mason took no notice of him for a moment, sending several others to the board, among them Tim Roon and Charlie Black. Then she came down the aisle to Bobby's desk, a piece of chalk in her hand.

"Go to the board, Robert," she said quietly, putting the chalk into his unwilling fingers and closing them around it with a warm friendly pressure of her own strong, slim fingers.

Bobby was suddenly ready to go, though not ready yet to show that he was ashamed of the way he had acted. Miss Mason read aloud the problem, and those at the board began their figuring.

"Margaret!" Miss Mason spoke so suddenly that Meg jumped. "Are you interested in this lesson? Have you finished your page?"

Meg blushed brightly and bent over her copy book. She had made only seven letters, but then she had been anxious lest Bobby get one of his "stubborn fits," as Norah called them, when no one but Father Blossom could persuade him to change his mind.

"I think Miss Mason is as mean as can be!" thought Meg to herself, carefully tracing the outline of a graceful "S." "She says cross things all the time. I wonder is she old?"

Old people had a right to be cross, Meg considered. Miss Mason didn't look old––she had hair as yellow as Meg's own, and big brown eyes. And she wore pretty dresses. Meg was so interested in studying Miss Mason that the recess bell rang before she had finished her copy-book page.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPOILED BOOK

The children put their books away thankfully and trooped out into the yard. Miss Mason, after putting up every window, as was her custom, went across the hall to the teachers' room.

Tim Roon was so busy dusting off the top of his desk and fastening down his papers so that the wind would not blow them away that he was the last pupil left in the room when Miss Mason went out, closing the door behind her. Tim waited till he was sure she was not coming back, then tiptoed hastily up to her desk.

"I'll show her!" he muttered, tumbling books and papers about till he found what he wanted.

It was the illustrated and autographed book of verses. And now if any one had been there to see Tim they would have been astonished at what he did next. Reaching down into a kind of cabinet that formed the lower part of Miss Mason's desk, Tim brought up a tall bottle of ink from which the desk inkwells were filled. He took the stopper out and opened the book.

"What you doing?" asked a voice at his elbow.

Tim's conscience was guilty enough, dear knows, so it was no wonder that he jumped. A thick stream of ink spurted out and ran down the crevice of the binding of the book. Tim closed it quickly.

"Gee, Charlie Black! you scared me," Tim said, relieved to find that the voice belonged to his chum. "What am I doing? You just watch me!"

Tim opened the book again and poured out more ink. Then he closed it and pressed down hard on the covers. He did this several times, each inking making an ugly, blurry figure that completely ruined two or three pages of the book.

"What's that for?" demanded Charlie.

"Think I'm going to be nagged every day in the week and never do a thing about it?" growled Tim. "Maybe when she finds her precious book marked up she'll begin to understand that there's some one who won't stand for everything."

"How's she going to know you did it?" asked Charlie Black, watching the ink seep into a fine illustration as Tim slowly poured more out.

"She won't know if I can help it," grinned that bad boy. "And if I catch you opening your mouth–––"

"I won't," promised Charlie hastily. "Honest, I won't say a word, Tim."

"You'd better not," warned Tim darkly. "Let me ever find out you as much as whispered you saw me and I'll, I'll––I don't know what I won't do to you!"

This vague threat was sufficiently terrifying to insure obedience from Charlie, who knew from experience that Tim could be both relentless and cruel. There was little danger that he would ever betray his chum.

"Now I guess that's finished," announced Tim with satisfaction, closing the once lovely book. "Don't look at me when she takes it out after recess to show the class. Wait till I put back these papers where they were. There now, let's go downstairs and come up with the others when the bell rings."

When the bell rang and the children came upstairs, they found a member of the school committee sitting on the platform beside Miss Mason's desk, and the teacher announced that they would have a reading lesson for the first and second grades in place of the usual work.

"I will show you the book I promised to let the second grade see, directly after the noon period," said Miss Mason. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here this recess, but we had an important conference. Now, Margaret, you may read the first paragraph of the third lesson."

Rufus Hornbeck was the name of the committeeman, and all the children who had been to school before knew him as the head of the school committee and a man who could, if he wished, scold even Mr. Carter, the primary and grammar school principal. Some of the boys said that "old Hornbeck," as they disrespectfully called him, had the right to tell Mr. Fredericks, the high-school principal, what to do. But the high-school was too far away for the majority of the boys to think about.

"Come up here on the platform, and face the class," said Mr. Hornbeck to Meg. "Read clearly now, and let your classmates enjoy the story."

Poor Meg was very shy as she went up to the platform, for reading aloud was an ordeal for her, though at home she always had her “nose in a book,” as Norah said. She reached the platform, grasped her reading book tightly in both hands, and began to read hurriedly.

“That’s enough,” announced Miss Mason, as Meg came to the end of a long paragraph.

Meg closed her book, stepped to one side to avoid the waste basket, and put her foot squarely into Mr. Hornbeck’s high silk hat which he had placed carefully on the floor beside his chair.

“Tut! tut!” said Mr. Hornbeck reprovingly. “Don’t be so clumsy, child. Don’t kick––lift your foot out.”

Meg was crimson with embarrassment, and the class was snickering in spite of Miss Mason’s frown. Meg was glad to escape to her seat, and the committeeman moved his hat further back before the next unlucky reader came to the platform.

It did seem as though the noon bell would never ring, but at quarter of twelve it did, and Meg and Bobby hurried home to lunch.

“What did you do all morning?” asked Meg of the twins, who as usual were waiting for them at the gate.

“Played school,” answered Dot.

That was the usual answer. The twins never tired of playing school, and whatever Meg and Bobby told them one day they were pretty sure to “pretend” the next. Always and always, too, they wished that they might go to “regular” school.

That afternoon, as soon as she had given the first grade pupils seat work to keep them busy, Miss Mason remembered her promise to show the higher class her book. Tim Roon, who had been secretly relieved that Mr. Hornbeck’s visit had delayed the discovery of his trick, now began to be uneasy. He flashed a warning look at Charlie Black as Miss Mason fumbled with the papers that covered the book.

“I’ll pass it down the aisle,” said Miss Mason, drawing out the book. “Now, Ellen, this first picture was drawn by an artist named–––”

Ellen Glover looked up startled. Miss Mason’s voice had stopped so suddenly when she opened her book that the effect was as if some one had closed a door sharply while some one else was speaking.

“Her face was just as white,” Meg afterward told her mother, “and then it got red and her eyes snapped like––like anything!”

Indeed Miss Mason’s eyes were snapping fire. Tim Roon for the first time in his life was actually afraid of his teacher.

“Some vandal has destroyed this beautiful book,” said Miss Mason, speaking coldly and slowly. “It was almost priceless. I want each one of you to come up to the desk and see how it has been ruined. First grade, put away your work.”

A sudden shiver of excitement went over the room. No one had ever seen Miss Mason so angry before. And yet she was very quiet and still about it. Aisle by aisle, she made them come up and look at the book, insisting that each child take it in his hands and examine the spots of ink. When the last pupil had returned to his seat she spoke again.

“This was done during recess,” she said. “I did not leave the room this noon. If any one in this class was in the room at recess this morning, raise his hand.”

Not one hand went up.

Miss Mason sighed impatiently.

“I see you are determined to make it hard for me,” she commented. “Very well, if we do no work this afternoon, we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Then beginning with the girls, she asked each one if she had been in the room during recess time. As it happened not a girl had entered the room between the bells. An interesting game of tag had taken the attention of both grades in the girls’ half of the school yard.

Then Miss Mason began with the boys. Each one denied that he had been in the room till she reached Bobby.

“Yes, I was up here,” he admitted.

“Why didn’t you raise your hand?” snapped Miss Mason. “What were you doing?”

“I came up to get my ball. I had left it in my desk,” answered Bobby.

Unfortunately for him, he looked confused and cross, and Miss Mason had some grounds for thinking he might know more than he cared to tell.

“When were you up here?” she persisted.

Tim Roon listened eagerly for Bobby’s reply. He was beginning to wonder if he had been seen leaving the room.

“About three minutes before the bell rang,” said Bobby defiantly.

“Don’t speak to me like that,” commanded Miss Mason. “Do you know how the ink got on this book, Robert?”

Bobby was silent. Meg looked worried.

“Robert, do you hear me? I am asking you if you know how this book was defaced?”

Bobby’s blue eyes shot out a few sparks equal to those in Miss Mason’s eyes.

“You know I don’t!” he retorted, not at all respectfully.

Bobby had been taught to love books at home and to handle them carefully. He was hurt and astonished that any one should think he would deliberately ruin a beautiful book, and he forgot that Miss Mason couldn’t know him as well as Father and Mother Blossom did. They would never suspect him of harming a book.

“If this is your idea of getting even for the arithmetic lesson this morning, all I can say is that you’ve chosen a very underhanded method,” declared Miss Mason, evidently determined to believe the worst.

“I never touched the book,” insisted Bobby hotly.

CHAPTER IX

BOBBY IN TROUBLE

Miss Mason glanced at him oddly.

“That will do,” she said.

Then she proceeded to question the other boys. Palmer Davis admitted that he had been in the room during recess, to get a pencil, he said. And Henry Graham, a boy in the first grade, whispered shakily that he had come back for an apple he had left in his desk. Miss Mason was cross-examining Wilbert Peters, another boy, when the door was suddenly pushed open and an odd procession entered.

“Well, for pity’s sake!” ejaculated Meg aloud, then slapped a hasty hand to her mouth.

Philip, his tail wagging ingratiatingly, came first, carrying Totty-Fay in his mouth. Back of him marched the twins, Twaddles’ face shining with soap and water he had evidently applied himself, for it had dried in streaks, and Dot in a frock so stiffly starched that each separate ruffle stood out around her like a small platform.

“Hello!” grinned Twaddles, embarrassed now that he found so many eyes fixed on him.

Miss Mason looked surprised.

Philip marched up to the platform and put down the doll. Then he sat down, panting, his tail wagging furiously.

“We––we want to go to school, too,” explained Dot, speaking to Miss Mason, “so we came.”

“I see,” admitted the teacher. “You’re not old enough to come to school yet. Whose children are you?”

“Please, Miss Mason,” Meg stood up bravely, “they’re my brother and sister, Twaddles and Dot.”

“Dorothy, I suppose,” amended Miss Mason, who could never bear to use a nickname, no matter how pretty. “But where on earth did a child get the name of Twaddles?”

“His right name is Arthur Gifford Blossom,” explained Meg timidly.

The twins were sitting down comfortably on the edge of the platform and studying the room with interest.

“Well, Margaret, I think you will have to take them home,” said Miss Mason, not unkindly. “It lacks only fifteen minutes of dismissal time, anyway. I shall let the girls go at half-past three, but the boys will have to remain till we get this matter of the defaced book straightened out. Go and get your hat and coat, Margaret.”

Meg went to the cloak room for her hat and coat and came back to find Miss Mason saying good-by to the twins.

“And when you are six years old we’ll be very glad to have you come to school,” she told them. “Don’t forget the doll––all right, now you’re ready.”

She held open the door for Philip, and even patted him on the head as he trotted through. The irrepressible twins, who had enjoyed their visit and were sorry to have it over so soon, turned as they were following Meg out of the room.

“Good-by, Bobby,” they chorused.

Poor Bobby blushed violently, and the other children laughed.

“You shouldn’t talk like that,” Meg reproved them as she piloted them down the hall. “You can’t holler out loud in school.”

“Isn’t it nice?” said Dot admiringly. “Oh, Meg, what’s this room?”

She had darted to the open door of the assembly hall and was peering in at the rows and rows of empty seats.

“Come on,” urged Meg. “Don’t snoop around like that, Dot. I’ll bet Bobby is mad ’cause you made everybody laugh at him.”

“’Twon’t hurt him,” declared Twaddles impishly. “Who’s that man in there, Meg?”

Meg glanced hurriedly into the office they were passing. The door was partly closed, but she could see a man speaking to Miss Wright.

“That’s the principal, Mr. Carter,” whispered Meg, her teeth almost chattering with fright. “I hope Miss Mason doesn’t tell him about her book.”

Miss Wright had heard the whispering and came to the door.

“Why, Meg,” she said pleasantly, “aren’t you going home early? And are these new scholars?”

“It’s the twins,” stammered Meg desperately. “They would come, and Miss Mason says I must take them home.”

Mr. Carter, who had come up behind Miss Wright, laughed. He had clear, kind eyes behind his glasses, and he was much younger than Meg had supposed him to be. The other children had talked to her so much of how terrible the principal was when he had a bad boy before him that she had really pictured an ogre, with gray hair and a terrible hooked nose and a loud, fierce voice.

“I’ve heard of children having to be driven to school,” said Mr. Carter, still smiling, “but this is the first time I ever knew that they had to be taken home to prevent them from learning. Never mind, youngsters, your school days are coming. And when you do come to Oak Hill School, you come and see me the very first day.”

The twins were too shy to do more than nod, and Meg hurried them out of the building, Philip having already pushed the door open and gone, before they should attract any more attention.

“What ever put it into your head to come?” she scolded, leading the way toward home. “Does Mother know it?”

For the first time Twaddles appeared to be somewhat confused.

“She doesn’t know it exactly,” he admitted. “We just said we were going out.”

And indeed Mother Blossom was very much surprised when Meg walked into the sitting room followed by the twins.

“Where is Bobby?” asked Mother Blossom, looking up from her sewing. “And you are early, dear. Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing much,” said Meg, with a severe glance at the culprits, “’cept the children came to school and brought the dog and Totty-Fay, and Bobby has to stay in because Miss Mason says he spilt ink all over her book.”

Of course there was an exciting half-hour after that, with the twins trying to show their side of the case and Mother Blossom half laughing and half scolding over their performance. Meg had also to tell everything that had happened in connection with the book, and Mother Blossom and the twins were all sure that Bobby had had absolutely nothing to do with it.

“Course he didn’t!” said Meg vehemently. “I know he was mad about missing the arithmetic lesson, but he wouldn’t go and spatter ink on a book. And it was such a lovely book, Mother.”

They were still talking when Bobby came in, looking hot and tired and very cross.

“How long did she keep you in?” asked Meg, as he flung his cap into the corner.

“An hour,” returned Bobby. “She let all the boys go but six of us at four o’clock, and she says one of us six must have done it. And they all say it’s me. But I didn’t do it.”

He was looking at Mother Blossom, and she smiled back at him, her own, sunny, cheerful smile.

“We know you didn’t, dear,” she declared proudly.

“She sent you a note, Mother,” said Bobby, fishing around in his pocket and bringing out a crumpled, rather soiled little envelope. “My, I was mad! She doesn’t believe a word I say. I wish I had spoiled her old book!”

“Hasn’t it been the meanest day!” sighed Meg. “I hate school!”

Mother Blossom folded the note she had been reading.

“Dot and Twaddles, Sam is just backing out the car to go after Daddy,” she said to the twins. “Run along, and you may go with him.”

The twins scampered off, and then she turned to Meg and Bobby.

“Miss Mason evidently thinks you destroyed the book, Bobby,” sighed Mother Blossom, “but as it can not be positively proved, you are to go to school as usual. I am sorrier than words can tell you that this has happened. But, dearie, I’m afraid you are a bit to blame.”

“Me?” cried the astonished Bobby. “Why, Mother!”

“Well, think how you acted over the arithmetic lesson,” Mother Blossom reminded him. “You

know Daddy and I have talked to you about this before, Bobby. You are not a very good loser, and the boy who can't lose and keep his temper will never be a good sportsman. Suppose Daddy got mad and 'talked back' whenever things didn't go to suit him at the foundry!"

Mother Blossom put an arm around Bobby and drew him closer to her.

"And if you had spoken to Daddy or to me as you did to Miss Mason," she went on, smoothing back his hair, "I think you know what you would be asked to do––what you would want to do, in fact. Don't you?"

"'Pologize," muttered Bobby shamefacedly.

"Yes," said Mother Blossom. "And I want you to apologize to Miss Mason for being discourteous. Never mind if she does think you spoiled the book. As long as you know and we know you didn't, that really doesn't matter very much; and you'll feel so much better if you do what is right. The boy who did ruin the book will be found out some day. Such things always come to light."

CHAPTER X

SENT TO THE OFFICE

The next morning Bobby trudged off to school with Meg feeling, for the first time in his life, that he would rather do anything except go to school.

"You stay out and play," he directed Meg when they reached the yard. "I'll go up and see Miss Mason."

He found the teacher at her desk. She looked neat and cool and self-possessed, and Bobby did not have any of those qualities at that moment.

"I'm sorry––I acted like that––yesterday at 'rithmetic," faltered Bobby jerkily. "My mother says I musn't be a poor loser."

"All right, Robert, we'll overlook that," rejoined Miss Mason graciously. "I could see you were piqued because you failed. But is that all you have to tell me?"

Bobby stared at her.

"Have you nothing to say about the book?" urged Miss Mason.

"I didn't do it," insisted Bobby. "You don't think I would lie, do you––not really?" he asked, amazed.

"I don't know what to think," sighed Miss Mason. "I am heartily sorry I ever brought the book to school. And, Robert, I thought it my duty to speak to Mr. Carter about this. You are to go to the office direct from assembly without coming back here."

Poor Bobby came as near to fainting as a boy ever does. Mr. Carter! He shared all the awe and fear of the other boys for the principal of whom little was known, he spending most of his time at the grammar school. Evidently Miss Mason must think him very bad indeed if she had sent for Mr. Carter.

All through assembly Bobby's thoughts were on the coming interview, and though he usually loved to sing the opening song, this morning he did not sing a note. He looked so solemn and serious that Tim Roon, watching him, decided his father must have whipped him.

The exercises were over too soon for Bobby, who would have had them last the rest of the day if he had been consulted, and the long lines of marching children went back to their classrooms.

"I wonder where Bobby is," thought Meg uneasily, when Miss Mason's classes had rustled into place and Bobby's seat was still vacant.

Bobby, if she had known it, was at that moment making his reluctant way to the office. Just the mere letters printed on the door were enough to make his heart sink down into his shoes, and, as he told his mother afterward, he wished he could "die on the little mat you're supposed to wipe your feet on."

He wiped his feet carefully, took a last desperate look up and down the empty hall, and tapped on the door.

"Come in," called a deep, pleasant voice, not at all the kind of voice you would expect a stern, cross principal to use.

Bobby opened the door and went in. Mr. Carter was writing at Miss Wright's desk and there was no one else in the room. Bobby knew the principal by sight, for he had seen him once or twice in the corridors. It seemed that Mr. Carter also knew the pupils.

"Well, Bobby," he said cheerfully. "You are Bobby Blossom, aren't you?"

Bobby nodded miserably. He was thankful for the "Bobby," for he detested the unfamiliar "Robert" Miss Mason invariably used.

Mr. Carter took off his glasses and laid them on the desk. He turned his chair slightly to face another chair drawn up at the side.

“Come sit down, Bobby, and don’t be afraid,” he said quietly. “I want you to tell me what happened in class yesterday, and why Miss Mason should think that you defaced her book.”

Bobby slid timidly into the chair and began to answer Mr. Carter’s quick questions. And then a strange thing happened. Bobby forgot to be afraid. As he told about the arithmetic lesson, where he had been a “poor loser,” and about the beautiful book that had been destroyed, and explained why he went back to the room at recess time, he forgot that he was speaking to the principal. He stood up straight beside the desk and talked to Mr. Carter as he would to Daddy Blossom. And the principal’s kind, earnest eyes, his ready smile, and deep, pleasant voice, all told Bobby that he was speaking to a friend.

“And I didn’t touch the book, honest I didn’t,” finished Bobby.

Mr. Carter put a big, firm hand over the little one resting on his desk top.

“All right, I believe you,” he said earnestly. “Some day we’ll find the boy who did it, never fear.”

“But Miss Mason thinks––she thinks I did it,” protested Bobby.

“I’ll see Miss Mason,” promised Mr. Carter briefly. “The thing for you to do is to forget this and go on as though nothing had happened. You’ll find Miss Mason fair-minded and ready to own a mistake has been made when once she is convinced. As long as you know you didn’t do it you have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

The principal put on his glasses and stood up.

“Next time you come to see me, let’s hope we have something pleasanter to discuss,” he said smilingly, holding out his hand to Bobby. “By the way, didn’t I see a little sister of yours yesterday and two other young people rather anxious to go to school?”

“That was Meg,” Bobby informed him. “She had to take the twins home. They’re crazy to come to school.” Then he backed out of the room.

“He was just as nice!” Bobby kept saying over and over to himself on his way upstairs. “Just as nice! And he doesn’t b’lieve I hurt the book.”

Tim Roon glanced at Bobby curiously as he came quietly into the room and took his seat. The class was having a reading lesson, and Tim could keep his book open and pretend to be very busy while he did several other things. He had not known that Miss Mason would make such a “fuss,” as Tim called it, over the book, and he was mean enough to be glad that Bobby was getting all the punishment. Tim had a wholesome fear of Mr. Carter, having met the principal on several occasions when his bent for mischief had brought Miss Mason’s wrath down on him. He wondered what Mr. Carter had said to Bobby.

The weather was clear and crisp now, and the grammar and high-school boys could talk of nothing but football. The primary grades, of course, were considered too little to have a team, but nevertheless they knew a good deal about the game and secretly thought they had just as fine players among them as the older boys.

“Let’s go round and watch ’em practice,” suggested Palmer Davis to Bobby after school, the afternoon of the day he had seen Mr. Carter. “Meg will tell your mother. Won’t you, Meg?”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Meg sunnily. “Go on, Bobby, she won’t care.”

“I’ll be back by five,” called Bobby after her.

Meg wanted to see the football teams practice, but she was attending to her music very diligently and practiced her hour after school faithfully. She meant to be able to play a march for assembly as soon as she was asked.

Bertrand Ashe joined Palmer and Bobby at the corner.

“Stop at my house a minute,” he urged, “and I’ll get my football. We can have a little game.”

Bertrand had a cousin at boarding school who always sent him the nicest presents for Christmas. He had a knack of knowing what a boy wanted, and this football was a gift from him.

The football under Bertrand’s arm, the three boys walked on to the large vacant lot back of the grammar-high-school building, which was used by the teams as a football field.

“Get some more of the fellows,” directed Palmer. “My, it’s kind of muddy, isn’t it?”

The field was a little soft, but the two teams were out practicing, and a crowd of enthusiastic followers, in small groups about the lot, were watching them. Palmer, who was a leader among the younger boys, succeeded in rounding up more of their class to complete his team, among them Tim Roon and his inseparable friend, Charlie Black.

“Come on over in this corner,” said Palmer, beckoning them to follow him. “Old Hornbeck’s down to watch the high-school squad, and like as not he’ll order us off if he sees us. Those high-school boys think they own the earth.”

There was a ruling, as Palmer knew, that the smaller boys should keep off the field while the others were playing football. The rule was made to keep them from getting in the way and possibly hurt. But the primary lads were sure they were being treated unfairly.

“Line up,” ordered Palmer, trying to read a crumpled paper he had taken from his pocket. “Here’s a signal I copied for us to try.”

The boys had only a hazy notion of the way a real game of football was played, but they kept their eyes desperately on the ball. They had no team to play against, as Palmer said it was hard enough to get boys for one team, let alone two, but they had often had great fun knocking the ball around among their own eleven.

“Six-ten-nine-nought,” read Palmer.

He dashed forward, Bobby after him. Together they fell on the ball and rolled over. Then Bobby rose with it tucked neatly under his arm, and began to run. Tim Roon and Charlie Black tried to head him off, slipped, and tripped him.

Bobby had fallen on the ball and he meant to keep it under him. He managed to shake off Charlie Black and half rose, watching his chance to run. Just as he was ready for a dash, a stout, heavy shoe struck him in the side and knocked him down again.

“Foul!” shrieked Bertrand excitedly. “Tim Roon, you’re a cheat!”

Bobby struggled to his feet, blind with anger.

“You––you–––” he sputtered, and rushed at Tim fiercely.

CHAPTER XI

OLD HORNBECK’S PICTURE

Tim met Bobby half way, and they grappled. The other boys closed in around them.

“Pound him good, Bobby!” advised Palmer excitedly. “The sneak! Kicking a player like that!”

“Sit on his head,” squeaked Bertrand in a funny little voice excitement always gave him. “Sit on his head, the big coward!”

Bobby did not even hear these. He was hitting wherever he could, and grunting like a small pig as Tim rained blows upon him. Tim was so much older and stronger that all the advantage was on his side. Charlie Black was hovering around the outside of the circle, not daring to say anything for Tim, but hoping his chum would win.

“Hornbeck!” suddenly cried Charlie in wild alarm. “Hey, fellows, here comes old Hornbeck. If he catches us–––”

Charlie never finished his sentence, but took to his heels, followed by the rest of the boys. Only Tim and Bobby, rolling over and over on the ground, had not heard the warning.

“Quit this this instant, I tell you!” roared a hard voice, and some one grasped Bobby by his collar, jerking him to his feet. “Fighting like two wildcats! What do you mean by such performances on the school grounds?”

It was Mr. Hornbeck, and he had Bobby in one hand and Tim in the other, and as he spoke he shook each boy violently.

“What do you call it you’re doing?” he roared again.

Tim ran out an impudent tongue, but said nothing. The committeeman’s eyes under his high silk hat glared at Bobby.

“We were just playing football,” stammered Bobby hastily.

“Football!” cried Mr. Hornbeck, giving each of them a tremendous shake. “Football! You young imps! Don’t tell me you don’t know of the rule that primary-grade boys are to stay off the field during football practice. If I ever catch you around here again I’ll have you up before Mr. Carter. He’ll teach you to remember.”

Still retaining his grip on their collars, Mr. Hornbeck marched them across the lot to the street.

“Now scoot,” he ordered.

They needed no second command. Tim fled up the street and Bobby ran down, each as fast as he could go.

“My stars and stripes!” ejaculated Sam Layton, meeting Bobby as the boy came running in the driveway, “is that what they do to you at school? Learning must be rather hard work.”

No wonder Sam was surprised. Bobby’s coat was torn, his blouse grimed with mud. A great bruise was on one cheek, and his cap was crushed and dirty. His hands and face looked as though he had been rolling in the mud, which, as we know, he had.

“I had a fight,” explained Bobby coolly. “I guess I do look a little dirty.”

“Come on out to the garage and I’ll brush you off. No sense in scaring your mother stiff,” said Sam. “Who won the fight?”

“I guess old Hornbeck did,” answered Bobby thoughtfully, rubbing a finger that was sore from handling the ball. “Anyway, he had a lot to say about it.” And then he gave Sam a few

particulars as he cleaned himself.

A few days later Meg and Bobby were going home from school when Meg suddenly remembered that she had forgotten her books.

“Well, I suppose we can go back and get ’em,” grumbled Bobby, “but why won’t to-morrow do? What do you want them for to-night?”

“I told you,” said Meg patiently. “Mother is going to cover them with calico, the way she had her books when she was little. Some of the covers are so torn I hate to have to use them.”

“All right,” sighed Bobby. “We’ll go back. I think girls have the worst memories!”

By the time they reached the school––they had been half way home––all the other children had gone. The janitor was sweeping out the lower hall and grinned cheerfully at them without stopping his work. Then they passed on to their own room.

“Doesn’t it seem funny without anybody here?” asked Meg, beginning to take the books out of her desk.

“Suppose I was the teacher!” Bobby seated himself in Miss Mason’s chair and rapped on the desk with her ruler. “First grade, go to the board!”

“Oh, don’t,” giggled Meg, half frightened. “She might come in and catch you. Bobby, stop it!”

Bobby jumped from the chair and scrambled off the platform as the door opened.

“Hello!” said a cheerful, chirping voice, and Dot and Twaddles marched into the room.

“We thought we’d come after you,” announced Dot serenely. “Mother said it was time for you to be coming. But we didn’t meet you.”

“I had to come back and get my books for Mother to cover,” explained Meg. “Don’t touch anything, Twaddles. You can carry my reading book. Come on, Bobby, don’t let’s stay.”

But the twins had no intention of leaving that minute.

“Isn’t it nice in school?” beamed Twaddles, eyeing the bowl of goldfish on the window sill with interest. “Oh, Bobby, won’t you draw us a picture?”

Twaddles had spied the chalk and the blackboard.

“All right, just one,” promised Bobby. “What’ll I draw?”

“Old Hornbeck,” snickered Twaddles, who had never seen the head of the school committee, but who never missed a word of anything the older children brought home.

Meg and Dot and Twaddles watched with absorbing interest as Bobby took up a piece of chalk and began to draw.

“These are his whiskers,” explained Bobby, making a lot of curly marks. “Here’s his chin. This is his coat collar. And now I’ll make his high silk hat.”

Bobby had to stand on his tiptoes to draw this, and the chalk screeched piercingly as he bore on it heavily. But the high hat really did look like the one Mr. Hornbeck wore.

“Now some funny little legs, and he’s done,” announced Bobby, drawing two wavering lines that had to serve the figure for legs.

“Come on now,” urged Meg. “Mother will be looking for us. Rub it out, Bobby. Suppose Miss Mason found it in the morning?”

“The janitor cleans the boards every night,” replied Bobby indifferently.

“Rub it out,” insisted Meg. “It would be mean if some one found it and blamed you.”

The spirit of mischief seized Bobby. He picked up the eraser as if to do what Meg asked, then dropped it and took up a piece of chalk.

“This is Old Hornbeck,” he scrawled under the picture, the words running downhill across the board.

A noise at the door caused them all to look around. There stood Mr. Hornbeck!

Luckily Bobby stood before the drawing he had made, and quick as a flash Meg darted forward. Slipping in behind her brother, she managed to rub the sleeve of her dress over the writing and smudged the greater part of the picture. Bobby, who had stood as if paralyzed, the chalk in his fingers, turned and with a sweep of the eraser blotted out the rest.

“What are you children doing here?” demanded Mr. Hornbeck severely.

He had not noticed the blackboard at all, for Twaddles had fixed him with such a fascinating stare the moment he entered the room that he had not been able to see any one else at first.

“Do these small children come to school?” he asked. “Why are they here, then? And aren’t you the boy I stopped from fighting only last week?”

“Ye-s, sir,” answered Bobby. “We’re going now. My sister had to come back for her books.”

“There must be no loitering about the building after school hours,” said the committeeman sternly. “I’ll speak to Miss Wright. When you have finished your school work, you are to go home immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” murmured the four little Blossoms, the twins joining in.

“Then go,” ordered Mr. Hornbeck majestically.

The four were very glad to go, and they lost no time in getting out of the building.

“My, I’m glad you rubbed that out, Meg!” said Bobby gratefully. “Just suppose he had seen it!”

“What would he do?” clamored Twaddles. “Keep you in?”

“He might expel me,” Bobby informed him gloomily. “Going to school is no joke, Twaddles. Is it, Meg?”

“No, it isn’t,” returned Meg absently, her eyes and thoughts on something else. “What does that big poster say, Bobby?”

She pointed to a large poster pasted on a pole across the street.

“Let’s go over and read it,” suggested Bobby.

They crossed over, and Bobby spelled out the large black and red letters for them.

“Goody,” he announced, “it’s a circus! With a p’rade, and everything! We’ll ask Daddy if we can go.”

CHAPTER XII

AT THE CIRCUS

Although a cold wind was blowing, the four little Blossoms stayed till Bobby had read aloud every word on the poster.

“It’s next Wednesday,” he announced. “I guess they’ll let us out of school for the parade. Oh, here are some more pictures. Look at the monkeys!”

The board fence surrounding the corner lot was plastered with gorgeous circus posters of prancing yellow lions, ladies in gauzy skirts riding on pretty ponies, and mischievous monkeys climbing up ropes and doing the most wonderful tricks.

“I wish we had a monkey,” said Meg, who did her best to keep a menagerie.

“What’s that man doing?” demanded Twaddles, pulling at Bobby’s sleeve and pointing to a trapeze performer.

“He does things like that,” answered Bobby. “You didn’t go to the circus when it was here two years ago, did you, Twaddles? You and Dot were too little. But I guess maybe you can go this time.”

The four little Blossoms talked of nothing but the circus after this, and Norah said she knew that Meg dreamed of lions and tigers every night. All but one of the Blossoms were going, the children with Father Blossom in the afternoon, and Norah with Sam at night. Mother Blossom had planned to spend the night with a friend in the city, and as she didn’t care much about circuses anyway, she thought she wouldn’t postpone her trip.

“What about school?” asked Father Blossom, coming home one evening to find Twaddles wrapped up in the fur rug and playing he was a polar bear, while Meg and Bobby, each under a chair, growled like panthers, and Dot swung from the curtain pole pretending that she was a trapeze performer. “What do you do about getting excused, Bobby? Really, Dot, you’ll have that curtain pole down in a minute.”

Flushed and smiling, Dot dropped to the floor, and Twaddles came out of his rug.

“School lets us out at eleven o’clock, so we can see the parade,” announced Bobby. “Then there isn’t any more after that. Some of the school committee said it was nonsense to close the school for a circus, but Mr. Carter said he wasn’t going to give us a chance to play hooky. Everybody’s going, Daddy.”

“Dot and Twaddles want to meet the children up town to see the parade. So you think that is safe, Ralph?” asked Mother Blossom, coming into the room to tell them that supper was ready. “There will be such a crowd.”

“They mustn’t go alone,” said Father Blossom quickly. “Let Sam take them. They can all sit in Steve Broadwell’s window. He asked me to-day if they didn’t want to come. And as soon as the parade is over, come home to lunch. I’ll meet you here and we’ll get an early start.”

The Wednesday morning, circus day, came at last. Very little work was done in school, and the teachers were as glad as the boys and girls when the dismissal bell rang, for trying to keep the minds of restless little mortals on geography and arithmetic when they are thinking only of monkeys and bears and lions is not an easy task.

“Going to see the parade?” asked Palmer Davis, as Miss Mason’s class poured down the stairway.

“Going to see the parade?” the girls asked Meg.

“Sure,” Bobby answered for both. “We’re going to sit in Mr. Steve Broadwell’s window. You can see fine from there.”

Stephen Broadwell was a druggist, and his window upstairs over his drugstore was a coveted place for parades of all kinds in Oak Hill. Everything paraded up the main street past the drugstore.

Meg and Bobby found Sam and the twins already waiting for them when they hurried up the

steep dark stairs that led to the storeroom over the drugstore.

“Been here half an hour,” grinned Sam. “Dot was so afraid she’d miss the start that she wanted me to bring her in the car.”

The four little Blossoms squeezed into the window and Sam looked over their shoulders.

“Music!” cried Dot. “I hear it! They’re coming!”

“I see ’em!” shouted Bobby, leaning out to look. “My, see the horses, Meg!”

Sam pulled him in again, and in another minute the parade was marching by in full swing. You know how wonderful a circus parade is; that is, if you have ever seen one. And if you haven’t, goodness! we couldn’t begin to do it justice. Of course the very largest circuses didn’t come to Oak Hill; but still this one had many things to see. There were cream-colored horses and black ones, with girls dressed in pink and blue and white fluffy dresses and gorgeous long red coats, riding them. There were cages of animals, some of them sleeping and some switching their tails angrily and showing their teeth. There was a whole wagon load of monkeys, two bands, and even an elephant and a camel.

“Wouldn’t it be awful if we couldn’t go to the circus?” said Bobby solemnly, as the last of the procession, the clown driving his own cunning pony and cart, went up the street. “After seeing that parade I never could be happy ’less I saw them at the circus.”

“Well, we are going,” Meg reminded him practically.

“Let’s hurry,” urged Twaddles. “Maybe all the seats will be gone.”

“Daddy bought tickets,” said Dot dreamily. “Wasn’t the first pony pretty? And did you see the little dog riding on him? Do you suppose Philip could ride a pony, Meg?”

Meg was sure Philip could, if he had a pony to ride and some one to teach him.

As the four little Blossoms and Sam went downstairs whom should they meet but Doctor Maynard, an old friend of the whole Blossom family, and the doctor who had helped them set Philip’s leg when he had broken it.

“Well, well,” said the doctor, smiling, “I think I know what you have been doing upstairs––watching the circus parade. And now where to?”

“Home,” replied Meg. “We have to hurry, ’cause Daddy is going to take us to the circus this afternoon.”

“Do you suppose you would have time to have a soda?” asked the doctor.

The children thought they would, and Doctor Maynard lined them up before the fountain and let each one choose. Meg and Bobby, who always liked the same things, took chocolate, and Dot asked for strawberry, while Twaddles said he would have orange. Doctor Maynard and Sam had ginger-ale, which Meg privately thought unpleasant stuff, it tickled one’s throat so.

“Have a good time at the circus,” said the doctor, as they said good-by. “Don’t tease the elephant, and don’t let the monkeys tease you.”

“I should think the monkeys would be cold in the winter,” mused Meg, as they walked home. “Bears and lions have warm furry skins, but monkeys don’t.”

“Oh, the circus rests up in winter,” Sam assured her. “This is about the last stop they’ll make this season. When it gets too cold for folks to sit out in tents, you know, a circus goes into winter quarters. They are just as cozy then as you are. All the circus people mend their clothes and rest and plan out new tricks for the spring. And the animals rest and sleep and get their coats into good condition, and have all they want to eat.”

At home the four little Blossoms found Father Blossom, and as soon as they had finished lunch they started for the big tent. It was pitched in the same place every time the circus came to Oak Hill, a wide open space just outside the town limits, and Bobby remembered it very well.

“See all the people!” cried Dot, jumping up and down with delight. “There’s Nina and Mary and Freddy, and oh, everybody!”

It did seem as if all Oak Hill had turned out to go to the circus, and Bobby wondered if there would be any left to see it that night when Sam and Norah went.

“Tickets,” said the man at the gate. “All right, five of you.”

They went into the big tent and found their seats down near the ring. The clown was already driving around and around in his pony cart, and he waved to Dot quite as if he knew her.

“I guess he remembers me from this morning,” she said with satisfaction.

More people kept coming in, and soon the tent was crowded. Then the matinée began, with a grand parade all around the ring, horses prancing, whips cracking, the monkeys shrieking shrilly. For three hours the four little Blossoms were enthralled by the antics of the clever beasts and the men and women performers, and they could hardly believe it when Father Blossom said they must put on their hats, for the performance was over.

“Won’t there be any more?” begged Dot, putting on her hat backward in her excitement. “Just a little more, Daddy?”

“Why, we’ve been here three hours,” said Father Blossom, smiling. “The circus has to have its supper and be ready for the evening crowd, you know. You wouldn’t want them to be too tired

to go through their tricks for Norah and Sam, would you?”

Of course Dot didn’t want the circus to get completely tired out, so she agreed that perhaps it was time to go home.

They brought Norah such glowing accounts of the things they had seen that she was “all in a flutter,” she said, and indeed she did serve the potatoes in a soup dish. But as Father Blossom said, most anything was likely to happen on circus day.

“You must all go to bed extra early to-night,” he warned the children. “If Meg and Bobby are late for school to-morrow, the circus will be blamed. Dot looks as if she couldn’t keep her eyes open another minute.”

Meg and Bobby went to bed when the twins’ bedtime came, for they were tired, and they fell asleep at once. But suddenly the loud ringing of the telephone bell woke them.

CHAPTER XIII

A MONKEY HUNT

“Daddy! Daddy!” cried Meg, tumbling out of bed and running into the hall. “There’s the telephone.”

Father Blossom came out of his room. He had been reading and was fully dressed, for it was not late for grown-up people, only about ten o’clock.

“I’m going, Daughter,” he said. “Perhaps Mother has decided to come out on the late train.”

Meg leaned over the banisters to listen, and Bobby joined her there. The twins did not wake up, for they were sound sleepers.

Father Blossom took down the receiver and said “Hello!” Then they heard him ask a quick, low question or two, and then he laughed. How he laughed! He threw back his head and fairly shouted. Meg and Bobby had to laugh, too, though they had not the faintest idea what the joke was about.

When Father Blossom hung the receiver up, he was still laughing. He glanced up and saw Meg and Bobby.

“You’ll get cold. Run back to bed,” he said. “That was Sam telephoning. What do you suppose happened? The cage of monkeys upset in the ring and the door-catch broke and they’re all loose! Sam said half the audience chased them around the tent and it broke up the show.”

“Did they catch them?” asked Meg, her eyes big with interest.

“Not one,” answered her father. “Get into bed immediately, children. Perhaps you’ll meet monkeys on your way to school to-morrow.”

“I wish we could,” murmured Meg, cuddling sleepily into her warm bed. “Wouldn’t that be fun!”

“I’d like to catch a monkey,” said Bobby to himself, as he climbed into his bed in the next room. “Maybe he’d do tricks for me.”

In the morning Meg and Bobby were out in the kitchen before breakfast, getting from Norah the details of the monkeys’ escape.

“’Deed then, I hope they catch every one of ’em––bad ’cess to ’em,” said Norah indignantly. “Thieving, sly, little torments! Didn’t they claw Mrs. O’Toole’s bonnet nigh off her head last night, to say nothing of scaring her into fits? Don’t say monkey to me!”

On their way to school the children found that the news of the overturned monkey cage was known to the whole town. Not a boy who didn’t hope to be able to catch a monkey or two.

“There’s a reward offered––five dollars for each monkey,” Palmer Davis reported when he met Meg and Bobby at the school door. “Yep––my cousin told me; and he’s in the Oak Hill *Daily Advertiser* office, and I guess he ought to know.”

The majority of the children in Miss Mason’s room stayed downstairs till the “warning bell” rang and then hurried to their room to put away their coats and hats in the cloak room. It was Miss Mason’s rule that they must be quietly in their seats, ready for the march to the assembly hall, when the nine o’clock bell rang.

“It’s too cold to hang around out here, so let’s go up,” suggested Palmer Davis on this morning. “The warning bell will ring in a minute, anyway.”

Meg and Bobby were willing, especially as the air was sharp and chill, cold enough for snow Meg thought, though of course it never snowed so early in the fall, and they trooped happily upstairs. A number of boys and girls were already in the room and Miss Mason was working at her desk. Her hat was off and lay on one of the school desks, for she meant to carry it over to the teacher’s room as soon as she had worked out an example for the little girl who had asked her help.

Nina Mills pushed her way into the cloak room ahead of Meg and Bobby, and as the latter grasped the swinging door they heard Nina give a loud yell.

“Look out! Get away!” She came tumbling out of the cloak room, her face white with terror. “There’s a monkey in there!” she gasped.

Half of the pupils immediately scattered. Most of the girls fled screaming, and some of the boys followed them. Miss Mason stood up, undecided what to do.

“Get a pole and kill him!” shouted Tim Roon, from a safe position behind the bookcase. “Mash him ’fore he has a chance to fight.”

“Don’t be silly,” snapped Bobby. “A monkey can’t hurt you. Let’s catch it.”

Now, no one had any experience, in catching a monkey, and they were willing to let Bobby go about it as he saw fit.

“One of you hold open the door,” he decided after a minute’s thought. “Meg, you stand there and hold out your dress. I’ll go in and chase him out to you. Are you afraid? ’Cause I’ll stand to catch him and you can chase him out if you’d rather. Only your dress will help.”

Meg said she wasn’t afraid and took her place in the doorway. Palmer Davis volunteered to hold the door back, and the others stood as far away as they could.

“Look out! Here he comes!” shouted Bobby suddenly.

Meg spread out her skirts. A small, black ball hurled itself through the door, rolled between Meg’s feet and jumped to a desk. Like a flash the monkey ran lightly over the desk tops, down the aisle, reached the desk where Miss Mason’s hat lay, and seized it in one paw. She made a frantic grab for it, but missed. With a derisive chuckle and some remark in monkey talk that no one could understand, the monkey gained the open window and scampered down the fire-escape.

“My best, new hat! Run after him!” wailed Miss Mason.

The nine o’clock bell had rung five minutes before, but no one thought of that. The entire school knew that one of the circus monkeys had been found in Miss Mason’s room, and there was no question of holding assembly till it was driven out or captured.

Pell-mell down the stairs ran the children after the monkey. His quick eyes glanced about for a haven. A tall pine tree stood near the front gate, and toward this the monkey ran, a pack of screaming children after him. He had the best of them when it came to climbing, and before the first boy reached the tree he was half way to the top.

“We can’t climb that,” said a fourth-grade pupil disconsolately. “All the branches have been cut to keep it off the ground. How’ll we ever get that hat back?”

But Miss Mason had no intention of losing her best hat, and she was already telephoning for one of the town firemen to come and bring his longest ladder. When he heard that he was to rescue a monkey he was indignant; then when she reminded him of the reward, he thought that after all he might be able to do it. So the children had the fun of watching him come with his ladder and climb up to get, after some difficulty, both monkey and hat.

Dear knows when the children would have gone back to school after the monkey was brought down, for he proved to be a friendly animal and was evidently used to petting, and every one was eager to make his acquaintance, but Miss Wright finally came out and ordered them all into the building, and after that affairs gradually settled down. But many were the secret wishes that every school day could start with a monkey hunt.

At noon Meg and Bobby had so much to tell, and the twins were so interested and so full of self-pity to think that they couldn’t go to school and find monkeys in the cloak room that Mother Blossom’s piece of news was almost overlooked.

“I have something nice to tell you,” she said at last, smiling mysteriously, as she helped them to pudding.

“Something nice?” puzzled Meg. “Can Annabel Lee sleep on my bed?”

Meg was sure that the comfortable kitchen was not comfortable enough for the cat, and she teased persistently to be allowed to have Annabel Lee sleep at the foot of her bed at night.

“Nothing at all to do with Annabel Lee,” said Mother Blossom. “This is something that will please you all. Don’t play with your spoon, Bobby––you’ll be late going back to school.”

“Company?” demanded Twaddles, who was very hospitable.

“You saw the letter come,” laughed Mother Blossom. “Well, I’ll have to help you this much––we *are* going to have company.”

“I know,” cried Meg, almost choking over her pudding. “I know! Aunt Polly’s coming! Oh, goody!”

“Is she, Mother?” asked Bobby delightedly. “Honest? When? Soon? Can we go to meet her?”

“Yes, she’s coming,” replied Mother Blossom. “Not right away. About a week before Thanksgiving, she says, and then she’ll stay over the holiday.”

“Oh, that’s ever so far off,” objected Twaddles. “I thought maybe she’d come to-morrow or to-day.”

Mother Blossom smiled.

“Thanksgiving is only about three weeks off,” she reminded him. “Aunt Polly will be here in less than two weeks. And Meg and Bobby have to begin to practice their Thanksgiving pieces soon, don’t you, children?”

“Miss Mason’s going to give ’em out this afternoon,” replied Bobby. “Say, Mother, do I have to learn a piece? Girls like to wear fussy clothes and get up on the platform and speak or sing, but I feel awful.”

“Well, that will be for your teacher to say,” returned Mother Blossom. “I don’t suppose either you or Meg will have to learn very long poems. And think, dear, wouldn’t you like to have a part in the exercises when Aunt Polly will be here to see you?”

Bobby hadn’t thought of that. Perhaps he would like to have Aunt Polly hear him recite something.

“But nothing with gestures,” he said firmly. “I’m not going to get up there and wave my hands and yell.”

CHAPTER XIV

AUNT POLLY ARRIVES

When Meg and Bobby came home from school that afternoon they brought the news that each had been given a Thanksgiving recitation to learn. Miss Mason did not feel as sure as she had at first that it was Bobby who had spoiled her book. Mr. Carter’s championship of Bobby was not without results. Still, she did not wholly absolve him, and while she was fair enough not to mention the subject again, Bobby knew that she had not forgotten. He was surprised when his name was read aloud as one to have part in the exercises.

“There’s six of us boys,” announced Bobby to Mother Blossom. “We all come out at once and take turns saying a verse. Tim Roon and Charlie Black aren’t in it. Miss Mason said that last year they promised to learn a part and they never even tried. And then they spoiled the whole thing by staying away from the exercises.”

Meg was waiting her turn impatiently.

“I have the longest piece!” she began breathlessly the moment Bobby finished. “Five verses, Mother! And we’re not going to have any time to study in school! Will you hear me?”

Mother Blossom said of course she would, and Meg began studying her verses that very night after supper.

“You’ll have to have a new white dress,” decided Mother Blossom. “You’re growing so fast, Meg, that none of your summer dresses will do. I’ll have to call up Miss Florence and see, if you can stop in to be measured to-morrow.”

For cheerful little Miss Florence, who flitted about from house to house making pretty dresses for little girls and their mothers and sisters, had sprained her ankle a day or two before and Doctor Maynard would not hear of her leaving the house for weeks and weeks.

“Lucky it wasn’t my wrist,” Miss Florence had laughed. “I can still sew, if my customers come to me.”

Mother Blossom telephoned that afternoon, and Miss Florence said that she could begin Meg’s new dress early the next week. She would only have to come two or three times to try it on, and then Miss Florence would send word when she or Bobby might come after it. Miss Florence had no one to run errands for her.

What with practicing “pieces,” and being fitted for a new dress, and going to school and playing a little every day, the time fairly flew, and before Meg and Bobby knew it Aunt Polly had come.

“How you’ve grown!” she cried when she saw the four little Blossoms. “Why, I don’t believe Jud would know you if he saw you.” Jud had been a great friend of the children’s when they visited Aunt Polly at Brookside Farm, and they had other friends to ask after, too.

“How’s Carlotta?” demanded Meg eagerly. Carlotta was the calf given to Meg and Bobby as a reward for help they had given one of Aunt Polly’s neighbors.

“Carlotta is growing,” said Aunt Polly, smiling. “And Linda is going to school, which leaves me all alone in the house. I declare I was glad to close it and come down to you, Margaret.”

Aunt Polly was Mother Blossom’s widowed older sister. The children loved her dearly, and now, each with a red apple in hand from the bag Aunt Polly had brought them, they crowded around to ask if she wouldn’t like them to rehearse.

“Rehearse?” asked Aunt Polly, puzzled. “Rehearse what, blessings?”

“Bobby and I have to speak a piece in school the day before Thanksgiving,” explained Meg, “and

the twins always have to say poetry, too, when we practice. Mother hears us every night; don't you, Mother?"

"What fun!" Aunt Polly clapped her hands, her eyes sparkling. "I don't know when I've been to any school exercises. By all means have a rehearsal, Meg. Your father, mother and I will be the audience."

The children went out of the room, and Bobby came back alone. He went to the center of the room, bowed a little stiffly and said his six-line verse rapidly.

"Of course it will sound better with six boys taking turns," he explained, slipping into a chair near Aunt Polly to enjoy the rest of the entertainment. "My, I hope I don't forget it that afternoon!"

Dot came next, walking composedly, and she gave them "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," her old stand-by; that was one verse Dot was always sure of.

When Twaddles' turn came he bowed, thought for a full minute, and then launched into the Mother Goose rhyme of "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater."

"Pumpkins are for Thanksgiving," he assured Aunt Polly anxiously, in case she should think his selection strange.

"Of course they are!" she cried, drawing Twaddles into her lap and hugging him. "I suspect Jud is packing the largest he can find into a box now to send us for our pies."

Meg had been upstairs and put on one of her summer white dresses, too short in the skirt and too tight in the sleeves, for Meg, as Mother Blossom had said, was growing very fast.

"You just ought to see the dress Miss Florence is making me, Aunt Polly," Meg said, her blue eyes shining. "It has two tucks in the skirt, and puff sleeves–––"

"And a pink sash," chimed in Dot.

"Well, what about your piece?" asked Father Blossom. "You don't suppose there is any danger that you'll march up on the platform Wednesday afternoon and recite a verse about pink sashes and tucks, do you, instead of Thanksgiving?"

Meg was sure she wouldn't do that, and to prove it, she recited her whole five verses very nicely, and with no mistake.

"She has gestures––Mother showed her how," said Bobby, very proud of his pretty sister. "I don't like to wave my hands, but I like to watch other people do it."

A few days before the all-important Wednesday Miss Florence telephoned––she had a telephone in her house now that she could not go out––and said that Meg's dress was finished. When Bobby and Meg came home from school at noon for lunch, Mother Blossom told them to go around by Miss Florence's house that afternoon and get the frock.

"Dear, dear, if I'm not stupid," fussed Miss Florence, folding the crisp, dainty folds of the dress a few minutes after the children had rung her bell and announced they were to take the package. "Here I've gone and saved this nice box for it, and it hasn't a lid. If I lay sheets of tissue paper over it and pin them carefully, do you think you can carry it?"

"Sure I can," said Bobby. "You don't need a cover, Miss Florence. Come on, Meg."

"Be careful and don't drop it," warned Miss Florence, hobbling on her lame ankle to the door to watch them down the steps. "Isn't it a miserable day out!"

Meg and Bobby didn't think it was a miserable day, though the wind was raw and cold, and the ground, soft from the first freeze, was slippery and muddy. But, as Bobby had once said, they were fond of "just plain weather."

"Oh, dear," wailed Meg when they were half way home, "here comes that mean, disagreeable Tim Roon. He's the hatefulest boy!"

Tim Roon, as usual, was loitering along, his hands in his pockets, his lips puckered up for the whistle that didn't come. Tim never quite did anything he started to do, whether it was to weed his father's garden or whistle a tune.

"Hello!" he said, stopping close to Meg. "What have we in the large box?"

"Go 'way," returned Meg fearfully. "Leave Bobby be. That's my new dress."

Tim's voice changed to a high, squeaky, thin note.

"'Call me early, Mother,'" he chortled, "'for I'm to be Queen of the May, Mother, I'm to be Queen of the May.'"

"You take the box, Meg," said Bobby angrily, "while I hit that big chump."

Meg reached for the box, but Tim was quicker and he knocked it spinning. Then away he went, running at top speed, his shouts of laughter echoing up the street.

"I'll bet it's all mud!" mourned Meg, crying a little. "Oh, Bobby, did it fall in a puddle?"

Bobby was peeping under the tissue paper covers.

"'Tisn't hurt a mite," he declared. "Not one spot, Meg. See, the box fell right side up. Isn't that lucky?"

Just at that moment Charlie Black came flying around the corner on his roller skates and ran

into Meg before he could stop himself. He knocked her down and landed on top of her.

“Meg, Meg, did he hurt you?” Bobby had Meg on her feet in a second. “No? You sure? Well, just you watch me pound him.”

Bobby was furious, and hitting Charlie Black he felt would relieve his feeling almost as much as a fight with Tim Roon. The two bad boys never lost an opportunity to torment him or Meg, and Bobby felt that here was a heaven-sent opportunity to even up old scores.

“I’ve got my skates on,” whimpered Charlie, as Bobby leaned over him. “Don’t you dare touch me, Bobby Blossom! Go ’way! I tell you ’tisn’t fair! I’ve got my skates on!”

“Well, I don’t care if you have!” roared Bobby. “Stand up, and see what you’ll get! Stand up!”

Charlie much preferred to lie down, and now he simply rolled over on his back and pawed the air wildly.

“Don’t you dare touch me!” he kept crying. “Go away! Leave me alone.”

Bobby looked disgusted.

“You leave me alone and I’ll give you something,” Charlie whimpered. “Honest I will, Bobby.”

“What?” said Bobby shortly.

Charlie Black sat up and tried to grin at Meg.

“I got four kittens,” he said, careless as usual of his grammar. “They’re beauties.”

CHAPTER XV

MR. FRITZ’S KITTENS

Of course Meg’s attention was held at once.

“Where did you get any kittens, Charlie?” she asked, half inclined not to believe him.

Charlie wriggled along the ground till he was a safe distance from Bobby, then scrambled to his feet.

“A man gave ’em to me,” he said. “He wants me to drown ’em!” and away he skated as fast as he could go.

“Bobby!” Meg almost screamed. “Bobby! don’t let him drown the kittens.”

Meg was, as her family said, “crazy” about all animals, and kittens were her special delight. But then Bobby didn’t like the idea of drowning four helpless little cats in the icy cold water of the pond, either. He started after Charlie Black, and Meg went after him and really wished she didn’t have a new dress for a moment because she found the box a nuisance to carry.

Charlie could skate fairly well, but that was when he was watching where he was going. This time he was watching Bobby instead and as a result he failed to see a curb and went over it with a jolt that landed him on his knees. Before he could rise, Bobby and Meg had caught Up with him.

“Where––are––the––kittens?” gasped Meg.

“In a bag,” Charlie answered sullenly.

“You give them to us,” said Bobby sternly. “If no one wants them, we can take them home.”

“The man said to drown them––they’re his cats and I guess he has a right to say what he wants done with them,” Charlie retorted.

Meg thought about this a minute.

“I’ll go see the man,” she announced calmly. “Where are the kittens?”

Now whether Charlie really didn’t want to drown the little, soft helpless kittens, or whether he was afraid of Bobby––perhaps his reasons were mixed as reasons often are––no one knew. But he said that Meg and Bobby could come home with him and he would give them the kittens.

The bag was in the woodshed and it was such a dirty old bag––made of canvas that looked as though it had been carried for years and never washed––that involuntarily Bobby held it at arms’ length from him.

“They won’t bite you,” said Charlie scornfully, thinking he was afraid of the kittens––they could be heard mewing inside the bag.

“What is the man’s name and where does he live?” Meg asked quietly.

“Ah, I was only fooling––he doesn’t care what happens to those old cats,” said Charlie. “It’s Mr. Fritz––over on Beech Street. He’s cross enough anyway without being asked a lot of extra questions.”

But Meg was determined to see Mr. Fritz and she made Bobby go around to Beech Street with her.

“It’s just as Charlie said––they are his kittens,” she argued. “And of course if he says they have to be drowned they have to be: only we won’t do it.”

“Don’t you want to look at them?” asked Bobby, swinging the bag gently.

Meg shook her head.

“Not if somebody has to drown them,” she said.

Mr. Fritz lived in a large old-fashioned house, set back from the street. When the children rang the door bell a deaf woman who did all the housework for him––he was an old bachelor––came to the door.

“We don’t want to buy anything,” she declared, frowning at the bag Bobby was carrying.

“We’re not selling anything––these are kittens,” Bobby explained, but without raising his voice. He didn’t know she was deaf.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“Kittens!” Bobby repeated, a little more loudly. “Mr. Fritz’s kittens.”

“He wears gloves,” said the maid crossly. “And my bread is in the oven and I can’t be bothered.”

Meg stood on tiptoe and shouted.

“Is Mr. Fritz home?” she cried.

To her dismay a deep voice somewhere back in the house answered her.

“That he is,” it said. “Won’t you come in?” and there stood Mr. Fritz himself, looking at her curiously.

Bobby with the bag and Meg with her dress box, stepped inside and the maid closed the door. That made the hall so dark that poor Bobby, unable to see where he was going, but moving ahead blindly, walked to the basement stairs and made the most fearful clatter as he lost his balance and fell half way. He managed to catch one arm around the banister rail and check his descent, but the bag of kittens went all the way.

“Bobby! Are you hurt?” Meg called fearfully.

“Bless me, child, I hope you haven’t broken anything,” said Mr. Fritz anxiously.

Bobby felt his way to the bottom of the stairs and found the bag.

“Not unless I smashed the kittens,” he said cheerfully, toiling up again.

Mr. Fritz opened the door of a room at the back of the house and enough light came out to show Bobby and Meg how to go in. Once inside they found it was evidently Mr. Fritz’s sitting room. It was rather untidy, but comfortable and warm, with books and papers spread about.

“Now what can I do for you?” said Mr. Fritz, looking at his visitors very kindly and trying not to show that he was surprised to see them.

“I’m Bobby Blossom,” Bobby introduced himself, “and this is my sister Meg. We came to ask you if you would care if your kittens weren’t drowned.”

“Eh? My kittens––not drowned?” repeated Mr. Fritz. “But they are––I gave that Charlie––what’s his name––Black, I gave Charlie Black fifty cents to drown them for me this afternoon.”

Meg looked ready to cry. Any one that *paid* to have kittens drowned, must, of course, get what he paid for.

“He didn’t say you paid him,” Bobby said slowly. “Meg and I thought perhaps you wouldn’t care and we could keep them.”

“Are those the kittens in that bag?” asked Mr. Fritz. “Do you mean to tell me that worthless boy hasn’t done anything with them? And he sends them back to me? Wait till I catch him!”

“Oh, he didn’t send them!” Meg cried in quick alarm. “He told us he had them and Bobby and I wouldn’t let him drown them. Then he said they were your kittens and you wanted them drowned. And of course you can do anything you want to with your kittens, but I thought you wouldn’t mind if we kept them.”

Mr. Fritz nodded his head several times.

“I see,” he said at each nod. “I see––you want to save the kittens and let them grow up and howl on the back fences. Well, I think there are enough cats in this world already. But as long as I don’t have to take care of the kittens, it makes no difference to me what becomes of them. You may have them, if you wish.”

Meg thanked him and was ready to go, but Bobby had something else on his mind.

“Do you want that fifty cents back from Charlie Black?” he asked.

“You could get it for me, I suppose,” Mr. Fritz said with a laugh. “No, Bobby, let him keep his fifty cents. After all, he earned it, for the stipulation was that he was to dispose of the kittens. I didn’t say they *must* be drowned.”

Mr. Fritz shook hands with Bobby and Meg and asked them to come and see him again. He went to the door with them, which was fortunate for the hall was so dark Meg was afraid Bobby

would fall downstairs a second time, and watched them go down the gravel path.

“We’ll have to hurry,” said Bobby. “Mother will wonder where we are.”

The twins saw them coming and their sharp eyes spied the bag the first thing.

“What have you got, Bobby?” shrieked Dot. “Bobby, what’s in the bag?”

“You needn’t tell the neighborhood,” Bobby said a little crossly, for he was tired, “but kittens are in it.”

“Kittens!” Twaddles shouted, leaping ahead to spread the news.

“Mother!” he called, racing into the house. “Oh, Mother, come and see the kittens Bobby has in a bag!”

Mother Blossom and Aunt Polly and Norah came into the hall and Bobby sat down on the rug, with Meg and the twins almost on top of him.

“They’re four,” he explained as he began to untie the string that was knotted around the bag. “Charlie Black was going to drown them for Mr. Fritz, but he said Meg could have them. Maybe they are pretty.”

He turned down the bag and a black kitten walked out. Then a gray and white one. Then a yellow one and next a striped “tiger” kitten.

Norah started to laugh.

“Four, is it?” she giggled. “Then I must be seeing double, Bobby, for there’s six already and––yes, here’s another––that makes seven!”

Well, there they were––seven kittens, none especially fat and none especially pretty, all “just kittens,” as Twaddles named them.

But Meg thought they were lovely and she was anxious to take them out to the garage and give them some warm milk. The garage was always chosen as a good place to feed stray animals, for the cement floor could be more easily washed than the linoleum that was the pride of Norah’s heart in the kitchen.

“Meg, darling, we simply cannot keep all those kittens,” Mother Blossom declared regretfully. “Seven kittens are a great many and I don’t believe Annabel Lee will welcome so much company.”

“But, Mother, we can’t drown them!” said Meg, her eyes round with horror. “We have to take care of them.”

“I think you children will have to find homes for them,” Mother Blossom announced. “Think over all the folk you know and try to find homes for these homeless little cats. That will be something for you to do, too, Dot and Twaddles.”

“I’m going to think now,” said Twaddles, sitting down on the lowest step of the stairs.

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT TWADDLES THOUGHT ABOUT

“I’m going to think, too,” Dot declared, sitting down beside Twaddles, to his great annoyance.

“You always talk,” he complained, as Dot pushed him over toward the wall.

Meg and Bobby postponed their thoughts till they had taken the kittens out to the garage and fed them. They begged a piece of rug from Norah and an old box from Sam, and they made a comfortable bed.

When they came in from their labors, Twaddles was still sitting on the stair step, but Dot had disappeared.

“How’s your brain working, Twaddles?” asked Bobby, as older brothers do.

“It’s working,” Twaddles answered soberly.

Norah said supper was ready at that moment, so there wasn’t time to find out what Twaddles was thinking. And after supper came bedtime at its usual fast pace––the four little Blossoms were sure that something happened to the clock between supper and bedtime; the hands came unscrewed, or something, and went around twice as fast as they worked the rest of the day.

“We’ll find homes for the kittens when we come home this afternoon,” Meg promised at the breakfast table the next morning. “I’ve fed them, Mother, and can’t Dot and Twaddles take them some milk this noon? Miss Mason wants us to stay and practice the songs for Thanksgiving.”

Norah had put up a neat little lunch for Meg and another for Bobby and the twins were almost beside themselves with envy. Would the time ever come, they thought, when they could go to school and sometimes have to stay over the noon hour and not come home to lunch? They were

sure there could be nothing more exciting, except the actual going to school, than taking one's lunch in a boy and eating it with a crowd of other hungry children.

"Let's go see the kittens," Twaddles suggested, as soon as Bobby and Meg had gone.

Dot trotted after him to the garage. They found Sam busily picking up little furry bodies and scolding under his breath.

"These blamed cats," he told the children, "don't know when they're well off. They keep climbing out of that box and first thing you know I'm going to step on one; then there will be a nice squalling."

Dot and Twaddles helped him stuff the kittens into the box and he pulled the rug over the top, saying that if it was dark enough inside, perhaps they would go to sleep.

"I have to take your father out to the foundry," said Sam, opening the big door. "Now see that I don't run over any live stock on my way out."

The twins watched him take the car and saw to it that no kittens were in his path. As soon as he had gone, Twaddles looked at Dot.

"Let you and me find homes for 'em," he said distinctly.

"Homes for the kittens?" Dot asked doubtfully.

"Of course. We can do it," declared Twaddles with magnificent confidence.

"Suppose people don't want them," Dot offered. "Lots of people have cats."

"Well, lots haven't," was Twaddles' reply to this argument. "We'll keep going till we find the folks who haven't any."

But Dot was not feeling ambitious that morning.

"They're awfully heavy to carry," she said, "and they cry."

Then Twaddles showed that he had spent much time and thought on his plan.

"We'll only carry one––for a sample!" he told her triumphantly. "A cat is a cat, isn't it? And we'll explain they have different colors but look just alike except for that. We'll go to different houses, the way Mr. Hambert does, and let folks order a kitten. Then we can take it to them."

"Mr. Hambert has samples!" cried Dot, beginning to understand. "Easter he has a nest and Christmas he has spun sugar Santa Clauses––and he only takes one. We can do it, can't we, Twaddles?"

"Didn't I just say we could?" demanded Twaddles. "Which one is the best sample?"

They hastily upset the box and the kittens rolled out on the floor. Dot wanted to take a black one and Twaddles leaned toward the yellow one, so, not without some argument, they finally compromised on the "tiger" kitten.

Mother Blossom and Aunt Polly were busy in the house, and when Twaddles and Dot came in to get their hats and coats and explained they thought they could find a home for a kitten, no one objected to their going out. They could go anywhere in Oak Hill with perfect safety and they knew just about every one in the town.

"We won't say anything about finding homes for all of the kittens," said Twaddles as he stuffed the "sample" inside his coat, "because if we can't get folks to take them, Bobby and Meg will laugh. Where'll we go first, Dot?"

"The grocery store," said Dot, who couldn't get Mr. Hambert and his methods of doing business out of her mind.

"Grocery stores don't want cats," Twaddles argued. Nevertheless he turned up the street that would lead him to the main store in Oak Hill, where kind Mr. Hambert was a clerk when he wasn't out delivering orders in the country.

"They do, too," shot back Dot. "They need cats to keep the mice away––Meg said so once. Anyway, we can ask 'em."

There were a number of people in the store lined up before the counter and the twins had to await their turn. They were so interested in watching one of the clerks slice ham with a machine, that when Mr. Hambert came up to them, smiling, and asked what he could do for them, they jumped.

"We don't want to buy anything," said Twaddles hesitatingly.

"Then you must be selling something," Mr. Hambert laughed good-naturedly.

"No––but we came to see if you didn't want a cat," Twaddles announced a bit jerkily. "We––we brought you a sample!" and he pulled the little kitten from his coat and held it out to the astonished grocery clerk.

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Hambert "Are you selling cats?"

"We're not selling them," Twaddles insisted. "We're getting homes for them. This is a sample."

Mr. Hambert began to laugh and so did several of the customers who had been listening.

"Come, now, Hambert, you do need a cat," said the man who was waiting for the sliced ham. "Didn't you tell me last week your old Minnie died? Now here's her successor. All ready delivered at your door and no trouble for you at all."

“I can’t take cats,” Mr. Hambert retorted. “Tell you what you do, Twaddles, go into the office and see what Mr. Morris has to say.”

Mr. Morris was the owner of the store and he had a desk in a small private office far back from the counters. Twaddles marched down the aisle and Dot after him. They found Mr. Morris reading a newspaper and looking as though he might not be very busy. He smiled when he saw them.

“Hello!” he said, “what brings you calling?”

“Don’t you want a nice kitten, Mr. Morris?” asked Twaddles persuasively. “It will grow up and catch mice and rats, and it won’t need much to eat. If Minnie is dead, you really need a cat, don’t you?”

Well, it took several minutes to make the grocery man understand what they were trying to do, and then he laughed and they had to wait till he wiped his eyes and could speak plainly. But, after all this, Mr. Morris said he would be very glad to take the kitten and it could live in the store and would be sure of a comfortable home.

“But we can’t leave this one––it’s a sample,” Dot explained earnestly. “We’ll bring you your kitten this afternoon––it will be just like this one, only a different color.”

“Are you sure it will be as good a mouser and as sweet-tempered and as pretty?” demanded Mr. Morris. “I wouldn’t want to be disappointed.”

The twins assured him that all the kittens were lovely and that gave him another thought. He wanted to know how many there were.

“Seven,” said Twaddles, “and Mother said seven are too many to keep.”

“I agree with your mother,” Mr. Morris said. “And I believe, if you go to see my sister, Mrs. Tracy, that she will be glad to take a kitten; she’s expecting her little grandson to come for a visit next week and she would be glad to have a pet ready for him. You know where Mrs. Tracy lives, don’t you? Over on Hammond Square?”

Twaddles and Dot knew, and they hurried over to Hammond Square eagerly. Sure enough, Mrs. Tracy was glad to have a kitten, and like her brother, she wanted to keep the “sample.” But when matters were explained to her and she understood that she could have her kitten that afternoon, she was quite satisfied.

“That makes two,” said Dot, as they went down the steps.

Finding homes for the five other kittens wasn’t so easy. The twins went to every house where they knew any one and some of these people already had cats and others didn’t want any cats. But they listened politely, though they always laughed, and some of them told the twins of friends who might be glad to have a kitten.

The poor little “sample” was growing quite rough looking and frowsy, from being pulled in and out of Twaddles’ coat so many times, and it was almost noon when they had disposed of all but one cat.

“Let’s go ask Miss Alder,” suggested Dot as they passed a handsome house set in a circle of evergreen trees.

“She’ll chase us,” Twaddles argued. “She can’t stand children––they make her nervous.”

Dot had heard this, too––Miss Alder was a wealthy and elderly woman who lived alone except for two maids. She didn’t have much to do with her neighbors and she had nothing at all to do with the children in Oak Hill. She didn’t like them and most of them were afraid of her.

“You needn’t come, if you don’t want to, but I’m going to ask her,” said Dot, turning in at the path which led to the white doorway of the Alder house.

“Well––I’ll come––you’ll need to show her the sample,” Twaddles murmured, wondering what made his knees feel so queer.

CHAPTER XVII

MISS ALDER’S HOUSE

Dot rang the bell and waited quietly, but Twaddles kept hopping up and down the steps. He was down, when the door opened suddenly and he was so afraid Dot would go in and leave him outside that he rushed up the steps, two at a time, and the maid nearly shut the door in his face.

“Go away, boy!” she said distinctly. “We don’t allow boys around here.”

This was discouraging, but Dot refused to be dismayed.

“I’m a girl,” she stated firmly. “Could I see Miss Alder?”

“Well––I’ll ask,” the maid answered. “Wait a minute.” And she closed the door.

“Mother says it is very rude to keep any one waiting at the door,” whispered Dot. “She always asks ’em in.”

“You can come in,” the maid announced, opening the door before Twaddles could answer Dot. “But the boy will have to wait.”

“He has to come, too––he has the sample,” said Dot, who had no intention of going into a strange house alone.

“Are you selling something?” the maid demanded. “It won’t do you any good to see Miss Alder if you’re selling something; she won’t look at samples.”

“For goodness’ sake, Agnes, are you going to stand there at the door all day?” said some one. “Either come in and close the door or go outside and finish your conversation.”

Dot glanced up and saw a face peering over the maid’s shoulder. She saw dark eyes and white hair and a rather grim mouth. But Dot smiled her friendly little smile and spoke clearly.

“How do you do, Miss Alder?” she said, as composedly as Meg would have said it. “Don’t you want a little kitten? We’re trying to find homes for them and we have––all but one.”

Now Miss Alder liked cats and she found herself liking Dot. But she couldn’t unbend all at once.

“Are you sure your feet are clean?” she asked crisply. “Well, then, come in, both of you. I can’t stand all this cold air. Come into the sitting room and tell me what you call it you are doing.”

Twaddles and Dot followed her into a pleasant sunny room, with a fireplace in which a fire was merrily blazing. Miss Alder’s chair was by the window and she pointed to a sofa nearby.

“Sit down there and keep your feet on that rug,” she directed the twins. “If there is one thing I cannot stand it is to have my floors tracked up. Now what were you trying to tell me about a kitten?”

Twaddles pulled the little tiger kitten out of his coat and held it toward her.

“That’s the sample,” he said gravely. “We had seven of them––Meg and Bobby brought them home, because Mr. Fritz was going to have them drowned.”

“And you’ve been going around, trying to get homes for them?” said Miss Alder approvingly. “Why, I think that is very kind of you. Could you find people who would give them homes?”

Twaddles told her where they had been and what the people had said, and all the time he talked Miss Adler was stroking the kitten which she had taken on her lap. She asked a great many questions and she did not laugh at all. She was most serious, and when she had heard the whole story, she said that she thought they were just as good as they could be.

“Most children wouldn’t go to so much trouble,” she said. “Why, you are friends worth having––and I should like a kitten very much indeed. Why don’t you let me keep this one?”

Twaddles looked uncertainly at Dot.

“It’s the sample,” he said uneasily.

“You mean it *was* the sample,” Miss Alder corrected. “If you have six kittens promised, you don’t need any more samples; and if you leave this one here with me, why, that will be one delivered and will save you that much extra trouble. Besides, I particularly like tiger cats.”

The twins saw how sensible this was, and they agreed to leave the kitten. Then Miss Alder showed them her pets––she had canaries and goldfish and a white poodle dog who seemed to like the kitten very much, though it humped up its back and spit at him and would have nothing to do with him.

“They’ll be friends in less than a week,” Miss Alder declared comfortably.

The noon whistle reminded Dot and Twaddles that they would be late for lunch and they hurried off, but not before Miss Alder had asked them to come and see her again.

“You’ll want to see how the kitten grows,” she told them.

Meg and Bobby were home from school before the twins arrived and the family were just sitting down to lunch. They had explained to their mother and their Aunt Polly that Miss Mason had put off the practicing of the Thanksgiving songs until the next day.

“So we ate the lunch that Norah put up for us at recess, Mother; and we can eat the regular lunch now,” said Meg.

“The kittens are one short,” said Bobby as soon as the twins came in sight. “Meg and I went out and counted them.”

“Where have you children been all the morning?” Mother Blossom asked Dot and Twaddles. “You look excited, too. Is anything the matter?”

The twins were bursting with news––any one could see that.

“All you have to do, Meg,” Twaddles informed her casually, “is to deliver the kittens; we have it all fixed.”

“Deliver them? Deliver them where?” said Meg, staring.

“Oh, around,” Twaddles returned airily. “Dot and I have been out and found homes for them all.”

“Not the whole seven?” said Bobby, staring in turn. “Seven homes, Twaddles? Who wants seven

kittens?”

Mother Blossom looked at Aunt Polly and laughed.

“Do you wonder Daddy says he doesn’t know what to expect when he comes home at night?” she said. “Twaddles and Dot, will you please stop talking in riddles and tell us where you have been and what you have done?”

Thus encouraged, the twins began to talk at once, and though it was difficult to understand them the family finally managed to learn what they had done.

“My goodness, I call that a good morning’s work,” said Aunt Polly at last. “To find places for seven kittens! Why, Dot and Twaddles, there isn’t anything you can’t do, if you stick to a plan as you have to this.”

“But one kitten is lost,” Meg pointed out. “There are only six left.”

“That was the sample,” said Twaddles calmly. “We left it at Miss Alder’s house, because she likes tiger cats.”

And then Bobby and Meg were surprised again, to hear that the twins had been to Miss Alder’s house, and they had to hear what had happened there and what she had said to them.

“Will you help us take them around this afternoon?” asked Dot. “We can do it faster if we all go; they are so squirmy to carry.”

Of course Bobby and Meg promised to help deliver the cats and they hurried home from school to keep their promise. As the houses where the kittens were to go were pretty well scattered––the twins had worked hard and they had covered most of Oak Hill that morning––it was decided that Dot and Twaddles should take three of the kittens and Meg and Bobby the other three. The twins were to go to the grocery store and two houses near there, including Mrs. Tracy’s, while Meg and Bobby would deliver the cats at the other end of the town.

“You never know what those children are going to do,” said Meg as she and Bobby walked down Spruce Avenue, “but I am awfully glad they found homes for the kittens; Mr. Fritz will be glad, too. I don’t believe he wanted them drowned, but he didn’t know what to do with them.”

Bobby nodded absently. He was watching some one further up the street.

“That looks like Charlie Black,” he said. “I don’t want to pass him when we’re carrying these kittens––he might try to start an argument and hurt them; let’s go down this next street and cut around the block.”

Meg was willing, for she knew that Charlie Black––who was on his roller skates again, might try to snatch a kitten, and would certainly do his best to torment them in some way.

The people who had promised the cats a home were very glad to see the kittens, and Meg and Bobby felt glad to think that the little creatures would be sure of care and attention. Meg was planning to tell Annabel Lee all about it that night, when around the corner came Charlie Black and almost skated into them before he saw them.

“You take the kitten, Meg,” said Bobby hurriedly. “I’ll wait for you.”

There was only one kitten left and Meg ran across the street with it and up the steps of Mrs. Anderson’s house.

She had to wait a few minutes for some one to answer the doorbell and a few minutes longer were required to explain to Mrs. Anderson’s sister, who had not been at home that morning when the twins called, and then Meg ran back to rejoin Bobby.

“What are you doing, peddling cats?” asked Charlie disagreeably.

“We’re not drowning them,” Bobby replied.

“Think you’re smart, don’t you?” said Charlie. “Well, Bobby Blossom, you’re not so smart as you seem to think––catch me, if you can,” and he made a dive at the little basket in which Meg had carried the kittens.

He twisted it from her hands and shot off down the street, Bobby after him. But Charlie had a good start and as the pavement was cement and exceptionally smooth, he seemed to be having things his own way for the first two blocks. Then he turned his head to see how close Bobby was and an ash box tripped him.

“Go away!” he whined as Bobby caught up with him, Meg following closely on his heels. “Go away––don’t you dare touch me!”

Bobby leaned over him and took the basket, handing it to Meg.

“You get up and let me punch you!” he said hotly, but Charlie was in no haste to get to his feet.

“Let me alone,” he cried. “You let me alone and I’ll tell you something, Bobby! Honest I will. I’ll tell you who spilled the ink on Miss Mason’s book.”

Meg heard and almost dropped her basket.

CHAPTER XVIII

TIM ROON IS FOUND OUT

Bobby continued to stand over Charlie Black, ready to pounce on him should he try to jump and run.

“Honest, Bobby,” Charlie whined again. “I’ll tell you who spoiled the book.”

“Well, who did?” demanded Bobby gruffly.

“You won’t hit me? Promise,” said Charlie, very much frightened.

“All right, I won’t hit you,” promised Bobby. “Who did it? You?”

Charlie Black scrambled to his feet.

“I’ll get killed if I’m found out,” he declared, “but Tim Roon did it, Bobby. I saw him. He spilled ink all over it, ’cause he was sore at Miss Mason. An’ he wouldn’t let me tell.”

Bobby and Meg were so excited that they hardly knew when Charlie Black skated away, after insisting that Tim Roon would certainly murder him if he ever discovered that he had told the secret.

“Tell? Of course we’ll tell everybody,” said Meg, dancing along beside Bobby, who had taken the box from her again. “Oh, hurry up, Bobby. You’re so slow, and we must let Mother know.”

At home the news was received with great rejoicing, and the twins had to relieve their feelings by banging on the dining-room gong till Norah descended on them and confiscated the padded stick. But Bobby was rather sober through all the noise, and presently Mother Blossom perceived this.

“I don’t think it’s fair to tell,” said Bobby, when she questioned him. “I’ll get Tim Roon into trouble, and Charlie Black, too. Course I’d like Miss Mason to know I didn’t do it, but I hate to make such a fuss.”

“Isn’t he silly, Mother?” demanded Meg. “If you don’t tell, Bobby Blossom, I’m going to school before you’re up and tell every one I meet.”

“Now, Meg!” remonstrated Mother Blossom. “This is Bobby’s affair, remember. But, Son, you shouldn’t feel as you do. Every one who heard that you were accused of spoiling the book has a right to know that you have been absolved. I will write Miss Mason a note and explain it fully, and then Tim and Charlie will have to take the consequences. Any boy that will stand aside and let another be unjustly accused deserves whatever he gets.”

Mother Blossom’s cheeks were quite pink and her blue eyes had little sparks in them, just as Bobby’s did sometimes when he was angry.

“Mother is right,” declared Father Blossom, who had come home early and had heard the story from Aunt Polly, Meg, the twins, and Norah before he had taken off his overcoat. “Don’t fret about Tim and Charlie––those young scamps need a couple of interviews with Mr. Carter if they are not to grow up utterly reckless.”

So the next morning Bobby carried a note to Miss Mason, and when she had read it she actually hugged him and begged his pardon as simply as if he had been a grown-up friend. She wanted to tell the whole class how mistaken she had been, but Bobby nearly fainted at the thought and begged her not to.

“I’ll tell them one by one, then,” announced Miss Mason, who, it seemed, could not do enough to make up for her unkindness.

Before the morning session was called nearly every child in the room knew that Bobby Blossom had not touched Miss Mason’s book but that Tim Roon was the culprit. Tim and Charlie had been sent down to the principal’s office by Miss Mason before assembly, and Miss Wright had telephoned for Mr. Carter. He came over at once, and Tim and Charlie spent an unhappy hour with him.

“You’re both cowards,” he told them hotly. “I’d have you up before the class to confess your underhanded scheme if I didn’t know that it would embarrass Bobby more than it would you. The school law won’t let me keep you longer than an hour at night, but every night for a month you’ll stay an hour after school. And, Tim, here’s a note for your father. Don’t try to get out of delivering it. I’ll call him up at six o’clock to-night and ask if he has received it.”

Tim gave his father the note that night, and something very serious happened to him. More than that, he had to work every Saturday for a long, long time in his father’s store to help pay the money his father insisted on sending to Miss Mason. Of course it was impossible to replace the book, for the autographs could never be collected again, but Mr. Roon was determined to pay Miss Mason the sum her friend had spent for the book. It was a great deal of money, but “the Roons always pay up,” declared Mr. Roon, “and if it takes Tim the rest of his lazy life, he’s got to work out the money.”

Soon every one but Tim forgot the book, for the Thanksgiving Day exercises were drawing

nearer and nearer. The Blossoms always had wonderful times Thanksgivings, and this year, with Aunt Polly with them, they meant to have the best holiday yet.

Such boxes and barrels as came down from Brookside Farm, packed by Jud and his father, and reminding the four little Blossoms of the good times they had had that summer. There were red apples and green apples, yellow pumpkins, potatoes, turnips and beautiful crisp celery, black walnuts and butternuts, wonderful for cake and candy and what Dot called “plain eating,” and, most wonderful of all, two great plump turkeys.

“Those are some you saw running around, Twaddles,” Aunt Polly told him as he helped her unpack the box. “Remember how they looked? You thought they were chickens.”

The morning before Thanksgiving Day fresh eggs and butter came by parcels post.

“If you’d only sent a tablecloth and a few forks, Polly,” laughed Mother Blossom, “I shouldn’t have had a thing to do about getting dinner.”

Meg and Bobby couldn’t think much about the dinner. Wasn’t this the day they were to recite?

“Wouldn’t it be too awful,” said Meg, at the breakfast table, “if when I got up on the platform I should forget every word?”

“But you won’t,” Mother Blossom assured her. “You’ll remember every word. See if you don’t. You come home to lunch, don’t you, children, and get dressed?”

“Yes. And then we have to be back by half-past one,” said Bobby importantly. “The exercises begin at two. Where’s my bag of apples?”

The children of the Oak Hill school every year brought gifts of food to the Thanksgiving Day exercises which were afterward distributed among the poor families of the town. Bobby took apples this year and Meg was to take two jars of home-made preserves.

They hurried through the morning at school, rushed home and found a devoted family on hand to help them dress.

“There were such lots of things brought,” chattered Meg, as her mother buttoned her into the new white frock and Aunt Polly tied her hair-ribbon. “They liked your potatoes, Dot.”

“And my popcorn?” asked Twaddles anxiously.

The twins, not to be cheated out of the fun, had insisted on sending Thanksgiving gifts, too.

“Yes, they thought that was great,” said Bobby, shining and neat in his new suit. “Hurry, Meg.”

“Come early and get good seats,” called Meg as they trotted off.

At exactly two o’clock the whole school marched into the assembly room and took the seats reserved for them. The first and second grades were seated on the platform, because experience had taught the teachers that some of the younger children invariably fell either up or down the platform steps if they had anything at all to do with them. On one side of the platform the school committee sat, headed by Rufus Hornbeck.

Bobby’s recitation followed the first song, and he and the five boys with him breathed a great sigh of relief when they were through and went back to their seats free to enjoy the rest of the afternoon.

Then came more songs and more recitations, and then finally it was Meg’s turn. She had discovered where her father and mother and Aunt Polly and the twins were sitting, and when she came out to speak she looked straight at them and smiled. And the five verses were as straight and clear in her mind as though she were reciting them to Mother Blossom in the sitting room at home.

“What a dear little girl, and what a pretty dress!” said an old lady sitting back of the Blossoms, as Meg made her little bow at the end and the room broke into hearty applause.

Twaddles turned around to beam approvingly at the old lady.

“That’s my sister,” he informed her.

Rufus Hornbeck and two others of the committee had to make rather long, tiresome speeches, and when that was over the audience joined in singing “My Country, ’tis of thee,” and the exercises were over.

“Oh, look!” exclaimed Bobby, as they opened the school door and stepped out into the street.

It was almost dark, for the days were fast shortening, and a fine, light snow was falling softly. Already the ground and walks were white, and the fences were taking queer shapes.

“Snow!” chorused the four little Blossoms in ecstasy. “Let’s ask Sam to mend the sleds to-night.”

The snow fell all that night and all the next day and people said it was an old-fashioned white Thanksgiving. An old-fashioned white winter it proved to be, too, and if you want to hear what fun the four little Blossoms had playing in the white snow, you will have to read the next book about them, called “Four Little Blossoms and Their Winter Fun.”

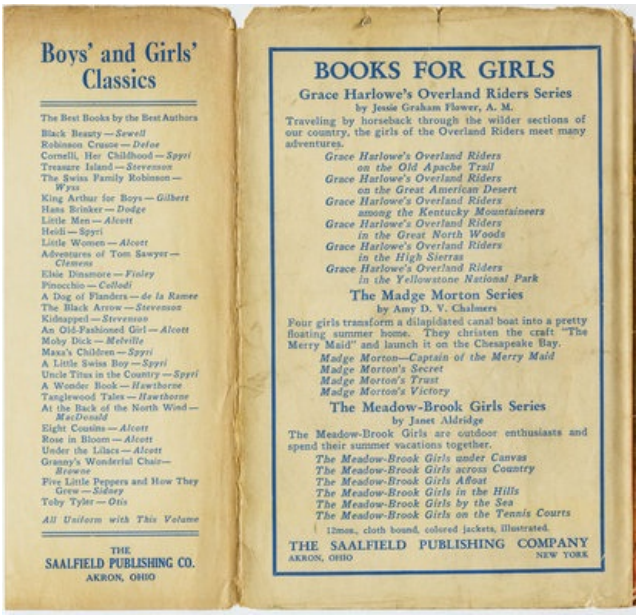
“If we only had new sleds,” sighed Bobby. The sleds they had were somewhat old and broken.

“We might get new ones,” said Meg hopefully.

“I’m going to learn to skate this winter,” remarked Twaddles.

“So am I,” added his twin.

And here, for a time, we will leave the four little Blossoms and say good-by.



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