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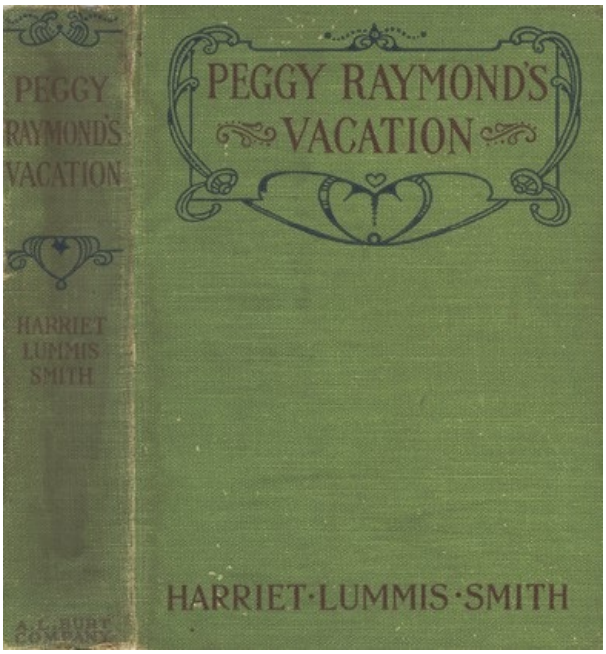


# Peggy Raymond's Vacation

*Stories by*

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

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# PEGGY RAYMOND'S VACATION

## Or Friendly Terrace Transplanted


By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Author of

"Peggy Raymond's Success," "Peggy Raymond's Schooldays," "Peggy Raymond at 'The Poplars,'" "Peggy Raymond's Way."



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# Peggy Raymond's Vacation

## CHAPTER I
## THE EXODUS

"Do you know, Peggy Raymond, that you haven't made a remark for three-quarters of an hour, unless somebody asked you a question?–and, even then, your answers didn't fit."

It was mid-June, and as happens not unfrequently in the month acknowledging allegiance to both seasons, spring had plunged headlong into summer, with no preparatory gradations from breezy coolness to sultry days and oppressive nights. Friendly Terrace wore an air of relaxation. School was over till September, and now that the bugbear of final examinations was disposed of, no one seemed possessed of sufficient energy to attempt anything more strenuous than wielding a palm-leaf fan.

On Amy Lassell's front porch a quartet of wilted girls lounged about in attitudes expressive of indolent ease. Tall Priscilla occupied the hammock, and Ruth was ensconced in a willow rocking-chair, with a hassock at her feet. Peggy had made herself comfortable on the top step, with sofa cushions tucked skilfully at the small of her back, and behind her head. Amy herself sat cross-legged like a Turk on the porch floor and fanned vigorously to supplement the efforts of the lazy breeze.

Peggy, pondering her friend's accusation with languid interest, dimpled into a smile which acknowledged its correctness. "Yes, you're right, Amy," she admitted. "And, if you want to know the reason, it's only that my thoughts were wandering. The fact is, girls, I'm just hankering for the country."

"Then what's the matter–"

The suggestion on the tip of Amy's tongue never got any farther, for Peggy, seemingly certain that it would prove inadequate, shook her head with a vigor hardly to be expected from her general air of lassitude.

"No, Amy! I don't mean going to the park, or taking a trolley ride out to one of the suburbs. What I want is the sure-enough country, without any sidewalks, you know, and with roads that wind, and old hens clucking around, and cow-bells tinkling off in the pastures, and oceans of room–"

"And sunsets where the sun goes down behind green trees, instead of peoples' houses," Ruth interrupted dreamily. "And birds singing like mad to wake you up in the morning."

"Yes, and berries growing alongside the road, where you can help yourself," broke in Amy with animation. "And apples and nuts lying around under the trees, and green corn that melts in your mouth, and–"

"Not all at the same time, though." The correction came from Priscilla's hammock. "You wouldn't find many nuts dropping from the trees at this time of the year."

Before Amy could reply, the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the most universally popular visitor ever gracing Friendly Terrace by his presence. He came often, without any danger of wearing out his welcome. Every household watched for his arrival, and felt injured if he passed without stopping. On Amy's porch four necks craned, the better to view his advance, and four pairs of eyes were expectant.

"If there's anything for me," observed Peggy hopefully, "mother'll wave, I know." But Mrs. Raymond, who sat sewing on her own porch, opened the solitary letter the postman handed her, and proceeded to acquaint herself with its contents in full view of the watchers on the other side of the street.

"This must be Mother's Day," Amy exclaimed disapprovingly, when, a moment later, she accepted

from the letter-carrier's hand a fat blue envelope directed to Mrs. Gibson Lassell. But, in spite of her rather resentful tone, she scrambled to her feet, and carried the letter through to the shaded back room where her mother lay on the couch, with a glass of ice-tea beside her, devoting herself to the business of keeping cool.

Some time passed before Amy's return. Priscilla's hammock barely stirred and the rhythmic creak of Ruth's rocking-chair grew gradually less frequent. Peggy, cuddling down among the cushions, let her thoughts stray again to the joys of being without sidewalks, and all that was implied in such a lack. The porch with the silent trio would not have seemed out of place in that enchanted country where the sleeping princess and her subjects dreamed away a hundred years.

All at once there was a rush, a slam, a series of little rapturous squeals. The Amy who had carried the blue envelope indoors, had been mysteriously replaced by a young person so bubbling over with animation as to be unable, apparently, to express herself, except by ecstatic gurgles and a mad capering about the porch.

Had a crisp October breeze all at once dissipated the languors of the June day, the effect on the occupants of the porch could hardly have been more immediate. Priscilla came out of the hammock with a bound. Peggy's cushions rolled to the bottom of the steps, as Peggy leaped to her feet. And so precipitately did Ruth arise, that her rocking-chair went over backward, and narrowly escaped breaking a front window.

"Amy Lassell!" Peggy seized her friend by the shoulders and gave her a vigorous shake. "Stop acting this crazy way, and tell us what's happened."

"Talk of fairy godmothers!" gasped Amy, coherent at last. "Talk of dreams coming true! Oh, girls!"

"What is it?" Three exasperated voices screamed the question, and even Amy began to realize that her explanation had lacked lucidity. She tried again.

"That letter, you know. It's the strangest coincidence I ever heard of. But haven't you noticed lots of times–"

"Oh, Amy," Ruth implored, "do let that part wait, and get to the point."

"Why, this is the point. That letter was from an old friend of mother's, Mrs. Leighton. She has a home up in the country, Sweet Fern Cottage I think they call it, or is it Sweet Briar–"

"Sweet chocolate, perhaps," suggested Priscilla with gentle sarcasm. "One will do as well as another. Go on."

"It's the real country, Peggy, for you have to take a four-mile stage ride to get to the railway station. And Mrs. Leighton wanted to know if some of us wouldn't like to use the cottage, as she is going to Europe this summer. And, right away, mother said it would be so nice for us girls to have it."

The clamor that broke out made further explanations impossible. It was Amy's turn to be superior.

"Girls, if you all keep talking at once, how can I ever tell you the rest? The cottage is all furnished, Mrs. Leighton says, and we would only have to bring bedding and towels, and things of that sort. And she says you can buy milk and vegetables very reasonably of the farmers in the neighborhood, so it wouldn't be expensive when we divided it up among us."

"We could do the cooking ourselves," interrupted Peggy.

"Of course. Mrs. Leighton takes up her own servants, but if we found somebody to do our washing, and scrub us up occasionally, we could manage the rest."

For half an hour the excited planning went on, and then four enthusiastic girls separated to subject the enterprise to the more cautious consideration of fathers and mothers. And that was the end of listlessness on Friendly Terrace for that hot wave, at least. At almost any hour of day, one might see a girl running across the street, or bursting into another girl's house without warning, in order to set forth some new and brilliant idea which had just popped into her head, or to ask advice on some perplexing point, or to answer the objections somebody had raised. Though only four families on the Terrace were personally interested in the solution of the problem, the whole neighborhood took it up. It was generally agreed that the girls had worked hard in school, and were tired, and a summer in what Peggy called "the sure-enough country" would be the best thing in the world for them all.

Elaine Marshall, whom Peggy waylaid as she came home from her work, not long after the plan had been broached, gave it her immediate approval, pluckily trying to hide her consternation at the thought of Friendly Terrace without Peggy. But, in spite of her brave fluency, something in her eyes betrayed her, as she knew when Peggy slipped an arm about her waist and hugged her remorsefully.

"Now, Peggy Raymond, don't go to being sorry for me, and spoiling your fun. You mustn't fancy you're so indispensable," she ended with a feeble laugh.

"If only you had two months' vacation, instead of two weeks," mourned Peggy.

"I'm lucky to get two weeks, when I've been in your uncle's office such a little while. And, anyway, Peggy, I couldn't leave home for long as things are, even if my vacation lasted all summer."

And it really was Elaine Marshall, speaking in that cheery, matter-of-fact tone, scorning the luxury of self-pity, conquering the temptation to look on herself as an object of sympathy. Peggy regarded her with affectionate admiration, quite unaware how important a factor she herself had been in bringing about a transformation almost beyond belief. 9

After twenty-four hours of reflection Friendly Terrace was practically a unit on the question. The fathers saw no reason why the girls should not go, and the mothers found a variety of reasons why they should. The question of a chaperon had been a temporary stumbling-block, for none of the mothers especially concerned had felt that she could be spared from home. But before the difficulty had begun to seem serious, Amy had exclaimed: “I believe Aunt Abigail would jump at the chance.”

“Aunt Abigail!” Priscilla repeated, with a thoughtful frown. “I don’t remember ever hearing you speak of her.”

“She’s father’s aunt, you know, but I always call her Aunt Abigail.”

There was a pause. “Then she must be a good deal like a grandmother,” Ruth hinted delicately.

“Why, yes. Aunt Abigail is seventy-five or six, I don’t remember which.”

Priscilla and Ruth looked at Peggy, their manner implying that the crisis demanded the exercise of her undeniable tact. Peggy made a brave effort to be equal to the emergency.

“Don’t you think, Amy, dear,” she hazarded, “that it would be a little trying to the nerves of an old lady to chaperon a lot of noisy girls–” 10

Amy’s burst of laughter was such an unexpected interruption that Peggy’s considerate appeal halted midway and the other girls stared. And Amy screwing her eyes tightly shut, as was her habit when highly amused, finished her laugh at her leisure, before she deigned an explanation.

“You’d know how funny that sounded if you’d ever seen Aunt Abigail. She’s along in her seventies, so I suppose you would call her old, but in a good many ways she’s as young as we are–Oh, yes, younger, as young as Peggy’s Dorothy.”

There was something fascinating in the idea of a chaperon, characterized by such singular extremes. The girls listened breathlessly.

“Mother says it’s all because she’s lived in such an unusual way. You see, her husband was an artist, and they used to travel around everywhere. Sometimes they’d board at a hotel, and sometimes they’d have rooms, and do light housekeeping, and, then again, they’d camp, and live in a tent for months at a time. And Aunt Abigail hasn’t any idea of getting up to breakfast at any special hour, or being on hand to dinner.”

The expression of anxious interest was fading gradually from the faces of the three listeners, and cheerful anticipation was taking its place. 11

“She forgets everything she promises to do,” Amy continued. “It isn’t because she’s old, either. She’s been that way ever since mother can remember. She’s always losing things, and getting into the most awful scrapes. We should have to look after her, just as if she were a child. And then she’s the jolliest soul you ever knew, and she’s a regular Arabian Nights’ entertainment when it comes to telling stories.”

After the vision of a nervous old lady who would demand that the house be very quiet, and get into a nervous flutter if a meal were delayed fifteen minutes, Amy’s realistic sketch was immensely appealing. “Girls,” Peggy exclaimed, “I move we invite Aunt Abigail to chaperon our crowd!” And the motion was carried not only unanimously, but with an enthusiasm Aunt Abigail would certainly have found gratifying, though it might have surprised her, in view of her grand-niece’s candid statement.

Peggy had pleaded to be allowed to take Dorothy along. “I can’t bear to think of that darling child spending July and August in a fourth-floor flat, looking down on the tops of street-cars. And I don’t think she’d bother you girls a bit.”

“Bother!” cried Amy generously. “We need something to fall back on for rainy days, and Dorothy’s a picnic in herself. Between her and Aunt Abigail we’ll be entertained whatever happens.” 12

Priscilla, too, had suggested an addition to the party. “You’ve heard me speak of Claire Fendall, girls. I saw a good deal of her at the conservatory, and she’s as sweet as she can be. Well, we’ve talked of her visiting me this vacation, and I don’t feel quite like announcing that I’m going off for the entire summer without asking her if she’d like to go too.”

The girls had fallen in with the suggestion with the thoughtless cordiality characteristic of their years. It was Amy who suggested later to Peggy that sometimes she thought there was such a thing as a girl’s being *too* sweet. “I met Claire Fendall once when I went with Priscilla to a recital,” Amy remarked. “And–Oh, well, I’m not one of the people who like honey for breakfast every morning of the year.” But the only reply this Delphic utterance called forth from Peggy was a reproachful pinch.

In a week’s time they were ready. A special delivery letter had carried to Mrs. Leighton the grateful acceptance of her offer, and the keys had come by express the following day, rattling about in a tin box, and with the tantalizing air of secrecy and suggestiveness which always attaches itself to a bunch of keys. Aunt Abigail had been invited to chaperon the party and had accepted by telegraph. Peggy’s father had made an excuse for a business trip to New York, and 13

had brought his small granddaughter home with him, full of the liveliest anticipation regarding her summer. And Priscilla had received a twenty-page letter from Claire Fendall, declaring that it would be perfectly heavenly to spend two months anywhere in Priscilla's society, and that nothing in the world could possibly prevent her from coming.

There had been no time during that week for lounging on porches, or swinging in hammocks. Afternoon naps were sternly eliminated from the daily program, and the day began early enough to satisfy the originator of the maxim which gives us to understand that early rising is synonymous with health, wealth and wisdom. Trunks were packed, amid prolonged discussion as to what to take and what to leave behind. The mothers, as is the way of mothers the world over, insisted on warm flannels, and wraps, rubbers and rain-coats, to provide for all extremes of weather. Peggy's suggestion that the country was a fine place for wearing out old clothes, had been received with enthusiasm, and faded ginghams and lawns of a bygone style, far outnumbered the new frocks with which the Terrace girls had made ready for the season.

The June day appointed for the departure dawned with such radiant brightness that all along the Terrace it was accepted as a good omen. Early and hurried breakfasts were in order in a number of homes. Dorothy viewing her oatmeal with an air of disfavor, launched into the discussion of a subject which had occupied her thoughts for some time.

"Aunt Peggy, if I should see a bear up in the country, do you s'pose I'd be 'fraid? I'd jus' say to him, 'Scat, you old bear!'"

"Eat your oatmeal, Dorothy." Peggy's voice betrayed that her excitement was almost equal to Dorothy's own. "There aren't any bears where we're going."

"Ain't there?" Dorothy's tone indicated regretful surprise. "I guess God jus' forgot to make 'em," she sighed, and fell to watching her grandmother's efforts to make the oatmeal more tempting, by adding another sprinkling of sugar to a dish already honey-sweet.

But even such a disappointment as this could not continue in the face of the thrilling nearness of departure. The trunks had gone to the station the night before, and now upon the porches of the various houses, suitcases, travelling bags, and nondescript rolls of shawls and steamer rugs began to make their appearance. Conversations were carried on across the street in a fashion that might have been annoying if everybody along the Terrace had not been astir to see the girls off. Elaine Marshall already dressed for the office, slipped through the opening in the hedge which separated her home from Peggy's, and took possession of a shawl-strap and umbrella.

"Of course I'm going to the station with you," she said, replying to Peggy's look. "There'll be room enough, won't there, if Dorothy sits in my lap?"

"I guess you'd better hold Aunt Peggy 'stead of me," Dorothy objected promptly, "'cause I'm going to have a birf-day pretty soon, and I'm getting to be a big girl." And then she forgot her offended dignity, for the hacks were in sight.

It was well that these conveyances had arrived early, for the process of saying good-by was not a rapid one. There were so many kisses to be exchanged, so many last cautions to be given, so many promises to write often to be repeated,–reckless promises which if literally fulfilled would have required the services of an extra mail-carrier for Friendly Terrace–so many anxious inquiries as to the whereabouts of somebody's suitcase or box of luncheon, to say nothing of Amy's discovery at the last minute that she had left her railway ticket in the drawer of her writing desk, that for a time the outlook for ever getting started was gloomy indeed. But at last they were safely stowed away, and while the girls threw kisses in the direction of upper windows, where dishevelled heads were appearing, and little groups on doorsteps and porches waved handkerchiefs, and "Good-by" sounded on one side of the street and then on the other, like an echo gone distraught, the foremost driver cracked his whip and they were off.

"My gracious me," a pleasantly garrulous old lady said to Mrs. Raymond half an hour later, "ain't it going to be lonesome without that bunch of girls. It's the first time I ever knew Friendly Terrace to seem deserted."

"It will seem a little lonely, I imagine," Mrs. Raymond answered cheerily, and then she went indoors and found a dark corner where she could wipe her eyes unseen. But when Dick came around to express his opinion as to the team that would win the pennant that season, she was able to give him as interested attention as if two long months were not to elapse before she saw Peggy again.

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# CHAPTER II

## A COTTAGE RE-CHRISTENED

The stage creaked up the slope. The four horses, sedate enough during the long drive, wound up with a flourish, the off-leader prancing, and all four making that final exhibition of untamed spirit, which is the stage-driver's secret. And from the body of the vehicle arose a chorus of voices.

"Is this it? Oh, girls, this can't really be it!"

The stage-driver took it on himself to answer the question.

“You asked for Leighton’s place, and this here’s it. Now, if you want suthin’ else, all you’ve got to do is to say so.” He folded his arms with the air of being only too well accustomed to the vagaries of city people, an implication which his passengers were too elated to notice. They scrambled out, not waiting for his assistance, Peggy first, extending a hand to Aunt Abigail, who waved it briskly aside, and jumped off the steps like a girl. Her bright dark eyes–she never used spectacles except for reading–twinkled gaily. And her cheeks crisscrossed with innumerable fine wrinkles, were as rosy as winter apples.

Dorothy followed Aunt Abigail, flinging herself headlong into Peggy’s extended arms, and then wriggling free to satisfy herself as to what the country was like, as well as to scan the landscape for a possible bear. The others crowded after, and the stage-driver relenting, began to throw off the trunks.

The Leighton cottage was a rambling structure, suggesting a series of architectural after-thoughts. Its location could hardly have been surpassed, for it stood on a rise of ground so that in any direction one looked across fertile valleys to encircling hills. A porch ran about three sides of the house, shaded here and there by vines. In spite of a certain look of neglect, emphasized by the straggling branches of the untrimmed vines, and the cobwebs everywhere visible, its appearance was distinctly prepossessing.

“Going to get these doors open any time to-day?” asked the stage-driver, apparently struggling for resignation.

“The keys, Aunt Abigail!” Amy cried.

“Bless you, child, I haven’t any keys!” the old lady answered. Then, with no apparent loss of serenity, “Oh, yes, I do remember that you handed them to me. But I haven’t an idea where they are now.”

The girls looked reproachfully at Amy. After having set forth the peculiarities of her relative in such detail, she should have known better than to have entrusted her with anything as important as keys. But clearly it was no time for recrimination, and after a moment all of them were following Peggy’s example, and hastily examining the various articles of hand luggage which contained Aunt Abigail’s belongings. Owing to the old lady’s habitual forgetfulness these were numerous, for the articles which had been left out when her trunk was packed had made the journey in shawlstraps and large pasteboard boxes. Just as every one had become thoroughly convinced that the keys had been left behind in Friendly Terrace, Dorothy made a discovery.

“I hear bells,” she announced dreamily, “little tinkly bells like fairies.”

Aunt Abigail jumped, and this time everybody’s ears were sharp enough to hear the fairy-like chime.

“Of course,” cried Aunt Abigail beaming. “They’re in the pocket. I told my dressmaker that if I was the only woman in the United States to boast a pocket, I wouldn’t be satisfied without one. I will say for her though, that she located it in the most inaccessible place she could possibly have chosen. Girls, come and help me find it.”

Aunt Abigail stood resignedly, while a group of girls made a rush, like hounds attacking a stag. The pocket was located without much difficulty, though some valuable time was expended in finding the opening. At last the keys were produced in triumph, the front door was unlocked, and the stage-driver grunting disdainfully, carried in the trunks.

Indoors the cottage lived up to the promise of its exterior. The front door opened into a big living-room furnished comfortably, though simply, and with a large brick fireplace at one end. Beyond this were the dining-room and kitchen, with store-room and pantry, and a long woodshed running off to one side. The second floor consisted of a number of small bedrooms, each with just enough in the way of furnishings to provide for the comfort of the occupants, without adding to housekeeping cares. From this story a staircase of ladder-like steepness, led up to an unfinished garret, empty, except for a few pieces of dilapidated furniture and sundry piles of magazines and paper-covered books, which had undoubtedly contributed to the entertainment of the cottagers in past seasons.

Thanks to an early start, it was little past noon when the arrivals from Friendly Terrace took possession. Luncheon was first in order. The dust of the winter having been removed from the dining-table, various alluring pasteboard boxes were placed upon it, and seven hungry people ranged themselves in expectant rows. The piles of sandwiches melted away as if by magic, and as they disappeared, the rooms silent for so long, echoed to the whole-hearted laughter which is the best of all aids to digestion.

The meal over, the trunks were ransacked for old dresses, gingham aprons, and sweeping caps, and under Peggy’s leadership, the girls fell to work.

“Now we’ll divide up, so as not to get in each other’s way. Priscilla, suppose you and Claire take the up-stairs rooms. Ruth and I will start here in the living-room, and Amy–where is Amy, anyway?”

Amy’s sudden appearance in the doorway was the signal for a general shriek of protest. The evening before, her father had presented her with a kodak, which she now pointed toward the group of girls in their house-maid’s uniforms, with the air of a hold-up man, demanding one’s money or one’s life.

“Oh, don’t please,” cried Claire, cowering and hiding her face. She wore her gingham apron with an unaccustomed air, and had looked askance at the sweeping cap, before she had followed the example of the other girls, and pulled it over her soft, brown hair. “Please don’t take my picture,” she implored in a doleful whimper. “I look like such a fright.”

“Oh, do stand in a row with your brooms and mops over your shoulders,” pleaded Amy. “You look perfectly dear–and so picturesque.”

Peggy perceived that Claire’s consternation was real, and sternly checked her friend. “Amy Lassell, put that camera away, and get to work. It will be time enough to take pictures when this house is fit to sleep in.”

By four o’clock at least a superficial order had been secured. The fresh breezes blowing from the windows on all sides, had aided the efforts of the girl housekeepers in banishing dust and mustiness, and they were ready to wait another day for the luxury of clean windows. By this time, too, most of the girls were frankly sleepy, for the prospect of an early start had interfered seriously with the night’s rest of some of them, and the freshly aired, newly made beds presented an irresistible temptation. 24

The indefatigable Peggy however, emerging from the wash-bowl as glowing as a rose, scorned the suggestion of a nap. “Couldn’t think of wasting this gorgeous afternoon that way. I’m going over to the farmhouse Mrs. Leighton spoke of, and make arrangements about eggs, butter, milk, and all that sort of thing.”

“And fresh vegetables too,” exclaimed Amy with surprising animation, considering that she was in the middle of a tremendous yawn.

“Yes, of course. And girls, if the farmer’s wife will make our bread, I think it will be lots more sensible to buy it of her, than to bother with baking.”

“Oh, you fix things up just as you think best,” exclaimed Priscilla. “The rest of us will stand by whatever you agree to.” A drowsy murmur of corroboration went the rounds, and Peggy, making open mock of them all for a company of “sleepy-heads,” went blithely on her way toward the particular column of smoke which she felt sure was issuing from the chimney of the Cole farmhouse.

A very comfortable, pleasant farmhouse it was, though quite eclipsed by the big red barn which loomed up in the background. Something in the appearance of the front door suggested to Peggy that it was not intended for daily use, and she made her way around to the side and knocked. A child not far from Dorothy’s age, with straight black hair, and elfish eyes, opened the door, looked her over, and shrieked a staccato summons. 25

“Ro-set-ta! Ro-set-ta Muriel!”

“Well, what do you want?” demanded a rather querulous voice, and at the end of the hall appeared the figure of a slender girl, her abundant yellow hair brought down over her forehead to the eyebrows, and tied in place by a blue ribbon looped up at one side in a flaunting bow. Her frock of cheap blue silk was made in the extreme of the mode, and as she rustled forward, Peggy found herself thinking that she was as unlike as possible to her preconceived ideas of a farmer’s daughter. As for Rosetta Muriel, she looked Peggy over with the unspoken thought, “Well, I’d like to know if she calls them city styles.”

Peggy, in a two-year-old gingham, quite unaware that her appearance was disappointing, cheerfully explained her errand and was invited to walk in. Mrs. Cole, a stout, motherly woman, readily agreed to supply the party at the cottage with the necessary provisions, including bread, twice a week. And having dispatched the business which concerned the crowd, Peggy broached a little private enterprise of her own. 26

“Mrs. Cole, I thought I’d like to try my luck at raising some chickens this summer. Just in a very small way, of course,” she added, reading doubt in the eyes of the farmer’s wife. “If you’ll sell me an old hen and a setting of eggs, that will be enough for the first season.”

“’Tisn’t an extry good time, you know,” said Mrs. Cole. “Pretty near July. But, if you’d like to try it, I daresay we’ve got some hens that want to set.”

“The old yellow hen’s a-settin’,” exclaimed the little girl who had listened with greedy interest to every word of the conversation. Rosetta Muriel looked wearily out of the window, as if she found herself bored by the choice of topics.

“Yes, seems to me I did hear your pa say something about the old yellow wanting to set, and him trying to break it up.”

“He drove her out of the woodshed three times yesterday,” said the little girl. “And Joe tried to throw water on her, but she flew off a-squawking and Joe splashed the water over himself.” She broke into a delighted giggle at the recollection of Joe’s discomfiture, and Peggy smiled in sympathy with her evident enjoyment. Peggy’s heart was tender to all children, and this small, communicative creature was so nearly Dorothy’s size as to appeal to her especially. 27

“I think you are about the age of my little niece,” said Peggy in her usual friendly fashion. “You must come to play with her some day. You see, she is the only little girl among a lot of big ones, and she might get lonely.”

“I’ll come along with you this afternoon,” said the child readily, whereat Rosetta Muriel uttered a horrified gasp, and her mother hastily interposed.

“Annie Cole! You won’t do any such thing. Folks that snap up invitations like a chicken does a grasshopper, ain’t going to be asked out very often.”

It was arranged that Peggy should carry home a basket of provisions for the evening meal, and that Joe should come over in the morning with a larger supply, bringing at the same time the yellow hen who was desirous of assuming the cares of a family. During the discussion of these practical matters, Rosetta Muriel had maintained a disdainful silence. But when Mrs. Cole went to pack a basket, the daughter, for the first time, took an active part in the conversation. 28

“I guess you’ll find it pretty dull up here, with no moving picture shows nor nothing.”

Peggy disclaimed the idea in haste. “Dull! I think it’s perfectly lovely. I couldn’t think of missing anything up here, except folks, you know.”

“Moving pictures ain’t any rarity to me,” said Rosetta Muriel, trying to appear sophisticated. “I’ve seen ’em lots of times. But I get awfully tired of the country. I’ve got a friend who clerks in a store in your town. Maybe you know her. Her name’s Cummings, Gladys Cummings.”

Peggy had never met Miss Cummings, and said so. Rosetta Muriel went on with her description.

“It’s an awful stylish store where she works, Case and Rosenstein’s. And Gladys, she’s awfully stylish, too. She looks as if she’d just stepped out of a fashion plate.” And something in her inflection suggested even to Peggy that from Rosetta Muriel’s standpoint, she had failed to live up to her opportunities. Certainly in a gingham frock two seasons old, and faded by frequent washings, Peggy did not remotely suggest those large-eyed ladies of willowy figure, so seldom met with outside the sheets of fashion periodicals. 29

“I’ll be glad to call on you some day soon,” said Rosetta Muriel following Peggy to the door. And Peggy, basket in hand, assured her that she would be welcome, and so made her escape. The air was sweet with myriad unfamiliar fragrances. Over in the west, the cloudless blue of the sky was streaked with bands of pink. Peggy reached the road, guiltless of sidewalks, and winding, according to specifications, and broke into a little song as she walked along its dusty edge. Such a beautiful world as it was, and such a beautiful summer as it was going to be. “If I couldn’t sing,” exclaimed Peggy, breaking off in the middle of her refrain, “I believe I should burst.”

Something rustled the grass behind her, and she turned her head. A gaunt dog, of no particular breed, had been following her stealthily, but at her movement he stopped short, apparently ready to take to flight at any indication of hostility on her part. He was by no means a handsome animal, but his big, yellowish-brown eyes had the look of pathetic appeal which is the badge of the homeless, whether dogs or men.

That hunted look, and a little propitiating wag of the tail, which was not so much a wag as a suggestion of what he might do if encouraged, went to Peggy’s heart. “Poor fellow!” she exclaimed, and the mischief was done. Instantly the dog had classified her. She was not the stone-throwing sort of person, who said “get out.” He bounded forward and pressed his head against her so insinuatingly that Peggy found it impossible not to pat it, then gave a little expressive whimper, and fell back at her heels. Whenever Peggy looked behind, during the remainder of her walk, he was following as closely and almost as silently as a shadow. 30

Peggy had the time to get supper preparations well under way before the other girls made their appearance, pink and drowsy-eyed after their long naps. Priscilla was the first to come down, and she started at the sight of the tawny body stretched upon the doorstep.

“Mercy, Peggy. What’s that?”

“It’s a dog, poor thing, and the thinnest beast I ever imagined.”

“I hope you haven’t been giving him anything to eat, Peggy.”

The flush in Peggy’s cheeks was undoubtedly due to the heat of a blazing wood-fire. “I guess we won’t miss a few dried-up sandwiches,” she said with spirit. 31

“Oh, it isn’t that. It’s only that if you feed him, we’ll never get rid of him. Doesn’t he look dirty though, like a regular tramp?”

The other girls slipped down one by one, and if there were any truth in the saying that many cooks spoil the broth, Peggy’s anticipations for the supper she had planned, would never have been realized. The meal was almost ready to be put on the table, when Amy appeared, demanding anxiously what she should do to help.

“We really don’t need you a mite,” Peggy assured, with a laugh. “But I’d hate to disappoint such industry. Come here and stir this milk gravy so it won’t burn.”

Amy moved to her post of duty without any unbecoming alacrity.

“I’m not industrious,” she retorted. “And I don’t want to be. I intend to work when you girls make me and that’s all. This is my vacation and I’m going to use it recuperating.”

“I really can’t see the need myself,” Claire whispered to Priscilla, but Priscilla did not return her smile. Amy’s plumpness was a joke which Amy enjoyed as well as anybody, but Claire’s covered whisper seemed to put another face on it. Priscilla bent over a loaf of bread on the board and sliced away with an impassive face. 32

“And that reminds me,” continued Amy cheerfully, “that I feel like re-naming this cottage for the season. Mrs. Leighton wouldn’t care what we called it.”

“Why, I think Sweet Briar Cottage is a beautiful name,” Claire protested.

“I think so, too. But it’s too dressy to suit my ideas. I’m sure I never could live up to it. Say, girls, I move we call it Dolittle Cottage.”

And, in spite of Claire’s manifest disapproval, the motion was carried.

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# CHAPTER III
## GETTING ACQUAINTED

The squawking of the yellow hen served as an alarm-clock for the late sleepers in Dolittle Cottage the next morning. Peggy who was up, but was loitering over her toilet, in a most un-Peggy-like fashion, scrambled frantically into her clothes and went flying down-stairs. As she threw open the kitchen door, a gaunt dog seated on the top step, greeted her with a courteous waggle, quite as if he were the head of the establishment and bent on doing the honors.

“He wouldn’t let me come no nearer,” said a lanky, grinning individual who stood at a respectful distance, with a basket on either arm. “Looks like he’d adopted you.”

“Yes, it does rather look that way,” returned Peggy, and bestowed an appreciative pat on the dog’s head. It might have been her imagination, but she fancied that a few hours of belonging somewhere, had wrought a marked change in him. If he had been human, she would have said that he seemed more self-respecting. He neither cringed nor cowered, but scrutinized Farmer Cole’s hired man with an alert gravity, as if demanding that he show his credentials.

“Mis’ Cole sent you over this here truck,” Joe explained, “and she says she’ll have Annie bring the bread, after she’s through baking. Where d’you want this hen?”

Peggy led the way to the woodshed, improving the opportunity to sound Joe on the subject of raising chickens. And that unsophisticated youth, who in the beginning of the interview had seemed as painfully conscious of his hands and feet, as if these appendages were brand new, and he had not had time to get accustomed to having them about, lost his embarrassment in view of her evident teachableness, and fairly swamped her with information.

The eighteen eggs for the setting were in a little basket by themselves. Peggy hung over them breathlessly, and saw in fancy eighteen balls of yellow down, teetering on toothpick legs. Then her imagination leaped ahead, and the cream-colored eggs had become eighteen lusty, pin-feathered fowls, worth forty cents a pound in city markets. Peggy’s heart gave a jubilant flutter. Many a fortune had started, she was sure, with less than that basket of eggs.

The work dragged in Dolittle Cottage that morning. It was not that there was so much to do, but there were so many distractions. Peggy’s business enterprise had been the occasion of much animated comment at the breakfast table, and when Peggy mixed some corn meal and carried it out to the woodshed, the girls dropped their various tasks and came flocking after her. The yellow hen was already on her eggs, and she ruffled her feathers in a hostile fashion at the approach of her new owner. Peggy placed her offering conveniently near the nest, raised a warning finger to the chattering girls, as if there had been a baby asleep in the soap-box the yellow hen was occupying, and then tiptoed off, with an air of exaggerated caution.

“You see, she’s very excited and nervous,” Peggy explained, in a subdued voice. “But Joe said she was hungry, and I guess she’ll get off the eggs long enough to eat. Sh! She’s coming now!”

The yellow hen had indeed yielded to the temptation of Peggy’s hasty-pudding. She popped out of the box, gobbled a little of the corn meal, took one or two hasty swallows of water, and then rushed back to her maternal duties. The girls broke into irreverent giggles.

“I shouldn’t call her a beauty,” Ruth declared, as the yellow hen settled down on her eggs, spreading out her feathers till she looked as large as a small turkey.

“Her legs remind me of feather dusters,” Amy remarked pertly.

“It looks to me as if she were trying to revive the fashion of pantalets,” suggested Priscilla.

Peggy was forced to join in the general laugh. “Her legs may not be much to look at, girls,” she admitted, “but those feathers are a sign of Breed.” And with this master-stroke she led the way back to the kitchen, the dog, who had followed them into the woodshed, with every appearance of being at home, stalking at her heels.

“Peggy,” Priscilla inquired suspiciously, “have you fed that dog again this morning?”

“He’s a splendid watch-dog,” replied Peggy, evading a direct answer. “He wouldn’t let Joe come near the house.”

“I suppose that means you’ve decided to add a dog to your menagerie.”

“I don’t think I’ve been consulted about it,” laughed Peggy. “He took matters into his own hands,–or, I should say, teeth.”

“Probably you’ve named him already.”

“Of course. His name is Hobo,” answered Peggy on the spur of the moment, and Priscilla replied

with dignity that he looked the part, and returned to her cooling dish water.

“It really isn’t safe picking up a strange dog that way,” Claire murmured, sympathetically, as she reached for a dish towel. “He might turn on us at any minute.” Priscilla whose criticism had been only half serious, found the implication annoying, and when, under her stress of feeling, she set a tumbler down hard, and cracked it, the experience did not tend to relieve her sense of vexation.

“Girls,” Ruth, who was sweeping the porch, put her head in the door, “there’s a boy here who wants to know if we’d like some fresh fish.”

Various exclamations sounding up-stairs and down, indicated that the proposition was a welcome one, and Peggy stepped out of the back door to interview the dealer. A boy in nondescript costume, with a brimless straw hat on the back of his head, held up a string of fish without speaking.

“Yes, I think I’ll like them if they’re fresh and cheap,” said Peggy firmly, resolved to be business-like.

It appeared that the fish had been caught that morning and the price impressed Peggy as extremely reasonable. She was about to conclude the bargain when Priscilla’s echoing whisper 38
summoned her to the screen door.

“Peggy, tell him we’ll buy fish of him several times a week if he’ll clean them. Fish scales are so messy and awful.”

Peggy thought well of the proposition, and the young fisherman offered no objection. With a grunt of acquiescence he seated himself on the steps, pulled out his pocket knife and began operations. Then as Hobo took his stand where he could view proceedings, the boy turned abruptly to Peggy. She saw that his brown eyes were keen, and his features clear-cut. “Why, if he’d only fix up a little,” she thought with surprise, “he’d be quite nice looking.”

“That your dog?” the boy was demanding, and Peggy hesitated, then laughed as she remembered her conversation with Priscilla.

“He seems to think so,” she acknowledged. “He followed me home last night, and he doesn’t have any intention of going away, as far as anybody can see.”

“That dog hasn’t had a square deal,” said the boy with sudden heat. “Dogs don’t have as a rule, but this one’s worse off than most. He used to belong to some folks who lived on the Drierston 39
pike, raised him from a puppy they had, and he saved one of the kids from drowning, one time. More fool he, I say.”

Peggy gasped an expostulation. The boy silenced her with a vindictive gesture of the hand that held the knife.

“You wait till I tell you. Their house burned down and they moved off and they just left the dog behind, as if he had been rubbish. That was more’n a year ago. And ever since he’s been sneaking and skulking and stealing his victuals, and been stoned and driven off with whips, and shot at till it’s a wonder he don’t go ’round biting everybody he sees.”

It was evident that Hobo’s lot had been a hard one, and that through no fault of his own. “Poor fellow,” Peggy said, resolving to atone, as far as a few weeks of kindness could, for that dreadful year of homelessness. “You seem to like animals,” she remarked, finding Hobo’s champion oddly interesting.

The boy cut off the head of a fish with a crunch. “I’d ought to,” he returned grimly. “I’ve got to like something and I don’t like folks.”

“What folks do you mean?”

“Don’t like any folks,” the boy persisted, and slashed on savagely. 40

Peggy was not prepared to believe in such universal misanthropy on the part of one so young. She guessed it to be a pose, and resolved that she would not encourage it by appearing shocked. “I don’t think you show very good taste,” she observed calmly, “disliking everybody in a lump that way. There are as many kinds of people as there are birds or flowers.”

“You ask any of the folks ’round here about Jerry Morton,” the boy exclaimed. “They’ll tell you what a good-for-nothing lazy-bones he is. They’ll say he isn’t worth the powder and shot to blow him up with.”

Peggy did some rapid thinking. “Are you Jerry Morton?”

“You bet I am.” His tone was defiant.

“Oh, I see,” said Peggy to herself. “People don’t like him, and so he fancies that he doesn’t like people.” This explanation which, by the way, fits more misanthropes than Jerry, resulted in making Peggy sorry for the boy in spite of the unbecoming sullenness of his face at that moment.

“Well, Jerry,” she said gently, “if your neighbors think that of you, I’m sure they are as much 41
mistaken as you are in what you think of them.” She counted out the change into his hand. “This is Thursday, isn’t it? Can you bring us some more fish Saturday?”

“Yes, I’ll bring ’em,” said the boy in a more subdued fashion than he had yet spoken. He dropped his earnings into his pocket uncounted, and went away without a good-by. Peggy carried the fish indoors, and was greeted by mocking laughter.

“You’ve added one tramp to the establishment,” said Priscilla, shaking a warning finger in her friend’s absorbed face; “don’t try to annex another.”

Peggy was too much in earnest to notice the banter. “That poor boy! He thinks he hates everybody, and I guess the trouble is that he wants to be liked. I’m going to ask Mrs. Cole or some other nice, motherly person about him.” Then her eyes fell upon the clock and she uttered an exclamation of dismay.

“Girls, where does the time go to? I meant to suggest that we go berrying this morning, but now we’ve got to wait till after dinner. I hope there are no naps to be taken this afternoon. I’m going berrying if I have to go alone.”

“You can count on me, darling,” Amy cried, flinging her arms about Peggy’s neck. And Dorothy 42
chimed in bravely, “An’ you can count on me, Aunt Peggy. But–but what are you going to bury?”

While Peggy was explaining, Claire laid her hand on Priscilla’s arm, and looked tenderly into her eyes.

“We’re going for a walk, you know. You promised last evening.”

Priscilla looked up in surprise.

“Why, I know I said we’d take a walk. But this will be a walk and a lot of fun beside.”

“But, don’t you see,” Claire leaned toward her and spoke rapidly, “it can’t take the place of strolling through the woods just with you alone? There are so many of us girls that I’m simply hungry to have you to myself. I’ve just been living on the thought of it ever since you promised me last night.”

“Very well,” said Priscilla compressing her lips. She resolved to be very careful what she said to Claire, if any casual remark could be construed into a binding promise. With dismay she realized that it was not yet twenty-four hours since their arrival, and already Claire’s demonstrations of affection were becoming irksome.

If she had cherished the hope that Claire would relent, she was destined to disappointment. An 43
early dinner was eaten, and the dishes washed with an alacrity in agreeable contrast to the dilatory methods of the morning. Then the party divided, Claire and Priscilla going off in the direction of the woods–Priscilla walking with more than her usual erectness–while the others took the route to the pastures where the raspberries grew, Peggy having ascertained their exact location in her talk with Joe that morning.

The array of tin pails with the berrying party suggested the probability that the occupants of Dolittle Cottage would eat nothing but raspberries for a week. Aunt Abigail and Dorothy had insisted on equipping themselves with the largest size of pail, though it was noticeable that when they were once in the pasture, most of the berries they gathered went into their mouths. And in this they were undoubtedly wise, for a raspberry fresh from the bushes, warmed by the sun, and fragrant as a rose, with perhaps a blood-red drop of fairy wine in its delicate cup, is vastly superior to its subdued, civilized self, served in a glass dish and smothered in sugar.

It was not long before Aunt Abigail and Dorothy were taking their ease under a tree and placidly 44
eating a few berries which had found a temporary respite at the bottom of their pails. Ruth picked with painstaking conscientiousness, and Peggy with the enjoyment which converts industry into an art. As for Amy, she wandered about the pasture always sure that the next spot was a more promising field of operations than the nearer. She was some distance from the others when her search was rewarded by the discovery of a clump of bushes unusually full.

“There!” exclaimed Amy triumphantly, as if answering the argument of her almost empty pail. “I knew I’d find them thicker. Peggy–oh, Peg–”

Her summons broke off in a startled squeal. There was a rustle on the other side of the bushes, and Amy took a flying leap which landed her on her knees with her overturned pail beside her. She screamed again, and a girl in a gingham dress and sunbonnet of the same material, ran out from behind the leafy screen.

“Oh, I’m sorry if I frightened you,” she exclaimed. “I hope you’re not hurt.”

Amy scrambled to her feet with a sigh of immense relief.

“No, indeed, and I shouldn’t have been scared only I thought it was a cow.” 45

The grave young face set in the depths of the sunbonnet broke into a smile that quite transformed it.

“Even if it had been,” the girl suggested, “it wouldn’t have been so very dangerous, you know.”

“Maybe not.” Amy’s tone was dubious. And then as Peggy and Ruth came hurrying to the spot, she turned to give them an explanation of the scream which had summoned them in such haste. All four laughed together, and the girl in the sunbonnet had an odd sense of being well acquainted with the friendly invaders.

“I suppose introductions are in order,” Amy rattled on, “but, you see, I don’t know your name.”

“I’m Lucy Haines.”

“Well, this is Peggy Raymond, our mistress of ceremonies, and this is Ruth Wylie, who thinks everything that Peggy does is exactly right, and I’m the scatterbrain of the lot.”

Lucy Haines looked a little bewildered as she met the girls' smiles, when Peggy came to the rescue. "A crowd of us are in Mrs. Leighton's cottage for the summer, and this is our first berrying. Don't you think I've had good luck?" She tilted her pail to show its contents, and Lucy Haines admired as in duty bound. 46

"Let's see how you've done," suggested Amy, and Lucy brought from the other side of the raspberry bushes a large-sized milk-pail so heaping full that the topmost berries looked as if they were contemplating escape. The girls exclaimed in chorus.

"You don't mean that you've picked those all yourself," cried Amy, remembering the scanty harvest she had spilled in her tumble.

"Your family must be very fond of raspberries," observed Ruth.

"Raspberry jam, I suppose," said the practical Peggy, but the sunbonnet negatived the suggestion by a slow shake.

"No. It's not that. I pick berries for pay. I send them into the city on the express train every night as long as the season lasts. I want to go to school," she ended rather abruptly, "and I'm ready to do anything I can to make a little money."

"And did you really pick them all to-day?" persisted Amy, eyeing the milk-pail respectfully. "It would take me a year, at the least calculation."

Lucy Haines smiled gravely at the extravagance. "I've been doing it all my life," she said. "That makes a difference."

"Then you've lived here always?" 47

"Yes, and my mother before me, and her mother, too. When I was a little girl I used to love to hear grandmother tell how one time she was picking blackberries in this very pasture, and she heard a sound and peered around the bush. And there sat a brown bear, eating berries as fast as he could."

"I'm glad Dorothy isn't around to hear that story," Peggy cried laughing; "she'd be sure it was bears whenever anything rustled." But Amy's face was serious.

"That's worse than cows!" she exclaimed. "The next time I hear a noise on the other side of a bush, I shan't even dare to scream."

Lucy Haines shifted her pail from her left hand to her right. "Well, I guess I'll call my stint done for to-day. Good-by!"

"Good-by," the others echoed, and Peggy added, with her friendly smile, "I suppose we'll see you again some day. I hope so, I'm sure."

She repeated the wish a little later, as the sunbonnet went out of sight over the brow of the hill. "Because she seems such a nice sort of girl. I'm going to like this place, I know. There are such interesting people in it."

"Oh, Peggy," Amy cried with a teasing laugh, "you know you'd like any place, and you find all kinds of people interesting." And then because the sight of Lucy Haines' full pail had made them somewhat dissatisfied with the results of their own efforts, they all fell to picking with a tremendous display of industry. 48

Priscilla and Claire were on the porch when the others came home laden with their spoils. Claire wore a noticeable air of complacency, but Priscilla looked a little tired and despondent. All through their stroll Claire had harped on the joy of being by themselves at last, and had insisted on walking with her arm about Priscilla's waist, which on a narrow path was inconvenient, to say the least. Priscilla was rather ashamed to acknowledge even to herself that she found Claire's devotion wearisome. Of course, Claire was a very sweet girl, but it was so easy to have a surfeit of sweets.

"I hope you left a few on the bushes," she said rather resentfully, when the berry-pickers had recounted their experiences with an enthusiasm which gave to the expedition through the pasture the glamor of real adventure, "I'd like the fun of picking some real berries myself."

"We might go to-morrow," Claire suggested in a careful undertone. Priscilla's face flushed, and Peggy seeing her look of annoyance, created a diversion by springing to her feet. 49

"Time to get supper. I'm as hungry as a wolf, now that I stop to think about it. How does cornbread and fried fish strike the crowd?"

"O Peggy," Priscilla forgot her vexation in the importance of the announcement to be made, "the frying-pan has been borrowed!"

"Borrowed!" Peggy stood motionless in her astonishment. "But who–but why–"

"It's a woman who lives down the road a way. I suppose she's what you call a neighbor up here. What did she say her name was, Claire?"

"Snooks. Mrs. Snooks."

"Oh, yes. And she was very much interested in everything about us, and asked all kinds of questions. But she came especially to borrow the frying-pan. Can you get along without it, Peggy?"

"Why, if you can't have what you want, you can always make something else do," returned Peggy,

unconsciously formulating one of the axioms in her philosophy of life. “But a frying-pan seems such a strange thing to borrow, Priscilla. She must have one of her own, and it’s not a thing one’s likely to mislay. However,” she added hastily, as if fearful of seeming to blame the over-generous lender, “we’ll get along. Well just forget that we ever had a frying-pan, and that it was borrowed.”

But, as Peggy was soon to learn, it was not going to be an easy matter to forget Mrs. Snooks.

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# CHAPTER IV
## A STUDY IN NATURAL HISTORY

From the very start the big brick fireplace in the living-room had held an irresistible fascination for the Terrace girls, accustomed as they were to the unromantic register. And when five days of their outing had passed and no fire had been kindled on the blackened hearth, Priscilla thought they were missing golden opportunities, and said so.

“The last of June isn’t the best time in the year for open fires,” suggested Peggy. “But I do think that to-night seems a little cooler. Perhaps we might have a fire and not swelter.”

“We could roast apples, couldn’t we?” Amy cried. “And chestnuts. Only there aren’t any chestnuts.”

“And just a few very wormy apples,” added Ruth. “But we can tell stories, and sit around in a circle, and not have any light in the room, except the light of the fire.”

The prospect was so alluring that supper was dispatched in haste, and one or two of the girls went so far as to suggest letting the dishes wait over till the next day. But as Peggy expressed horror at this unhousewifely proceeding, and Amy called attention to the fact that left-over dishes are doubly hard to wash, the motion failed to carry. Five pairs of busy hands made short work of the necessary task, and when the dishes were out of the way, and Peggy was conducting Dorothy up-stairs to bed, the others made a rush to the woodshed and filled their gingham aprons with pine knots and shavings.

Dorothy suspecting delights from which she was to be excluded, was inclined to make slow work of undressing, and relieved the tedium of the process by frantic demonstrations of affection. “Wish you’d go to bed with me, Aunt Peggy. ’Cause I love you so awfully.”

“Oh, this isn’t bedtime for big girls. They won’t be sleepy for a long while yet.”

“I won’t be sleepy for a long while, either. Won’t you sit beside my bed, Aunt Peggy, ’cause I’m ’fraid. If a bear should come–”

“Oh, Dorothy, don’t think so much about bears. Think about the little angels that watch good children when they are asleep.”

Dorothy fell into a fit of musing. “I wish those little angels would play with me when I was awake, ’stead of watching me when I was asleep. Say, Aunt Peggy, which would you rather have, wings or roller-skates?”

Peggy steered the conversation away from this delicate question to Dorothy’s prayers, which Dorothy galloped through with cheerful irreverence. On the “Amen” her eyes flashed open.

“Now, Aunt Peggy, you’ve got to tack down my eyelids, same as my mamma does.”

“Why, of course.” Peggy patiently kissed the long-lashed lids shut, stimulated by Dorothy’s cheerfully impersonal comments on her performance, and even drove a few extra “tacks,” in quite unnecessary spots, as, for example, the corners of Dorothy’s roguish mouth, and the dimple showing in the curve of her pink cheek. And by that time even Dorothy could think of no further excuses for detaining her.

Down-stairs the preliminary steps to the realization of the romance of a real wood fire on a real hearth had proved prosaic enough. In the beginning the fire had frankly sulked, and instead of blazing up brightly, had emitted clouds of smoke out of all proportion to its size. Every one was coughing as Peggy came into the room, and handkerchiefs were busy wiping tears from brimming eyes, so that outwardly the scene was anything but joyous. But the draught from the open windows finally stimulated the lazy chimney to greater exertions, and just as Peggy crossed the threshold, a brave little flame leaped up from the smoking, smouldering mass, and a cheery crackle made music plainly audible above the chorus of coughing.

“Lovely!” cried Peggy, and warmed her hands at the blaze as if it had been midwinter. “As long as I didn’t have any of the trouble of making the fire, I’ll brush up the shavings and things.”

“I’m not sure but you’ve got the worst end of it,” remarked Priscilla, casting a dismayed glance about her. “How in the world did shavings get scattered over this room from one end to the other?”

As no one had anything to offer in explanation, Peggy went to find the dustpan and was absent for some minutes. By this time the fire was blazing merrily, and throwing off an amount of heat quite unnecessary for a mild June evening. Even while the girls were exchanging congratulations

on their success, it was to be noticed that they did not form a compact circle about the fireplace, but sat in the most remote corners of the room, and fanned themselves with newspapers.

“It’s the strangest thing,” announced Peggy returning, “I can’t find the dustpan high or low.”

Amy jumped. “Didn’t she bring it back?”

“Who? Not Mrs Snooks?”

“Yes, she came when you’d gone to pay Mrs. Cole, and she said she’d send her little girl back with it in half an hour or so.”

“It’s certainly strange,” said Peggy, giving evidences of exasperation, “that when we’ve only one of a thing, that’s exactly what Mrs. Snooks wants to borrow. Of course it’s nice for neighbors to help one another out, especially in a place like this where you are so far from a store. If it was baking-powder, I wouldn’t say a word. But a dustpan.”

“It was baking-powder yesterday,” suggested Amy. “Sweep the shavings into a corner, Peg, and let’s start on the stories. Now, Aunt Abigail, here’s your chance to shine.”

“Oh, yes, Aunt Abigail,” echoed Peggy, for it had early been decided that Amy should not be allowed a monopoly in the use of that affectionate title. “We’ve heard you were the best ever, since the woman in the Arabian Nights–what was her name–Scheherezade,–and we want to know if Amy was exaggerating.”

Aunt Abigail smiled complacently.

“What sort of story do you want?” she asked. “Something pathetic, or a story of adventure, or a humorous story or a ghost story or–”

An approving shout interrupted her. “Oh, a ghost story, Aunt Abigail!”

Priscilla clapped her hands. “Isn’t this simply perfect! The firelight on the wall, and shadows flickering, and then a ghost story to crown everything. Do make it a creepy one, Aunt Abigail.”

Aunt Abigail hardly needed urging along that line. She had been an omnivorous reader all her days, and from books, as well as from what she had picked up on her travels, she had acquired an unsurpassed collection of weird incidents which she now began to recount with dramatic effect. The girls sat spellbound, and when, at the conclusion of the first story, a faint little wail sounded from the distance, the general start was indicative of tense nerves.

But it was only Dorothy, awake and standing at the head of the stairs. “Aunt Peggy!”

“Go back to bed, darling.”

“But, Aunt Peggy, what d’you s’pose those little angels have done now? They’ve bited me right on my fourhead.”

“Oh, my!” Peggy ran up the stairs, to a justly aggrieved Dorothy, indicating an inflamed lump on her forehead, as a proof of misplaced confidence. Peggy lit the candle and after some search discovered a swollen mosquito, perched on the head of Dorothy’s bed, ready to resume operations at the first opportunity. Gluttony had lessened his natural agility, and at Peggy’s avenging hand he paid the penalty of his crime. Peggy lingered to correct Dorothy’s misapprehension, and then went down-stairs, to find another blood-curdling tale in progress, and the girls sitting breathless, while the firelight threw fantastic shapes upon the wall, and the shadows looked startlingly black by contrast.

Ten o’clock was the sensible bedtime decided on in Dolittle Cottage, but on this occasion the big clock chimed ten unheeded. Apparently Aunt Abigail’s repertoire was far from being exhausted. She had rung the changes on all the familiar horrors in a dozen stories, and yet no one seemed willing to have her stop. It was quarter of eleven when Peggy remarked reluctantly: “Girls, if we’re going to get up any time to-morrow, we’d better-be going to bed.”

The suggestion was not received with enthusiasm. Priscilla declared that she wasn’t a bit sleepy, and the others all echoed the statement. Then Aunt Abigail was appealed to, for just one more, and complied without any pretence of reluctance. Aunt Abigail was enjoying herself hugely, and it was characteristic of her amiable irresponsibility that it never occurred to her that there might be undesirable consequences, from thus stimulating the vivid imaginations of a party of sensitive girls.

It was very near midnight when at last they filed up-stairs to bed. The fire was out, after having played its part so efficiently as to render it necessary to open to its widest extent every door and window in the cottage. It was a rather silent crowd that climbed the stairs. The girls went to their respective rooms without any of the laughter and gay chatter which usually characterized the hour of retiring. Peggy said to herself that they were all too tired to talk.

But Amy knew better. While Peggy shared Dorothy’s quarters, and Priscilla and Claire occupied the room next to Aunt Abigail’s, Amy and Ruth were tucked into a snug little box of a bedroom on the opposite side of the hall. As Amy hastily lighted the candle on the little table at the side of the bed, she turned a perturbed face on her roommate.

“Oh, why did I let her do it?” she exclaimed tragically. “Why did I ever listen? I know I’m not going to sleep a wink to-night.”

“Why, Amy, what nonsense!” Ruth remonstrated, but she was aware that her heartbeats had quickened. It was one thing to listen to Aunt Abigail’s harrowing recitals, in a room made

cheerful by firelight and companionship, and another to recall the same horrors in comparative solitude. “You’re not foolish enough to believe in things of that sort,” Ruth remarked, with a brave effort to maintain her air of superiority.

“No, I’m not foolish enough to *believe* in them,” Amy acknowledged, “but I’m foolish enough so they scare me dreadfully. Oh, dear! Won’t I be glad when it is to-morrow!”

She repeated the wish a little later, when both girls were in bed, and Ruth answered her a trifle tartly that it *was* very nearly to-morrow, and that she wanted to go to sleep some time before morning, if Amy didn’t. Then for a matter of thirty minutes silence reigned. The hour was late and the girls were tired. In spite of her gloomy prophecy, Amy was surprised and pleased to find a 60
delicious drowsiness creeping over her.

All at once she sat up in bed. “Ruth,” she exclaimed in a frightened whisper, “what was that?”

“What was what?”

“That rustling noise.”

“O, Amy!” Ruth’s whispered exclamation conveyed an extraordinary amount of exasperation for three syllables. And then as Amy remained up-right, staring intently into the darkness, Ruth was conscious of a curious pricking of the scalp. For she herself distinctly heard the sound to which Amy referred, and, truth to tell, it was not unlike the rustling of the unseen garments which had figured so frequently in the stories to which they had lately been listening.

“I can hear it as plain as anything, Amy. Do you suppose it is the maple-tree back of the window?”

“Of course it’s the maple-tree,” Ruth replied in a husky whisper. How she envied Amy. Amy frankly acknowledged to being a coward, and poor Ruth wished that she herself did not have a reputation for courage to sustain. For certainly that sound was not the whisper of the wind in the 61
boughs of the maple. It was in the room, apparently at the foot of the bed.

A long silence followed Ruth’s bravely mendacious assurance. Amy lay down at length and drew the coverlet over her head. The thumping of Ruth’s heart gradually steadied into an ordinary beat. Just as she was telling herself that Amy’s foolish fancies had made her nervous, and she had imagined the peculiar sound, her heart jumped again. Amy’s shivering body suddenly huddled against hers, gave convincing testimony to the fact that Ruth’s ears were not the only ones to catch something unusual.

“What do you suppose it is?” choked Amy.

This time Ruth made no attempt to hold the maple-tree responsible. “I don’t know,” she whispered. The sound that vibrated through the room was such as might be produced if a finger-nail were drawn across the window screen. The thought entered Ruth’s mind, that perhaps some one was trying to enter the room by the window, and supernatural horrors paled beside this possibility.

But this demonstration also was succeeded by a puzzling silence. Gradually the tense muscles of the two frightened girls relaxed, and they ventured to exchange perplexed comments on the mysterious interruptions to the peace of the night. “It certainly was the screen,” declared Amy. 62
“Do you suppose that the wind blowing through it could make a noise like that?”

Ruth did not think it likely, but forbore to say so, and after half an hour of quiet, weariness again asserted itself and she began to feel agreeably drowsy. Then Amy caught her arm and with the startled pinch, Ruth’s hopes of sleep were indefinitely postponed.

“There it is again,” said Amy, her teeth fairly chattering. “There’s that rustling.”

“Sh!” Ruth whispered back and her hand found Amy’s in the dark. This time the rustling continued. It was a curiously elusive sound, as difficult to locate as to understand. At one minute it seemed at the foot of the bed, and again off in the corner of the room, and once Ruth was almost sure that it was over her head. And that was the time when it seemed to her that her heart must stop beating.

“Ruth!” Amy snatched away her hand in her consternation. “Ruth–I’m going to sneeze!”

“You mustn’t!” protested Ruth panic-stricken. What appalling consequences were to be apprehended from so rash an act, she herself could not have told. But she was certain that if Amy 63
sneezed, her own self-control would give way, and she would scream. “Smother it,” she commanded fiercely.

Amy grasped the sheet in a heroic effort to obey, but she was too late. She sneezed, and to poor Ruth’s unstrung nerves, the sound was only to be compared in volume to a peal of thunder. The mysterious rustling ceased, and just outside the door a board creaked.

“Girls!” The tentative whisper stole softly through the half-open door. “Girls, are you awake?”

“Oh, Peggy!” There was untold relief in that brief welcome. Peggy’s presence brought a sense of reinforcement, even against supernatural terrors. Noiselessly Peggy crept into the room, and perched on the edge of the bed. Considering the lateness of the hour, her air was peculiarly alert.

“I knew by Amy’s sneeze that she was awake, too, and I thought I’d come in. I never had such a wakeful night in my life.”

“Have you been hearing things, too?” demanded Amy, with an immediate accession of respect for her own fears if Peggy shared them.

Peggy hesitated. “Well, it hasn’t seemed as quiet as most of the nights,” she replied, evasively.

“Rustling in all the corners, and the screen twanging, that’s what we’ve had,” exclaimed Ruth in an excited whisper. 64

Peggy’s silence indicated that such phenomena did not surprise her. “I suppose,” she remarked at length, in her most judicial manner, “that we all got nervous over those uncanny stories, and so we’re ready to imagine–Oh!”

Something had swooped by her, almost brushing her cheek, and stirring her hair with the breeze made by its passing. Peggy’s muffled shriek had two echoes.

“What is it?” demanded Amy, a hysterical catch in her voice. “Oh, Peggy, what has happened?” And Peggy’s only reply was a stern demand for the matches.

The little candle, flaring up at last, showed nothing unusual, unless three girls wide awake at half-past two in the morning could be included under that head. Peggy stared incredulously about the empty room, and then faced her friends.

“Girls, I don’t know what ails us all,” said Peggy honestly, “but I’m pretty sure none of us will go to sleep till daylight. So, if you’ve no objection, I’m going to sit here and talk till the sun’s up.”

Nobody had any objection. In fact, with the little candle flickering on the table, and Peggy sitting at the foot of the bed, discussing commonplace things, Amy and Ruth felt an immediate accession of courage. Luckily their time of waiting was not long. Daybreak comes early on a summer morning, and by the time the candle was burned to the socket, the pale daylight had stolen into the room and all three watchers were certain that they could go to sleep. 65

It seemed to Peggy that she had barely dozed off, before Dorothy awoke her. Dorothy was standing by the window with one stocking on. When Dorothy’s toilet had progressed to the point of putting on one stocking, she generally thought of something else more interesting.

“Oh, Dorothy dear,” implored poor Peggy, turning on her pillow, “it can’t be time to get up yet.”

Dorothy crossed the room, and stood beside the bed. “Aunt Peggy,” she inquired gravely, “did you ever see a mousie with an umbrella?”

“A mouse–with an umbrella!” repeated Peggy stupidly, wondering if she were too sleepy to understand, or if Dorothy were only talking nonsense. “Of course not.”

“Well, I did. There’s one hanging to our screen.” 66

Peggy arose with alacrity. Suspended head downward from the screen, was indeed a mouse-like shape, with the folded wings of a gnome, which Dorothy had not unnaturally mistaken for an umbrella. Apparently the little creature had passed an active night, and was now enjoying his well-earned repose. Peggy took one look and crossed the hall with a bound. Amy and Ruth were sound asleep, but Peggy was too excited to be merciful.

“Girls! Girls! Come quick and see our ghost before it wakes up!”

The startling summons brought the sleepers to their feet in a twinkling and when Peggy introduced the explanation of the night’s mystery, there was a good deal of shame-faced laughter. Tacitly the girls agreed that the joke would be more enjoyable if its circulation were strictly limited, and even when at the breakfast-table Aunt Abigail remarked that she never saw such air for producing sound sleep, three heavy-eyed girls exchanged glances, and kept their own counsel.

But a little later Dorothy was anxious for enlightenment on a point in natural history. “Aunt Peggy, what makes you call a mousie a goose?”

“Why, I didn’t, dear. A mouse and a goose aren’t the least bit alike.” 67

“But I heard you say it, Aunt Peggy. When I showed you the mousie, you ran and said, ‘Here’s our goose.’”

As good luck would have it, Ruth and Amy were the only ones to overhear the remark, and Peggy was not called upon to satisfy more than Dorothy’s curiosity.

“That funny little thing that looks like a mouse, Dorothy, except for its horrid black wings, is called a bat. And the goose was only Aunt Peggy.”

“And Ruth, another,” remarked the owner of that name.

“And I was Number Three. Three gooses instead of three graces,” was Amy’s addition, after which the three laughed in the fashion which Dorothy found so mystifying, and consequently objectionable.

That was not the last of the story-telling evenings by any means. Aunt Abigail had abundant opportunity to display her *repertoire*. She told pathetic stories, which brought the tears to the girls’ eyes, and funny stories, which made them laugh until they cried, and the most thrilling tales of adventure. But she was never called upon to duplicate her early success. In the opinion of her entire audience, apparently, one night of ghost stories was enough for the entire summer. 68

# CHAPTER V
## A SAFE AND SANE FOURTH

“The three-legged race is what I’m dying to see,” Amy declared. “It sounds so mysterious, you know, like some new kind of quadruped. No, I don’t mean that,” she added hastily, as Peggy laughed. “Quadrupeds have to have four legs, don’t they? Well, anyway, it sounds like something queer.”

The village celebration of the approaching Fourth of July had for some days been the chief topic of conversation in Dolittle Cottage. The idea of a picnic, with the whole community invited, was in itself a startling innovation to girls who were city-bred, and the entertainment promised in the shape of various contests, winding up with a baseball game between the “Fats” and the “Leans” appealed to them all, more or less strongly. Peggy, with that faculty for picking up information which would have made her an unqualified success as a newspaper reporter, was continually announcing new items of interest, that Farmer Cole’s Joe was to pitch for the “Leans,” or that Jerry Morton had won the potato race the previous Fourth, and meant to enter again, or that Rosetta Muriel disdained the promiscuous appeal of the picnic, but thought she might bring herself to view the fireworks in the evening.

The morning of the third was for the most part given up to preparing the picnic luncheon, and Jerry Morton, who sampled Peggy’s doughnuts still hot from the kettle, carried away a new-born respect for the accomplishments of that versatile young person. Mrs. Snooks, too, arriving when the house was fragrant with the mingled odors of blueberry turnovers, spiced cake and gingersnaps, sniffed appreciatively, and lost no time in expressing her surprise.

“Well, I want to know. I’ve heard tell that city folks most generally bought their cake and stuff, instead of baking it. Dreadful shiftless way, I call it. I just dropped in to see if you could let me have half a pail of lard and a table-spoonful of soda.”

Even the generous Peggy rejoiced that the opportunity to say no had arrived at last.

“I’ve just used up the last of the lard, Mrs. Snooks, and we haven’t thought to get any soda yet.”

“You don’t mean to tell me that you’ve been getting along without baking-soda,” exclaimed Mrs. Snooks with unconcealed disappointment. “Well, well! Young folks are certainly thoughtless. And here you’ve used up all your lard, and to-morrow the Fourth, and the store shut.” From all appearances Mrs. Snooks was having something of a struggle to control her irritation at such evidences of short-sightedness. It was clear, however, that her efforts had been crowned with success, when she announced with an explosive sigh, “Well, if you haven’t lard or baking-soda, I’ll take a cup of granulated sugar, and a ball of darning cotton. Yes, black, I guess, though if you’re out of black, ’most any color will do.”

It was certainly disappointing when after such preparations and anticipations, the girls were waked on the morning of the Fourth by the beating of rain on the roof. The most optimistic of weather prophets could have seen no promise of clearing in the lowering sky. The girls had roused a little early, in honor of the occasion, and they came down-stairs with gloomy faces, and over the oatmeal and bacon exchanged condolences. “To think that the first really rainy day had to be the Fourth,” scolded Priscilla. “And when we had made up our minds to be so patriotic, too.”

“And that three-legged race,” mourned Amy. “Probably I’ll never get a chance to see another. Peggy, I warn you that when you look so–preposterously cheerful, it makes me feel like throwing something.”

Peggy laughed, and helped herself to toast. “I was only thinking that if we were going to keep the Fourth of July indoors, we’d have to have a flag of some sort.”

“You don’t mean you’d go three miles in this rain after a flag, Peggy. And, anyway, the store would be closed for the Fourth.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to buy one. I thought we’d make it.”

“Make a flag!” exclaimed Claire Fendall. “Who ever heard of such a thing?”

“Betsy Ross did it,” Peggy reminded her. “Let’s us hurry through the dishes and see if we can’t do as much.”

Even though the prospect of emulating Betsy Ross was an unsatisfactory substitute for the anticipated excitements of the day, Peggy’s suggestion was noticeably successful in raising the drooping spirits of the crowd. The work of the morning was dispatched in haste, and the girls flocked to the living-room where a fire less ambitious than their first attempt had been kindled on the hearth. Peggy had produced a large-sized white towel from her trunk, and she at once began to explain her plan.

“This will do for a foundation, girls. It’s soft and it will drape nicely. Now all we need is a blue patch in one corner, and red stripes. Who’s got any red ribbon?”

“I’ve got that red ribbon I use for a sash,” responded Amy. “But I’d hate to have it cut.”

“Oh, we won’t need to cut it. You see, this flag is going to be draped over the fireplace, so its shortcomings won’t be in evidence, and we’ll turn the ribbon on the side that doesn’t show. Bring me all the red ribbons in the house. Amy’s sash won’t be enough.”

So with much animated discussion, the flag grew apace. Nobody was exactly sure whether the outer stripe should be red or white, and for economical reasons, Peggy decided on the latter. “We’ll begin with white, girls, for that will make seven white stripes and only six red ones. And we’ve got plenty of white towel, while red ribbon is a little scarce.”

Another perplexing question arose when Peggy had sacrificed the dark blue sailor collar of an old blouse, to form the blue field in the upper corner of the flag. “Now we can cut white stars out of paper and sew them on,” exclaimed Peggy, standing back to admire her handiwork. “How many are there, anyway?” 74

Nobody was able to answer. Peggy gazed around the circle with a mingling of indignation and incredulity.

“What! All of us high school girls and not know how many states there are in the Union! This is really awful. Aunt Abigail, *you* must know.”

“Dear me, child,” replied Aunt Abigail serenely, “I have an impression that there were in the neighborhood of thirty-six at the time of the Centennial Exposition. And since then I’ve lost track.”

“I wonder if we could count them up,” mused Peggy, wrinkling her forehead. “Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont–”

“What’s the use?” protested Amy. “Who counts the stars on the flag, anyway? We’ll crowd in forty or fifty, enough to pretty well cover the blue, and it will look all right.”

Ruth had a suggestion to offer. “As long as this is a sort of Betsy Ross flag, why not have thirteen stars, just as she had?” 75

As this proposal afforded a satisfactory solution to the difficulty, the thirteen stars were promptly cut from white paper and sewed in place, and the finished flag was draped above the fireplace. Peggy’s anticipations in regard to its shortcomings had been realized. The red stripes were not of uniform width, or of the same shade, and the blue field was a trifle small in proportion to the size of the flag, owing to the limitations of the original sailor collar. Yet when it was in place, with the stripes composed of Dorothy’s hair-ribbons drawn up artistically, so that the wrinkles didn’t show, the effect was most impressive. And along with their pride in their success, the girls experienced that indescribable thrill which is the heart’s response to the challenge of our national emblem.

“Now, girls,” Peggy was looking at the clock, “we’ve got time for just one thing more before we start to get dinner. Each one of us must write a patriotic conundrum, and then we’ll put them around at each other’s plates, and we’ll have to guess them before we can eat a mouthful.”

The girls groaned in a dismay half real, half assumed. “I don’t see how a conundrum *can* be patriotic,” objected Claire. 76

“Oh, if it’s about your native land, or George Washington, or the flag, it’ll do,” conceded Peggy, and the words were hardly out of her mouth when Amy made a dart for the writing desk. “Oh, let me have a pencil, quick,” she begged, “before I forget it.”

“You don’t mean that you’ve thought of one already!” Ruth cried, but the radiant satisfaction on Amy’s countenance was answer enough. With an expression of mingled wonder and envy, Ruth found a pencil and scrap of paper, and set to work to produce her own conundrum in the allotted half hour. With the exception of Amy, none of the girls could boast of any inspiration for the task. Every face wore an expression of stern and relentless absorption, in striking contrast to Amy’s air of carefree content.

The ample provision made for a picnic dinner the previous day rendered the preparation of the midday meal unusually easy, and the girls gathered at the dinner-table less eager to sample the pressed meat and potato chips than to examine the folded slips of paper placed under each plate. Peggy was the first to unfold hers.

“Why is Peggy like Betsy Ross?” she read aloud. “Oh, Amy Lassell! No wonder it only took a half minute.” Her tone was reproachful, but Amy beamed upon the company with no decrease of complacency. 77

“That’s what I call a good conundrum,” she declared; “it’s patriotic, and it’s easy to guess. The trouble with most conundrums is that nobody can guess them except the people who make them.”

“That’s the case with this one, I think,” said Aunt Abigail, scrutinizing her conundrum through her lorgnette. “What do you make of this? At the top of the paper are the letters W. P. H. and underneath is the question ‘Why are these letters like the Father of his country?’”

It was some time before any ray of light was thrown on this dark mystery. “Whoever made it up will have to explain it,” Amy declared for the tenth time. “It’s Peggy, of course, for she hasn’t helped in the guessing. Now, my conundrum–”

“Wait,” cried Priscilla, sitting up suddenly, “I know. First in war–”

“To be sure *W* is first in war, and *P* first in peace. A little far-fetched, but not bad for a beginner,” said Aunt Abigail patronizingly, while Ruth patted Priscilla’s tall head, not without difficulty, and Amy read aloud. “‘What is the most important of the United States?’ New York, I suppose, though of course I like my own state lots better.” 78

“No, it’s *matrimony*.” In her haste to explain, Ruth forgot to wait for the guesses that might come nearer the mark. “But I can’t see that it’s particularly patriotic, though it is about our native land, and I’m dreadfully afraid it’s not so very original.”

“Original enough. Even in Solomon’s time there was nothing new under the sun,” Peggy consoled her. “Now, Priscilla.” But Priscilla had colored fiercely on unfolding her paper and crumpled it in her hand. Even if she had not instantly recognized the handwriting she would have had no difficulty in ascribing the sentiment to its rightful source.

“Who is it that I love better than my native land? Can my dearest Priscilla guess?”

“Read yours, Claire,” Peggy said hastily, interrupting Amy who was about to protest against the suppression of a single conundrum, and Claire read obediently, “Why was Martha Washington like the captain of a ship?” It was Peggy who distinguished herself by suggesting, “Because Washington was her second mate,” and Priscilla, whose flushed cheeks were rapidly regaining their natural hue, pronounced the answer correct. “Rather suspicious,” Amy declared. “Priscilla guesses Peggy’s, and Peggy, Priscilla’s. Looks as if it was all fixed up beforehand. Well, Ruth, yours is the last.” 79

The last conundrum proved to be the most puzzling. “What battle of the Revolution is like a weather-cock?” Various explanations of the mysterious affinity were offered, and each in turn rejected. Aunt Abigail, the author, was finally appealed to.

“Why, dear me!” Aunt Abigail smiled upon the circle of interested faces. “I haven’t the slightest idea, but I was sure that if *any* battle of the Revolution was the least bit like a weather-cock, one of you smart young folks would find it out.”

After this auspicious beginning, the cheeriness of the midday meal was in pleasing contrast to the gloom of breakfast. Even Amy forgot to mourn over missing the three-legged race, and Ruth, who, under Graham’s tutelage, had become an ardent devotee of baseball, was reconciled to her failure to witness the unique contest between the Fats and the Leans. The morning had passed so rapidly, and so pleasantly on the whole, that every one was inclined to be hopeful regarding the remainder of the day, and to wait with tranquillity the further unfoldment of Peggy’s plans. 80

When dinner was over, the dining-room in order, and the last shining dish replaced on the cupboard shelves, expectant eyes turned in Peggy’s direction, as if to ask “What next?” And Peggy, as was her custom, promptly rose to the occasion.

“Now for this afternoon–”

A reverberating rap immediately behind her, caused Peggy to turn with a start and throw open the door, whereupon the figure on the step entered without waiting for an invitation. It was Jerry Morton, but a Jerry startlingly unlike his every-day self. Even the fact that he was dripping with rain could not obscure the magnificence of his toilet, including very pointed tan shoes, and a hand-painted necktie. Under his coat was partially concealed some bulging object which gave him an appearance singularly unsymmetrical.

Peggy was the first to recover herself. “Why, good afternoon, Jerry. But I guess we shan’t want any fish to-day.”

“You don’t suppose I’d sell fish on the Fourth, do you?” demanded Jerry with the impressive scorn of a patriot misjudged. “I thought maybe you’d like–like a little music, seeing it’s raining cats and dogs.” He had thrown apart his soaked coat as he spoke, and the bulging object proved to be a banjo, in a little flannel case, which Jerry hastily removed, twanging the strings of the instrument in his anxiety to ascertain the effect of the dampness on their constitution. 81

“Music! Why, that’s very nice of you, Jerry. Come into the next room and let me introduce you to Mrs. Tyler.” Peggy was a little in doubt as to the light in which Aunt Abigail would regard this unceremonious call from the youthful fish-vender. But the shrewd old lady was familiar with the customs of too many lands, not to be able to accommodate herself to the democratic simplicity of a country community. She gave Jerry her hand, insisted that he should take a seat by the fire, where his damp clothing would gradually dry, and forthwith called for “Dixie.” And hardly was the stirring melody well under way before the girls were keeping time with toes and fingers, and a general animation was replacing the temporary frigidity induced by Jerry’s advent. Jerry really played surprisingly well, and on a stormy day such an accomplishment stands its possessor in good stead.

But it was not left to Jerry to uphold the reputation of the community for sociability. The ringing of the front-door bell interrupted “The Suwannee River,” and Peggy, who was nearest the door, jumped up to answer the summons, while Hobo, a little ahead of her as usual, stood with his nose to the crack, gravely attentive, as if to satisfy himself as to the intentions of the new arrival. This time the open door revealed Rosetta Muriel, struggling to lower a refractory umbrella, with her hat tipped rakishly over one eye. 82

“Why, how do you do?” exclaimed Peggy, attempting to conceal her surprise under an effusive cordiality. “Come right in.” But Rosetta Muriel was not to be hurried. She closed her umbrella, righted her hat, and began fumbling in a little beaded bag which dangled from her wrist. All the heads were turned wonderingly toward the open door before she produced the object of her search, a gilt-edged card, upon which was written with many elaborate flourishes, “Miss Rosetta Muriel Cole.”

Peggy gazing upon this work of art, began to realize the importance of the occasion. Rosetta 83

Muriel was making a call. “Will you walk in?” Peggy repeated, this time with proper decorum, and the caller entered and was presented to each of the company in order.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Rosetta Muriel, primly, in acknowledgment of each introduction, but when Jerry’s turn came, both she and Peggy varied from the usual formula. “Of course you know Jerry Morton,” Peggy said, and Rosetta Muriel admitted the impeachment, with the stiffest of bows. If not pleased at meeting Jerry, it was evident that she was surprised to find him in Dolittle Cottage, and apparently quite at home.

The music ceased temporarily and conversation took its place. Rosetta Muriel, invited to lay aside her hat, declined with dignity and commented on the weather. After full justice had been done to that serviceable theme, Peggy introduced another.

“We’ve met such a nice girl several times when we’ve been picking berries. I suppose you know her?–Lucy Haines.”

“I know who you mean,” replied Rosetta Muriel coldly. “She ain’t in society, you know.”

“Not in–”

“Not in society,” firmly repeated Rosetta Muriel. “She used to come to my house sometimes, but that was before I came out. After you come out you’ve got to be more careful about who you associate with.” 84

An awestruck silence followed the enunciation of this social law, and Rosetta Muriel addressed herself to Priscilla, whose aristocratic bearing seemed to impress her favorably. “Do you know Mrs. Sidney Dillingham?”

Priscilla stared at this familiar mention of one of the society leaders in her own city. “Why, I never met her, if that’s what you mean. I know her by sight. I’ve seen her at several concerts.”

“I suppose you know she’s entertaining Sir Albert Driscoll at her Newport house this summer. Quite a feather in her cap, ain’t it?”

Priscilla replied with a gasp that she supposed it was, and looked appealingly at Peggy. Peggy’s responsive attempt to bring the conversation back to normal levels, proved quite unsuccessful. Rosetta Muriel was determined to impress her new acquaintances with her knowledge of customs of the Four Hundred, and indeed it was evident that she had studied the society columns of the New York papers, with an industry worthy a better cause. Peggy at length grew desperate.

“As long as it’s Fourth of July, wouldn’t it be nice to sing some patriotic songs? You can play ‘America,’ can’t you, Jerry?” 85

“Well, I guess,” said Jerry, with unfeigned relief, and he struck a resounding chord. After Rosetta Muriel, and the atmosphere of tawdry pretense surrounding her, it was a relief to every one to launch into the splendid words,

“My country, ’tis of thee.”

Amy, who did not know one tune from another, sang at the top of her voice. Aunt Abigail hummed the air in a cracked soprano, with traces of bygone sweetness. Priscilla’s silvery notes soared flute-like above the others, and even Rosetta Muriel joined after a brief hesitation, probably due to her uncertainty as to whether this was customary in the best society, on the occasion of a formal call.

“That went splendidly,” declared Peggy, her face aglow, when the last verse had filled the room with melody. “Now, what about ‘The Star Spangled Banner?’ Can you play that, Jerry? It’s a lot harder than the other.”

“You bet it’s harder, but I can play it all right.” Jerry instantly proved his boast by striking the introductory chords, winding up with an ambitious flourish. “Now,” he said, with a nod, and the chorus burst out lustily, Priscilla’s voice leading. 86

“O, say, can you see by the dawn’s early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming.”

The chorus, strong on the first line, weakened on the second. Priscilla sang through the third alone, and then came to a full stop. Jerry drummed a few further chords, and broke off to demand, “What’s the matter?”

“Why, I’ve forgotten just how that goes,” cried Priscilla. “What is the next, anyway?”

After a protracted struggle, in which each girl racked her memory and contributed such fragments as she could recall, four lines were patched into comparative completeness. But, beyond this, their allied efforts could not carry them. For the second time that day, Peggy included herself in her stern denunciation.

“It’s perfectly appalling. We didn’t know how many states there were, we didn’t know about the stripes on the flag, and now we don’t know ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’ It’s a disgrace. Not a single person in this room knows ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’”

“I do,” said Jerry Morton. 87

“Oh, all right. You can teach it to the rest of us, then,” declared Peggy, and for the next hour the drilling went forward relentlessly. The company repeated each verse in chorus till there was no sign of doubt or hesitation, and then sang it through. When the verses had been mastered separately, the entire song was rendered with telling effect. Aunt Abigail clapped her hands.

“I’ve often wondered why the English and the Germans were so much better posted on their national songs than we are. If all patriotic young Americans took this sensible way of spending a rainy Fourth of July, our critics would have one less arrow in their quiver.”

The afternoon was well advanced, and Rosetta Muriel rose to make her farewells, expressing an enjoyment which was perhaps a concession to her sense of propriety, rather than a perfectly spontaneous expression of feeling. Rosetta Muriel found the girls of Dolittle Cottage strangely puzzling. She had prepared herself to meet these city visitors on their own ground, and instead of holding her own, she had it all her own way. Apparently she was the only one of the company who could claim with any show of reason, to be an authority on the doings of the smart set.

After supper, while the rain still pounded unweariedly on the roof, Aunt Abigail told the story of a high-spirited young ancestress, who had lived back in the colonial times, and in the stirring days of ’76 had pitted her wits against one of King George’s officers, and won from him a concession which was perhaps equally a tribute to her beauty and her brains. It was one of the stories which cannot be re-told too often, full of the audacious courage of gallant youth, and the listening girls felt a vicarious pride in the daring of their countrywoman of bygone days. As for Amy, she straightened herself so as to give the effect of having grown suddenly taller.

“*My* ancestress,” she observed with fitting pride. “How many times my great-grandmother was she, Aunt Abigail? It’s no wonder I’m a little out of the ordinary.”

In spite of a disheartening beginning, it had been a very satisfactory Fourth. Up-stairs, as the girls made ready for bed, Ruth voiced the general opinion. “For a safe and sane Fourth, it hasn’t been half bad.”

Peggy who had crossed the hall, to combine sociability with the ceremony of taking down her hair, brushed her refractory locks with energy.

“I wish they’d never tacked that on to the Fourth of July,” she said. “So many things are safe and sane, darning stockings, for instance. The Fourth of July ought to be a lot more. It ought to be jolly, and to teach you something, and make you think. And this Fourth has come pretty near all three.”

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# CHAPTER VI
## THE PICNIC

Though the Fourth of July picnic had failed to materialize, it was responsible for turning the thoughts of the girls in a new direction. In the beginning of their stay the cottage porch with its shading vines and inspiring view, had satisfied them completely, but the magic of the word “picnic” had awakened a longing to come a little closer to the heart of things.

“I’m tired of eating off a table,” Amy declared. “I want to sit on the grass, and pick ants out of my sandwiches, and feel as if I was really in the country. What’s the matter with a picnic?”

As far as could be gathered, nothing was the matter with this time-honored festivity, and plans and preparations began. The latter were on a somewhat less elaborate scale than those undertaken in honor of the Fourth, partly because Peggy, who easily ranked as chief cook, had undertaken to find a desirable picnic-ground and secure a suitable vehicle for transporting the party. The double responsibility proved engrossing, and the cooking which went on in her absence was less inspirational in its character, and certainly less successful, than when Peggy was at the helm.

As Farmer Cole’s carry-all could not accommodate the party, a farm wagon with three seats, and abundant space for baskets, was put at their disposal, along with two horses of sedate and chastened mien. But Peggy looked at them askance. Peggy laid no claim to skill in horsemanship, and though lack of confidence was not one of her failings, she would almost as readily have undertaken to manage a team of giraffes, as this stolid pair, with their ruminative eyes, and drooping heads.

“I–I don’t suppose they’re likely to run away, are they?” questioned Peggy, making a brave effort to speak with nonchalance.

Joe, to whom the question was addressed, grinned broadly.

“If you can make ’em run,” he replied, “by licking ’em or scaring ’em or anything else, I’ll see you get a medal. Why, Bess here is twenty-three years old.” He struck the animal a resounding smack upon the flank which demonstration caused Bess to prick one ear reflectively. “Her frisky days are over,” continued Joe, “and Nat ain’t much better. A baby in arms could drive ’em.”

In spite of such encouraging assurances, Peggy did not feel at all certain of her ability to manage the double team on hilly country roads. Priscilla’s father kept a horse, it was true, but he was a rather spirited animal, and neither Priscilla nor her mother ever attempted to drive him. “They’ll all insist on my driving,” thought Peggy, as she turned her face toward Dolittle Cottage. “And what if I should drive into a gully and spill them out? I’ve half a mind to go back and see if Mr. Cole can possibly spare Joe.”

But before Peggy had time to retrace her steps, a somewhat familiar figure came into view at the

turn of the road, a girl in a sunbonnet, with a tin pail in either hand. Peggy hurried forward to greet her, rejoicing in a possible solution of her problem.

“Oh, good afternoon. Do you know how to drive?”

Lucy Haines looked as surprised as if she had been questioned as to her ability to button her own shoes. “Why, of course,” she answered staring.

“I thought so. Then don’t you want to go on a picnic with us to-morrow and drive the horses? Joe says a baby could manage them, but I don’t feel equal to it, and I’m sure the other girls won’t. If you’ll come,” added Peggy with sudden inspiration, “we’ll have a berry-picking bee, and all fall to and help you, to make up for your squandering a day on us.” 93

“Oh, you wouldn’t have to do that,” protested Lucy; “I’d love to go if I could really help you.”

With all her powers of intuition, Peggy was far from guessing what her impulsive invitation meant to this ambitious girl whose life had been pathetically bare of pleasure. The girls of Dolittle Cottage would have been vastly surprised had they known how carefree and opulent they seemed to Lucy, whose rapt absorption in the task of realizing her ambition involved the danger that she would forget how to enjoy herself. Had Peggy’s invitation come in any other way, the chances are that Lucy would have declined it, her sensitive pride rendering her suspicious of kindnesses uncalled-for, from her point of view. It was quite another matter when she was asked to do a favor.

A team and a responsible driver having been secured for the morrow, Peggy returned to the cottage highly elated over her success, and lent her aid to the disheartened cooks. When Joe drove the plodding team up to the cottage on the following morning, the array of baskets on the porch promised satisfaction for the appetites of double the number awaiting his coming. Lucy Haines sat in the hammock beside Peggy, her sunbonnet replaced by a little black hat, which had done service through the dust of many summers, and originally was better suited for a woman of fifty than a girl of seventeen. Peggy studying this new friend’s clear-cut profile and fresh coloring, could not help wondering how Lucy would look in a really girlish costume. She was of the opinion that under such circumstances she would be actually pretty. 94

“Fine morning for your shindig,” remarked Joe, who had long before lost all traces of bashfulness in Peggy’s presence. “Don’t you get them horses to speeding, now, so’s you’ll be arrested for fast driving.” He chuckled gleefully over this thunder-bolt of wit, and bethought himself to add, “How’s your chickens coming on?”

“Why, it isn’t time for them to hatch for ten days yet. The old hen has broken three of the eggs. Don’t you think that is pretty clumsy?”

“Clumsy, if it ain’t worse. You’d better keep an eye on her. Sometimes they break their eggs a-purpose just to eat ’em.” And having opened Peggy’s eyes to the dark perfidy possible to the nature of the yellow hen, Joe departed whistling, and the gay party climbed aboard. Peggy sat on the front seat with Lucy, Dorothy snuggling between them, and reflected on the surprising distance from the seat to the ground, and on the appalling size of the clumsy hoofs of the farmhorses. She was glad Lucy was on hand to take up the lines with such a business-like air, and that the responsibility of driving did not devolve on herself. 95

The picnic-grounds Mrs. Cole had especially recommended were several miles away, though the winding road on either hand gave such charming glimpses of shady groves, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, and of a placid river, with silver birches all along its bank, like nymphs who had come down to the water to drink, that it really seemed as if almost any place where they cared to stop would be an admirable picnic-ground. But Lucy appealed to, agreed with Mrs. Cole, that Day’s Woods were worth the drive, and the horses plodded on, now stimulated to a trot, by Lucy’s exertions, but dropping into a walk again as soon as she relaxed her efforts.

As the day had all of July’s brightness with an exhilarating tang in the breeze, not always characteristic of this sultry month, nobody was in a hurry. And, in spite of the deliberate progress of the team, and the fact that the springs of the wagon left something to be desired, it was hardly a welcome surprise when Lucy suddenly turned the horses up a rough bit of road, climbing the hill with such ambitious directness that several muffled screams sounded from the rear of the wagon, and Dorothy clutched Peggy’s arm, evidently under the impression that she was likely to go over backward. 96

“It’s all right,” Lucy explained hastily, suppressing a smile at indications of alarm so unaccountable from her standpoint. “It’s a little steep, but we’ll be at the top in a minute.” Indeed, Bess and Nat, laying aside the lassitude which throughout the drive had momentarily suggested the possibility of their deciding to lie down, struggled bravely up the slope.

“Here we are,” announced Lucy, as the wagon jolted over a stump still standing in the road, and turned to the left under a sentinel oak whose low-growing branches seemed to be reaching for trophies in the shape of hats or locks of hair. “This is the place at last.” As a matter of fact, Day’s Woods needed no voucher. Now that they were on the spot, the girls were positive that no other place would have satisfied them. 97

The wagon had halted on a stretch of partially cleared pasture where the early summer flowers were much in evidence. Not far away was a splendid grove, chestnuts mingling with oak and maple, and the trees far enough apart so that the grass had a chance to flourish at their roots. The pleasant sound of running water, without which no landscape is complete, rose from a ravine to the right, its rocky sides feathered with delicate ferns. With little shrieks of rapture, the girls

ran from one point of beauty to another, while Lucy unharnessed, her efforts supplemented by willing, though awkward assistance on Peggy's part.

Contrary to the habit of most picnic parties, which eat on arriving at their destination, regardless of the hour, the delights of exploration for a time rendered these picnickers oblivious to the clamorous voice of appetite. It was Dorothy who first turned the thoughts of the company in the more practical direction by announcing plaintively, "My stomach is so hungry that it hurts, Aunt Peggy. I wish I had the teentiest bit of a sandwidge."

"Poor dear," cried Peggy, "I believe I'm hungry myself." And then with surprising unanimity, each picnicker from Aunt Abigail down, declared herself on the verge of starvation. The big 98
baskets were taken from the wagon, a red and white checked table-cloth spread upon the grass, and various appetizing viands set out in order. From one of the springs which sent a trickling tribute down the sides of the ravine to the brook below, water was brought for the lemonade.

Lucy Haines, who had lent deft assistance, had barely seated herself upon the grass, before she was on her feet again. "The sun's got at poor old Bess already," she said, as Peggy glanced up inquiringly. "I'll have to tie her in the shade, or I can't enjoy my luncheon."

Bess, who was gazing on the landscape with lack-lustre eyes, submitted to be led into the shade of a big maple, without evidencing any especial appreciation of Lucy's thoughtfulness. Lucy tied the halter to the snake fence, and returned to the group on the grass, who were already justifying their claims regarding their appetite by an indiscriminate slaughter of sandwiches.

"After we've eaten–I don't want you to look like a row of Indian famine sufferers–I'm going to take a picture of the crowd," announced Amy. "Don't you think it's nice to have little souvenirs of 99
such good times? Pass the stuffed eggs to Lucy, somebody. She hasn't eaten anything."

"I've made a pretty good beginning, I think," said Lucy with the grave smile which made her seem a score of years older than her light-hearted companions. She helped herself to an egg, and immediately dropped it on the table-cloth and sprang to her feet. "Oh, dear!" she exclaimed in a tone of consternation.

The others rose as hastily. Farmer Cole's Bess was stamping frantically, and pulling on her halter in a way that bore eloquent testimony to the stability of Lucy's knots.

"I've tied her close to a hornets' nest," explained Lucy, her voice still indicating dismay. "She's stamped about and stirred them up. Well, there's only one thing to do. She's got to be untied before things are any worse."

"Wait!" Peggy had seized her arm. "If you go over there you'll get stung."

"But if we leave her alone, she'll plunge around, and as likely as not she'll be stung to death."

"I'm going with you. Perhaps I can keep the hornets off while you untie her. What can I fight them with? Oh, look! This box cover will be just the thing."

"I'm going, too," said Priscilla quietly. Claire uttered a stifled shriek and caught her friend's arm 100
protestingly. Priscilla shook her off.

"Don't be silly," she said sharply. "Do let me alone, Claire. Now where's that other box cover?" She snatched it up and ran in pursuit of the intrepid pair advancing toward the animated scene under the maple-tree.

"I really think we ought to get further away," said Ruth in alarm. "Oh, hush, Dorothy!" For Dorothy who had felt the contagion of the general excitement, and whose fears were complicated by a harrowing uncertainty as to whether a hornet might not be distantly related to a bear, had burst into noisy weeping.

The desirability of retreat had presented itself forcefully to the others. Claire, in spite of her anxiety over Priscilla's fate, was not averse to getting further away from the scene of the combat, and Aunt Abigail was already hurrying toward the woods, with an agility which discredited her claim to having long passed the prescribed three-score years and ten.

"Aren't you coming, Amy?" Ruth cried, seizing the weeping Dorothy by the hand. "What are you waiting for?" She turned her head, and for a moment stood transfixed, as if astonishment had 101
produced a temporary paralysis.

"Amy Lassell," she choked, "I–I think you're just heartless."

Instead of joining in the retreat, or lending aid to the attacking party, Amy had snatched up her camera, and was bending over the finder in an absorption which rendered her quite oblivious to Ruth's denunciation. She was, indeed, excusable for thinking that the scene under the maple would make a spirited and unusual photograph. Old Bess was rearing and plunging with a coltish animation quite inconsistent with the dignity of her twenty-three years. Priscilla and Peggy, armed with the tin covers of the boxes which had contained the cake and sandwiches, were striking wildly at the advance guard of the hornet army. And Lucy, in her efforts to get at the halter, without coming in contact with Bess's heels or being seriously stung, was dodging about in a fashion calculated to awaken despair in the breast of a photographer.

"If only they would stand still a minute," groaned Amy, too absorbed in her undertaking seriously to consider the consequences of a literal fulfilment of her wish. But apparently nothing was further from the thought of those participating in the pantomime than standing still. The hornets, 102
stirred to activity by Bess's incautious stamping close to their quarters, were rising like sparks from a bonfire. Bess was making a spectacular though not altogether successful effort to stand on

her head, while the agility displayed by Peggy and Priscilla would have gratified their teacher of gymnastics in the high school, had she been present to witness the performance.

Before Lucy was able to reach the fence, the hitching strap had given away under the unusual strain, sending old Bess to her knees. But with no trace of the stiffness of age, she was up in an instant and galloping across the pasture, a number of enraged hornets in hot pursuit. At the crucial moment Amy's finger pressed the button, thus preserving a record of a fact which needed to be substantiated by even more convincing evidence than the testimony of eight disinterested witnesses. Now that it was no longer a question of Bess's safety, the courageous trio who had gone to her rescue, betook themselves to flight.

At the edge of the woods they reconnoitred. The hornets had apparently given up the pursuit and were circling about their endangered castle, ready to sound the alarm in case of hostile approach. Considering that they had advanced into the enemy's camp, so to speak, the girls had 103
come off very well. Lucy had been stung twice, to be sure, and Peggy once, while Priscilla's right eye was rapidly closing in testimony to the effectiveness of the dagger thrusts of the vindictive little warriors. But it might easily have been much worse.

Claire, who had rushed forward to greet the returning heroines, put her hands before her eyes at the sight of Priscilla's unsymmetrical countenance. "You're hurt," she shrieked. "Oh, do you suppose you'll be blind?"

"Blind! What nonsense," returned Priscilla brusquely. "The sting is right over my eyebrow." But the reassuring statement failed to appease Claire's apprehensions. After inquiring hysterically of each of the company in turn, as to the probability that Priscilla would lose her sight, Claire succumbed to tears, and for twenty minutes absorbed the attention of the picnic party. Priscilla, it must be confessed, stood somewhat aloof, confining her assistance to remarking at intervals that something, not defined, was too silly for words. But the others were more sympathetic and in course of time Claire's sobs became gradually less violent, and leaning against Peggy's shoulder, she was able to say faintly that she was sorry to be so foolish and upset everything. 104

"Where'd *you* get stung?" demanded Dorothy, who, now that her earlier fears were assuaged, was inclined to look upon the excitement as a pleasing variation on the hackneyed forms of entertainment. Then, without waiting for an answer, "Aunt Peggy, do you s'pose those hornets have eated up all that nice gingerbread?"

"Oh, our luncheon!" Peggy cried. "I'd forgotten that we hadn't more than started. Let's bring everything up here and finish in peace."

Leaving Claire to the ministrations of Dorothy and Aunt Abigail, the others started off to put Peggy's suggestion into execution, Lucy walking at Peggy's side. "I'm awfully sorry I spoiled your picnic," she said in a constrained voice.

"Spoiled the picnic? You?"

"Yes, it was all my fault, for tying Bess so near that hornets' nest. I suppose I should have been more careful, but the bushes were thick all around it, and I never noticed."

Peggy patted her arm reassuringly. "It wasn't your fault a bit, and the picnic isn't spoiled. We've time for lots of fun yet, and besides, little exciting things like this rather add spice. When we go home and tell about the good times we've had, we'll mention that hornets' nest one of the first 105
things."

It was a cheerful view to be taken by a girl with a painful lump on her arm–still swelling–as Lucy was in a position to appreciate. Yet Peggy's confidence was comforting, and Lucy helping to remove the remnants of the picnic feast, to a safe distance from the restless hornets, was conscious of an appreciable rise in spirits.

The remainder of the day justified Peggy's optimism. Bess was captured at the further end of the pasture, where she was grazing placidly amid the stumps, with nothing in her demeanor to suggest her brief relapse into youthful agility. The girls picked flowers and ferns, explored the ravine and made friendly advances to a family of gray squirrels who chattered angrily at them from the boughs overhead, apparently under the impression that they were the owners of the wood which these noisy human creatures were invading. Then they drove home in the golden light of the sunset, and sang all the way. And Lucy Haines carried into her dreams a memory of cheery friendliness and wholesome fun which was a novelty in her staid and often sombre recollections.

Joe only grinned when Peggy announced herself as a candidate for the medal he had promised. It 106
was not till a week later, when the print which chronicled old Bess's display of spirit was exhibited, that he was convinced. He stood with mouth open, and eyes distended, incredulity slowly giving way to conviction.

"Well, it *is* old Bess, galloping off like a two-year-old. You must have fired off a cannon at her heels. Think of old Bess, legging it in that style! That there picture had ought to be framed."

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## CHAPTER VII 107

### THE COTTAGE BESIEGED

Peggy was in high spirits. Ever since her first meeting with Lucy Haines she had been haunted by a growing desire to find some practical way of showing her sympathy for the hard-working, ambitious girl. With Peggy the longing to be helpful was like hunger or thirst, a keen craving whose satisfaction brought a pleasure equally keen.

On the drive home after the picnic Peggy had questioned Lucy as to the price she received for her berries, and Lucy's answer had caused her to open her eyes. "Why, that's queer. We pay twice as much at home."

"Yes, I know. It's the same way with farmers' stuff. The commission men get a big part of the profits," Lucy explained.

"It doesn't seem fair when you have to stand hours in the hot sun picking, and all they have to do is to set the boxes where folks will see them, and they sell like hot cakes. Wouldn't it be nice–" 108
Peggy stopped abruptly, and gave herself up to formulating a delightful, and as it seemed to her, a perfectly feasible plan, namely that a part of Lucy's berries at least, should be shipped directly to Friendly Terrace, and sold at the market price, Lucy to receive the entire proceeds less the expense of transportation.

Tired as she was after the exertions and excitement of that eventful picnic, Peggy could not sleep till she had written a letter to her mother describing her brilliant scheme in detail. Two days later, the Rural Free Delivery wagon brought encouraging news. Dick had canvassed the houses on both sides the Terrace, and nearly every housekeeper had fallen in with Peggy's plan. Every one seemed pleased at the prospect of getting berries picked only the day before, and Dick, in spite of his responsibilities as first baseman for the Junior Giants, readily undertook to see that the fruit reached its various destinations safely.

But even now Peggy was not satisfied. "You see, girls," she explained to the interested circle around the supper-table, "it's just preserving time, and the Terrace folks will be glad to buy more berries than Lucy can possibly pick. Let's have a bee and help her out. She took a day off to drive us to the picnic, and it's only fair that we should take a day to work for her." 109

It was not necessary for Peggy to use her persuasive arts to induce the others to agree to the plan. Berry-picking as an occupation had lost its charm for most of them, but berry-picking with the generous purpose Peggy had suggested, was quite another matter. After they had calculated Lucy's probable profits for a single day, if she could be sure of five or six volunteer helpers, enthusiasm ran high. Claire's pensive hope, voiced with a sigh, that it wouldn't be too blisteringly hot, was passed over without comment.

It was decided to carry a picnic luncheon to the berry pasture and have the hearty meal of the day after their return. Aunt Abigail though heartily approving the plan, begged off from joining the party. "Dorothy and I are not quite old enough yet to be of much assistance," she said with a funny little grimace. "We lack the patience that will come with years."

"But, Aunt Abigail," Ruth protested, "you couldn't stay here all by yourself. You'd be lonely."

Aunt Abigail's laugh indicated derision. "It'll be a pleasant sensation. Why, you chatter-boxes keep things in such an uproar that I haven't had a chance for quiet, connected thought since I landed here. Go along. I shall be glad to be rid of you." 110

The season for the red raspberries was nearly over, but the blackberries were ripening fast. "My, but I'm glad they're not blueberries," Amy confided to Peggy. "Think of picking a six-quart pail full of shoe-buttons, or what amounts to that. Now, blackberries count up."

The adage that many hands make light work was never better exemplified than on that July day in the berry pasture. Even Lucy lost a little of her air of stern resolution and found herself curiously observant of her surroundings, as if she were regarding them through the unaccustomed eyes of girls who were city bred. She even joined, though with all the awkwardness of a novice, in the gay chatter which went on about the laden bushes. Lucy had always looked on picking berries as a serious business, like life itself. She was a little astonished to see these girls turning it into play, leavening it with laughter. Lucy had been brought up on the saying, 'duty first, pleasure afterward,' though in her particular case, duty engrossed the day so completely that pleasure was of a necessity postponed to some indefinite future. It was a new 111
idea to her that the two might be blended without injury to either.

Hobo who had insisted on joining the party against Claire's protests, for she rather boasted of the fact that she was afraid of dogs, divided his attention equally between Peggy and Dorothy. Peggy he adored, but he had an air of feeling responsible for Dorothy, and as she scampered about the pasture, Hobo followed her, not with any pretext of devotion, but much as a faithful nurse-maid might have done. The girls laughed at his conscientious air as they laughed at everything Dorothy said. It seemed to Lucy she had never seen people who found so many things to laugh about. She wondered how it would seem if gaiety were the habit of life instead of the rare exception.

But though the berry-picking went on with none of the relentless haste which would properly characterize contestants in a Marathon race, though blackened lips gave convincing testimony that all the berries had not found their way into the shining pails, though the incessant talk and almost incessant laughter were suggestive of a flock of blackbirds, and though luncheon turned into a protracted feast, which left only crumbs for the ants and squirrels, yet the pails filled up before Lucy's eyes. And when the declining July sun intimated that he for one had done about 112
enough for a day, the little group in the berry pasture had reason to be well satisfied with their efforts.

“Can’t you smell the blackberry jam cooking on Friendly Terrace day after to-morrow?” demanded Peggy, as she stood beaming over the full pails. “Haven’t we done splendidly?”

All the others were in a mood equally jubilant. Lucy Haines looked from one glowing face to another, and felt a queer tightening in the muscles of her throat. It was not so much their help that touched her. She had been helping other people all her life, in her grave, conscientious fashion. But she had always thought of sympathy as a rather sombre thing, extended when some one died in the family or on like sorrowful occasions. That day she saw it in a different guise, smiling, radiant, something for which one could not say thank you, but which warmed one’s heart through and through, nevertheless. She almost forgot to count up what that berrying-bee would mean to her in dollars and cents, it had meant so much more in other things.

It was a noisy, talkative file of girls who having escorted Lucy to her home, and left the back doorstep covered with berry pails, turned their faces toward Dolittle Cottage. The day spent in 113
the open air had made them hungry. Peggy was invited to divulge her intentions concerning supper and her proposed *menu* aroused enthusiasm.

“I wonder if Aunt Abigail has missed us?” remarked Ruth, who hated above all things to be left alone for five minutes, so that her thoughts had invested Aunt Abigail’s solitude with a pathos which the independent old lady would have instantly resented.

Amy took it on herself to answer. “No, indeed. That’s the best thing about Aunt Abigail. She likes people and she’s always happy in a crowd, but she’s never lonely when she’s by herself. If there’s something around to read she wouldn’t mind if she didn’t have anybody to speak to for a week.”

Dolittle Cottage was in sight by now. The girls’ eyes scanned the porch for a lounging figure absorbed in a book or magazine. “She isn’t outside, is she?” remarked Peggy. “I hope she isn’t trying to get supper.”

“I hope so, too,” agreed Amy fervently. “I’ve tried Aunt Abigail’s cooking once or twice.” Whether it was due to the hope of arresting Aunt Abigail’s supper preparations, before they had gone too 114
far, or because of some other undefined anxiety, the line advanced on the double-quick.

As they drew nearer the cottage, something peculiar in its appearance gradually became evident. It had a forsaken look, such as it had presented on the day of their arrival. Peggy was the first to discover the explanation of the mysterious change.

“Why, she’s got all the shutters closed!”

Peggy was not mistaken. As a rule, every door and window in the cottage stood wide open, except during heavy storms. Now its tightly shuttered windows and closed doors gave it the look of being unoccupied.

Surprise, and perhaps a vague, unformulated anxiety, had quickened the lagging feet of the girls, so that when they came up the gravel walk leading to the door of the cottage, they were almost running. Peggy who was a little in the lead, was the first to reach the door. She turned the knob quickly, pushed till she was red in the face, gave the door a sharp shake and then stood staring blankly. “It’s locked!” she exclaimed.

“I’ll try the back door.” Amy started for the rear of the cottage, but the nimble Priscilla was ahead of her, and when Amy came panting to the back doorstep, met her with the startling news, 115
“This is locked, too. Do you suppose she’s gone away?”

“I don’t know where she’d go unless it was to borrow something of Mrs. Snooks,” Amy though puzzled was not really anxious, as she was only too familiar with Aunt Abigail’s eccentric possibilities. “We’ll knock as hard as we can,” she suggested. “Maybe she lay down to take a nap and overslept.”

A vigorous tattoo began forthwith on the back door, to be reinforced presently by the ringing of the front door bell. Had Aunt Abigail been a rival of the celebrated Seven Sleepers the combined tumult would have been pretty sure to arouse her. Priscilla and Amy at length desisted, and returning to the front of the house, met the other girls coming to the rear. By this time every face was anxious.

“There’s just a chance that the woodshed door is open,” said Peggy. “Though she’s locked everything up so carefully that I don’t think it’s likely.” A moment’s investigation showed that this door, too, was firmly bolted, and Peggy returned to the sober girls grouped under the dining-room window. “She must have gone somewhere,” Peggy said. “Do you suppose she could have got tired of staying here all day by herself, and tried to find us in the pasture and lost her way?” 116

The suggestion struck a little chill through the listeners. The locked house, the setting sun, the mystery of Aunt Abigail’s disappearance had all combined to dissipate their previous cheerfulness. In addition to their anxiety about Aunt Abigail, certain unformulated doubts regarding their chances for supper and bed, weighed upon their spirits.

“Look!” cried Amy suddenly. “Look!” and pointed a directing finger upward. The shutter of one of the bedroom windows was conducting itself very strangely, now opening a trifle, and then slamming to as if it had suddenly changed its mind. But presently it opened sufficiently wide to give the watchers below a glimpse of snowy hair, arranged in a rather elaborate combination of coils and puffs.

“Aunt Abigail!” Amy shrieked, “oh, Aunt Abigail!” Her cry was echoed by the voices of the others, Dorothy’s treble sounding clearly above the rest. The shutter opened again, and an unmistakable Aunt Abigail looked down.

“Who’s there?”

“Why, it’s us!” Grammatical accuracy ceases to be important when people are tired and hungry, and, if the truth must be confessed, a little out of temper. “Do come down, and let us in.” 117

“Are you sure there’s nobody else.”

The girls looked over their shoulders. The gathering dark began to seem unfriendly. Dorothy hid her face in Peggy’s skirts.

“Why, of course there is nobody else here.” It was Amy who gave the answer, though her statement ended in an interrogative upward note as if it asked a question.

“Then come to the front door.” Aunt Abigail’s head disappeared and the shutter closed. A minute or two later the front door opened just far enough to admit one girl at a time, and when a subdued procession had filed in, it closed sharply, and was locked and bolted without an instant’s delay.

Every one realized that the situation was serious. “What’s happened?” exclaimed several voices with anxious unanimity, while Peggy hurried to light the lamp, the dreariness of the shuttered house proving depressing to the spirits, as well as a practical inconvenience.

“Girls!” Aunt Abigail spoke with the air of one who realizes the importance of what she has to tell. “I have had a very singular experience this afternoon. I am not a timid woman, but I must confess I feel quite upset.” 118

“Oh, dear! I felt all the time as though we shouldn’t go off and leave you by yourself,” cried Ruth, and the old lady patted her hand as if grateful for the impulsive outburst.

“I got along very well the early part of the day. I found some interesting books in the garret and read till nearly two. Then I made myself a cup of tea, and after luncheon I thought I would take a nap. The screened doors were shut and hasped, but the windows were all open. Any one could have entered without difficulty.”

Even on the memorable evening when she had entertained her listeners with ghost stories, Aunt Abigail’s tones had not been more blood-curdling. The girls listened with open mouths.

“I was dreaming that I was captured by pirates, and one of them had put me in a chest, along with some of their booty, and was nailing down the lid. When I waked I could still hear the hammering, and for a moment I didn’t know where I was. Then I realized that some one was knocking and I went to the window, and called, ‘Who is it and what do you want?’ And instantly two tramps appeared.”

The girls uttered an exclamation. “If only we’d left you Hobo,” Peggy cried. 119

“I’m afraid he wouldn’t have been much protection against two such ruffians. Each one of them carried a heavy stick, and I dare say they were armed beside. As soon as I saw them, I called for them to go away, that I had nothing for them, but they were bold enough to stay and argue the point.”

“What did they say, Aunt Abigail?”

“Don’t ask me. I kept my self-possession perfectly, but at the same time I was excited, and didn’t understand what they were saying. I presume they were demanding food and money and I kept declaring that I would give them nothing. At last they gave up and went off in the direction of Mrs. Snooks, and then I rushed down-stairs and locked everything up just as you found it.”

It was clear that Aunt Abigail had found her experience trying. She was pale and seemed very unlike her usual composed self. Conscience stricken over having left her by herself, the girls petted her and asked innumerable questions, few of which Aunt Abigail was able to answer. But she described her unwelcome callers in detail, and Peggy found herself thinking that they bore more than a superficial resemblance to the desperadoes of Treasure Island. She could not help wondering if Aunt Abigail’s lively imagination, excited first by her reading, and then by her vivid dream, had not added some touches to the picture. 120

“Well, girls,” Peggy said at length, in a tone surprisingly matter-of-fact considering the circumstances, “I guess supper is the next thing in order. After we’ve had something to eat–”

She stopped abruptly. A loud knocking at the back door echoed through the cottage. Amy uttered a scream, clapping her hands over her mouth instantly, to stifle the sound. The others instinctively moved closer to one another, exchanging frightened glances. Hobo growled softly, the hair on his neck bristling and giving him a peculiarly savage appearance.

The knocking broke off for a moment, and then was resumed. “They’ve come back,” said Aunt Abigail.

“Why, perhaps it’s only Mrs. Snooks come to borrow something,” Peggy was beginning hopefully, when out at the rear of the cottage somebody laughed. Whatever the cause of the unseemly merriment, Mrs. Snooks was not responsible for it. Peggy’s sudden anger went to her head. She felt as if she had forgotten the meaning of fear. “I’m going to tell them,” she exclaimed, “that if they don’t go away, I’ll set the dog on them.” 121

She marched out into the kitchen, Hobo following, and as she reached the door, the knocking began for the third time. “If you don’t go away,” shouted Peggy through the keyhole, “my dog–”

A burst of laughter interrupted her. “Oh, come off, Peggy Raymond,” cried a voice outside. “Open

this door quick, if you know what's best for yourself."

Peggy's cry of joy was echoed by a rapturous shriek from Ruth, for the girls had courageously followed Peggy, as she advanced to hold parley with the besiegers, with an air of resolute determination worthy of Joan of Arc. Peggy fumbled at locks, bolts and catches, for Aunt Abigail had neglected no precaution, and the instant the door was opened, Ruth threw herself into the arms of a tall young fellow who walked in with the air of thinking that it was high time for him to be accorded the privilege.

"Oh, Graham, I never was so glad to see anybody! Some tramps scared us almost to death."

"Tramps! Oh, nonsense!" returned Graham, with a collegian's instant readiness to belittle the 122
fears of his feminine relatives. "Come on in, Jack. It seems to be safe. You know Jack Rynson," he added over his sister's shoulder to Peggy, who nodded and turned to shake hands with another young man, who seemed a little uncertain as to his welcome.

But unmindful of her manners, Ruth was protesting. "It isn't nonsense, Graham. It's true. Two tramps were here this afternoon, shouting all kinds of threats at Aunt Abigail."

"Tramps," repeated Graham, and glanced at his friend. "What sort of looking chaps were they?"

"Oh, perfectly villainous. And each one had a great club of some sort and a bundle on his back."

Graham broke into a roar of laughter, in which Jack Rynson joined, though it should be reckoned to the latter's credit that he was making an evident effort not to seem amused.

"Talk of the journalistic imagination," shouted Graham. "Why, Jack, you newspaper fellows could get all sorts of points from these girls. We were the tramps, Ruth. So much obliged for your kind comments on our personal appearance."

Gradually Graham's incredulous listeners were driven to accept his assurance. The arrival of the
two young men when Aunt Abigail's thoughts were full of the horrors of her dream, had led her to 123
see the good-looking boys, equipped with packs and walking sticks, in a most sinister light. The "tramps" were taken into the front room and introduced, Hobo, who had all of a dog's intuitive suspicion of old clothes, sniffing disapprovingly at their heels.

The laugh was against Aunt Abigail as she herself owned. "I would have taken my oath," she remarked reflectively, "that one of you had only one eye, and a scar that ran the length of his cheek. It shows that even if I'm not as young as I was, my imagination is still active. But you had packs on your backs. What has become of the clubs and packs?"

Graham explained that they had taken rooms at a farmhouse a little way down the road, and had left their belongings there. "We're out for a long tramp," Graham explained. "We mean to make several stops of a few days each, and we didn't know any better place to begin than right here."

"Are you staying with Mrs. Cole?" asked Peggy, and Graham shook his head. "No, the name wasn't Cole. It was–let's see."

Jack Rynson helped him out. "Snooks, I believe."

"That's it, Mrs. Snooks," agreed Graham, and then looked about him astonished, for the entire 124
company, including Aunt Abigail, was helpless with laughter.

"She'll borrow your walking stick for a clothes pole," said Peggy, when she was able to speak, "and your pack for a footstool. She'll borrow everything you've got, and then be provoked because you haven't more."

It is a question whether anybody would have thought of supper if it had not been for Dorothy, who retired into a corner to weep. Questioned regarding her tears, she replied that she wanted her mother. "Homesick," some one said significantly.

"Hungry!" cried Peggy, with one of her flashes of intuition. "And what wonder! Just look at the clock! Girls, let's see how quick we can get something ready."

The meal though less ambitious than that which Peggy had originally planned, was satisfying. And it was not till the next day that the girls learned that the two young men who did such abundant justice to the bounty of Dolittle Cottage, had eaten another supper at Mrs. Snooks, a little over an hour earlier.

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## CHAPTER VIII 125
## HOBO TO THE RESCUE

Life at Dolittle Cottage had been anything but uneventful, even before the arrival of Graham and his friend. But it must be confessed that the presence of the two young men added appreciably to the agreeable excitements and diversions of the days. For upwards of twenty-four hours the girls had maintained the superiority of first arrivals, and then to their surprise, found the tables turned and that they were being introduced to spots whose charms they had never discovered, and to pleasures as yet untried.

Jerry Morton bringing his fish as usual, looked askance at the two young fellows, taking their

ease in the porch hammocks, and received with marked ungraciousness Peggy's suggestion that he should act as their guide to some point where the fishing was good.

"I never could get on with swells," said Jerry, with his customary frankness. "Let 'em fish out of your cistern. Them city dudes will catch as much there as anywhere."

Peggy restrained her laughter with difficulty. It seemed rather hard that Graham and Jack, attiring themselves in garments so old as barely to be presentable should yet be designated by a term of such unbounded contempt. Privately, Peggy thought Aunt Abigail had come nearer the mark, and that the boys bore a more striking resemblance to tramps than to city dudes.

Wisely she made no effort to defend her friends. "Of course, if you are too busy," she said indifferently, "we can make some other arrangement. Perhaps Mr. Cole would spare Joe–"

"Oh, I'll take 'em," interrupted Jerry, still sulkily, though he looked a little ashamed of himself. "I'll show 'em where the fish are, and if they come home with nothing but their tackle, don't blame me."

But the fishing excursion was more successful than Jerry's gloomy hints gave ground for anticipating. The boys brought back so many fish that thrifty Peggy racked her brains to find ways of disposing of them all. Jerry, for his part, carried home a new idea of "city dudes" and their ways. These clear-eyed, clean-minded young fellows had not treated him as an inferior, nor had they committed the offence still less pardonable, from Jerry's standpoint, of condescending to his level. As fishermen, too, they had showed no mean skill, and from dislike and mistrust, Jerry had at length been brought to grudging admiration and reluctant respect.

The favorable impression was not all on one side, however. As Graham cleaned his fish–the girls lightening his labors, by sitting around in an appreciative circle–he suddenly checked his operations to exclaim: "Say, do you know, that fellow's a wonder!"

"Who? Not Jerry Morton?" Ruth's tone was rather scandalized, for Ruth did not share Peggy's faculty for finding all kinds of people interesting, and had a not uncommon weakness for good clothes and conventional manners.

"Yes, Jerry. Why, he's a walking encyclopedia! He knows everything about the trees and plants growing around here, except their scientific names. And it's the same way with birds. He's learned it all first-hand, instead of out of books, you see. His eyes and his ears too, are as sharp as an Indian's! Pity that there isn't a better prospect of his amounting to something."

Peggy was delighted with the opportunity to discuss Jerry's case with some one inclined to appreciate the boy's good qualities. "He's got started wrong," she explained. "He's not really lazy, but he seems lazy to the people here. They think he's worthless and he resents that, and so he fancies he hates everybody. You see, he hasn't any father or mother. He lives with his grandmother and she–"

"Dear me! How do you pick up so much about that sort of people?" demanded Claire, suppressing a yawn rather unsuccessfully. Claire found such topics of conversation far from entertaining, and was perfectly willing that Peggy should realize this fact. But Peggy herself was too interested to suspect that Claire was bored.

"Oh, I asked Mrs. Cole about him," she replied. "Graham, I wish you'd talk to him if you get a chance, and try to wake up his ambition. It's a shame for such a bright boy to grow up with the reputation of being a loafer."

Graham shook his head. "Guess I wouldn't be much of a success as a home missionary. You'd better try your hand on him yourself, Peggy."

"Me? Oh, I do," Peggy answered simply. "But, perhaps he'd think more of it coming from a boy." And Graham reaching for another fish, reflected that a girl like Peggy Raymond could not even go away for a summer vacation without framing innumerable little plots for helping people, with or without their coöperation. Ruth had told him of the berrying-bee, and mentioned casually that Peggy was going to give Lucy Haines lessons in algebra. At the same time she was puzzling her head over the possibility of turning the good-for-nothing of the community into a useful citizen. Humility was not Graham's dominant characteristic, but for the moment the popular young collegian had a queer and uncomfortable sense of amounting to very little.

Dorothy rescued him from this unwonted self-depreciation by bursting on the scene with eyes distended to their widest. "Aunt Peggy, your old hen's scolding–and scolding."

"Now, Dorothy, you mustn't go near her nest."

"I stood 'way off by the door and jus' looked at her an' she talked as cross as anything."

"Oh, I wonder–What day is it, anyway?" Peggy disappeared through the open door of the woodshed, to have her jubilant suspicions instantly confirmed. The yellow hen was in a mood of extreme agitation, and a shrill peeping from beneath her ruffled feathers furnished the explanation of her disquiet.

Peggy herself was hardly more composed, and her excitement was contagious. All plans for the remainder of the afternoon were instantly forgotten till Peggy's chickens should be ushered from their egg-shell prison-houses into the world of sunshine. Peggy had fortified herself against this hour by asking advice of Mrs. Cole and Joe, and all the other experts in the neighborhood, but now she realized the appalling gulf between theory and practise. The demeanor of the yellow hen convinced her that everything was going wrong, and she felt pathetically unequal to doing ever

so little toward making it come right.

Yet, in spite of Peggy's forebodings, one chicken after another was rescued from beneath the wings of the perturbed foster-mother, and placed in a carefully prepared basket set behind the kitchen stove. The girls, eager for a peep at the new arrivals, failed to wax enthusiastic after their curiosity had been satisfied. Amy voiced the general disappointment when she said regretfully, "I hadn't an idea they looked like that to start with. I thought they'd be fluffy and cute, like the chickens on Easter cards." Peggy, who had herself found the appearance of the wobbly, shrill-voiced mites a distinct shock, said bravely that they would undoubtedly be prettier when they were older.

After six chickens had been placed in the basket, silence reigned in the nest. The yellow hen settled down on her remaining eggs, emitting, at intervals, an agitated cluck. Peggy vibrated between the woodshed and the covered basket behind the stove, like an erratic pendulum. The other girls, weary at last of waiting for more chickens, trooped to the living-room, and Graham, who like many young gentlemen of twenty, could on occasion conduct himself like a boy half that age, sought to create a diversion by tickling his sister.

Ruth was agonizingly sensitive to this form of torture. A forefinger extended with a threatening waggle was sufficient to rob her of every vestige of self-control, while the play of her brother's fingers over her ribs reduced her instantly to grovelling submission. To do Graham justice, he was quite unable to appreciate the fact that this pastime cost Ruth real suffering. He would have put his hand into the fire before he would have struck his sister, yet he frequently subjected her to misery compared to which a blow would have been welcome.

With a sudden freakish reversion to the prankishness of a growing boy, Graham pointed his finger at Ruth, who instantly screamed. The girls looking on, laughed, and there was some excuse for their amusement. The spectacle of the sensible Ruth, shrinking and shrieking over nothing more alarming than an agitated forefinger, was ridiculous enough to be funny. Graham, encouraged by the laughter, took a step toward his sister who instantly burst into incoherent appeals and protests.

"Oh, Graham, please, Graham! Oh, dear! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Hobo, lying on the porch outside, leaped to his feet. Hobo keenly felt the responsibility of the family he had adopted. He subjected all new arrivals to a careful scrutiny which marked him sufficiently as the guardian of the household. But never before in his three weeks of domesticity, had the need for his services seemed as urgent as now.

Barking excitedly, Hobo ran to the nearest window, raised himself on his hind-legs, his forepaws resting on the outer sill, and looked in. The scene which met his eyes confirmed his worst suspicions. Ruth, standing in the middle of the room, cowered and pleaded, while the teasing brother prolonged the fun by touching her lightly now and then, finding her writhing protests eminently diverting.

Outside, Hobo barked his warning. The girls turned to the window and the laughter broke out afresh. The dog's eyes shone with a bluish light, like burnished steel. The hair on his neck bristled threateningly. As Graham looked up, Hobo's upper lip drew back in a menacing fashion, showing his teeth.

"That dog would be an ugly customer in a fight," remarked Graham casually, not averse to teasing a barking dog as well as a screaming girl. He caught Ruth by the arm as she edged away, and tickled her again. Ruth's responsive shriek was ear-splitting.

Hobo's head disappeared from the window. The dog ran back, crouching for a spring. Unluckily the screen had been removed from that particular window the previous day, when Peggy had discovered a break through which the flies were entering, and the window itself had been lowered till the necessary repairs could be made. Just as Graham was beginning to think that the fun was losing its zest, a heavy body launched itself against the glass.

Hobo was a large dog, and since he had become a member of the family at Dolittle Cottage the hollows of his gaunt frame had been filling out rapidly. With such a projectile hurled against a window, the result could not be in doubt. There was a startling crash. Pieces of glass flew in all directions, and Hobo, bleeding from several wounds, struggled through the splintered aperture made by the force of his spring, and leaped at the young man who had disturbed the peace of the cottage.

For all Hobo's injuries, there was plenty of fight in him yet, and the consequences might have been serious if Peggy had not arrived upon the scene at the critical moment. Her stern command, "Down, Hobo! Down, sir!" emphasized by stamps of her foot had a magical effect. The poor, bleeding, bewildered creature, who had stopped at nothing to protect a member of the household which commanded his fealty, recognized in Peggy the ultimate authority. The tense muscles, bent for a spring, instantly relaxed. The lip dropped over the bared teeth. With a whimper the poor brute crouched at Peggy's feet, and Peggy saw with sickened dismay that the blood was oozing from gashes in the dog's neck.

"Graham!" she gasped. "Oh, Graham! He's hurt! He's bleeding dreadfully!"

Graham's temporary lapse into the sins of his youth was over. He was again a young college man, and thoroughly ashamed of himself. The amusement he had found in teasing Ruth suddenly seemed inexplicable, in view of this tragic culmination. Flushing and awkward, he stood looking on while Peggy bent over the wounded dog, unable to restrain her tears. But when she attempted

to remove a splinter of glass from the gash for which it was responsible, Graham uttered a startled protest.

“I wouldn’t try that, Peggy. He’s likely to bite you.”

“Oh, he won’t bite me,” Peggy returned confidently. “He knows I’m his friend, don’t you, poor old fellow?” Hobo, realizing that the loved voice was addressing him, even though the trend of the question was beyond his comprehension, gave a feeble flop of his tail, and raised to Peggy’s face eyes full of loyalty and trust.

The living-room became a hospital forthwith. Those of the girls who were affected with unpleasant qualms at the sight of blood, fled precipitately, while the others lent aid to Peggy, who had taken upon herself the double rôle of operating surgeon and chief nurse. Several ugly splinters of glass were removed from the bleeding neck, and the wounds bathed and bandaged. Graham’s usefulness in the operation was confined to offering advice; for once, when he had 136
extended his hand to assist Peggy, the light of battle had again kindled in Hobo’s eyes, and a low, rumbling growl had voiced his objections to any ministrations from so objectionable a source.

When Peggy’s patient was swathed in bandages, till he looked as if he might be suffering from a severe attack of sore throat, Peggy called him out into the woodshed, where an inviting bed had been made ready for him. Hobo stretched himself upon the folded rug with a groan startlingly human. It was clear that the loss of blood had weakened him, and his gaze directed to Peggy was full of pathetic questioning and dumb appeal.

“I believe I’ll run over to the Coles, and ask them if there is anything more we can do,” Peggy said, looking as unhappy as she felt. “They know so much about all kinds of animals. I’ve taken care of Taffy in his attacks of distemper, and once he had a dreadful fight with another dog, and came home all torn. But he didn’t bleed like this.”

“I’ll walk over with you,” said Graham, only too ready to show his penitence, and Dorothy, who had an innate antipathy to being left behind, also proffered her services as escort.

Accordingly the trio set forth, Dorothy declining to follow the path but circling around the others, 137
like an erratic planet, revolving about twin suns. Graham, who felt personally responsible for the shadow clouding Peggy’s bright face, lost no time in apologizing.

“Peggy, it’s a shame for me to upset things so. You’ll all wish that we had got discouraged over Mrs. Tyler’s reception, and gone on without stopping.”

“Why, no, Graham,” Peggy protested. “Nobody could have dreamed that anything like this would happen.”

Graham was not in a mood to spare himself. “Perhaps not, but there wasn’t any excuse for teasing poor Ruth almost into hysterics. It’s the kind of fun a red Indian might be expected to enjoy.”

Peggy was so inclined to agree with this diagnosis that she found it impossible to be as comforting as she would have liked. “I often wonder how it is that we all think teasing is fun,” she said. “Girls are just as bad as boys. In fact, I think their kind of teasing is even more cruel sometimes. It’s queer, when we stop to think of it, that anybody can get real satisfaction out of making some one else miserable, or even uncomfortable.”

“It’s beastly,” Graham declared with feeling. “I’m going to stop teasing Ruth, that’s sure. It seems 138
so ridiculous to have her scream and wriggle if I point my finger at her, that I can’t realize that it isn’t all a joke. But, I suppose, it is serious enough from her point of view, and I’m going to quit.”

The walk to Farmer Cole’s, enlivened by similar expressions of penitence and good resolutions, was a very edifying excursion, and Peggy, in her sympathy for Graham, almost forgot her anxiety concerning Hobo. She was further relieved when the case was laid before Farmer Cole.

“Oh, he’ll get over it all right,” said that authority encouragingly. “Being a cur dog, that way. Now, if you buy a highbred animal, and pay a fancy price, it goes under at the least little thing. Never knew it to fail. But to kill a cur, you’ve got to blow him up with dynamite.”

“But they *do* die,” objected Peggy, who found it difficult to accept the farmer’s optimistic view, much as she wished to.

“Old age,” said Farmer Cole. “That’s all. A few scratches like that ain’t going to hurt a cur. But I paid through my nose for a blooded colt a few years back, and ’twarn’t a week before he cut 139
himself on barbed wire, and bled to death.”

“It won’t do any harm for her to use some of the salve,” said Mrs. Cole, and went to her medicine closet in search of the remedy. Rosetta Muriel smoothed her hair, with a motion that set her bracelets jingling, and cast a provocative glance at Graham. Rosetta Muriel admired Graham extremely. In spite of his shabby clothing, there was about him the indefinable air which Jerry had recognized and which had led him to classify the young man as a “city dude.”

“I should have thought that Raymond girl would have put on something more stylisher,” reflected Rosetta Muriel, casting a disapproving glance at Peggy’s gingham. “I haven’t seen her in a nice dress yet.” Had she been in Peggy’s place, she would have known better how to improve her opportunities, she felt sure.

Owing to Hobo’s injuries, the event which up to the time of the accident had seemed to Peggy so tremendously important, had been quite cast in the shade. She recalled it as Mrs. Cole brought out the salve. “Oh, I didn’t tell you. My chickens have hatched.”

“Turned out pretty well, did they?” asked Mrs. Cole, smiling at Peggy benevolently. Peggy was an immense favorite with the good woman, a fact which Rosetta Muriel recognized with irritated wonder. She asked herself frequently why it was that folks got so crazy over that Raymond girl, “with no style to speak of.”

“There’s only six hatched yet. I’ve put them in a basket just as you said. The old hen is on the other eggs.”

“Maybe six will be all,” said Mrs. Cole. “That thunder-storm day before yesterday was pretty rough on eggs ’most ready to hatch.”

Six chickens, instead of eighteen! An air-castle fell with such a crash that it almost seemed to Peggy as if the little group about her must be aware of its downfall. Then she took a long breath. “Well, even six, at forty cents a pound, won’t be so bad for a start,” said Peggy to herself.

Mrs. Cole looked admiringly after the young people as they took their departure, Dorothy and Annie racing on ahead. “They’re what I call a handsome pair,” she exclaimed.

Rosetta Muriel objected. “He’s awful swell, but she ain’t a bit. Look at her gingham dress.”

“Seems to me that her gingham dress is just the thing for running around in the woods and fields,” said Mrs. Cole, who did not often pluck up courage sufficiently to oppose her own opinions to her daughter’s superior wisdom. “I’ve seen her fixed up in white of an evening, and looking like a picture. But, as far as that goes,” she concluded resolutely, “there’s so much to her face, just as if her head was crammed full of bright ideas, and her heart of kind thoughts, that you get to looking at her, and forget what she’s wearing. An’ I guess that young man thinks so, too.”

The closing sentence silenced the retort on Rosetta Muriel’s lips. Her mother had voiced her own suspicions. As a rule, the sophisticated Rosetta Muriel had very little respect for her mother’s opinions, but, in this case, her views happened to coincide with some inward doubts of her own. Rosetta Muriel wondered if it were possible, after all, that sweetness and intelligence written in a girl’s face, might count for more than some other things.

Farmer Cole’s optimism regarding Hobo was justified. For that very evening as the young folks ranged themselves in a semi-circle for the flash-light picture, on which Amy had set her heart, Hobo appeared, looking very interesting in his big collar of bandages, and squeezed himself into the very front of the circle, with a dog’s deep-rooted aversion to being left out of anything. Poor Hobo! He was inexperienced in the matter of flash-lights, and that eventful day was to end in still another shock. For when the powder was touched off and the room was illumined by the lurid glare, high above the inevitable chorus of screams and laughter, sounded Hobo’s yelp of terrified surprise. He left the room with his tail between his legs, and never again, while the summer lasted, could he be induced to face Amy’s camera.

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# CHAPTER IX
## RUTH IN THE RÔLE OF HEROINE

The boys’ stay was almost at an end. There had been a number of “last days,” indeed, and Graham declared that he felt like a popular *prima donna* with a farewell tour once a year. “Jack and I hate like the mischief to go,” he acknowledged frankly, “but for all it’s so jolly here, you can’t exactly call it a walking tour, and that’s what we set out for. So to-morrow is positively our last appearance.”

They had been sitting around the fire in the front room when Graham made the announcement, and forthwith it was unanimously decided that the closing day of the boys’ visit must be a red-letter occasion in the annals of the summer. Enough suggestions were offered to provide a week’s entertainment for people who object to taking their pleasures strenuously. In addition to outlining plans for the morrow, it had been tacitly agreed to make the most of the present, and this had resulted in their sitting up very late and clearing among them several platters of fudge, which Amy had thoughtfully made ready. It was that fudge which Ruth recalled about five o’clock the next morning,–recalled with an aversion which by rapid degrees became loathing.

“I ought to have known better,” thought poor Ruth, failing to find any especial consolation in the reflection that she herself was responsible for her present misery. “I didn’t eat half as much as Amy, though.” She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples and groaned. “It’s Graham’s last day, and I’m going to be sick and spoil everything.”

She entertained herself for some moments by picturing the consternation with which her announcement would be received. “You’ll have to go without me to-day. I’ve got such a headache that I can’t do a thing.” But, of course, they would not go without her. They would sit on the porch and discuss regretfully the good times they would have had if nothing had interfered.

All at once Ruth came to a magnificent resolve. She would not spoil the pleasure of Graham’s last day. She would not allow the shadow of her indisposition to cloud the enjoyment of the others. She would bear her sufferings in silence. The resolution was such a relief that she almost fancied that the pain in her head was a little easier. She turned her pillow, pressed her hot cheek to its refreshing coolness, and proceeded to enjoy contemplating herself in the rôle of a heroine.

After two wretched hours in which the only alleviating feature was her heroic resolve that her suffering should affect no one but herself Ruth fell asleep. And almost immediately, as she thought with indignation, she was waked by Peggy, who stood over her, holding fast to her shoulder and shaking her vigorously at intervals, as she cried: “Oh, you sleepy-head! Aren’t you ever going to get up?”

“Don’t, Peggy!” Ruth’s tone did not reflect the cheeriness of Peggy’s greeting. She jerked away with a feeling of aggrieved resentment. To be shaken awake was something she had not bargained for, in mapping out her course of action. How her head did ache, to be sure. If Peggy had only let her sleep a couple of hours longer in all probability she would have felt much better.

But Peggy had no intention of letting anybody sleep. “Get up this minute, both of you,” she insisted. “We’ve got oceans to do to-day, and everybody must hustle.”

Ruth reluctantly obeying the summons, clutched the bed post to steady herself. Her head swam. 146
The pain was fiercer, now that she was standing. It was all very well for Peggy to talk of hustling. Probably if her own head ached distractingly she would be satisfied with a less strenuous word.

“See you later, but not late, if you please.” Peggy shot out of the room, and the door slammed to behind her breezy departure. Ruth started and shuddered. She had a feeling, which she would have recognized as unreasonable if she had stopped to analyze it, that she would have expected more consideration from Peggy.

But worse was coming. The boys had been invited to breakfast, in order that the day’s festivities might begin as early as possible, and so ardent had been their response that Peggy found them on the porch when she came down-stairs. She threw the door open and gazed at them commiseratingly. “Hungry?”

“Starved,” Graham looked at his watch and sighed. “We’ve been here a trifle over two hours.”

“Nothing of the sort, Miss Peggy,” exclaimed Jack. “It’s hardly half an hour.”

“Half an hour is bad enough. We all overslept. If you’d like, you may hurry things by setting the table, while I mix the griddle-cakes.”

Graham smacked his lips. “Maple sirup?” he asked insinuatingly, and at Peggy’s nod, he indulged 147
in frantic demonstrations of delight. Jack looked at him disapprovingly. “From your actions I should judge you to be about eight years old.”

“’Tis the griddle-cake doth make children of us all,” parodied Graham recklessly, not at all abashed by his friend’s criticism. “Come on, Jack. I’m going to set the table, and I shall need your housewifely aid.”

When the girls came flocking down, the table was set, although not altogether in the conventional fashion, and from the kitchen issued the odor of frying pan-cakes, agreeable or otherwise, according to one’s mood. Graham sniffed it as ecstatically as if it had been the fragrance of a rose-garden. Ruth hastily found her way to the open door, and tried to think of something beside food.

“Ruth!” It was Peggy’s voice sounding from the kitchen. Ruth looked resolutely ahead, and did not move. There was Amy and Priscilla and Claire to choose from. If she didn’t answer, Peggy would of course summon another assistant.

“Ruth!”

“Don’t you hear Peggy calling you, Ruth?” Graham asked peremptorily. And again Ruth’s mood 148
was resentful. How unkind and unfeeling everybody seemed. The tears started to her eyes as she crossed the room. In the kitchen Peggy was turning cakes on the smoking griddle, her cheeks glowing from her exertion over the blazing fire.

“Here, Ruth. Watch these cakes, will you, while I see to the hash? I wonder if those boys have got enough dishes on the table to eat out of. And push back the coffee pot please. The coffee’s done, anyway.”

“Is breakfast nearly ready?” Graham put his head through the door. “I told you I was starving you remember, three-quarters of an hour back. Now the pangs of hunger are less cruel, but I’m gradually growing weaker.”

“You’re a pathetic figure for a famine sufferer,” scoffed Peggy. “Oh, Ruth, that cake is burning.”

“Upon my word, Ruth,” exclaimed Graham, with mock severity, “that’s inexcusable. Burning up a perfectly good pan-cake when your brother is suffering from hunger.” It was of course, in keeping with the nonsense he had been talking all the morning, but to poor Ruth it seemed as if he were really finding fault.

“I’m doing the best I can,” she replied rather sharply, and Peggy noticed the suppressed 149
irritation of her tone and wondered. Then, as Graham advanced into the kitchen with the intention of helping to carry in the breakfast, Ruth backed into a corner and screamed.

“What on earth is the matter now?” Graham knew the answer to his question, even before he asked it, and was irritated. If it was amusing to make Ruth scream by pointing his finger in her direction, when he was in a teasing mood, it was extremely annoying to have her suspect him of such intentions when his conscience was altogether clear, when indeed, with Peggy as a witness, he had solemnly renounced all such diversions forever. “What are you making such a fuss about?” he insisted, as Ruth did not answer.

“You were going to tickle me.”

“Nothing of the sort. Oh, say! The rest of those cakes are burning up. Peggy, you’d better get somebody to help you who will attend to her business.”

Peggy saved the situation by telling Graham he could take in the hash, and that there was so much batter that a few scorched cakes would never be missed. “You carry in the coffee,–will you, Ruth?” said Peggy, and improved the opportunity to resume her former position by the griddle. 150
Ruth understood the manœuvre, and her heart swelled. Evidently Peggy thought she couldn’t do anything right, not even turn a griddle-cake when it was brown. And Graham was actually cross. She began to think it did not pay to be heroic in order to spare the feelings of such inconsiderate people.

Poor Ruth could not eat. She sipped her coffee and played with her fork, expecting every moment that some one would notice that her food had not been touched and inquire the reason. To tell the truth, Ruth had reached the point where she would not have been averse to such an inquiry, and the attendant necessity of explanation. It was much pleasanter, she had decided, to have people know you were feeling sick, and trying to be brave about it, than to suffer in heroic silence, sustained only by your own sense of virtue. But, to her surprise and disappointment, no questions were asked. The gay party surrounding the breakfast-table was too engrossed with satisfying clamorous appetites, and discussing the day’s program, to notice that one of the number was not eating. This confirmed Ruth’s impression, that it was, after all, a selfish, if not a heartless world.

“Now, Peggy,” began Priscilla, when the last plate of golden-brown cakes had failed to melt away 151
after the fashion of their predecessors, “nobody can eat another thing. As long as you got the breakfast, Ruth and I will wash the dishes.”

“And Claire and I will make the beds,” said Amy, “while Peggy attends to the menagerie.” Amy had always continued the disrespectful custom of referring to Peggy’s poultry yard as the menagerie.

“It won’t take me ten minutes to attend to the chickens and Hobo, too.” Peggy left the table, and went blithely out to the small coop, shaped like a pyramid, with slats nailed across the front, where the yellow hen exercised maternal supervision over six chickens. Whether or not the thunder-storm was responsible, Mrs. Cole’s foreboding regarding the other nine eggs had been justified by the outcome. But to make up for this disappointment, the six chickens which had hatched had turned out to be as downy and yellow and generally fascinating as the chickens favored by the artists who design Easter cards, and this agreeable surprise had enabled the optimistic Peggy to take an entirely cheerful view of the situation.

It was a shock to the others when a wailing cry came to their ears from the vicinity of the chicken 152
coop. Priscilla, who was just filling her dish-pan with steaming water, set the kettle down so hastily as narrowly to escape scalding herself, and ran to the scene of the excitement. The others followed with the exception of Ruth, who was glad of the opportunity to drop into a chair and press her hands to her throbbing temples.

The cause of Peggy’s cry of distress was at once apparent. She stood beside the coop, a motionless ball of down on her open palm. Below the yellow hen scratched blithely and clucked to her diminished family.

“She did it herself,” cried the exasperated Peggy. “She deliberately stood on top of it and crushed the life out of it. When I came out it was too far gone to peep, and she was looking around as if she wondered where the noise had come from. But by the time I could make her move, the poor little thing was dead.”

It was the general verdict that the conduct of the yellow hen was reprehensible in the extreme. The comments passed upon her would have been sufficient to make her wince, had she been a hen of any sensibility. But regardless of the disapproval so openly expressed, she continued to scratch and summon her brood, with every indication of being perfectly satisfied with herself. 153

> “Six little Indians stole honey from a hive,
> A busy bee got after one and then there were but five.”

Peggy looked at Graham as if she did not know whether to laugh or be angry. Being Peggy, she, of course, settled the question in favor of the first-named alternative, though even as she dimpled, she told Graham severely that it was nothing to laugh about.

“As I understand it, the tragedy has only been hastened,” said the teasing Graham. “You designed the chicken for the butcher, didn’t you? And now let’s feed this unnatural mother before she gets hungry and eats up the other five.”

The appetite of the yellow hen was not the least impaired by the family disaster. She gobbled down her corn meal with a dispatch which argued indifference to the possibility that there might not be enough left for her offspring. Then while Peggy and Graham made ready a little grave for the victim of maternal clumsiness, the others flocked back to the house discussing the calamity. Reluctantly Ruth resumed her duties, and her sense of resentment grew rapidly, as she listened 154
to the excited chatter of her companions. All this fuss about a dead chicken, and not a word of sympathy for her sufferings. Ruth was rapidly approaching the point of extreme unreasonableness.

A long walk was the first of the festivities scheduled for the eventful last day. The boys had

discovered a view that they were very anxious to have the others see, and even Aunt Abigail, who was not a great success as a pedestrian, had decided to go along. Ruth was putting on her wide brimmed shade hat, when a wave of faintness swept over her, and for a minute everything turned black. Then she recovered herself, and saw a white face with unnaturally large eyes staring back at her from the mirror.

"I–I don't believe I'll go," said Ruth in an uncertain voice, in which there was no suggestion of heroism.

"Go?" Amy was down on her hands and knees, looking for a pin in the cracks of the floor. "Of course you'll go. Don't be grumpy."

Grumpy! And after she had endured so much to avoid casting a shadow over the spirits of the party. Ruth frowned on her, but in silence. It seemed to her that she had never before realized 155
the amount of selfishness in the world. Nobody cared what she suffered. Her dearest friends, her own brother were prodigies of inconsiderateness. With an effort she kept back the burning tears of self pity, and tottered down the stairs, prepared to endure the martyrdom of a long walk under the July sun.

"Ruth," called Peggy from the pantry, "just help me with these sandwiches, will you?" They were coming home for the midday meal, but Peggy had determined to carry along a few sandwiches, as country-grown appetites seemed independent of the limitations of those appetites with which she was best acquainted.

Ruth rose to obey. But her indisposition was becoming more than a match for her will. She was half way across the room, when she halted, swayed, and crumpled up in a little helpless heap. Graham was too late to save her from falling, but he had her in his arms almost as soon as she touched the floor, and carried her to the couch, turning pale himself at the sight of her colorless face.

From all directions the girls came running. As usual, Peggy took command.

"She's fainted, Graham, that's all. Bring some water. We must get the sofa cushions out from 156
under her head. Bring that palm-leaf fan, Amy. There, she's coming to already."

The eyelids of the forlorn heroine had indeed fluttered encouragingly. A moment later Ruth opened her eyes. As her languid gaze travelled around the circle of faces, she saw consternation written on each one. Peggy patted her hand tenderly.

"Don't try to speak, darling. You fainted, that's all."

"Could you drink a little water, dearie," coaxed Priscilla, bending over her, glass in hand.

"Here, let me lift her." Graham rushed forward, thankful for the opportunity to do something, as he found the sense of helplessness characteristic of his sex in all such crises extremely galling.

Ruth felt it incumbent on herself to relieve the general anxiety. "It's only one of my headaches," she explained faintly. "I ought to have given up to it. But I hated to spoil Graham's last day."

There was a little chorus of mingled disapproval and admiration. "You dear plucky thing!" cried Peggy. "And here I've been ordering you around all the morning. Those pan-cakes must have been torture."

"As if Jack and I wouldn't have waited over another day!" exclaimed Graham in a tone of disgust. 157
"We'd rather have waited a week, than have you put yourself through like this," He smoothed her ruffled hair with awkward tenderness, and Amy, carried away by her emotions, fanned so vehemently that she tapped the patient on the nose, and was sharply reprimanded.

The tears Ruth had been holding back all the morning could no longer be restrained. They overran her trembling lids, and streamed down her cheeks. The little murmurs of soothing sympathy were redoubled, though Graham walked off quickly to the window and stood looking out with a stern, fixed gaze, as if the landscape had suddenly become of absorbing interest. But Ruth's tears were not wrung from her by suffering. They were tears of penitence and honest shame. How dear and kind every one was! How cruelly she had misjudged the world when she had called it inconsiderate. And the course of conduct which in the morning had seemed to her admirable and heroic, suddenly appeared foolish in the extreme. The faint tinge of color showing in her white cheeks was not an indication of returning strength so much as of mortification.

The departure of Jack and Graham was immediately put off till Ruth should be well enough to 158
take part in the fun which was to serve as a climax to the visit. For the remainder of the day, Ruth found herself the centre of attraction in Dolittle Cottage. She lay at ease on the couch, with wet compresses on her forehead. The shutters were closed to keep out the sunshine. Every one walked on tiptoe, and spoke in subdued accents. Even the fly-away Dorothy sought the invalid at frequent intervals to murmur, "Poor Rufie! Poor Rufie," and to pat Ruth's arm with a sympathetic little hand. Now that it had gained its point, the headache decreased in severity, but had the pain been far more violent, Ruth would have minded it less than sundry pangs of conscience which would not allow her to forget that she really was undeserving of all this tender consideration.

By the end of the afternoon she was able to sit up and to share in the general excitement which welcomed Amy on her return from the village. Several days before, Amy had carried down a roll of films to be developed at the local photographer's, and was now bringing back a neat little package of prints. "Oh, the flash-light picture is here, isn't it?" exclaimed Ruth, to whose chair the package had been brought immediately, while the others stood around awaiting their turn. "I 159
want to see that first."

Amy looked a trifle discomfited.

“Yes, it’s here,” she replied. “But the photographer said if I wanted to be a success I’d have to learn to flatter people more. He said that he learned that long ago.”

The flash-light picture was certainly far from flattering. The brilliant light had caused every pair of eyes to roll heavenward, till only the whites were visible, so that the group looked not unlike a company of inmates of a blind asylum, posing for a photograph. But the missing eyes were not the only startling features of this remarkable picture. Several mouths were open to their widest extent, and except for the face of Jack Rynson, who was a young man with an unusual capacity for self-control, every countenance was convulsed by an agitation whose exciting cause was left to the imagination of the beholder.

Ruth laughed over the flash-light picture till she cried, and declared that it had almost cured her headache. When Graham helped her up the stairs that night, she startled him by leaning up against him to laugh again. “I was thinking of Claire’s picture in the flash-light,” she explained, as her brother looked down at her anxiously. “Poor Claire! I’m afraid she felt more like crying than laughing.” 160

“’Tisn’t every girl that’s as plucky as my little sister,” said Graham, tightening his clasp about her. Ruth’s laughter ended abruptly. “Oh, don’t, Graham,” she pleaded, as if distressed by his praise. “If you only knew–” And there she stopped. It was quite enough for Ruth Wylie to know the true inwardness of that day; a day, Ruth was certain, that would never, never be duplicated in her experience.

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# CHAPTER X 161

## MRS. SNOOKS’ EDUCATION

For the next few days Ruth continued to be the centre of the life of the cottage. All the fun was planned with due regard to her lack of strength. At almost every meal some little extra delicacy appeared beside her plate. Whatever impatience Graham and Jack may have felt over the further postponement of their tramp, they concealed the feeling with remarkable tact. There was little danger however, that the unusual attentions showered on Ruth would turn her head, as she had a counter-irritant in the shape of a firm conviction that she did not deserve any of this spontaneous kindness.

It was a day or two after her unsuccessful attempt to enact the rôle of heroine that Graham arrived at the cottage at an early hour and in a noticeable state of indignation. In spite of Ruth’s protests that she was quite well enough to assist in the work of the morning, the girls had unanimously scoffed at the suggestion, and had forcibly seated her in one of the porch rockers and thrust a late magazine in her hands. But by the time Graham arrived, the magazine had slipped to the floor and Ruth sitting with folded hands, was able to give her brother her undivided attention. 162

“It’s the most extraordinary thing,” Graham sat down on the steps at Ruth’s feet, and fanned his flushed face with his hat. “Have you missed anything that belongs to you, lately?”

“Why, no! Have you found anything?”

“That’s what I’m going to tell you. To start at the beginning, the first night Jack and I slept at Mrs. Snooks’, we weren’t warm enough. There weren’t many covers on the bed, and in this hilly country the nights are cool, even when the days are pretty warm. So, in the morning, I spoke to Mrs. Snooks, and said we’d like some extra bedding, and she promised to attend to it.”

Ruth’s face had crinkled suddenly into a smile of comprehension, which Graham was too absorbed to notice.

“Well, that night a steamer rug appeared on the bed. It wasn’t exactly a success. You know a steamer rug’s too narrow to cover two people properly. If it was over Jack, I was left out in the cold, and *vice versa*. We had to take turns shivering. After one of us got to the point where his teeth chattered, he’d snatch the rug off the other fellow and warm up. But it wasn’t till this morning that I took any particular notice of that rug. And Ruth, it belongs to us!” 163

Graham looked at his sister with an air of expecting her to be greatly surprised. Translating her smile into an expression of incredulity, he began to prove his assertion.

“Yes, I know it sounds absurd, but I’m not mistaken, Ruth. I suppose two rugs might be of the same pattern, but it’s hardly likely they would have the identical ink-spots. Don’t you remember how I spilled the ink on that rug when I was getting over the measles? And down in the corner is part of a tag Uncle John had sewed on, when he borrowed it for his trip abroad. The ‘Wylie’ is torn off but ‘John G.’ is left. And now the question is–”

Ruth’s laughter could no longer be restrained. “Oh, Graham, she borrowed it.”

“Borrowed it!” repeated the amazed Graham. “Well, I like that.”

“She rushed down here the morning after you came and said she had an extra bed to make, and would we lend her a little bedding. Of course we didn’t have any bedding to spare. We’d only 164

brought enough for ourselves and hardly that, for it's cooler here than we expected. But the steamer rug was lying around and we thought we could let her take that."

"But she must have bedding of her own," insisted Graham. "What does she do in the winter time?"

"That's the funny thing about Mrs. Snooks. She borrows dust-pans, and flat-irons and all sorts of necessary things and you feel sure that she hasn't been doing without them all her life. And the queerest part of all is that she acts so aggrieved if we refuse. If we tell her that we're out of sugar, she seems as indignant as if we kept a store, and it was our business to have sugar for everybody."

Peggy came out on the porch at that moment, and listened with interest, not unmixed with indignation, to Graham's account of his discovery. "Sometimes I think the trouble with that woman is that she's formed an appetite for borrowing, just like an appetite for drugs, you know." Peggy laughed as she added, "Perhaps I ought not to say a great deal just now, as long as I'm going borrowing myself. I've just discovered that we haven't any ginger in the house, and I've set my heart on gingerbread for dinner." 165

"Why don't you borrow it of Mrs. Snooks?" cried Ruth. "It's time we were getting a little return for what we've lent her."

Peggy hesitated. "I don't know why I shouldn't," she acknowledged frankly. "If it isn't very convenient for her to lend it, perhaps she'll realize that her borrowing may inconvenience other people sometimes."

It was while Peggy was absent on this errand that the plot was formed. Gradually the group on the piazza had increased till only Peggy and Dorothy were missing. Not unnaturally the conversation concerned itself with Mrs. Snooks' peculiarities, and the undeniable disadvantages of having her for a neighbor. Graham's story of the steamer rug was matched by equally harrowing tales of useful articles borrowed with the promise of an immediate return, and missed when wanted most.

"Peggy imagines that she's going to teach Mrs. Snooks a lesson by borrowing a little ginger of her," Ruth said with a shake of her head. "It's my opinion it'll take a good deal more than that to teach Mrs. Snooks anything."

A sudden mischievous light illumined Amy's eyes. "Let's give her a real lesson," she cried. "Let's show her how it seems to have your neighbors always borrowing things. Peggy's gone after a little ginger, you say?" 166

"Yes," nodded Ruth fascinated by the possibilities she saw unfolding in Amy's plan.

"Well, when Peggy gets home, I'll go down and do some borrowing. And it won't be anything like ginger, you understand. I'll pick out some real useful article, that she'll miss every minute. That's the way she does. And when I get back, Priscilla will take her turn."

Had Peggy been present it is doubtful whether the project would have been received with such unanimous enthusiasm. Peggy's softness of heart interfered sadly, at times, with her theories of discipline. But in her absence the conspiracy against Mrs. Snooks' peace of mind was discussed and elaborated without a dissenting voice. Even Aunt Abigail tacitly approved, and Jack Rynson, who, it appeared, had been solicited to lend a handkerchief and a black necktie, that Mr. Snooks might be properly attired for attending a funeral in the village, gave the schemers the benefit of several valuable suggestions.

Peggy made her appearance dimpling with amusement, and was greeted with a shout of interrogation. "Did you get it?" cried half a dozen voices in chorus. 167

"Yes, I got it, but you never saw anybody so surprised and unwilling. She hinted and fussed, and dropped hints that she'd been thinking of making gingerbread for supper herself. It really made me uncomfortable to take it, but I felt it was time that she had a lesson."

"High time!" agreed Amy with a droll glance at her fellow-conspirators. The unsuspecting Peggy looked about with mild surprise on the laughing group. "Well, we're sure of our gingerbread, anyway," she said and passed into the house. Amy was instantly on her feet.

"Oh, Amy," exclaimed Ruth, half admiringly, and half in remonstrance, "do you really dare?"

"Dare? Why, I don't need any great amount of courage. I'm only Number Two. It's Number Five or Number Six who'll have to be brave." Amy went gaily down the path, and Peggy as she stirred the soda into the molasses, wondered at the laughter on the front porch and reflected that the crowd was in unusually jolly spirits.

About the time that the gingerbread was beginning to diffuse its savory odors through the house, Amy returned. A glance at her triumphant face furnished sufficient proof that her undertaking had been successful, even without the silent testimony of a large object concealed by a napkin, and carried with ostentatious care. "Oh, Amy, what have you there?" cried Priscilla, finding some difficulty in making her voice heard above the chorus of exclamations and laughter. 168

"An apple-pie." Amy's tone indicated immense satisfaction with herself.

"Amy, not really? You couldn't!" Ruth protested, choking with laughter.

"Seeing's believing, isn't it?" Amy whisked off the napkin, and revealed the pie still steaming. When order was sufficiently restored, she told her story.

“I hadn’t exactly made up my mind what I’d ask for, but the minute I was inside the kitchen, I saw the pie set in the window to cool and I decided on that. Poor Mrs. Snooks couldn’t believe her ears. She asked me over twice, and then she said she’d never heard of anybody’s borrowing a pie. And I said that we happened to be out of pies, and were going to have company to dinner. You and Jack will have to stay,” she added to Graham, who accepted with as profound a bow as if he had not been counting confidently on the invitation. 169

“Did she act very cross?” questioned Priscilla, who was beginning to wonder if Mrs. Snooks’ education had not progressed sufficiently for that day, without any further assistance.

“Oh, not particularly. She looked rather sad, and you couldn’t call her manner obliging, but it isn’t likely that she’d say very much, considering that she’s borrowed something from us once a day on an average, ever since we came.”

“I wish you’d let me take my turn next,” said Claire a little nervously. “I don’t want to wait till she gets to the exploding point, and then be the one to be blown up.”

“Oh, go ahead, I don’t mind.” As a matter of fact, Priscilla shared Claire’s qualms, but would not for the world have admitted as much. Ruth watched Claire moving down the path, reluctance apparent in every step, and declared that it didn’t seem fair. “You girls are bearding the lioness in her den and I’m having all the fun without doing a thing. Aunt Abigail and I are the lucky ones.”

“Bless you, child, I’m going to take my turn,” said the old lady, with a twinkle in her eye which indicated that her requisition on the generosity of Mrs. Snooks would mark a distinct advance in the education of that lady. “I’m going when Priscilla gets back.” 170

But, as it happened, Aunt Abigail was not called on to redeem her boast. Claire returned with a small package of salt, folded up in brown paper, her courage having failed her when it came to the point of requesting the loan of a more useful article. Priscilla, having joined in the scoffing called out by this evidence of faint-heartedness, was on her guard against a similar display of timidity.

Mrs. Snooks was ironing as Priscilla appeared in the doorway, and the flush that stained her sallow cheeks was not altogether due to the proximity of a glowing stove.

“Mrs. Snooks,” Priscilla began, finding the ordeal rather more trying than she had expected, “I’ve come to see if you’ll lend us your coffee-pot till to-morrow.”

Mrs. Snooks tested her flat-iron with a damp forefinger, and then resumed her work. Her answer was so long coming that Priscilla began to wonder if she were not intending to reply.

“There’s been a good deal of borrowing ’round in this neighborhood first and last,” Mrs. Snooks remarked at length, with impressive dignity. “And lately I’ve been laying in a considerable stock of new things, including a coffee-pot. I’ve made up my mind that I’ll neither borrow nor lend. While I don’t like to seem unneighborly,” concluded Mrs. Snooks, setting down her flat-iron with a startling thud, “it’s a matter of principle. I’ve done the last lending or borrowing that I’m a-going to.” 171

It was apparent that Amy’s ruse had worked, and that Mrs. Snooks had learned her lesson, but it needed the girls’ united efforts to dissuade Aunt Abigail from following up Priscilla’s visit, by a call of her own. Aunt Abigail argued that in order to make the effects of the lesson permanent, it was necessary to “rub it in.” From a hint she finally let fall, the girls gathered that she was disappointed in not being able to carry out a brilliant idea that had flashed into her mind while the plot was developing.

“What was it you were going to borrow, Aunt Abigail?” Ruth asked, but Aunt Abigail shook her head. “If I had succeeded in getting it from Mrs. Snooks,” she replied, “you should have known. Not otherwise.” And as Peggy who happened out on the porch at that moment, threw the weight of her influence on the side of those who were protesting against any further visits to Mrs. Snooks, it seemed probable that the curiosity of the company would remain ungratified. Aunt Abigail was an old lady abundantly able to keep her own counsel. 172

Peggy viewed the apple-pie with an air of disquiet. “Now, we’ll have to buy some apples, right away. We’re out.”

“Well, what of it?”

“Why, we must make a pie in the morning to return to Mrs. Snooks.”

“Return!” cried Amy. “Why, Peggy, you’re going to ruin everything. This is ‘spoiling the Egyptians.’ What did Mrs. Snooks ever return that we didn’t send for?” As Peggy refused to alter her determination, a little murmur of dissatisfaction arose.

“I think we’re getting the worst of that bargain,” Jack Rynson said with feeling. “Swapping one of Miss Peggy’s pies, for one of Mrs. Snooks’. I’ve tried both, and I ought to know.”

“Then we’ll send it back just as it is,” declared Amy with another happy inspiration. “We’ll change it to another plate, and she won’t know whether it is her pie or not. And, even if she suspects the truth, what difference does it make?”

This brilliant idea was actually carried out, after some demurring on the part of Peggy, who was afraid that Mrs. Snooks’ feelings might be hurt. Graham was delegated to return the pie and did so that evening, with a suitable expression of thanks which Mrs. Snooks received without returning the usual assurance that every one concerned was perfectly welcome. 173

Graham turning to go up-stairs, halted by the door. “Oh, by the way, Mrs. Snooks, if you could let me have–”

“I’m entirely out,” replied Mrs. Snooks, without waiting for him to finish.

Graham stared. Then he understood that Mrs. Snooks was suspecting him of complicity in the plot, and his amusement came very near getting the better of his politeness. In his effort not to laugh, his handsome young face flushed a not unbecoming scarlet.

“It was only that I lost a button on the way home, Mrs. Snooks, and I thought if you would–”

“I’ve lent my last spool of thread,” said Mrs. Snooks, “and I haven’t a needle to my name. Henney dropped my thimble down the well last week, and as for buttons, the only ones I own are on the children’s clothes. But if you want any of them things, Mr. Wylie, you’ll find a right good assortment at Dowd’s. He keeps a good stock, if ’tis nothing but a country store.”

Graham thanked her and went to his room. He reflected that Mrs. Snooks had not only learned her lesson, but had applied it, which is not always the case with promising pupils.

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# CHAPTER XI
## DOROTHY GETS INTO MISCHIEF

The experiment which had marked such an advance in the education of Mrs. Snooks had proved equally beneficial to Ruth’s health. There is no panacea like laughter. Since Ruth had been spared the ordeal of requesting the loan of any of Mrs. Snooks’ belongings, her enjoyment of the situation had been unqualified and she had laughed most of the day, and even waked once or twice during the night to find herself still chuckling. By morning her manner had lost every trace of lassitude and her assurance that she felt as well as ever was accepted by the household without question.

The final obstacle in the way of the boys’ long deferred tramp was now removed. Still another last day was celebrated with fitting ceremonies, and the Snooks’ roof sheltered the wanderers for positively the last time. Graham and Jack had made their farewells the previous evening, as they were to start early, and Ruth’s suggestion of rising to see them off was immediately vetoed by her brother.

“You won’t do any such thing. Why should you miss two or three hours of sleep for the sake of saying good-by to-morrow morning, when you can just as well say it to-night?” Yet for all his masculine assumption of superiority to sentiment Graham was conscious of a little pang of disappointment as he and Jack passed Dolittle Cottage, in the dewy freshness of the summer morning. He had more than half expected to see a hand or two flutter at a window, in token that their departure was not unnoticed.

“‘How can I bear to leave thee,’” hummed Jack under his breath, and his smile was a little mischievous. Graham regarded him disdainfully, and Jack, breaking off his song, hastened to say: “Well, they’re as nice a crowd of girls as we’d find anywhere, if we tramped from here to the Pacific coast.”

“You’re right about that,” Graham returned, mollified, and then the boys, turning the bend of the road, halted as abruptly as if a highwayman had checked their advance. For hidden from sight by a tangled thicket of underbrush and vines, five girls in white shirt-waists and short skirts were waiting their arrival. The girls shrieked delightedly at the amazement depicted on the countenances of the two knights of the road.

“Now, don’t try to pretend that you were expecting this all the time. You know you never thought of it,” Ruth cried, slipping her hand through her brother’s arm, and giving it a fond squeeze.

“Of course I never thought of it. Only a girl could originate such a brilliant idea.” The assumed sarcasm of Graham’s rejoinder could not conceal his pleasure, and Ruth flashed a satisfied glance at Peggy, who met it with a twinkle of understanding.

“We’re only going to walk about a mile,” explained Peggy, as the procession moved forward. “We know you want to make a record, your first day out. And, besides, we haven’t had a real breakfast yet, only crackers and milk.”

It was a long mile that they traversed before parting company, as the girls found when they came to retrace their steps. Familiar as they thought themselves with the vicinity, the sunrise world was full of delightful surprises. There was magic in the air, and the winding road lured them ahead, as if it had been an enchanted path leading to fairyland.

“I wish somebody’d go away early every morning,” Amy sighed from a full heart, “and give us an excuse for getting up early. To think of sleeping away hours like this.”

“It’s a pity we didn’t leave long ago,” suggested Jack Rynson, between whom and Amy there existed a sort of armed truce, “so that you could discover what a country morning was like.” But before Amy could form a sufficiently withering reply, a tiny bird, perched on the topmost bough of a neighboring tree, had burst into such music that the little party stood silenced, and even playful bickering was forgotten.

Something of the magic of the morning vanished, it must be confessed, when the farewells could no longer be postponed, and the girls turned their faces toward Dolittle Cottage. “The worst of nice things,” said Ruth crossly, “is that you miss them so when they stop.”

“It’s only half-past six now,” announced Priscilla, consulting her watch. “Goodness! What are we going to do with a day as long as this?”

“I know what I’m going to do with part of it,” said Peggy. “I’m going to give Lucy Haines a good boost on her algebra. There’s been so much going on since the boys came, that she’s felt shy about dropping in. Afraid of interfering, you know. But I sent word to her by Jerry, yesterday, that I should expect her this afternoon.” 179

As it proved, it was not a difficult matter to occupy the long day, since each hour brought its own occupation and a little to spare. At the threshold of the cottage they were met by startling news, Dorothy hurrying out importantly to make the announcement.

“One of your little chickens has goned to Heaven, Aunt Peggy. A big bird angel took it.”

“What on earth does she mean?” Peggy demanded in a perplexity not unnatural, considering the highly idealized character of Dorothy’s report. It was left to Aunt Abigail to translate the catastrophe into prose. The Dolittle Cottagers were not the only early risers that fine morning. A big hawk, up betimes, and looking for his breakfast, had selected as a choice tit-bit, one of the yellow hen’s fast diminishing brood. Peggy felt that she could have borne it better had it not been for the unimpaired cheerfulness of the yellow hen’s demeanor.

The discussion of the tragedy delayed breakfast, and when the household finally gathered about the round table, it was a little after the regular breakfast hour rather than earlier. And, as sometimes happens, dinner seemed to follow close on the heels of breakfast, and directly after dinner, came Lucy Haines. Lucy’s manner of accepting a kindness always betrayed a little hesitancy, as if her independent spirit dreaded the possibility of incurring too heavy a weight of obligation. But usually after a little time in Peggy’s society, that air of constraint disappeared, greatly to Peggy’s satisfaction. 180

That afternoon session was a protracted one. Lucy’s attempt to master algebra without a teacher, had been not unlike the efforts of a mariner to navigate without a chart. Lucy’s little craft had struck many a reef, and was aground hard and fast, when the tug “Peggy” steamed up alongside. The fascination of discovering a key to mysteries seemingly impenetrable rendered Lucy as oblivious to the flight of time as Peggy herself. When the girls on the porch called in to ask the time, and Peggy glancing at the clock in the corner, replied that it was half-past four, Lucy let her book drop in her consternation. Instantly her face was aflame.

“Oh, it can’t be,” she said in dismay. “I can’t have been here three hours. What must you think of me?” 181

Peggy looked at her in a surprise more soothing to the girl’s sensitive pride than any amount of polite protest.

“Why, I’ve enjoyed every minute,” she said simply. “And I think we’re beginning to see daylight, don’t you?”

“Indeed I do. I didn’t believe that such puzzling things could get so clear in one afternoon. And I can’t begin to thank you.” Lucy gathered up her belongings and made a hasty exit, while Peggy followed her out upon the porch.

“Hasn’t Dorothy come yet, girls? Then wait a minute.” This last to Lucy. “I’ll get my hat and walk part way with you. I told Dorothy she might play with little Annie Cole this afternoon but it’s time she was home.”

The two girls had covered about half the distance to the farmhouse, when they were met by Rosetta Muriel who nodded, cordially to Peggy, and stiffly to her companion. “We thought it was time Annie was coming home,” she explained. “Ma said you folks would get tired having her ’round. So I was just going for her.”

The color had receded from Peggy’s face in the course of this explanation. “Annie! Why, I thought–” 182

“Ma told her she could go over to play with Dorothy. Didn’t she come?”

“Why, I haven’t seen her. I told Dorothy she might go to play with Annie.”

There was a frightened catch in Peggy’s voice. Rosetta Muriel hastened to reassure her, though with a distinct touch of patronage.

“It’s nothing to get fidgety about. Those young ones are up to some mischief, that’s all. Our Annie’s a whole team all by herself as far as cutting up goes, and I guess your Dorothy is another of the same kind.”

“But where can they be?” faltered poor Peggy, too engrossed with that all-important question to be concerned as to the implied criticism of her small kinswoman.

“Oh, they’re about the farm somewhere, I s’pose. You needn’t worry. That Annie of ours is always getting into the awfulest scrapes, but, you see, she hasn’t been killed yet.”

With this modified comfort, Rosetta Muriel led the searching party. Peggy followed, looking rather white in spite of repeatedly assuring herself that the children were sure to be safe. Lucy Haines brought up the rear, because she could not bear to go her way till Peggy’s anxiety was 183

relieved.

The investigation of several of Annie's favorite haunts proved fruitless, and Rosetta Muriel began to show signs of temper. "Looks like they've gone down to the pond. That's a good quarter of a mile, and I've got on satin slippers." She held out an unsuitably clad foot for Peggy to admire, but Peggy was thinking of other matters than French heeled slippers. "The pond! Is it very deep?"

"No, indeed. But ma don't like–"

Lucy Haines interrupted the explanation by a stifled cry, which from a girl so self-controlled meant more than a fit of hysterical screaming on the part of one differently constituted. Peggy whirled about.

In the adjoining pasture separated from them by a low stone wall, was a fantastic spectacle, worthy a midsummer night's dream. Down the slope, snorting as he ran, galloped a full sized boar, his formidable tusks grotesquely emphasizing his terrified demeanor. The fairy-like figure perched on his back and holding fast by his ears, was Dorothy. And behind ran Annie, plying a switch and shouting commands intended to hasten the speed of the frightened charger. 184

As if she were in a dream, Peggy heard behind her the horrified whisper of Rosetta Muriel. "They'll be killed!" gasped the girl. "Why, that boar's dangerous!" Then her fear found voice and she screamed. At the sound Annie looked up, and halted in her tracks. Dorothy, too, lifted her eyes and straightway fell off her flying steed. And the boar, apparently uncertain as to what might happen next, lost no time in putting space between himself and his late tormentors. He turned and galloped up the slope in a frenzy of fear highly ludicrous under the circumstances. Unluckily none of the lookers-on were in a mood to appreciate the humor of the situation.

Peggy reached Dorothy about the time that the fallen equestrienne was picking herself up, her face rueful, for she realized that the hour of reckoning had come. A moment later Rosetta Muriel had pounced on Annie, and, as an indication of sisterly authority, was boxing both ears impartially.

"You little piece! You might have been killed, and it would have served you right. I don't believe you'll ever be anything better than a tomboy as long as you live. If I was ma, I'd lick these tricks 185 out of you, you bet."

The frantic child, between her sister's blows and angry words, was more like a furious little animal than a human being. Struggling in Rosetta Muriel's grip, her face crimson with passion, she showed herself ready to use tooth and nail indiscriminately in order to free herself. For all her advantage in size and strength, Rosetta Muriel was unable to cope with so ferocious an antagonist. She solved the problem by giving Annie a violent push, as she released her hold. The child struck the ground at some distance and with a force which brought Peggy's heart into her mouth. But immediately Annie scrambled to her feet, her face scratched and bleeding, and started toward home, screaming as she went, though less from pain than from anger.

"That brat!" cried Rosetta Muriel breathing fast. Then her eyes fell on Peggy, standing in disdainful quiet, and her expression showed uncertainty. Rosetta Muriel was hardly capable of appreciating that for one in a fit of passion to attempt to correct a child is the height of absurdity, but she recognized the indignation Peggy took no pains to hide.

"Does seem sometimes," observed Rosetta Muriel with an unsuccessful effort to regain the air of 186 languor which she imagined the badge of good breeding, "as if nothing I could do would make a lady out of that young one."

"I should think not," replied Peggy, and it was not her fault if Rosetta Muriel thought the remark ambiguous. "Good night," she added hastily and turned away, fearful that a longer interview would bring her to the point of speaking her mind with a plainness hardly allowable on slight acquaintance. Like many people noted for tact and consideration, Peggy, when driven to frankness, left nothing unsaid that would throw light on the situation.

Dorothy walked at her aunt's side with chastened step. In the chaos of feeling into which Rosetta Muriel's unwise discipline had plunged her small sister, there was little chance for the voice of Annie's conscience to make itself heard. But Dorothy, on the other hand, was the prey of conscientious qualms. She had been naughty. Annie's angry big sister had said they might have been killed, which, from Dorothy's standpoint, was censurable in the extreme.

"Aunt Peggy," she began at last, in such a forlorn little pipe that Peggy was forced to steel herself against an immediate softening of heart. "Aunt Peggy, I guess you'd better whip me. If you send 187 me to bed 'thout any supper it wouldn't make me a good girl a bit, 'cause me and Annie ate lots of cookies and I don't want any supper, anyway."

Peggy studied the sunset earnestly before she could trust herself to reply.

"Dorothy, how often have you and Annie done what you did to-day?"

Dorothy was not certain, but it was evident that the diversion had been tried on several occasions and Peggy's heart almost stood still, realizing the peril to which the children had exposed themselves. Without doubt their immunity was due to their very audacity. Apparently the boar had not connected these fearless mites with human beings whom he knew to be vulnerable, but had fancied them sportive elves, against whom his tusks would be powerless. Peggy registered a vow not to let Dorothy out of her sight again while the summer lasted.

"Why didn't you tell Aunt Peggy what you and Annie were playing?"

The candid Dorothy had an instant reply. "'Cause I didn't want you to make me stop." It was clear that the sin had not been one of ignorance. Peggy resolved to act upon Dorothy's counsel.

After the two reached home, the story had so many tellings that there seemed a little danger of Dorothy's penitence evaporating in self-importance. "I had the last turn, anyway," she boasted; "and he runned faster with me on his back, too."

"Oh, if I'd only been there with my camera," lamented Amy. "Think what a snap-shot it would have made." Then as Peggy frowned at her behind Dorothy's shoulder, she subsided with a grimace of comprehension.

As Dorothy climbed the stairs to bed, it was understood that the hour of retribution had arrived. Dorothy wept softly while undressing, and uttered agonizing shrieks as she underwent her chastisement. Down-stairs the girls looked at one another aghast, and Hobo whined uneasily, as if asking permission to interfere. Then the uproar ended abruptly, and Dorothy climbing upon Peggy's knee, pledged herself solemnly never again to ride boar-back, a promise which stands more than an even chance of being religiously kept.

Altogether Peggy was inclined to regard her methods of discipline as highly successful. It was not till a penitent and altogether adorable Dorothy had been tucked into bed, and kissed uncounted times, that doubt assailed her. She was moving toward the stairs, when a small voice arrested her steps.

"Aunt Peggy," Dorothy said dreamily, "you don't spank as hard as my mamma does. You whipped me just the way Hobo whips himself with his tail."

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## CHAPTER XII
### THE NEW LUCY

In the week that followed, the education of Lucy Haines progressed rapidly. After that first afternoon when the time had slipped away without her knowing it, she kept her eye on the clock and was careful not to over-stay the hour. But as she came every day, and her enthusiasm for learning fully matched Peggy's enthusiasm for teaching, the results were all that could be wished.

Then one afternoon her pupil failed to appear, and Peggy wondered. A second afternoon brought neither Lucy nor an explanation of her absence. "I'm afraid she's sick," said Peggy, who never thought of a discreditable explanation for anything till there was no help for it.

"Sick of algebra, more likely," suggested Claire. "I thought such zeal wouldn't last."

"She doesn't seem like that sort of a girl," declared Amy, who was developing a tendency to disagree with Claire on every possible pretext. "She's one of the stickers, or I don't know one when I see it."

A little assenting murmur went the rounds, and Claire glanced reproachfully at Priscilla, who had sided against her. "Two souls with but a single thought," represented Claire's ideal of friendship. That two people could love each other devotedly, and yet disagree on a variety of subjects, was beyond her comprehension. She was ready at a moment's notice to cast aside her personal convictions, and agree with Priscilla, whatever stand the latter cared to take, and it seemed hard, in view of such unquestioning loyalty, that Priscilla should persist in having opinions of her own.

But Claire's hour of triumph was on its way. When Jerry Morton came in the morning with a string of freshly caught fish, he produced from the depths of an over-worked pocket a folded paper, which, to judge from its worn and soiled appearance, had served as a hair-curler or in some equally trying capacity. This he handed to Peggy, who regarded it with natural misgiving.

"That Haines girl sent it," Jerry explained. "I put it in the pocket where I carry the bait, but I guess the inside is all right."

Thus encouraged, Peggy unfolded the dingy scrap, but the changes of her expressive face did not bear out Jerry's optimistic conjecture that the "inside" was all right. Judging from Peggy's crestfallen air, it was all wrong. The note was not written in Lucy's usual regular hand. The letters straggled, the lines zig-zagged across the page, and the name signed was almost an unintelligible scrawl. But Peggy thought less of these superficial matters than of the unwelcome news communicated.

> "Dear Friend:–I shan't come to study algebra any more. I've given up the idea of going to school any longer. I thank you very much for trying to help me, but it's no use.
>
> "Yours truly,
> "Lucy Haines."

"I thought it was something like that," Claire remarked triumphantly when the note was read aloud, and she reflected with some satisfaction that she alone had suggested the rightful explanation of Lucy's action.

"I must say I'm disappointed in that girl," declared Peggy, absently smoothing out the crumpled paper. Her bright face was clouded. "Wednesday she was just as interested and ambitious as she

could be. And now she's given up. It doesn't seem like her."

"I must say she doesn't show a great deal of gratitude," exclaimed Ruth, always ready to rush to Peggy's defence. "Here you've been using your vacation to teach her, when you might have been enjoying yourself, and then all at once she gets tired of it. It doesn't seem to occur to her that if you were like most girls, you'd be the one to give up."

The expression of Peggy's face suggested that she was rather absorbed in her own thoughts, and giving but scant heed to the words of her champion.

"Do you know, girls," she said slowly, "I'm going over to see Lucy and find out what this means."

There was a chorus of protests. "Don't you do it, Peggy," Amy cried indignantly. And Priscilla remarked, "I wouldn't tease her into accepting a kindness that she hadn't the sense to appreciate."

"It was too much for you to do anyway," Ruth chimed in. "I think it's a good thing she's tired of it, myself." But Peggy was not to be dissuaded from her purpose. Under the uncompromising statements of the bald little note, there was something that claimed her sympathy. Even the straggling lines, so little suggestive of the Lucy Haines she knew, carried the suggestion of appeal. "I'm not going to coax her into doing anything," Peggy explained. "But–" and this with unmistakable firmness–"I'm going to find out." 194

After dinner, when the other girls were indulging in afternoon naps, or lounging on the porch, Peggy donned a broad-brimmed shade hat, and with Hobo at her heels, started toward Lucy's home. The zig-zag path crossing the pastures was both shorter and pleasanter than the road, and Peggy rather enjoyed getting the better of such obstacles as snake fences and brooks that must be crossed on stepping stones. Such things gave to an otherwise prosaic ramble the fine flavor of adventure.

She was flushed and warm, and looking, had she known it, unusually pretty, with her moist hair curling in rings about her forehead, when she came in sight of Lucy's home, a straggling cottage which would have been improved by paint and the services of a carpenter. Both lacks were partially concealed by vines which climbed over its sagging porch, and tall rows of hollyhocks, generously screening with their showy beauty its weather-beaten sides. A girl was in the back yard chopping wood, a rather slatternly girl with disordered hair. Peggy descended on her briskly to ask if Lucy were at home. 195

Hatchet in hand, the girl faced about. Peggy's head whirled. She made a confused effort to recall whether Lucy had ever mentioned a sister, a sister considerably older, and not nearly so nice. Then her momentary confusion passed, and she realized she was facing Lucy herself. The shock of her discovery showed in her voice as she exclaimed, "Why, it's you!"

"Of course," said Lucy a little coldly, but she cast a half-apologetic downward glance at her untidy dress, and her color rose. With obvious reluctance she asked, "Won't you come in?"

Peggy was conscious of a thrill of righteous indignation. She stood very straight and her eyes met those of the other girl squarely. "Lucy, are you angry with me?"

Lucy Haines did not answer immediately. Her bared throat twitched hysterically and all at once the eyes which looked into Peggy's brimmed over.

"Don't, please!" she said in a choked voice. "Me angry! Why, you're the kindest girl I ever dreamed of. Till I'm dead I'll love to think about you and how good you are. But it's no use."

Peggy seated herself on the woodpile. Her native cheerfulness had returned with a rush. 196

"Now, Lucy Haines, let's talk like two sensible people. If I'm as nice as all that, you ought to be willing to trust me a little. What's the reason it's no use? What's made all the difference since Wednesday?"

Lucy's silence was like a barrier between them. If it had not been for the tears upon her cheeks, Peggy would have been inclined to distrust her memory of that momentary softening. The girl's confidence came at last reluctantly, as if dragged from depths far under the surface, like water raised in buckets from a well.

"My money's gone."

Peggy had an uncomfortable feeling that she must grope her way. "Your money's gone?" she repeated, to gain time.

"Yes, the money I've been saving up. The money that was to help me get through school next year. You know how I've worked this summer. And there isn't a thing to show for it."

"How much was it?"

"Forty dollars."

All at once Peggy felt an insane desire to laugh. The impulse was without doubt, purely nervous. 197
For though there seemed to her a surprising discrepancy between the sum named and the despair for which it was responsible, the humorous aspect of the case was not the one which would naturally appeal to a disposition like Peggy's. Desperately she fought against the impulse, coughed, bit her twitching lips, and finally acknowledged defeat in a little hysterical giggle. Lucy stared at her, too astonished to be angry.

"There!" Now that the mischief was done, Peggy felt serious enough to meet all the requirements

of the case. “I’ve laughed and I’m glad of it. For it’s a joke. Forty dollars! A girl as bright as you are, ready to sell out for forty dollars. It’s enough to make anybody laugh.”

Lucy put her hand to her forehead. “But it was all I had,” she said rather piteously.

“All you had. But not all you can get. Why, I had a friend who went into a business office last winter. She’s earning forty dollars a month now, and they’ll raise her after she’s been with them a year. Forty dollars means a month’s work for a beginner. You’ve lost a month, and you talk as if everything had been lost.”

The rear door of the cottage opened, and a young man appeared, a distinctly unprepossessing young man, whose shabby clothing somehow suggested a corresponding shabbiness of soul. He 198
stood irresolute for a moment, then turned and struck off across the fields, his shambling gait increasing the unfavorable impression that Peggy had instantly formed.

Lucy regarded her visitor with burning eyes.

“I didn’t mean to tell anybody,” she said. “I thought my pride wouldn’t let me, but what’s the use of my being proud? That was my brother, and he drinks. I guess you’d know it to look at him, wouldn’t you? It was he who stole my money. That’s the kind of people I belong to.”

Peggy got to her feet. She had an odd feeling that she could not do her subject justice sitting on a woodpile, with her feet dangling.

“Lucy Haines,” she said with a severity partly contradicted by the kindness of her eyes, “I’m ashamed of you. I can tell just by the little I know of you, what kind of ancestors you had, and you ought to be thankful for them every day you live. Think of all the sickly people in the world, that can’t more than half live at best, and you with your splendid, strong body. And think of the stupid ones, who try to learn and can’t, and you seeing through everything like a flash. I know what kind of people you belong to, Lucy Haines, and you ought to be proud and thankful, too.” 199

The immediate effect of this outburst was a surprise. Lucy Haines sat down on the chopping-block and began to cry. She cried as if the pent-up sorrows of her life were at last finding outlet, cried as if she never meant to stop. Peggy in her dismay tried coaxing, scolding, petting, each in turn, and at last gave up the vain endeavor, and took her old place on the woodpile, to wait till Lucy should have come to the end of her tears.

At last the figure in the soiled calico was no longer shaken by convulsive sobs. Lucy turned toward the patient watcher on the woodpile, and in spite of her swollen lids and blood-shot eyes, Peggy knew it was the old Lucy looking up at her. “Well?” she demanded cheerfully. “It’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Lucy agreed hesitatingly. “I’m going to try again, if that’s what you mean.”

“And you’ll come to-morrow?”

“Yes, I’ll come to-morrow, if you’re not too disgusted to bother with me any longer,” said Lucy humbly.

“Well, it’s time for Hobo and me to be going home.” Peggy jumped to her feet, crossed briskly to 200
the unkempt figure, and stooping, kissed a tear-stained cheek. And then Lucy’s arms went about her, and clasped her close in passionate gratitude.

“Peggy Raymond,” said a stifled voice, “I can’t do anything to pay you back, but this. I promise you I’ll make you proud of me yet. You were ashamed of me to-day, but if I live, I’ll make you proud of me.” And Peggy had one more bewildering impression to add to the varied catalogue of characteristics which made up the Lucy Haines, whom she was beginning to think she had never known till that day.

In spite of this triumphant conclusion to her enterprise, Peggy returned to the cottage heavy of heart. There is always a danger that the sensitive and sympathetic will find the revelation of the misery in the world overwhelming, bringing the temptation to shut one’s eyes to suffering, or else in its contemplation, to lose the joy out of life. And as it only takes an added drop to cause a full cup to brim over, Peggy’s dejection reached the overflowing point, through no other agency than the yellow hen.

The girls all noticed that Peggy was silent, as well as uncommunicative. She fenced skilfully to evade direct answers to their questions, but she did not seem inclined to introduce new topics of 201
conversation. And when Amy called her from the kitchen, where she and Ruth were getting supper, Peggy sat staring abstractedly ahead of her till the call was repeated.

Priscilla glanced up from her magazine. “Say, Peggy, the girls are calling you. Probably they are having trouble with the muffins.”

“Oh, I didn’t hear,” Peggy sprang to her feet, and went hastily through the house to the kitchen. But it was not domestic difficulties which accounted for Amy’s summons. She stood at the window, flattening her nose against the screen.

“Peggy, I wish you’d tell me what this old vixen is about. Is she trying to punish one of the chickens, or is it only a game?”

For ten days past the yellow hen had been freed from the restraints of the coop, and by day had led her brood in adventurous quest of grasshoppers, and at sunset had conducted them to the waiting nest in the rear of the woodshed. But at the present moment, a peculiar scene was being enacted. At the open door of the woodshed, a sleepy brood huddled close, awaiting the return of

their mother, who with an air of determination was pursuing a squawking chick, running as if for his life.

Around the cherry-tree they circled, once, twice, thrice. Then the pursuer overtook her foster-child, and pecked him savagely. It was not a game. 202

The yellow hen strutted off in the direction of her peeping brood, clucking complacently, as if she congratulated herself on solving some problem satisfactorily. The poor little outcast followed with a piteous pipe, which caused the Spartan mother to turn and repeat her admonition.

For a moment Peggy was at a loss for an explanation. Then she understood. “I know,” she cried. “He’s a different breed from the others, and he’s outgrown them, and the senseless old creature thinks he doesn’t belong to her. She’s just got to be nice to him, that’s all.”

But Peggy’s efforts at discipline were unavailing. The speckled chicken surreptitiously introduced under the yellow hen’s hovering wings, enjoyed the briefest possible period of maternal protection. Before Peggy could get back into the house, the yellow hen was chasing him all around the woodshed, and Peggy found it necessary to make him comfortable for the night in a basket set behind the stove.

And this was the little drop which made her cup overflow. The forlorn peeping of the outcast chicken seemed to blend with poor Lucy’s sobs. Peggy wondered if it could be that the voice of earth’s suffering was like the hum of the insects on a summer night, so constant that one might not hear it at all, but an overwhelming chorus if one listened. 203

“Peggy Raymond, do you think you’re coming down with anything?” Amy demanded crossly, at half-past nine o’clock that evening. “Because you’re about as much like yourself as chalk is like cheese.”

Peggy stood up.

“No, I’m not coming *down with* anything,” she said lightly, “but I’m going *up to* something, and that’s my bed. I believe I’m sleepy.”

Before she climbed the stairs, she went out into the kitchen to be sure that the speckled chicken was comfortable. As she touched the basket he answered with a soft, comfortable sound like the coo of a baby, or the chirp of a sleepy little bird, the sound that speaks of warmth and contentment. Peggy stood beside the basket thinking.

“There! I knew something was wrong.” Amy had followed her friend out into the kitchen. “You’re crying over that chicken. Why, you silly Peg!”

But Amy had misinterpreted the moist eyes. That little contented sound from the basket back of the stove had brought a message to Peggy. She had made the chicken comfortable in spite of its unnatural mother. She had rekindled ambition in Lucy’s heart in spite of her thieving brother. All at once Peggy understood that the compensation for insight is the joy of helpfulness. It was not meant for any heart to bear the burden of earth’s grief, but only to lighten it as one can, and be glad. 204

And so, after all, Peggy went up to bed comforted.

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## CHAPTER XIII 205
## A BENEFIT PERFORMANCE

Peggy had a bright idea. Any one familiar with the Peggy disposition would have guessed as much from a number of infallible signs. There were periods of abstraction, characterized by long silences or random replies. There were thoughtful little frowns, and sudden dimpling smiles, all for no reason apparent. And when Peggy reached the point of saying to herself in a confidential undertone, “There! That’s just the thing!” speculation ran riot in Dolittle Cottage.

But though the guessing was both varied and ingenious, it was all wide of the mark. The announcement of Peggy’s project at the breakfast-table one morning took everybody by surprise. “Look here, girls,” began Peggy, betraying a degree of nervous excitement in her reckless salting of her scrambled eggs, “what would you think of our giving a benefit performance?”

“Performance of what?” asked half the table. And the other half wanted to know, “Whose benefit?” Peggy answered the last question first. 206

“Lucy Haines’. She’s had–that is, she isn’t going to have some of the money she was counting on for next year,” Peggy flattered herself that this discreet statement gave no hint of the heartache and humiliation poor Lucy had undergone. “And even if we didn’t make very much, a little would help her out.”

“But, Peggy, what could we do?” cried Amy, setting down her glass of milk with an emphasis that sent part of its contents splashing over the brim. “None of us sing any to speak of, except Priscilla, and she and Claire are the only ones who play. I don’t see–”

“Well, I’ve been wondering why we couldn’t repeat that little farce we gave at school last June. It wouldn’t be much work, for we all know our parts. Beside ours, there was only one that

amounted to anything. I thought maybe Claire would take that. The other characters have so little to do that we could easily pick up girls for the parts. Lucy herself might take one."

"And Rosetta Muriel," suggested Amy, rather maliciously. It was so seldom Peggy really disliked anybody that the temptation to make frequent mention of their pretentious neighbor was too much for Amy's fun-loving disposition. Unconsciously Peggy's face assumed an expression suggestive of just having swallowed a dose of quinine. "I suppose so," she agreed grudgingly, and Amy indulged in a wicked chuckle. 207

"But where could we give it, Peggy?" Ruth asked with animation. It was easy to see that the suggestion had made a most favorable impression on the company. The little comedy had been given during commencement week and had proved the most popular feature of that festive period. The performers had not had time to forget their parts, and a very few rehearsals would be sufficient to assure a smooth presentation. Peggy, delighted with the friendly reception accorded her plan, continued her explanation.

"Why, I think they'll let us have it in the schoolhouse. It's just standing empty all summer. I'll have to see Mr. Robbins about that, Mr. Silas Robbins. He's the committee man who hires teachers, and everything of that sort. And, of course, Lucy ought to know what we are planning before we do anything further. It won't be necessary to have her name put in the paper, or anything like that, but I'm sure the people will be more interested if they know it is a benefit for one of their own girls." 208

Lucy Haines, on learning the latest of Peggy's schemes for her advantage seemed rather overwhelmed. As a matter of fact, she exaggerated the generosity of the girls who had so cordially endorsed Peggy's plan. The summer days were all very delightful, but the presentation of the little play promised that agreeable variety without which all pleasures pall. Indeed, Lucy's expression of gratitude, fervent if not fluent, rendered Priscilla really uncomfortable.

"I wish you'd make her understand, Peggy," she said, "that though we're awfully glad to help her, we're not a collection of philanthropists. I'm afraid she doesn't understand that this play is going to be lots of fun."

Other misunderstandings had to be cleared up before everything was running smoothly. When Peggy called on Mr. Silas Robbins, and stated her errand, that excellent man failed to grasp her explanation, and took her for the manager of a theatrical troupe.

"You don't mean that you're running a show at your age! I call it a shame. You don't look a day older than my Ettie. Haven't you got a home and folks, child, or what is it that's druv you into this dog's life?" 209

Of course it was necessary for Peggy to begin at the beginning, and in the course of twenty minutes or so, the good man began to understand. As the extent of his blunder gradually dawned upon him, he threw back his head and broke into a hearty guffaw whose enjoyment was contagious. Peggy joined him, and then there was an exultant note in her laughter. Observation had taught her that when a man is laughing, it is one of the hardest things in the world for him to say no.

"Now, suppose we start over again, and go kind of slow," said Mr. Silas Robbins. "I've got as far as this, that you're all high-school girls and want to give a show. It would take a reg'lar racehorse of a brain to keep up with that tongue of yourn."

Peggy's further explanations were characterized by the utmost deliberation, so that Mr. Robbins had time to ask any questions that occurred to him, and the outcome justified her expectation. Not only did she secure the use of the school building, but Mr. Silas Robbins agreed to purchase tickets for himself and family.

"And to think I took you for a perfessional," said Mr. Robbins, smiling very broadly as he turned back to his waiting horses. "If there's anything in your show funnier'n that, it'll be wuth the price. Going to ask a quarter, be you? That's right. Folks don't appreciate a cheap ten-cent show, the way they do one they've got to pay a good price for." 210

Peggy met a similarly cordial reception at the office of the *Weekly Arena*, the country paper, on which she was relying for free advertising. Mr. Smart, the editor, was a careworn little man, whose frayed and faded business suit suggested that too many subscriptions were paid in potatoes and cord wood, and too few in the coin of the realm. He agreed to her request with a readiness Peggy thought wonderfully kind, though it would have surprised her less, had she realized with what eagerness Mr. Smart was continually seeking items with a news value.

"I'll make one or two references to it in this issue," Mr. Smart promised, "to sort of pique curiosity, you know. And next week you might give me a little write-up of the thing. Outline the plot, without giving away the surprises, and put it on thick about its being funny. It *is* funny, ain't it?"

"Oh, yes, very."

"That's the talk," said Mr. Smart approvingly. "I don't know how it is with city people. Sometimes it seems to me that they must like to have their feelings harrowed up, judging from the kind of plays they go to see. But here in the country, we like to get our money's worth of laughing. And, by the way, I suppose you understand, Miss, that it's customary for the Press to receive two complimentary tickets." 211

Notwithstanding this cordial and valuable support, Peggy was to find that the lot of an actor-

manager is not altogether free from thorns. Claire had obligingly agreed to accept the vacant *rôle* in the cast, but after one reading of the little play, a marked decrease in her enthusiasm was observable.

"Do you know I don't like the part of *Adelaide* a bit," she confided to Priscilla. "I'd like to play *Hazel*. I'm going to ask Amy if she'd mind changing with me."

Priscilla stared.

"Of course she'd mind. She knows her part and has played it once. You couldn't ask her to learn a new one just because you prefer hers."

Claire's air of depression became more marked.

"Priscilla," she quavered, "I don't see how I'm going to play that part. I don't know how I'll endure it." 212

Priscilla's amazement grew. "Why, what's wrong with it? I think it's particularly cute."

"Why, we're quarrelling every minute, you and I. And at the end of the second act, you say–" Claire's voice died away in a dejected whimper. But there was little balm for her grievance in Priscilla's unfeeling laughter.

"Well, what of it? There's nothing real about it. A quarrel in a play isn't anything."

"It's something to me," replied Claire, in tones nicely balanced between despondency and tenderness. "When I think of your glaring at me and saying such cruel, cruel things, it seems as if it would almost kill me." She found her handkerchief, and actually shed a few tears, while Priscilla choked down her exasperation, and tried to answer with fitting nonchalance.

"Sorry you feel that way. We might ask Dorothea Clarke, the girl who took the part before, to come up for a week, just to play it. Though I must say," concluded Priscilla, her irritation getting the better of her good resolutions, "that your idea impresses me as too silly for words."

The suggestion that Claire's coöperation was not necessary to the success of the undertaking was all that was needed. Claire had no intention of being reduced to the position of an on-looker, while the others enjoyed the fun and reaped the plaudits of the enterprise. Nothing more was heard of Claire's giving up her part, but in the rehearsals she showed such a total lack of spirit, and played the *rôle* assigned her with so unmistakable an air of injury, that patient Peggy was driven to the verge of desperation. 213

Nor were her troubles confined to Claire. Rosetta Muriel who had been offered an unexacting part in the cast, confided to Peggy her intentions in regard to costume. "I'm going to have an apple-green silk. The skirt'll be scant, of course, and draped a little right here. And which do you think would be stylisher, a square neck or–"

Peggy had by now recovered herself sufficiently to interrupt. "Why, you're cast for a parlor-maid."

"I know it," said Rosetta Muriel, indifferently.

"You can't dress in apple-green silk. You ought to have a plain black dress and a little white apron."

Rosetta Muriel flushed and tossed her head.

"I don't know what difference that makes. If you're going on the stage you want to look as nice as you can, I should think." 214

"One can look very nice in a black dress and a white apron. I'm going to be a frumpy old woman, with the worst rig you ever saw. But of course," concluded Peggy firmly, perceiving that Rosetta Muriel was inclined to argue the point, "If you'd rather not take the part, I can probably find some one else. But whoever takes it, will have to be dressed suitably."

That argument was as effective with Rosetta Muriel as it had been with Claire. She yielded as the other girl had done, and as ungraciously. "It's easy enough to see through that," she told herself angrily. "Those city girls want to be the whole thing. They're afraid to let me dress up nice, for fear folks will look at somebody else." And it argues well for the strength of Rosetta Muriel's vanity that for the moment she actually believed her preposterous charge.

Plans for the play absorbed the leisure of the cottagers. Little else was talked of. To Jerry Morton had been assigned the responsibility of organizing an orchestra of local talent, and he came twice a day or oftener, to report progress or ask counsel. The tan shoes, whose excessively pointed toes betrayed that probably they were as old, if not older than Jerry himself, but which in Jerry's estimation were synonymous with unpretentious elegance, appeared so frequently that the razor-like tips began to look somewhat scarred and battered, as if they might perhaps retire from active service in ten years' time, or so. But the tan shoes were not Jerry's only concession to the social amenities. An unwonted attention was given to grimy knuckles and finger-nails. More than once he made his appearance with his usually frowsy hair as sleek as the coat of a water rat, and dripping, in further likeness to the animal mentioned. Peggy, whose original interest in Jerry had been intensified by the favorable impression he had made on Graham, hailed these signs of awakening with satisfaction, and laid plans to bring about still more startling changes. 215

The little comedy did not require much in the way of scenery. But to present even a simple home scene on the schoolhouse platform, necessitated considerable planning, to say nothing of hard work. Arrangements were made for extra benches to put back of the battered desks, for the

*Weekly Arena* had exhibited a noble determination to earn the two complimentary tickets, and Peggy felt sure of a full house. Farmer Cole had agreed to lend Joe for the important day, and it looked as if the hired man would not find his post a sinecure.

“If ever a place was misnamed,” Aunt Abigail remarked one day, “this is the spot. Dolittle Cottage. Do-*little* Cottage,” she repeated, with an emphasis calculated to make her meaning apparent to the most obtuse. “In the course of a few weeks we have become a preparatory school and an orphan asylum.” She looked significantly at Peggy who sat on the steps, feeding the speckled chicken from a spoon. “And our last development is a theatrical agency. Well, I can’t say that it is exactly my idea of a quiet, restful summer.”

The hour of preparation was at its height, and the great occasion less than a week away, when Peggy received news which sent her already buoyant spirits climbing like a rocket. The rural delivery had brought her several letters, and as Priscilla noticed, she pounced first on a missive in a business-like envelope, with a typewritten address. She had hardly read two lines before she interrupted herself with a joyous squeal.

“Girls, isn’t it glorious! Elaine is coming Saturday.”

“Elaine! Why, I thought she said she couldn’t.” Priscilla’s answer was a little less spontaneous than usual.

“Her mother and Grace have been invited somewhere, and they insisted on her coming here. She’s worked so hard, and they feel she needs a change.” Peggy was reading down the page, her bright face aglow with anticipation, but Priscilla’s look indicated no corresponding pleasure, and she answered with a non-committal murmur, when Peggy added, “She’ll be here for the play. I’m so glad.”

And Priscilla struggling to express a degree of satisfaction in the prospect, did not guess how soon she would echo Peggy’s words from the bottom of her heart.

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## CHAPTER XIV
## AUNT ABIGAIL IS MISLAID

The little country schoolhouse had been the scene of varied activity that morning. Even in term time, when the battered desks were occupied, it is a question whether a forenoon’s program would have been more strenuous. Equipped with tape-measures the girls had calculated to a nicety just how much furniture the platform could accommodate, and still give the performers room to make their entrances and exits without colliding with the armchair or overturning the small table. The question of extra benches had also come up for consideration, and the girls had demonstrated to their complete satisfaction that two people of ordinary size could be seated comfortably at each desk. Absorbed in these fascinating calculations, they had failed to notice how rapidly the time was passing, till Dorothy began to complain of being hungry.

“You’re as good as an alarm-clock,” declared Priscilla, consulting her watch. “It’s half-past eleven, Peggy.”

“Is it? Then we mustn’t wait another minute. If Aunt Abigail is back from her walk, she may be hungry too.” Aunt Abigail had been invited to attend the preliminary inspection of the schoolroom, but had declined, frankly avowing her preference for a walk. Jerry had told her of a somewhat rare fern growing half a mile from the cottage, and Aunt Abigail who intermittently was an enthusiastic amateur botanist had professed a desire to see this particular species in its native haunts.

“Don’t hurry, Peg,” pleaded Amy, as the procession headed for the cottage at a more rapid pace than Amy approved on a summer morning. “It’s more than likely that she isn’t home yet. You know she never thinks anything about the time if she’s interested.”

As Amy’s conjecture was based on an intimate knowledge of Aunt Abigail’s peculiarities, no one was surprised to find it correct. The front door of the cottage was locked, and the key was hanging on a nail in full view, a custom of the trusting community which had gradually come into favor at Dolittle Cottage. The girls trooped indoors, and preparations for dinner began forthwith, even Dorothy lending her aid. Dorothy loved to shell peas, that ordinarily prosaic task being enlivened by the certainty that she would drop at least two-thirds of the agile vegetables, and be compelled to pursue them into the most unlikely hiding-places.

The peas were shelled at last, and Dorothy comforted for the untimely fate of several luckless spheres which had rolled under the feet of preoccupied workers, and, according to Dorothy, had been “scrunched.” Another twenty minutes and Peggy announced that dinner was ready. “If Aunt Abigail would only come. Things won’t be so good if they wait.”

“I won’t be so good if *I* wait, either,” Dorothy declared. “’Cause it makes me cross to get hungry.”

Dorothy was provided with an aid to uprightness in the shape of a slice of bread and butter, and the others seated themselves on the porch to await Aunt Abigail’s return. It is an open secret that time spent in waiting invariably drags. The wittiest find their ideas deserting them under such circumstances. The most congenial friends have nothing to say to each other. There are, as a

rule, any number of things one can do while one is waiting, but unluckily there is nothing one feels inclined to do. Up till one o'clock conversation was spasmodic. For the next half hour silence reigned, and each face became expressive of a sense of injury and patient suffering. At quarter of two, open revolt was reached.

“Peggy, how much longer are you going to wait?” Amy demanded. “Everything is probably spoiled by now.”

Peggy did her best to be encouraging. “Oh, not exactly spoiled. But it doesn't do a dinner any good to wait an hour or two after it is cooked.”

“Why not sit down? She's sure to be here by the time we're fairly started,” suggested Ruth.

“I'd as soon wait as not.” Claire's face was angelically patient. “I haven't a bit of appetite any more. I suppose it's because my head always begins to ache so if I don't eat at the regular hour.”

Peggy rose to her feet rather hastily. “Come on,” she said briskly. “We'll begin. Probably that'll be just the way to bring her.” And she wondered why it was that Claire's patient sweetness was so much more trying than Amy's fretful complaint.

But the device for bringing Aunt Abigail home proved unsuccessful. Peggy put her dinner on the back of the stove to keep warm, and it was still simmering, undisturbed, when the platter and the various serving dishes on the table had been scraped clean, for the loss of appetite of which Claire complained was by no means universal. The work of clearing the table and washing the dishes was usually protracted, for every other minute some one ran out on the porch to see if Aunt Abigail were approaching. By three o'clock a general uneasiness began to make itself evident.

“I believe I'll go over to the place where those ferns grow,” Peggy declared. “Even if she's forgotten all about her dinner, it can't be good for her to go so long without eating. Don't you want to come with me, Amy?”

Amy, who seemed less concerned than any of the company, blithely accepted the invitation. “We'll probably find her with a great armful of ferns and her hat tipped over one ear, and she'll be perfectly astonished to know that it's after twelve o'clock. Oh, you don't know Aunt Abigail as well as I do.”

But though they searched the section of the woods Jerry had designated as the *habitat* of the rare fern, and called Aunt Abigail's name at frequent intervals, there was no answer, nor did they find anything to indicate that there had been an earlier visitor to the locality. Amy's confidence seemed a little shaken by this discovery and she made no objection to the rapidity of their return to the cottage. Ruth came hurrying out to meet them. “Has she come?” Amy called, her voice betraying her change of mood.

“No. Haven't you found her?” It was of course an unnecessary question, for the anxious faces of the two girls would have told that their quest had been unsuccessful, even if their failure had not been sufficiently demonstrated by the fact that Aunt Abigail was not accompanying them.

“We'd better go right over to Coles',” Peggy said after a minute's pause. “Perhaps Mrs. Cole found she was alone, and asked her to dinner.”

“I've been there,” was Ruth's disappointing reply. “And I went down to Mrs. Snooks', too. I thought Aunt Abigail might have gone there to borrow something. You know she was so unwilling to give up the idea. But Mrs. Snooks was sitting out on the porch, and she said she hadn't seen her.”

The others had gathered around them as they stood talking. The speckled chicken, who, as a result of being brought up “by hand,” was developing an extravagant fondness for human society, came up peeping shrilly, evidently under the impression that in so sizable a gathering, there must be some one who had nothing better to do than minister to his wants. Hobo, too, made his appearance, and he alone of the company gave no sign of mental disturbance. Amy pushed him away impatiently as he rubbed against her, the effect of worry on Amy's temperament having the not unusual result of making her short-tempered. Then a bright idea flashed into her head.

“Peggy, maybe he could track her.”

“Who could?”

“Why, Hobo. We can let him smell something Aunt Abigail has worn, and then if he's any good, he ought to be able to follow the trail. I don't see how we're going to hunt for her, unless we try something like that.”

Peggy did not regard the suggestion in a particularly hopeful light, but at the same time she had nothing better to suggest. To continue the search for Aunt Abigail without a single clue as to the direction she had taken, was not unlike looking for the proverbial needle in the haymow. Accordingly, Peggy followed without protest, while the other girls, relieved by the mere suggestion of a definite program, hurried into the house and up the stairs to Aunt Abigail's room. A moment later they reappeared, each bearing something selected from Aunt Abigail's belongings.

The various articles were deposited in a circle about Hobo, as if he had been a heathen idol, and Aunt Abigail's worsted shawl and silk work-bag, votive offerings. Hobo did not in the least understand the meaning of this new game, but he was pleased to find himself the centre of attention, and thumped his tail against the porch with a sound like persistent knocking.

“I don’t believe I’d give him this,” exclaimed Peggy, picking up the work-bag and sniffing thoughtfully. “It smells so strong of peppermint that it’s likely to mislead him.”

“She always carried peppermint drops in that bag,” said Amy. The use of the past tense was such an unconscious admission of fearing the worst, that the girls looked at one another aghast. And then Peggy, with a desperate realization that something must be done, and that immediately, seized the worsted shawl, and knelt down before Hobo. “Find her, good fellow,” she urged, holding the wrap close to the dog’s nose.

Over the fleecy mound, Hobo regarded Peggy with bright, intelligent eyes. “He’s smelling of it,” said a thrilled voice in the background.

“Yes, and he looks as if he understood,” cried another voice. “See how his eyes shine.”

Even Peggy’s doubts were vanishing before Hobo’s air of absorbed attention. “Find her, Hobo,” she insisted. “Find Aunt Abigail.” 226

The little group stood breathless, while Hobo descended the steps, and nose to earth, followed the winding gravelled path for half its distance. Then taking an abrupt turn, he struck off across the lawn. Their hearts in their mouths the girls hurried after. Peggy heard Priscilla just behind her, saying that it was perfectly wonderful. Priscilla had always retained a trace of her first disapproval of Hobo’s admission into the family circle, and even at that anxious moment, Peggy felt a little thrill of satisfaction over the fact that the wisdom of her charity had been vindicated.

Hobo ambled across the lawn, stopped abruptly at the foot of the pear-tree, and there seated himself, looking up into the branches, and wagging his tail, with an air of having abundantly satisfied his own expectations. Peggy’s efforts to induce him to take up the trail were useless. Familiar as they all were with Aunt Abigail’s eccentricities, it was impossible to believe that she had improved the occasion of their absence to climb a pear-tree, especially as its fruit had been gathered weeks earlier. Moreover, even granting the possibility of so erratic a proceeding, she must have descended from her perch, unless she had continued her journey by airship. Peggy brought the worsted shawl, and renewed her appeals and commands, while Hobo continued to wag his tail, apparently under the impression that he was being praised for some remarkable achievement. 227

“There’s no use wasting any more time,” Amy cried at last, “on a dog as stupid as that one.”

“He never pretended to be a bloodhound,” said Peggy, her sense of justice driving her to the defence of her protégé. And then she dropped the shawl and ran to meet Jerry Morton, whose cheery whistle usually announced his coming some time in advance of his actual arrival.

Jerry had come to ask the opinion of the company as to the advisability of occupying the second intermission by a banjo duet. But before he could introduce the subject, his attention was claimed by the news of Aunt Abigail’s mysterious disappearance. As all the girls talked at once, the resulting explanation was somewhat confused, and Jerry gathered the impression that Hobo was being held responsible for driving Aunt Abigail into the pear-tree. Corrected on this point, his face suddenly acquired an expression of extreme seriousness.

“I saw long ’bout noon–but ’tain’t likely that had anything to do with it.” 228

“What was it?” cried the girls in chorus, each conscious of a chilly sensation in the neighborhood of the spine. And Amy added fiercely, “If you know anything, Jerry, tell it quick! We’re losing lots of time.”

“Well, it was a band of gypsies.”

There was a minute of awed silence. “But you don’t think–” Amy began, and paused helplessly.

“I don’t think anything but–well, they had three wagons–you know the kind–and in the bottom of the last one, I could see somebody lying stretched out and all covered over with a blanket. I thought most likely one of the men had been drinking and was just sleeping it off. But, of course–”

Jerry paused, overwhelmed at the sight of the horror depicted on the faces of his auditors. Vainly he racked his brain for a less harassing explanation of the fact that Aunt Abigail had disappeared some time during the forenoon, and at five o’clock was still missing. Peggy, her lips very white, attempted to reassure herself and the others, by attacking the theory he had suggested.

“But, Jerry, what would gypsies want with an old lady like Aunt Abigail? I thought they only stole babies.” 229

“Yes, and they come back after a while and claim their fathers’ estates,” chimed in Amy hysterically.

Jerry would have liked to be consoling, but did not see his way clear to that end. He accordingly observed that real gypsies would steal anything they could lay their hands on. And when he had finished this expression of his inmost convictions, Amy burst into tears.

“Oh, why are we wasting time?” she cried. “We ought to get Mr. Cole and Joe and all the men around to drive after those people and see who was under that blanket. Oh, dear. Oh, dear!”

Dorothy was pulling Peggy’s skirt. “Aunt Peggy! Aunt Peggy, listen!”

“Oh, hush, Dorothy. I can’t attend to you.”

“But listen, Aunt Peggy–”

“Dorothy, you’re a naughty girl. I can’t listen.”

Dorothy too burst into sobs. “I just wanted to tell you,” she wailed, “that Aunt Abigail was a-sitting on the porch.”

Peggy spun about. The astonishing news was true. On the porch sat Aunt Abigail, swaying slightly in one of the willow rockers, with her meditative gaze fixed on the western sky. After the first inevitable half minutes of stupefaction, there was a wild rush for the house. 230

“It seems to me I never saw the sky prettier,” was Aunt Abigail’s astonishing beginning. But no one was in the mood to join her in discussing the beauties of nature. “Where have you been?” was the cry echoed from lip to lip.

Aunt Abigail smoothed a wrinkle in her skirt, and for the first time since undertaking the chaperonage of the Terrace girls, she looked a trifle discomfited.

“I found such an interesting story in the garret,” she said, “a continued story it was, and it ran through an entire year, fifty-two numbers. I had a little difficulty in finding every instalment, but I succeeded at last. You girls will enjoy reading it. I am afraid–” Aunt Abigail glanced uneasily at the rosy west, and left the sentence unfinished. “I hope,” she said instead, “that you didn’t wait dinner for me.”

“But the door was locked,” said Peggy, finding it almost impossible to believe that their alarm had been groundless.

“Yes. I thought it wasn’t quite safe to leave the door unlocked, when I would be in the third story, but I didn’t want to have to hurry down to let you in. I locked the front door on the outside, and hung up the key. Then I went in by the back door and locked it on the inside.” 231

“And you mean that you’ve been in the garret all these hours?” cried Amy in accents of exasperation. Her face gave no hint of its usual easy-going good-nature. Though the tears were still undried upon her cheeks, ominous lightning played in her eyes. It really looked as if she could not easily forgive Aunt Abigail for her failure to be kidnapped by gypsies.

And just at the right moment somebody giggled. Among other benefits that laughter confers on the race, it not infrequently serves as a lightning conductor. With all the anxiety they had suffered, the situation was ludicrous nevertheless. While they had agonized below stairs, Aunt Abigail had sat on the garret floor, absorbed in a sensational serial story, oblivious to everything but the next chapter. An uncontrollable titter went the rounds. It gained volume, like a seaward flowing brook. It swelled to a roar. And Amy, who for a moment had stood silent and disdainful, as if she defied the current to sweep her off her feet, gave up all at once, and laughed with the rest.

Aunt Abigail laughed too, though more as if she wished to appear companionable than because she really saw the joke. When the silence of exhaustion followed the uproar, and the girls were wiping their wet eyes and each avoiding the glances of her neighbor, for fear of going off into another paroxysm, Aunt Abigail made a remark which helped to explain her failure to enter into the fun. 232

“I really hope you didn’t wait dinner,” repeated Aunt Abigail politely. “And if–if it’s the same to the rest of you, I vote for an early supper.”

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## CHAPTER XV

### PRISCILLA’S LOOKING-GLASS

233

“In less than twenty-four hours Elaine will be here.”

“You’ve been saying that for a week,” Priscilla commented tartly. The two girls had the porch to themselves, Priscilla stretched her lazy length in the hammock, while Peggy had curled herself into the biggest chair in a position which only a kitten or a school girl could by any possibility consider comfortable. Life at Dolittle Cottage was not favorable to *tête-à-têtes*, and Priscilla found ground for a grievance in the fact that on one of the rare occasions when they were alone together, Peggy should occupy the time in discussing the approaching visit of another friend. Though Priscilla had been making a gallant fight against her besetting weakness, it occasionally took her off her guard.

“If I’ve been saying that for a week,” observed Peggy with unruffled good nature, “I’ve been talking nonsense. For this is the first day it’s been true.” 234

“Don’t be silly, Peggy. You know perfectly well what I mean. For a week you haven’t been able to talk of anything but Elaine’s coming.”

Peggy made no reply. There was a critical note in the accusation which she found vaguely irritating, and it seemed to her the wisest course to let the matter drop where it was. But Priscilla was in the unreasonable mood when even silence is sufficient ground for resentment.

“Dear me, Peggy, I didn’t mean to reduce you to absolute dumbness. By all means talk of Elaine, if that’s the only topic of interest.”

“See here, Priscilla!” Peggy straightened herself, an unwonted color in her cheeks. For all her sweetness of disposition, she had a temper of her own, and was perhaps no less lovable on that account. “I thought we’d settled this thing long ago. You know I’m fond of Elaine,” she went on steadily, “and after her hard year, I’m delighted that she can have an outing up here with the rest of us. It isn’t anything I’m ashamed of, and it isn’t anything you’ve a right to call me to account for. I don’t care any the less for you because I care for Elaine, too.”

There are few better tests of character than its response to frankness. A girl of another sort would have found in this straightforward speech additional cause for umbrage. Priscilla showed that her faults were only superficial after all, by her immediate surrender. 235

“Oh, Peggy,” she exclaimed, a choke in her voice. “You don’t need to tell me that. I don’t know what ails me sometimes. I should think you’d lose all patience with me.”

A tear splashed down upon her cheek, and Peggy, surprised and touched, leaned forward to pat the heaving shoulder consolingly. “Never mind, dear. We won’t say another word about it.”

“Just one more,” pleaded Priscilla. “You know, Peggy, that even when I’m hateful, I love you better than anybody in the world except my father and mother. But if you weren’t the dearest girl on earth–”

The screen door flew open, and slammed shut with an explosive effect which might have startled listeners unused to such phenomena. But in a cottage filled with young folks, doors are so likely to slam that this miniature thunder-clap did not cause either head to turn. It was rather the singular silence following which led Peggy to lift her eyes, and it was the expression on Peggy’s face which brought Priscilla to the realization that something out of the ordinary was taking place. 236

Claire stood by the screen door, her hands clenched, her face scarlet, her whole demeanor indicating the intensity of her struggle for self-control. Priscilla looked at her aghast, all sorts of alarming speculations racing through her mind. “Oh, what is the matter?” she cried.

“I heard every word.”

“You heard–” Priscilla broke off, and turned on Peggy a blank face. “Do you know what she means? What has she heard?”

“Oh, you needn’t try to get out of it,” Claire’s voice was suddenly shrill and rasping. “So Miss Peggy Raymond is the dearest girl on earth, is she, and you love her better than anybody in the world! It won’t do any good for you to deny it.”

“I haven’t any intention of denying it,” Priscilla replied, choosing her words with care. Instantly she knew that this meant the end of the friendship, which had by degrees become a burden rather than a joy. Claire’s exactions, her extravagant protests of an affection which in its expression proved itself to be nothing but self-love, had been the one discordant note in the summer’s harmony. To have the unreal bond dissolved, even in so drastic a fashion, came as a relief. “I haven’t any wish to deny it,” Priscilla repeated, as Claire gasped hysterically. “Everybody who knows me knows that Peggy’s my best friend.” 237

“And what about me?” The tragic tone of Claire’s inquiry threw its absurdity into temporary eclipse. “I’m nobody, I suppose. I can just be set aside when it suits your pleasure. And you called yourself my friend.”

“Why, Claire,” Peggy began, throwing herself into the breach with her usual irresistible impulse toward peacemaking, but, to the angry girl, this well-meant interference was additional provocation. “Oh, don’t you say anything,” she cried, turning savagely on the would-be pacificator. “You ought to be satisfied. It’s all your fault.”

“My fault!” The accusation was too preposterous to be taken seriously. Peggy could not keep from smiling.

“Oh, yes, I don’t wonder that you laugh,” exclaimed Claire, finding in that involuntary twitching of the lips new fuel for her wrath. “It’s what you’ve been plotting all the time, and now you’ve done it, so, of course, you’re satisfied.”

Peggy’s impulse to laughter had passed. She turned rather pale, and sat silent, not deigning to reply to such a charge, while Claire rushed on recklessly. “Of course, after this, nothing would induce me to stay in this house another night.” 238

“I should hope not,” remarked Priscilla with deadly coldness. She might have forgiven Claire’s attack on herself, but such treatment of Peggy was not to be overlooked. The eyes of the two girls met like clashing swords.

But in spite of Claire’s declaration that nothing would induce her to spend another night at Dolittle Cottage, when it was ascertained that the first train on which she could take her departure left at ten o’clock next morning, she did not seek the hospitality of Mrs. Snooks’ roof, nor even suggest sleeping on the lawn. After her first paroxysm of anger was over, she became abnormally and painfully polite, begged everybody’s pardon for nothing at all, and proffered extravagant thanks for the simplest service. She declined to come down to supper on the pretext that she was too busy packing. And when Peggy carried up a well-laden tray, Claire received her with courteous protests.

“Oh, dear me! You shouldn’t have done that. I had no idea of your taking any trouble on my account. I’m not at all hungry, you know.” Claire would have given much for sufficient strength of 239

will to refuse to taste another morsel of food in Dolittle Cottage, but being angry is, unluckily, no safeguard against being hungry.

As a matter of fact, the voice of Claire's appetite was too insistent to allow her to give herself the satisfaction of haughtily declining to profit by Peggy's thoughtfulness. "Just set the tray down anywhere," she continued, packing ostentatiously, "and if I get time and feel like it, I'll eat a mouthful." And Peggy departed, relieved by her sincere conviction that no one in the cottage would go to bed without a satisfactory evening meal.

As Claire was to leave at ten, and Elaine arrived at eleven, it was but natural that the girls who were to meet the new arrival should accompany the departing guest on the four-mile drive to the station. Indeed, if they depended on the stage, it was necessary that they should go together, as this conveyance made but one trip a day in each direction. Peggy did not wish to delegate to any of the other girls the responsibility of meeting Elaine, whom she regarded as her especial guest, and since Claire had come to the cottage on Priscilla's invitation, Peggy felt that it devolved on Priscilla to see her off, in spite of the unfortunate termination of the visit. 240

"As for seeing her off, I shall be glad enough to do that," declared Priscilla, who, now that her tongue was loosed, was atoning for many days of repression. "But, Peggy, I don't see how I can stand a four-mile drive with that girl."

"I'll be there too, honey, and with the stage driver listening to every word, we can't talk about anything except the scenery. Please come, Priscilla. Don't give her any excuse for thinking that you haven't done everything that could possibly be expected of you."

Accordingly, the stage calling the next morning found three passengers awaiting its arrival, and the keenly observant driver, who occasionally turned his head, and proffered an observation, in case the conversation languished, must have formed an entirely new conception of girls of seventeen. Had they all been seventy, and the merest acquaintances, they could not have treated one another with more precise politeness, nor have conversed with greater decorum. Altogether, Priscilla had some show of reason for referring later to the drive as "ghastly." Unluckily, Claire's train was thirty minutes late, and the tension was accordingly prolonged for that length of time. 241 As Peggy attempted to make conversation out of such material as the weather and the time Claire would reach home, Priscilla was reflecting that if she were obliged to wait much longer she would disgrace herself either by laughing or by crying, or by indulging in both diversions at one and the same moment.

But the whistle sounded in time to save Priscilla's hardly tried self-control. The girls shook hands primly. Peggy and Priscilla wished Claire a pleasant journey. Claire replied by effusive thanks. At length, to the relief of all three, she handed her suitcase to an obsequious porter and stepped aboard the Pullman.

"Now be ready," Peggy cried, clutching Priscilla's arm. "Wave your hand if she looks out." But Claire did not deign so much as a glance at her late companions, and the train which bore her out of the heart of the green hills, carried her forever out of the lives of the two who watched her departure.

The girls seated themselves on one of the station benches to await Elaine's train. Peggy was a little sober, for unjustified as she knew Claire's suspicions to be, she could not help asking herself how it was that she had gained so little of Claire's confidence in a summer's association. 242 And Priscilla's face, too, was overcast, but for a different reason.

"Peggy," she exclaimed abruptly, "do you know I feel as if I'd been looking at myself in the mirror."

"Then you ought to feel more cheerful than you look," returned Peggy with a sweeping glance, and a smile, designed to express her conviction that Priscilla was an unusually handsome girl.

But Priscilla was not to be turned aside by the little compliment. "It isn't any reason to be cheerful. I mean, Peggy, that this affair with Claire has just helped to show me what I'm like myself."

Peggy broke into excited protests, to which Priscilla listened unmoved.

"It's exactly the same thing. I've been jealous of Elaine in just the same way she has been jealous of you. And both of us called it love, when all the time it was just the meanest kind of selfishness. I wonder why it is that your faults never look very bad till you see them in somebody else."

"If you imagine that you're like Claire Fendall," interjected Peggy, seething with indignation, "you're badly mistaken, that's all."

But glad as Priscilla would have been to accept the comforting assurance she shook her head with decision. "It's exactly the same thing," she insisted. "But I really hope–Why, Peggy, what's 243 the matter?"

If Peggy's convulsive movement had not been sufficient to account for the startled question, the expression of her face was abundant ground for the inquiry. "Why, Peggy," Priscilla repeated in real consternation, "what is it? What has happened?"

"I never thought of it till this minute. She's spoiled everything."

"Who? Claire? What has she spoiled?"

"Our play," groaned Peggy. "It comes off on Tuesday, and has been advertised in the last three issues of the *Arena*. We can't possibly find anybody to take her place. What are we going to do?"

“Dorothea Clarke played it last June. Why not telegraph for her to come up. We just can’t have a fizzle at the last minute.”

“Why, Dolly Clarke is in California! Somebody spoke of it in a letter only last week.” Peggy groaned again. “I wonder if Claire didn’t think that her going would spoil everything. Or if she just didn’t care.”

Priscilla was inclined to favor the latter hypothesis, yet even in her resentment she realized that any amount of criticism of Claire would not save the situation. Vainly the girls grappled with the problem, to end by looking at each other despairingly.

When Elaine stepped off the train at eleven o’clock she was immediately conscious of missing something in her welcome. It was not that Peggy did not seem glad to see her, for the steadfast eyes that met her own were beaming with affection. Priscilla too was unusually cordial. And yet Elaine missed something, the spontaneous overflowing of light hearts.

“What is it?” she asked, looking from one to the other, as the stage driver went for her little trunk. “Is anybody ill? Is anything wrong? Somehow you look–”

Peggy and Priscilla exchanged glances. Peggy laughed.

“We might as well tell her now as later. Perhaps when that’s off our minds, we’ll be able to think of something else. You know, I wrote you about the benefit we got up for Lucy Haines.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, we’re going to give the little farce we learned for commencement week. It happened that we four girls took all the principal parts but one, and Claire Fendall agreed to take that. You were at one of our rehearsals last spring, weren’t you? Well, this was Adelaide’s part.”

“Yes, I remember. The girl who was always losing her temper over things.”

“Well, unluckily, Claire lost her temper over something, and went home just an hour ago. And the play is for Tuesday night. We can’t possibly postpone it, because there is no way of getting word to the people. The paper only comes out once a week. Did you ever hear of anything so dreadful?”

Elaine was musing. “If I remember, it isn’t such a very long part.”

“Why, it isn’t as long as Priscilla’s or mine, but Adelaide is one of the leading characters. She couldn’t possibly be left out.”

“I didn’t mean that. I was only going to suggest–” Elaine hesitated, with a little of her old-time shyness. “I was only going to say that if you couldn’t do any better, I’d take the part.”

“Take the part?” Peggy looked at her friend in an amazement which temporarily obscured her gratitude. “But we give the thing Tuesday night.”

“Yes, I know.” Elaine smiled a little at the conflict of hope and incredulity written on Peggy’s expressive face. “But I really have a very quick memory, Peggy, though I don’t retain things as long as lots of other people. And before I came to Friendly Terrace I took part in school theatricals quite often. I can’t promise to distinguish myself, but I’m sure I can get through the part and save the day.”

And then, to Elaine’s secret amazement, it was Priscilla’s arm that went about her waist, and Priscilla’s voice that cried, with a thrill of sincerity there was no mistaking:

“Oh, Peggy, isn’t it splendid to have her here?”

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# CHAPTER XVI

## PEGGY MAKES A SPEECH

The great occasion was at hand. Assisted by Joe and Jerry, the girls had spent most of the day in the schoolhouse, with results that surprised themselves. The platform had been slightly enlarged, to meet the exigencies of a dramatic representation. Curtains of various colors and material provided dressing-rooms for the actors, on either side of the stage. A screen brought from Dolittle Cottage hid from view the blackboards back of the spot usually occupied by the teacher’s desk. A rug covered the pine boards of the platform, while a few chairs, a small table and a fern in a brass jardinier produced the homelike effect the girls were after. Jerry was immensely proud of the curtain, which, thanks to the pulleys he had arranged, worked as smoothly as if it had been a professional curtain, instead of belonging strictly to the amateur class. Peggy suspected that down in his heart Jerry believed that curtain to be the most important and appealing feature of the prospective entertainment.

While the girls labored at the schoolhouse, Elaine sat on the porch of Dolittle Cottage, and studied her part with such fixed attention as to be completely oblivious to the charm of her surroundings. When Peggy came hurrying home to look after the dinner she groaned self-reproachfully at the sight of Elaine’s furrowed brow, and silently moving lips.

“It’s a perfect shame! You came up here for a rest, and the first thing we do is to set you to work–and such hard work.”

“Two days of it won’t hurt me,” Elaine returned buoyantly. “And you know, Peggy, I’m ever so glad to help out.” But it was quite unlikely that Peggy realized the satisfaction Elaine experienced in the knowledge that her opportune arrival meant the success of Peggy’s scheme. Elaine had a deep-rooted antipathy to being under obligations, a characteristic which has its root in wholesome independence, though it may easily be carried too far. Nothing could have promised better for her enjoyment of her little holiday than this unexpected opportunity to turn the tables on her hostesses, and become the benefactor.

Although two days seemed a very short time for mastering her part, Elaine felt confident that she would make no serious slip. Her memory was quick, and responded to the spur of necessity. If 249
her attention wandered even for a minute, she caught herself up, realizing how much depended on her application. Luckily the *rôle* appealed to her, and for that reason was more readily memorized. Though she had prefaced her offer with the assurance that she should not distinguish herself in the part, she began to be hopeful that she would be able to do more than repeat the lines mechanically.

As the critical hour approached, Elaine was perhaps the least nervous of any of the household, and she gleaned more than a little amusement from the efforts of the others to reassure her. “You know I’ll be right there with the book,” said Aunt Abigail, who had accepted the important post of official prompter. “So it won’t be a serious matter if you forget.” The others had similar encouragement to offer, some of it mingled with good counsel. “Don’t lose your head if you get tangled up,” Peggy warned her. “Because the rest of us know our parts perfectly, and we can go on with it, even if something is left out.” And Elaine, while agreeing not to lose her head, promised herself the satisfaction of surprising the doubters.

Early as the girls reached the schoolhouse, they were not the first arrivals. Farmer Cole’s Joe, 250
transformed almost beyond recognition, by what he would have designated as a “boiled shirt” and a high collar, had already quite a little pile of tickets and silver ranged on the table before him. Jerry and his orchestra were in their places. Jerry’s hand-painted necktie was, of course, in evidence, while the pointed shoes creaked whenever he moved, as if in protest against the exacting service that was being required of them at their time of life. The Dolittle Cottage girls hurried past the observant eyes, and in the improvised dressing-rooms found Lucy and Rosetta Muriel awaiting them. Resentfully Rosetta Muriel had dressed according to Peggy’s specifications, black dress and ruffled white apron, with a jaunty cap perched on her fair hair. Then she had viewed herself in the mirror and had experienced the surprise of her life.

“Why, I look real pretty!” exclaimed Rosetta Muriel staring, but there was no vanity in the observation. Rosetta Muriel announced it as a scientist would proclaim the news of some discovery in physics. She tested the accuracy of her impression by the help of a hand-mirror. She had not been mistaken. “I really look pretty,” repeated Rosetta Muriel, and, for the first time in 251
her life, realized the æsthetic possibilities of simplicity.

Her lingering grudge against Peggy in part dissipated by her scientific discovery, vanished completely when Peggy removed the rain-coat and the heavy veil which had obscured her charms. Peggy’s make-up was very successful in effacing every suggestion of youth and girlish prettiness. Artistically designed wrinkles made her look seventy-five at the least computation, and suggested in addition, a quarrelsome disposition. Rosetta Muriel took one look, and gave way to giggles.

“My goodness, but you *are* a sight,” said Rosetta Muriel, entirely forgiving Peggy for the prohibition of the apple-green silk. “Is that a wig you’ve got on?”

“Nothing but corn-starch,” replied Peggy, piling her wraps in the corner. “Now, Elaine, you see, Aunt Abigail will sit right here, so you needn’t be one bit nervous about forgetting. Hear the people coming. I believe we’re going to have a full house.”

This pleasant expectancy was confirmed by the continued and increasing shuffling of feet over the bare schoolhouse floor and the hum of voices. The time of waiting was somewhat trying for all the performers, especially for the novices. Lucy Haines, whose part consisted of a dozen 252
sentences or less, grew gradually paler and paler, till she looked like anything but a footlight favorite. Rosetta Muriel smoothed her apron and adjusted her cap with the regularity of clockwork, till it began to look as if both these serviceable articles would be worn out before the little bell gave the signal for drawing the curtain.

All at once the hum of voices outside took on a menacing volume. Behind the curtain the girls were unable to distinguish a word, but judging from the sound, an altercation was in progress. “What can be the matter?” demanded Peggy, turning a startled face on the others.

“Nothing to worry about, child,” said Aunt Abigail soothingly. “Probably some of those young farmers are having some noisy fun.” But the loud voices did not impress Peggy as suggesting good-natured nonsense. And her apprehensions were presently confirmed by Jerry Morton, who slipped under the curtains and came hurrying toward her. The boy’s face was flushed, and he was breathing fast.

“It’s that Cherry Creek crowd,” he exclaimed. “They’re going to spoil everything.”

“The Cherry Creek crowd?” Peggy repeated in bewilderment. “Oh, I remember.” Vaguely she 253
recalled the little settlement scattered along the banks of Cherry Creek and taking its name from that unassuming stream. In the opinion of Peggy’s neighbors, the young people of Cherry Creek were a distinctly inferior class. Peggy had been inclined to set this down to prejudice. In view of the demonstrations outside, she began to think that possibly she had been mistaken.

“A crowd of ’em drove over,” continued the exasperated Jerry, “and more’s coming. And they say they won’t pay any admission, ’less they can have seats. They say it’s our business to have seats for everybody, the way we’ve been advertising this here show.”

In spirit Peggy groaned. It appeared that the too obliging *Weekly Arena* had overshot the mark.

“It’s going to spoil everything to have them standing up there at the back of the room,” repeated Jerry. “They’ll get to fooling, and shuffling ’round. They wouldn’t like anything better than to upset the whole show. I’ll bet that’s what they came for.”

“What are we going to do?” Peggy wrinkled her brows in the effort to decide the question.

“Joe says he’s ready to take a hand in throwing out the whole bunch. There’s some of our fellows here, good and husky, who’ll help. But he says if we do that, we ought to do it quick, before the rest of the crowd gets here.” 254

“Certainly *not*.” And as Peggy vetoed one suggestion, her groping brain seized on another. “Jerry, how far is Cherry Creek?”

“Eight miles, the nearest houses. Why can’t they stay to home and get up their own shows, ’stead of coming all this way to spoil ourn?”

Peggy’s answer was unexpected. She pushed past Jerry, mounted to the platform, and pulling aside the curtain, stepped out before the uneasy audience. A characteristic of leadership is the ability to dispense with advice in a crisis. At that minute Peggy did not need to ask whether she were right.

The clamorous voices died down at her appearance. There was an instant of astonished silence, and then a roar of laughter. The laugh was something on which Peggy had not counted, and for a moment, she was completely bewildered. Peggy was on too good terms with her fellow beings to be afraid of them in bulk, but she had forgotten that her grotesque appearance would naturally create amusement, and the roar of laughter took her unawares. For the first and only time in her life, she knew the meaning of stage-fright. 255

Then her momentary confusion passed. The faces which for a long moment had seemed blended in one gigantic face, jeering and unfriendly, regained their individuality. She saw them looking up at her with interest. The uproar was quieting. She took a fresh grip on her self-control, and as she regained the mastery of herself, she knew that she was mistress of the situation.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!”

The clear, girlish voice, in combination with Peggy’s aged appearance, was incongruous enough to create further laughter, had the audience not been too interested to hear what she was about to say, again to interrupt.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, first of all, I want to thank you for coming. All of you know, I’m pretty sure, that the proceeds of this entertainment go to help one of your own girls who wants an education. And the way you’ve turned out shows how glad you all are to help.”

She paused an instant, to be sure that the time had come to broach her proposition. The aspect of her listeners was reassuring. Nearly every face raised to hers was smiling. Even the Cherry Creekers wore an air of conscious virtue. 256

“But, Ladies and Gentlemen, there is one little embarrassment we hadn’t counted on, an embarrassment of riches, you might call it. There are too many people here for the schoolhouse. A number are standing, and it would be impossible for them to enjoy an entertainment as long as this without having seats.”

The smiles vanished as Peggy approached the delicate point. The Cherry Creekers no longer looked virtuous, but rather defiant.

“Now, I’m going to make a suggestion, Ladies and Gentlemen. Part of our audience has come quite a long way. We don’t want them to go home without seeing what they came for. But you who live near could come out to-morrow night. Now I’m going to ask those of you who live in the neighborhood to give your seats up to the friends who have come so far for the sake of helping us.” (Sensation in the audience.) “Your money will be returned as you pass out, and we shall hope to see every one of you here to-morrow evening. Positively no postponement, Ladies and Gentlemen, on account of the weather.”

The silence that followed was of the briefest possible duration. In nine cases out of ten, a frank, tactful appeal to the generosity of an American crowd proves successful. Somebody started to clap, and all at once the schoolhouse shook with applause, even the disappointed succumbing to the contagion and clapping as enthusiastically as any one. And then when Mr. Silas Robbins rose to his feet and ushered his wife and daughter from the building, the crisis was safely past. 257

What with returning the money of half the audience, and receiving the quarters of the other half, for the Cherry Creek crowd was making haste to pay up, Farmer Cole’s Joe had his hands full. He reached for his money box as the Robbins family filed past, but the head of the house checked him with a genial gesture.

“Never you mind the money, Joe,” said Mr. Robbins. “That girl’s speech was wuth it. She’s a corker.” He chuckled admiringly. “The way she can get ’round folks and make ’em do as she says beats the Dutch. If she was a boy now, it’s dollars to doughnuts that she’d get to be president.” He went on his way, still chuckling, and at the door encountered the second delegation from Cherry Creek.

It was doubtless due to the earlier excitements of the evening that Peggy came so near disaster later. They had reached the second act most successfully, and the audience had laughed at every suggestion of a joke, and when the curtain was drawn, had joined in tumultuous applause, piercing cat-calls blending euphoniously with the clapping of hands, and the stamping of feet. And then Peggy, who knew the entire comedy from beginning to end, and could have taken any part at five minutes' notice, stumbled in her lines, and to her horror, found her mind a blank.

She looked toward Aunt Abigail, but unluckily the prompter had been so carried away by her enjoyment of the presentation, that she was listening delightedly, quite unmindful of her professional duties. As she met Peggy's appealing gaze, she started violently, and an excited flutter of leaves conveyed to Peggy the unwelcome information that Aunt Abigail had lost her place.

Oddly enough, it was Elaine who came to the rescue. In playing her part, practically without rehearsals, Elaine had found it necessary to familiarize herself with the general dialogue of the little comedy. While the other girls stood stricken dumb by the realization that Peggy had forgotten, the opening sentence of the deferred speech flashed into Elaine's mind. "'But I demand the proof,'" she said in a sharp whisper.

Instantly Peggy was herself again. "But I demand the proof," she cried, and swept commandingly toward the centre of the stage. The pause, which had seemed such a long hiatus to the little group on the platform, was hardly noticed by the audience. Aunt Abigail glued her eyes to the page and did not look away again till the next intermission. Peggy gave herself a mental shaking and her fellow actors took a long breath, while the audience laughed delightedly, quite unaware of the little by-play.

Not till the second act was finished, and Jerry's orchestra was rendering a spirited Spanish fandango, a score of feet beating time, did Peggy find opportunity to express her sense of obligation.

"You darling!" She caught Elaine in her arms, and hugged her mightily. "That's twice you've pulled us out of a hole. If the audience knew all that we do, they'd pick Adelaide for the star of this performance." And indeed, considering the disadvantages under which Elaine had labored, Peggy's generous tribute was hardly exaggerated.

The play was repeated on the second evening to an equally crowded and appreciative house. Indeed, the audience which had obligingly retired in favor of the visitors from a distance, reaped the reward of its generosity, for the second performance was distinctly better than the first. Lucy and Rosetta Muriel, who had gained confidence from one public appearance, spoke their few lines in distinct, audible voices, which was as much as the parts required. Elaine had had one more day to study her part, and was able to do it better justice than on the preceding evening. As for Peggy, since her thoughts were not distracted by the necessity of making a speech, she was in as little danger of forgetting her lines, as of forgetting her name.

On the whole, they had every reason to congratulate one another, and when the audience had dispersed, the performers lingered with a few outsiders especially interested, to say again and again, how well everything had gone off, and how pleased every one had seemed. And Joe added convincing testimony to the correctness of the verdict.

"When folks pay more than they've *got* to pay for a thing, it comes pretty near being a success. Why, there was a half a dozen said to me they didn't care for no change, and two of 'em were Cherry Creekers. What do you think of that? And Deacon Bliss, he paid three admissions with a five-dollar bill, and said it was all right."

"How much do you think we've made, Joe?" Peggy asked.

"Well, I've just been counting it up. The tickets cost a dollar fifty, and Jerry spent a little for wire and stuff for the curtain. But I guess you've got, above all that, as much as forty dollars."

Peggy turned and looked at Lucy Haines. Silently Lucy looked back at her. And without a word on the part of either, it was plain that one had spoken and the other answered.

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## CHAPTER XVII
### A PLAIN TALK

There was trouble in the poultry yard. Whether over-indulgence in a grasshopper diet was accountable, or the responsibility was to be laid at the door of early morning rambles through damp grass, Peggy was not sure, but the condition of the three chickens still under the charge of the yellow hen was plainly alarming. The wretched little creatures hardly had strength to peep, still less to follow their energetic mother on the excursions she showed no intention of relinquishing, out of regard to the health of her family. Peggy found it necessary again to confine her to the small coop she had occupied previously, and the yellow hen indicated her dissatisfaction with the cramped quarters. While she thrust her long neck through the slats and scolded clamorously, her family of three stood about in varying attitudes of dejection, indifferent to the corn-meal mush Peggy spread lavishly before them.

The neighborhood authorities, whom Peggy naturally consulted, pronounced the chickens

suffering from “pip” and prescribed weird remedies. Jerry Morton was appealed to along with the rest, and surprised Peggy by professing complete ignorance of the subject.

“I’ve heard my grandmother talk about the pip, but I don’t know what it’s like. I don’t know nothing about chickens anyway.”

“That’s queer,” remarked Peggy musingly, “when you know so much about birds.”

“Oh, birds!” The boy’s face lighted up. “Birds is different. They’ve got their own way of doing things, and one kind ain’t any more like another than folks is. You ought to see a pair of old birds teaching a young one to fly. If he hasn’t got spunk enough to get out of the nest himself, they’ll push him over, and then they’ll fly around him, and keep on talking and talking and saying how easy it is, and show him how. And then when he tries they praise him up, as if he was a perfect wonder, and he begins to think he’s pretty smart himself.” Jerry chuckled, as if recalling such a scene as he was so vividly describing, and Peggy watched him thoughtfully but without speaking. She had learned long before that Jerry was most likely to discuss the subjects nearest his heart when stimulated by silent attention. 264

“Some people talk as if folks was the only things with sense,” Jerry continued, “but seems to me they’ve got about the least. Why, you can’t lose a bird or a bee. And the orneriest little spider knows enough to play dead if you poke him. Inside he’s pretty near scared to death, but he’s got too much sense to cut and run the way a man would. He curls up his legs, and makes himself look withered up, so you’ll say, ‘Oh, shucks! he’s dead already. What’s the use of killing him over again?’”

Peggy’s smile proved her to be paying close attention, and Jerry went on. “Now, most folks think one bird’s as good as another. Why, there’s thieves and robbers among birds same as men. A blue-jay’s one of the worst, and my, how the other birds hate him! Once I saw a whole crowd of ’em chasing a jay. It was a reg’lar bird mob, all kinds in it, thrushes and cat-birds, and robins, and song-sparrows. They were all small birds ’longside of the jay, but together they were too much for him, I can tell you. And he dodged and ducked around till he see ’twasn’t no use, and then he dropped what he’d stole and they let him go.”

“And what had he stolen?” asked Peggy.

“A little bird just hatched out of some nest. You needn’t tell me that birds don’t have a language. The father and mother, they hollered to some of their neighbors that a jay was ’round kidnapping, and the chase started. And every bird they met, they’d say, ‘Come on, boys! Let’s make it hot for this old robber.’ And they did too.” Jerry caught himself up, and cast a suspicious glance at Peggy’s attentive face. He had early learned to keep to himself the dialogues he imagined as taking place between his friends of field and forest, as any attempts at confidence on his part had invariably called out derision or reproof. He was glad to assure himself that Peggy was listening respectfully, though he realized that her silence had lured him on to say much more than he had intended. 265

“Jerry,” remarked Peggy, breaking the brief pause that had fallen between them, “did you ever hear of Audubon?”

“What’s that? Do you mean the language for everybody to learn, so that Japs and Dagoes and us folks can talk together, same as if we’d been raised ’longside each other?”

“Oh, no! That’s Volapük you’re talking about, Jerry. Audubon was a man.”

“Oh!” Apparently Jerry had lost interest. 266

“And the reason I wondered if you knew about him is that sometimes you remind me of him.”

“Oh!” And the change in Jerry’s inflection showed the change in his mental attitude.

“Yes, he loved birds just as you do. Dick had to write a composition about Audubon last spring, and I helped him in reading up for it. That’s how I happen to know so much about him.”

With this preface Peggy began. The life of the great ornithologist would need to be told very unsympathetically, not to be a dramatic and appealing recital. The story of the enthusiast who found no toil irksome which furthered his research, however unreliable he might prove in the humdrum occupation of earning a livelihood, was calculated to impress the boy who realized that his matter-of-fact neighbors had long before catalogued him as a thriftless ne’er-do-well. The great man’s hardships, his persistence, and his prosperous and honored old age, made up a fascinating story. Peggy, noticing the effect upon her listener, was more than satisfied.

“Well, he got there, didn’t he?” Jerry kicked a pebble out of his way, and frowned reflectively. “I guess the folks that thought him a good-for-nothing must ’a’ been surprised.” 267

“But there were a great many who believed in him,” Peggy suggested. “I think he was very fortunate in his friends. In fact, that was one of the things that helped him. He made friends wherever he went.”

“Well, that ain’t like me.” Jerry’s tone indicated a grim satisfaction in the extent of his unpopularity, which Peggy recognized as a bad sign.

“That’s a pity,” she said gravely. “Because nobody’s big enough to get along all by himself. Everybody needs friends to help him.”

Jerry became meditative. That he had rightly interpreted the meaning of Peggy’s story, and applied it as she wished, was apparent when he broke out impatiently, “Why, if I should try to

draw pictures of birds, folks would just laugh at me. I couldn't make 'em look like anything."

"No, I suppose not. Audubon had to learn. That's another mistake of yours, Jerry, to think that you can get along without books and teachers. You've found out a lot by yourself, but that's no reason why you shouldn't have the help of all the things other people have been discovering. It's just as I said about friends. Everybody can help, and everybody needs to be helped." 268

"I'm too old to go to school," Jerry replied despondently. And the answer, coupled with his dejected manner, was to Peggy an indication of a success she had hardly dared to hope for. Jerry realized his lacks. The armor of his complacency had been pierced. Then there was hope for him.

"How old are you, Jerry?"

"Sixteen in September." He hung his head, as if ashamed of his advanced years. And at Peggy's laugh, his face flushed hotly.

"The reason that sounds so funny," Peggy explained, "is because I was thinking of a friend of my father's. He's a college professor, and sometimes he comes to visit us in his vacation. He was twenty when he first learned to read and write. How's that for a late start? And see where he's got to!"

Jerry leaned toward her confidentially. "It's this way," he said. "I wouldn't mind going to school if it 'twasn't for ringing in with a lot of kids. I couldn't stand that, you know." He looked at Peggy, expectant of her ready sympathy. But to his surprise, her lip had curled slightly. "Oh, of course," she said, "if you're afraid–"

"Afraid!" Jerry flung back his head. "Me! I'm not afraid of nothing. Did I ever show you the rattle I got off that big snake I killed? That doesn't look much as if I was easy scared." 269

"I didn't know," returned Peggy, quite unmoved, "but that you might be afraid of being made fun of."

Jerry had nothing to say. Peggy proceeded to occupy the interval of silence.

"A boy graduated at one of our high schools a year ago, who had plenty of pluck, I thought. He came from Russia, a Jew, you know, and when he got here he couldn't speak a word of English. He was fourteen then, and they started him in the first grade. That was the only thing to do, I suppose. Well, it really was a funny sight to see him going into school with those first-grade tots. He was a big boy for his age, and he had to curl himself up to sit at one of those tiny desks, so he must have been awfully uncomfortable. And, of course, it looked queer. If he'd been a cowardly sort of boy," observed Peggy significantly, "I suppose he would have given up."

Jerry made no comment, unless an uneasy movement might have been interpreted as such.

"But he didn't give up, and after a few months he was promoted to the second grade. And it took him even less time to get into the third. And then it got so that we'd ask every morning what grade David had been promoted to. Instead of laughing at him, everybody was proud of him." 270

Still no comment on Jerry's part.

"Well, as I said, he graduated from the high school a year ago last spring. He stood second in his class. The boy who was ahead of him is the son of a circuit judge. David was nineteen. In five years he had gone from the very beginning to the end of the high school course. Now he's in college, and I don't know what he'll do after he graduates, but I'm sure it will be something fine. Don't you think that's better than being afraid of being laughed at, and settling down to be an ignorant laborer all his life?"

"Oh, I guess it's all right, if he felt like it." Jerry spoke with an elaborate carelessness. "Well, I must be going." There was a trace of resentment in his tone, more than a trace in his heart. Jerry's high opinion of Peggy had originally sprung from her appreciation of his good qualities. It was a rather painful surprise to find that she recognized his lacks. In fact, Jerry was inclined to think that she exaggerated them.

"I ain't no coward, just because I don't want to be cooped up in school with a lot of kids," he told himself angrily, as he walked away. Yet his morning's talk with Peggy had clouded his spirits. Long before Jerry had come to accept with cheerful philosophy the disapproval of his neighbors. They understood crops and dairying. He understood birds and trees, and, in his own opinion, he was at no disadvantage in the comparison, but rather the opposite. He regarded their knowledge as humdrum, and it did not disturb him that they looked on his acquisitions as worthless. 271

But with Peggy it was different. The naturalist who had impoverished himself in his eagerness to study birds, she had held up to his admiration as a great man. Jerry was sure that his neighbors would not so estimate him. They would call him "shiftless," the adjective that had been applied times without number to Jerry himself. Peggy approved such research, and yet she found fault with him. She thought he needed the help of the schools, of books, of friends. Undoubtedly she had implied that he was a coward. Jerry winced at the recollection.

"I don't have to go to school just to please her," Jerry boasted, but his declaration of independence failed to assuage that curious uneasiness that was almost pain. He had disappointed a friend. His effort to forget that fact in manufacturing resentment against Peggy proved quite unsuccessful. 272

As for Peggy, she watched the vanishing figure rather ruefully, and was inclined to think her morning's effort wasted, if not worse. Like most amateur gardeners, Peggy was fond of immediate results. She liked to see shoots starting when the seed had hardly touched the soil,

leaf and blossom following with miraculous swiftness. Nature's slow processes were trying to the patience. Peggy watched Jerry out of sight, and then, her face unusually thoughtful, made her way to the front porch which presented an unusually populous appearance that morning. The day was rather warm, and a forenoon of idleness had appealed to the household as preferable to a more strenuous form of entertainment.

"Aren't they any better?" asked Elaine, noticing the gravity of her friend's face, but misinterpreting it.

"Who? Oh, the chickens." Peggy roused herself. "I can't say that I see any improvement. And if there's anything that looks more sickly than a sick chicken, I don't know its name."

"Well, anyway, Freckles is perfectly healthy," Ruth said encouragingly. "And it's all the more to your credit because you brought him up yourself." Some time before, the speckled chicken had asserted his individuality to such an extent that a name had seemed a necessity, and after considerable canvassing of the matter, "Freckles" had received a majority vote. Freckles had long ceased to impress the observer as a pathetic object. He was an energetic, pin-feathery creature, noted equally for his appetite and his pugnacity. Dorothy who had not hesitated to bestride Farmer Cole's boar, and was absolutely fearless as far as Hobo was concerned, retreated panic-stricken before Freckles' advances. For owing to reasons not apparent, Freckles found an irresistible temptation in Dorothy's slim, black-stockinged legs.

Peggy shooed away the persistent Freckles, who had given up his designs upon the gravel walk at her approach, and was pecking frantically at her shoe-buttons, evidently under the impression that they were good to eat. "Oh, he's healthy enough," she replied. "It begins to look as if he'd be all I'd have to show for my poultry raising experiment, and I had it all planned out how I'd spend the money for the whole eighteen chickens." Peggy joined in the laugh against herself before she added cheerily: "Well, even if air-castles tumble down, it's fun to build them."

"And to build them over again," suggested Aunt Abigail with a smile. "Like castles little children build out of blocks."

It was fortunate that Peggy was able to take so philosophic a view of the situation, for, before night, two of the little sufferers had succumbed to their malady, and the yellow fowl, who could not wholly disclaim responsibility for the misfortunes of her family, was left a hen with one chicken.

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## CHAPTER XVIII
### THE CASTAWAYS

It really began to look as if Jerry were seriously offended. For several days there had been no fresh fish at Dolittle Cottage. Peggy reproached herself for having gone too fast. "I ought to have told him about Audubon and David and let it soak in awhile. But when he started to talk about going to school, there didn't seem any way out of saying what I thought."

Jerry's prolonged absence was very annoying to Peggy. Five minutes face to face, she felt sure, would straighten out the tangle. Peggy had a not unreasonable confidence in the efficacy of kindly frankness. If Jerry once understood the friendliness of her criticism, it was impossible that he should cherish a grudge against her.

As a matter of fact, the mood which accounted for Jerry's aloofness was no more puzzling to Peggy than to Jerry himself. His first resentment of her criticism had burned itself out for lack of fuel, and had been succeeded by a restlessness unappeased by hours of tramping and climbing. For the first time since he could remember, Jerry found himself looking ahead, questioning the future. In spite of his real ability and his freedom from the more outbreaking faults, Jerry had been progressing steadily toward utter worthlessness, by the simple but effective method of always obeying the whim of the moment. The old grandmother with whom he lived had long before given up all attempt to control the boy, who was generally good-natured when allowed to do exactly as he pleased. Jerry enjoyed himself, kept busy in his own way and returned the disapproval of the community with interest.

Under the influence of the girls at Dolittle Cottage, and of Peggy in particular, Jerry's attitude toward the world had been gradually changing. He found to his surprise that he liked to be liked. The courteous attitude of these strangers had raised him in his own estimation. The frequent appearance of the hand-painted necktie and the pointed shoes–both of which had belonged to Jerry's father–was indicative of a change that went deep.

The part he had taken in Lucy Haines' benefit had also had its share in his development. Strange to say, the extent of Jerry's musical attainments had proved a surprise, even to the people who had known him from babyhood, and he had received more compliments since that occasion than had fallen to his lot in his previous sixteen years of existence. Whereupon Jerry made the discovery that the praise and admiration of one's fellows is pleasanter than their disapproval, and his youthful cynicism had weakened accordingly.

The effect of Peggy's words on this new-born complacency was the havoc of a hailstorm on premature buds. Just as he was beginning to enjoy the flavor of approbation, his attention had

been directed to his lacks and shortcomings. He stayed away from Dolittle Cottage because his last visit had been responsible for this present uneasy discomfort. He fished and hunted, rose early, and wandered late, without succeeding in the effort which older and wiser people have undertaken with equally poor success, the attempt to escape from one's self.

One of the Snooks children was waiting for him when he came home late one afternoon. Mrs. Snooks had hesitated when Peggy had asked to use one of the boys as a messenger, not being sure that the loaning of her offspring for such a purpose was not contrary to her newly acquired 278
principles. The casual mention on Peggy's part of a dime to be awarded the messenger, had settled the question satisfactorily, and little Andy Snooks, digging his bare toes into the yielding earth, at last found the chance to do his errand.

"They's going to Snake River, them city girls. And She says–" Jerry did not find the pronoun ambiguous–"She says will you drive 'em?"

"I'm going to be busy."

Little Andy stared unbelievingly.

"They's baking turnovers and things. She gave me a cooky with a crinkled edge. 'Twas good, too, you bet."

"You tell 'em I'll be busy." Jerry pushed past Andy and entered the house. He was astonished at the turmoil of his spirit. "Wish she'd let me alone," he said fiercely. "I'm not bothering her none. I don't see why she can't leave me be."

Peggy received the concise report of her messenger with a little grimace which hid a real disappointment.

"The silly boy!" she mused. "Next time I'll go myself. I simply won't stand his sulking. It's too absurd." Then she gave her attention to the more immediate problem.

"Well, girls, Jerry won't drive us and Lucy can't." Lucy Haines was devoting herself to making her 279
meagre wardrobe ready for the opening of school, and for her a holiday was out of the question. "Now, what are we going to do? Give it up?"

An indignant chorus negatived that suggestion. "I used to know something about driving," said Elaine, who seemed to have developed a remarkable faculty for filling vacancies of almost any description. "But I shouldn't like to try to manage spirited horses. Now what are you all laughing at?"

"You could hardly call Nat and Bess spirited," Peggy replied, when she could make herself heard. "Not if you keep them away from hornets' nests, anyway." She explained her qualification by telling the story of the other memorable picnic, and the description of the two old horses which Farmer Cole had placed at the disposal of the cottagers entirely relieved Elaine's uncertainty.

"I'll do it, then. I seem to be a regular Jack-at-a-pinch," she laughed.

"You're an emergency girl, and I'm proud of you," Peggy declared. "The wonder of it is that we've been able to get along without you this summer. Now that you're here, you seem indispensable." 280

Accordingly it happened that Jerry Morton, from a point of concealment in the underbrush, watched a farm-wagon rattle past the following morning, the faces of the occupants indicating high spirits, their voices blending jubilantly, in spite of his rejection of the chance to share the day's pleasure. "The new one's driving," Jerry said to himself. "But then, they could tie the lines to the whip stock and them two old plugs would take 'em there all right, just so they didn't fall down on the way." It was a relief to him to know that his refusal had not detracted from the pleasure of the company, and yet he was inconsistent enough to resent the gay chatter and the unclouded cheeriness of the smiling faces. He plunged back into the woods, well aware that his surreptitious glimpse had not helped to ease that inner disquiet.

The drive scheduled for the morning was longer than that to Day's Woods, but the charm of their destination was worth the extra effort. The spot to which they had been directed was a knoll on the river's edge, crowned by tall pine-trees, whose needles formed a fragrant carpet. Snake River was an erratic stream, which, to judge from appearances, lived up to the principle of always 281
following the line of the least resistance. It turned and twisted in fantastic curves, suggesting that the name Snake River might have been applied because of its serpentine windings. Charming little islands dotted its course, like green beads strung irregularly upon a silver cord. To add to its attractions, there was a dwelling near the knoll, with a barn where their horses could be cared for, and the white-haired, rheumatic old man who led Nat and Bess away to their well-earned oats, pointed out two canoes, fastened to a silver birch at the river's edge, which could be rented for the moderate sum of ten cents apiece for the entire day.

As on all well-conducted picnics, luncheon came early, and then followed the diversions which invariably contribute to the pleasure of such festive occasions. The girls strolled in the woods, picked the showy, scentless flowers, which had replaced the small, fragrant blossoms of springtime, and took little excursions on the river, two to a canoe. The strength of the current was something of a surprise. Ruth and Amy floating down the stream, and barely dipping their paddles into the water, had exclaimed over the ease of propelling the little bark. But the attempt to return to their starting-point had proved that the smoothly flowing water had a will of its own. 282
The paddles were plied vigorously, and the girls reached the birch-tree with little beads of moisture showing at their temples, and an unusual color in their cheeks.

"Another time I'd paddle up stream and float down," exclaimed Amy, stepping ashore, and

fanning herself with her hat. “I want my hard times at the start. But who would have supposed that there was such a current in this lazy old river?”

Characteristically Peggy defended the reputation of the stream. “It’s not lazy a bit. Up here it winds around a good deal, but that’s only its playtime. Just a mile or two below are the falls, and I think the power is carried quite a long way to some town for electric lights and that sort of thing. So Snake River’s really a worker.”

The drowsy hour of the afternoon had arrived. The breeze which had been so fresh in the early morning had died down. The pine-trees on the knoll rustled softly, and the sound was as soothing as a lullaby. “I believe I’ll feel better for a nap,” said Aunt Abigail, and forthwith settled herself on a steamer rug, spread out invitingly. The suggestion proved popular, and the younger members of the party followed her example, except that most of them stretched out luxuriously on the pine needles, sun-warmed and fragrant.

Dorothy looked about on the somnolent gathering with dismay. “Aunt Peggy, I don’t like sleepy picnics. I want to play tag.”

“Oh, it’s too hot for tag, and, besides, you always squeal so when you’re caught that it would wake everybody up. Don’t you want a tiny bit of a nap?” Either because of the force of example, or because the languor of the summer day was too much even for her energy, Peggy herself was frankly sleepy.

“But I can have naps to my house.” Dorothy’s chin quivered in her disappointment, and Peggy surrendered with a laugh.

“Naps are a kind of fun you can have almost anywhere, can’t you, dear? Well, we mustn’t play tag, but we’ll take one of the canoes and go on a nice little expedition all by ourselves.”

Dorothy’s face was radiant over the prospect of stealing a march on the sleepers. She was on her feet in a moment, tiptoeing her way with exaggerated caution. Amy opening one eye, saw the buoyant little figure trip past, and wondered vaguely what was up, though in her state of comfortable lethargy it seemed altogether too much trouble to inquire.

“Now, you must sit as quiet as a mouse,” warned Peggy, lifting Dorothy into the canoe. “For these boats are the tippy kind. And this time we’ll go up stream instead of down.”

The twisting, winding river was unexpectedly alluring. Every bend Peggy paddled past, the point just above beckoned her onward. Her temporary drowsiness had disappeared, and she enjoyed her sense of discovery and the exercise which was vigorous without being exhausting. Knowing that the return would be both swift and easy, she did not hesitate to yield to her new-born zeal for exploration, especially as Dorothy’s face was expressive of unalloyed satisfaction.

“How pretty the river is here,” Peggy exclaimed at last, breaking a long, happy silence. “Prettier than below, if anything. Dorothy, aren’t you glad we’re not sleeping away our chance to see all this?”

“My mamma puts me to bed when I’m *naughty*,” replied Dorothy, thereby explaining her inability to regard sleep as a diversion. “And I’ve been a good girl to-day.”

“We’ve both been good girls,” boasted Peggy. “Too good to be sent to bed. And oh, Dorothy, see that darling little island! What do you say to landing and exploring?”

Dorothy was ready to agree to anything which promised novelty and excitement. Accordingly, Peggy paddled into the welcoming arms of a miniature harbor, tied her craft to a convenient willow, and helped her small niece ashore.

Islands had always possessed for Peggy a peculiar fascination. The smaller they were the better, from her standpoint, since with the larger it was always necessary to remind one’s self that they were not a part of the mainland. On this particular island it was quite impossible to forget for a moment that you were entirely surrounded by water.

Peggy pursued her discoveries with zest. Considering its detached and lonely state, the little island had conformed surprisingly to the ways of the mainland. Peggy found flowers of the same varieties that she had picked in the woods back of the knoll a little earlier. A blackberry vine was heavily hung with fruit, though some of the berries were dry and withered. Peggy noticed a bird’s nest in a more exposed location than the little builder would have chosen elsewhere, she was sure, and she thought of the deductions Jerry would have drawn from this fact, and smiled while she sighed. Poor Jerry! She must take him in hand, and settle this absurd misunderstanding.

“Aunt Peggy,” piped Dorothy, trotting at her heels, “let’s not ’splore any longer. I don’t like ’sploring.”

“Oh, I don’t want to stop till I’ve seen everything, Dorothy. Be a good girl and don’t fret.”

But Dorothy did not feel like being a good girl. One of her rare wilful moods had taken possession of her. She stood motionless, scowling at Peggy’s unconscious back, and then her little face overcast and rebellious, she turned and made her way down to the willow and the waiting canoe. The latter moved gently as the water rippled past. It seemed to Dorothy to be tugging at its fastenings with an impatience that matched her own.

“You don’t like ’sploring either, do you?” she said, addressing the canoe in a confidential undertone. “And–and it’s very naughty of Aunt Peggy to want her own way all the time. I guess she’d be s’prised if we went off and left her.”

The canoe repeated its wordless invitation. Dorothy drew closer, cast a defiant glance behind her, and then set one small foot firmly on the bottom of the uncertain craft. The responsive lurch was so unexpected that she went over in a heap, luckily landing in the bottom of the canoe, instead of in Snake River. She sat up, feeling a little frightened, and under the necessity of excusing herself.

“There, I didn’t disobey Aunt Peggy, ’cept with one foot. I guess that old canoe pulled me in its own self.”

Her complacency vanished with a startling discovery. The canoe had been carelessly tied and the jar of her tumble had loosened it altogether. Yielding to the current it began to move down the stream, and Dorothy’s alarm found vent in an ear-splitting shriek.

“Aunt Peggy! Aunt Peggy!”

Peggy came crashing through the bushes, startled by the summons, and yet scarcely prepared for the sight which met her eyes. And then so rapidly did things happen, that there seemed to be no time to be frightened. For, at the first glimpse of her rescuer, foolish little Dorothy sprang to her feet. As a matter of course the canoe overturned, throwing her into the water.

Peggy’s instinctive leap took no account of the depth of the stream. She could have drowned with Dorothy. It was quite impossible for her to stand by and look on while Dorothy drowned. Luckily the water, though deep at this point, was not over her head. She floundered to her feet choking and blowing, and clutched desperately at a small, damp object the current was sweeping past her. Instantly two arms went about her neck in a frantic embrace.

“Dorothy, don’t hold so tight. I can’t breathe.”

The appeal was useless. Dorothy was beyond heeding any admonition but that of the blind instinct of self-preservation. Peggy would not have believed that there was such strength in the slender little arms. Gasping, and with reeling senses, she edged step by step nearer the shore, groping with her disengaged hand for the sloping bit of beach where she could deposit her burden. When at length her fingers came in contact with the pebbly edge the bright summer world was a black mist before her unseeing eyes.

Luckily the contact with mother earth suggested to Dorothy that here was something more stable than the swaying support to which she had been clinging so desperately. Her hold relaxed, and a minute later she was scrambling up the slope into the grass and bushes, caring for nothing except to get as far as possible from the terrible water. Peggy caught her breath, waited an instant for brain and vision to clear, and then, with the aid of the obliging willow, climbed dripping from the stream. For a minute or two she gave herself up to the luxury of being frightened. Shuddering and sick, she gazed over her shoulder at the rippling water, while one monotonous thought repeated itself over and over in her brain like a chant. “She might have been drowned. I might have been drowned. We might both have been drowned.” Peggy was conscious of an overwhelming, panic-stricken longing for her mother.

Dorothy was sitting back in the bushes, crying with a lustiness which suggested that no serious consequences were to be apprehended from her plunge bath, beyond the possibility of taking cold. “I don’t like ’sploring islands,” she sobbed. “Let’s go back, Aunt Peggy.”

Peggy turned sharply. Down the stream floated the overturned canoe, already at a distance which made its recapture hopeless. A little in advance was a white straw hat, a pert bow acting as a sail. Not till that moment had it occurred to Peggy that her troubles were not yet over. Her gratitude for her escape from death was tempered by irritated dismay.

“Why, Dorothy, we can’t go back! We’ve got to wait till they come for us. How provoking!”

Nothing was to be gained by fretting, however, and luckily other matters were soon absorbing Peggy’s attention. She wrung the water from Dorothy’s drenched hair and clothing, and set her in the sun to dry, a forlorn little figure of a mermaid. And then she performed a like service for herself, stopping at intervals to lift her voice in a ringing “Hal-loo!”

“Oh, dear! We’re going to be so late getting home,” scolded Peggy. “It’ll be dark, and none of us know the roads very well.” She looked longingly at the point around which at any moment a canoe might appear. “It’s going to take some time to land us,” she reflected, “as long as these canoes can’t carry any more than two. Oh, dear, Dorothy! How much trouble you’ve made.” And the pensive mermaid wept again, with the submissive penitence which disarms censure.

Over in the west above the treetops, the sky grew pink, deepened to crimson, paled to ashes-of-roses. The sparkling lights on the water were snuffed out one by one. The air was full of sounds, shrill-voiced insects cheeping, the pipe of frogs, the twittering of birds seeking their nests.

The downward droop of the corners of Dorothy’s mouth became more pronounced.

“I don’t like that noise,” she protested. “It sounds as if things were all crying.”

Peggy hugged the little penitent close. She did not like the sound herself. “You’re pretty near dry, aren’t you?” she said, trying to speak lightly.

Dorothy’s answer was a grieved whimper, “Aunt Peggy, when are they coming for us?”

“I don’t know, dear.” The resolute cheerfulness of Peggy’s tone gave no hint of her inward perturbation. What did it mean, she asked herself. What were the girls thinking of? It was growing dark. She tightened her clasp about Dorothy and the disconsolate little maid snuggled her damp head against Peggy’s shoulder, and forgot her troubles in sleep.

Little flickering lights began to play about the island, as the fire-flies lit their fairy lamps. Overhead the stars came out. The warm wind of the summer night sighed through the treetops, and the sad chorus of humble earthly pipers answered from below. It seemed to Peggy as if the dear familiar world with its cheery homes and friendly faces, had been blotted out, and Dorothy and herself were alone on an unfamiliar earth. Yet with all the strange, terrifying loneliness, the stars had never seemed so bright nor the heavenly Father so near.

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# CHAPTER XIX
## THE RESCUE

The picnickers had slept late. Elaine was the first to wake, and she lay for a moment staring at the tranquil sky above her, unable to understand why she was not viewing the ceiling of her bedroom on Friendly Terrace. Then recollection came, and she raised herself on her elbow just as Amy opened her eyes.

“Did Peggy call?” inquired Amy stretching lazily. “Is it time to wake up?”

“I didn’t hear Peggy,” Elaine admitted. “But I should say that it was high time for us to be stirring, unless we’re going to spend the night here.”

At the sound of voices, one sleeper after another gave signs of returning animation. Priscilla sat up languidly, glanced at the little watch she wore on a leather strap about her wrist, and uttered a surprised exclamation.

“Why, it’s five o’clock! I thought Peggy said we were to start back at five.”

“We’ve slept away all the afternoon,” Amy commented in some vexation, as she jumped to her feet with an energy in striking contrast to her late lassitude. “I don’t see why Peggy didn’t wake us.”

“Perhaps she didn’t know how late it was getting.” Priscilla, too, was on her feet. “Peggy!” she called. “Oh, Peggy!” and then stood listening vainly for the reply.

“She took Dorothy and went somewhere,” Amy explained. “That was the last thing I saw. Oh, Peggy! Peggy Raymond!”

Repeated calls were fruitless. “Perhaps she went to the barn to see about the horses,” was Aunt Abigail’s contribution to the jumble of suggestions, and Priscilla and Ruth promptly volunteered to test its accuracy. They found that the rheumatic old man had Nat and Bess already harnessed.

“Somebody said you wanted ’em for five o’clock,” he explained. “’Twasn’t neither of you two. A pretty girl in white.”

“Oh, yes, Peggy! But we can’t find her. We thought perhaps she’d been down here.”

As the rheumatic old man was unable to give them news of Peggy, the girls returned to their companions at a pace which unconsciously grew more and more rapid, as they discussed the situation. “Good joke on Peggy,” Ruth said with a little laugh. “Because she’s always the one that’s on hand, no matter who’s late.”

“Yes, it’s certainly a joke on Peggy.” And Priscilla also laughed with a determined heartiness. But with all her air of amusement, she was conscious of a vague uneasiness.

Just as they reached the knoll they were met by Amy and Elaine. “She’s out in one of the canoes,” Amy said quickly, before the others could explain that their search had been without success.

“Oh!” Priscilla’s sigh was expressive of relief. “Well, she’d better come in now. The old man has harnessed, and it’s quite a little after five.”

“We couldn’t see her anywhere.” Elaine took up the story as Amy was silent. “But one of the canoes is gone, so, of course, she’s taken Dorothy for a little ride.”

The girls were chattering like blackbirds as they went down the slope to the river. Elaine recalled Peggy’s fondness for the water, and Amy remarked that it was almost a relief to have Peggy behindhand for once, she had such a mania for looking out for everybody else. The other girls contributed observations equally important, and each tried to hide from the others, if not from herself, the fact that her persistent and voluble cheerfulness was designed to silence the uneasy whisperings of an anxiety that was waxing stronger, moment by moment.

Aunt Abigail was standing at the water’s edge, straining her old eyes this way and that. For the first time that summer she looked her full age.

“Call again, girls!” she commanded peremptorily. “It isn’t at all like Peggy to be so late, and worry us this way. I don’t like it.”

It was really a relief to have some one voice an anxiety so that they could all unite in demonstrating its utter unreasonableness. But to relieve Aunt Abigail’s mind, they shouted in chorus, “Peggy! Peg-gy Raymond!” and heard as they listened, the echo repeating their summons more and more faintly with each reiteration. That was all. No answering cheery hail. No musical dip of the paddle in the stream.

It was during one of these tense moments of listening that Elaine started violently, and in spite of the sunburn, which in her case had not had time to deepen into tan, she turned pale. Instantly she was bombarded by excited questions.

“What was it? What did you see, Elaine?”

“Why, I guess it’s nothing. You look, girls, that dark thing on the water way over. It isn’t–it can’t be–” 296

But it *was* an overturned canoe. The rheumatic old man who had come up with the team towed it ashore, in the wake of its sister bark. As if in a dreadful dream, the girls heard the quavering tones of the old voice, his gray head shaking the while.

“Two of ’em, you say. The pretty girl in white and the little one. And me a-waiting on, for I don’t know what. It don’t seem fair, somehow.”

It was ten o’clock that evening when Jerry Morton heard the news. Ill tidings travel fast, even without the help of modern invention. One of the Snooks boys, not Andy but Elisha, an older brother, brought the word, and his manner was suggestive of a certain complacency as if he felt that his own importance was increased by his momentous tidings. He found Jerry sitting on the steps, though it was long past bedtime, his chin on his hand, and his unblinking gaze fixed upon the stars, as if he were trying to stare them out of countenance.

“I don’t b’lieve you’ve heard about the drownding.”

“What d’ye mean?” Jerry’s head lifted, yet his response was less dramatic than Elisha had hoped for. 297

“You know that Raymond girl, up to the Cottage. Well, she–”

With a cry, Jerry pounced upon his informer. The terrified Elisha struggled to free himself, gasping disconnected protests. “’Twasn’t me–I didn’t do it–Snake River–”

“If you’re lying to me,” warned Jerry, coming to his senses and loosening his hold, “you’ll be sorry. Mighty sorry.”

Elisha crossed his heart in proof of his veracity. “And if you don’t b’lieve me, go over to Cole’s and ask them.”

The advice seemed good. Jerry took to his heels. It was a mistake, of course, either one of ’Lish Snooks’ lies, or else a mistake. Yet a horrible doubt rose in the midst of his assertions of confidence, like the head of a snake lifted amid a bed of flowers.

At the Cole farmhouse every one was astir. Mrs. Cole who had just returned from Dolittle Cottage, and was going back to spend the night, after attending to some necessary household tasks, was crying softly as she worked and talked.

“Those poor children! Seems as if they couldn’t take in what had happened. They’re dazed like. 298 The one that looks delicate, Ruth, had a bad fainting spell, and the plump little one, she breaks down and cries every now and then, but the other two, they sit around white and still, not saying a word or shedding a tear. ’Tain’t natural. The Lord meant tears to ease our hearts, when the load’s too heavy to bear. It worries me when I see folks taking their trouble dry-eyed.”

“How are they going to let their folks know, ma?” asked Rosetta Muriel, her voice strangely subdued. The sudden tragedy had stirred her shallow nature to its depths. Though a small mirror hung against the wall at a convenient distance, she did not glance in its direction. For an hour she had not smoothed her hair, nor pulled her ribbon bow into jaunty erectness, nor indicated by any other of the familiar forms of self-betrayal the all-absorbing importance of her personal appearance. Her hands lay idle in her lap, and her face was pale, under her dishevelled hair.

“Joe’ll drive over to the station with a telegram the first thing in the morning,” Mrs. Cole replied. “We could telephone by going to Corney Lee’s, but I don’t know why the poor souls shouldn’t have one more night of quiet sleep, for they can’t take anything earlier than the morning train anyway. And, besides, a telegram kind of brings its own warning, but to go to the ’phone when 299 the bell rings, and hear news like this, must be ’most more than flesh and blood can bear.”

Her gaze wandered to the boy standing by the door. “You’ll go over with the rest of the men in the morning, won’t you, Jerry?” she asked. “I guess there won’t be many sleeping late to-morrow.”

Jerry had refused a chair, but had stayed on, listening to such meagre information as was to be had, the discovery of the overturned canoe, and later of Peggy’s hat, stained and water-soaked. As to the cause of the catastrophe no one could be sure, though Mrs. Cole hazarded a guess. “That little Dorothy was as full of caper as a colt, and anything as ticklish as a canoe ain’t safe for a child of that sort.”

Looking at Jerry, the good woman was almost startled by the drawn misery of the boy’s white face. She had not credited him with such keen sensibilities.

“You’d better go home and get to bed, Jerry,” she said kindly. “The men are going to start as soon as it’s light enough, and you’d ought to get a good sleep first.”

Jerry slipped through the door without replying. Indeed he had hardly spoken since he had 300 uttered his threat against ’Lish Snooks. As he stepped out into the night, he began to run, though his face was not set toward home, and his confused thoughts recognized no especial destination. But fast as he ran, the realization of what had happened kept pace with him, and when at last he

tripped over a tangle of vines, and went sprawling, he made no effort to rise, but lay motionless, his hot tears falling on the grass.

He could never tell her. That was the bitterest drop in his cup of grief. The words he might have said yesterday could not be spoken now. It had been in his power to make her glad, to bring a sparkle into her eyes. He had had his chance and refused it. Alas! the sorrowful wisdom that one day had brought, a wisdom that had come too late for him to profit by it.

He did not know how long he lay there, his tears mingling with the falling dew. He struggled to his feet at last, limping a little, for the fall had been severe, and went on his way, still without conscious purpose. And when long after a silvery expanse shone ahead of him, he did not realize for the moment that his aimless wanderings had brought him to Snake River. He stumbled on till 301
he reached the edge of the stream and saw in the black shadow of the trees a dugout half filled with water. For the first time in his night of wandering, a vague purpose took shape in his throbbing brain.

This was Snake River. And here was his boat awaiting him. He would take it and drift down the stream, meeting the men in the morning. There was no moon, but the night was clear and starlit, and except for the shadows cast by the trees on the bank, the river looked a luminous highway. Though he did not know the hour, he felt sure that it could not be long before the east began to grow light with the first promise of the sunrise. It would not be worth while to go home.

He fell to bailing the awkward craft, and found a certain relief in the necessity for methodical work. The water trickled in again, to be sure, but less rapidly than he could empty it out. He plugged the largest crevice with his handkerchief, untied the rotting rope, and pushed out from under the shadows into the centre of the stream. Then he let the current have its way, using an oar now and then to keep the dugout from floating ashore, or going aground on one of the numerous islands which started out of the water as if to bar his progress. Except as he roused 302
himself for this purpose, he sat huddled on his seat without moving, his head resting on his folded arms.

The birds discovered that the morning was coming before Jerry found it out. Jubilant notes of welcome to the new day sounded above his head. He straightened himself, and made an effort to throw off the lethargy which had succeeded his paroxysms of grief. The horizon in the east was banded with yellow, and overhead the sky blushed rosily. He looked about him and tried to locate himself.

“Guess I must be just back of Denbeigh’s farm. Yes, that’s their windmill. I’d better row awhile. I’m a good way from Pine Knoll yet.” Again he bailed out the boat and took up the oars. The dugout moved ahead like a plodding farm-horse that feels the spur and responds reluctantly.

Morning was coming as radiantly as if there were no sorrow in the world. With dull incredulity Jerry watched the sky kindle and the earth flash awake. It hurt him, all this glow and sparkle, this sweetness in the air, and the sound of the birds singing. He thought how Peggy would have loved it all and his throat ached, and he lifted his hand to his eyes to clear his vision. Then he pulled hard on his left oar, for the current was swinging him around toward a little island that rose 303
suddenly out of the mist like an apparition.

All at once a figure stood out against the tangled green, a slender figure in white. Jerry dropped both oars, and put his hands before his eyes. When he looked again the vision had not vanished. Its hand moved in an appealing gesture.

Jerry found himself rowing frantically, a hope in his heart so like madness that he dared not let himself think what it was that he hoped for. The dugout crashed against the willow where Peggy had tied her canoe the afternoon before. And in the unreal light of the dawn, a pale, tremulous Peggy stretched out her arms with a cry. “Oh, it’s Jerry! Oh, Jerry, how came it to be you?” It had been a night of weeping for many, but Peggy’s tears had waited till now.

“Oh, such a time, Jerry! The canoe tipped over, and spilled Dorothy into the river, and I don’t know how I ever got her out. And then we couldn’t get away, and I screamed till I was hoarse, but nobody came. Oh, Jerry! I’m so glad!”

Jerry’s answer seemed a trifle irrelevant. But he said the things he was certain could not be postponed another instant.

“Look here! I’m going back to school. I’ve been a coward, just like you said, but now I’m going to 304
start out same as David did, and stick to it like that other fellow–I forget his name–and say! I’m–I’m sorry.” He was out of breath when he finished, as if he had been straining every muscle to raise the weight, crushing, overwhelming, that had been lifted from his heart.

They picked up Dorothy without awaking her, and Jerry pulled hard for the bank. “We’ll go straight up through the woods. There’s a house not quarter of a mile back. Prob’ly they’ll all be up and around. You see, the men were going to start early this morning, so’s to–so’s to–” Jerry floundered, his pale face suddenly flushing scarlet, and Peggy understood.

“Oh, Jerry!” Her voice dropped to a shocked whisper. “Oh, Jerry, they thought we were drowned.” Then she uttered a little pained cry. “And at home, too? Do they know?”

“Joe’s going to telegraph first thing this morning.”

“He mustn’t,” Peggy cried fiercely. “I can’t bear it. I won’t bear it to have mother hurt so.” Unconsciously her arm tightened about Dorothy, till the child roused with a little cry.

Jerry looked at the sun. “I guess we’ll be in time to stop him,” he reassured her. “Don’t you fret.” 305

And then, as the boat bumped against the bank, “Here, I’ll take the baby.”

Jerry’s conjecture proved correct. There was a light in the kitchen of the farmhouse, where the farmer’s wife was preparing breakfast for the men hurrying through their morning tasks to be ready for the sombre duties awaiting them. At the sight of Jerry, with Dorothy in his arms, Peggy dragging wearily behind, the men guessed the truth, and the trio was welcomed with such shouts that Dorothy woke up in earnest. As for Peggy, she could hardly keep back the tears at the rejoicing of these total strangers over the safety of Dorothy and herself.

Jerry had thought this problem out in the toilsome climb from the river. “Say, I want the fastest horse you’ve got. They’re going to telegraph this morning to her folks and I’ve got to stop ’em.”

The farmer nodded comprehendingly. “I’ve got a three-year-old that’s a pretty speedy proposition. Ain’t really broken, though. Think you can manage him, son?”

“’Course I can.” In his new-born zeal for atonement, Jerry felt himself equal to the management of an airship. The three-year-old was accordingly interrupted in her breakfast, expressing her dissatisfaction by laying her ears close to her head. And as she was hurriedly saddled, Jerry added, “You’ll get ’em home as soon as you can, won’t you? I guess by their looks they’re pretty near beat out.”

“We sure will.” The farmer cleared his throat, for his deep voice had suddenly grown husky. “Driving the two of ’em home alive and well is a good deal pleasanter job than I’d bargained for this morning. Now look out for this here vixen,” he continued, dropping suddenly from the plane of sentiment to the prosaic levels, “for she’ll throw you if she can.”

And while Peggy was making an effort to eat the breakfast the farmer’s wife insisted on her sharing, a clatter of hoofs under the window told of Jerry’s departure.

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# CHAPTER XX
## HOME SWEET HOME

“Joy cometh in the morning.” At Dolittle Cottage white-faced, sad-hearted girls had crept up-stairs to bed, and some of them had slept and waked moaning, and others had lain wide-eyed and still through the long hours, thankful for the relief of tears which now and then ran down their hot cheeks and wet their pillows. But when the dawn came, nature had its way, and the last watcher fell into the heavy sleep of exhaustion.

Apparently they all waked at once. Down-stairs was a clamor of uplifted voices, strange, choking cries, sounds that almost made the heart stop beating. And then above the tumult, a shrill fretful pipe that to the strained ears of the listeners was the sweetest of all sweet music.

“Make Hobo stop, Aunt Peggy. He’s a-tickling me with his tongue.”

Pandemonium reigned in Dolittle Cottage. There was a wild rush of white-robed figures for the hall, just as a girl in a dress that had once been white, and with dark circles under her eyes, came flying up the stairs. Peggy forgot her aching limbs and weariness in the transport of that moment. And then there was a little time of silence, broken only by the sound of happy sobbing, and everybody was kissing everybody else, without assigning any especial reason, and laughing through glad tears.

The appearance of Mrs. Cole, with Dorothy in her arms, was the signal for another outbreak, and perhaps Dorothy’s manifest ill-humor was fortunate on the whole, for something of the sort was needed to bring the excited household down to the wholesome plane of every-day living. Camping out did not agree with Dorothy. She had caught a slight cold from her wetting, and her night’s rest had been far from satisfactory. And now to be seized and passed from hand to hand like a box of candy, while people kissed and cried over her, was too much for her long-tried temper. She screamed and struggled and finally put a stop to further affectionate demonstrations by slapping Amy with one hand, while with the other she knocked off Aunt Abigail’s spectacles.

“She’s tired to death, poor little angel,” cried Mrs. Cole, generously ignoring the fact that Dorothy’s conduct was the reverse of angelic. “She wants to get to bed and to sleep, and so do the rest of you, before Lucy and me have the lot sick on our hands.”

“Oh, I couldn’t sleep,” protested Peggy, “and I want to wait till Jerry comes, and find out if he stopped Joe from sending that telegram.”

“And we’re dying to hear everything that’s happened,” Amy cried, “and, besides, I’m afraid to go to sleep for fear I’ll dream that this is only a dream.”

But Mrs. Cole was firm, and Lucy Haines, who had come to the cottage before sunrise, added her entreaties to the older woman’s insistence. Then everybody discovered that Peggy was very pale, and Dorothy did some more slapping, and Mrs. Cole’s motion was carried. Although every girl of them, and Aunt Abigail as well, had protested her utter inability to sleep, it was not fifteen minutes before absolute quiet reigned in the second story of the cottage. Wheels ground up the driveway again and again, and penetrating, if kindly, voices made inquiries under the open windows, but none of the sleepers waked till noon.

Jerry Morton, coming to report the success of his mission, was more than a little disappointed not to secure an immediate interview with Peggy. But Lucy, who was peeling potatoes in anticipation of the time when hunger should act as an alarm clock, in the hushed second story, bade him sit down and wait. “I know she’ll want to see you. She was so worried for fear the news would get to her mother.” 310

“Well, it came mighty near it, I can tell you. Joe was just ahead of me. When I got in he was saying to the operator, ‘Rush this, will you?’ and I grabbed his coat and said nix.” Jerry’s tired face lighted up with satisfaction, and Lucy regarded him rather enviously. It seemed to her that Jerry was getting more than his share. He had found the castaways, and had spared Friendly Terrace the shock of the mistaken news, while Lucy with equally good will, was forced to content herself with peeling potatoes and like humble services.

“How did you ever come to think of looking for them?” she asked, wishing that the happy idea had occurred to her, instead of to Jerry.

“I didn’t. ’Twas just a stroke of luck.” Jerry told the story of his night’s wandering, a recital as interesting to himself as to Lucy, for as yet he had hardly had time to formulate the record of what had happened. Before they had exhausted the fascinating theme there were sounds overhead which told that the late sleepers were at last astir. 311

They kept open house at Dolittle Cottage that afternoon. The country community, aroused by the news of the supposed tragedy, and then by the word that all was well, gave itself up to rejoicing. Vehicles of every description creaked up the driveway, bringing whole families to offer their congratulations. Though farm work was pressing, Mr. Silas Robbins drove over with his wife and daughter, and patted Peggy’s shoulder, and pinched Dorothy’s cheek. Luckily a morning in bed had done much to restore Dorothy to her normal mood, and though she bestowed a withering glance upon the gentleman who had taken this liberty, she did not retaliate in the fashion Peggy feared.

“Couldn’t think of letting *you* get drowned, you know,” remarked Mr. Robbins with ponderous humor. “A girl who can speechify the way you can, might get to be president some day, if the women’s rights folks should win out. I don’t say,” concluded Mr. Robbins, with the air of making a great concession, “that I mightn’t vote for you myself.”

Mr. Smart, too, dropped in to secure additional information for the write-up, which he informed Peggy would appear in the next issue of the *Weekly Arena*. “Though but a country editor,” said Mr. Smart feelingly, “I believe that the Press ought to be reliable, and I’m doing my part to make it so. No yellow journalism in the *Arena*.” And he showed a little natural disappointment on discovering that even this assurance did not reconcile Peggy to the prospect of figuring as a newspaper heroine. 312

One of the surprises of the day was Mrs. Snooks’ appearance. Never since her education had been taken in hand by the occupants of Dolittle Cottage, had she darkened its doors. But now she came smiling, and with an evident determination to regard bygones as bygones. For when she had expatiated at some length on the effect of Elisha’s harrowing news upon her nerves, and had repeated in great detail what she had said to Mr. Snooks, and what Mr. Snooks had said to her, she gave a crowning proof of magnanimity.

“Now, I’ve got to be getting back home. Mr. Snooks is a wonderful good-natured man, but he likes his victuals on time, same as most men-folks. I wonder if you could lend me a loaf of bread? I was just that worked up this morning that I didn’t get ’round to set sponge.”

The bread-box was well filled, thanks to Mrs. Cole, and Peggy insisted on accompanying Mrs. Snooks to the kitchen and picking out the largest loaf. She also suggested that Mrs. Snooks should take home a sample of the new breakfast food they all liked so much. As they parted on the doorstep Peggy was sure that the last shadow of their misunderstanding had lifted, for Mrs. Snooks turned to say, “I got a new cooky cutter from the tin peddler the other day–real pretty. And any time you’d like to use it, you’re perfectly welcome.” 313

Even then the surprises of the eventful day were not over. For late in the afternoon, when the kindly strangers occupying the porch chairs were just announcing that they guessed they’d have to move on, two figures came up the walk at a swinging pace. Ruth who was a little in the background was the first to notice them, and she was on her feet in a moment, with a glad cry. There was a general movement in the direction of the new arrivals, but Ruth was the first to reach them.

“Oh, Graham! Oh, Graham! You don’t know–”

“Yes, I’ve heard all about it,” Graham said in a voice not quite natural. The two boys on their way back to the city had stopped for dinner at the farmhouse where Peggy had taken breakfast, and had been favored with all the details of what Jack called the “near tragedy,” though his effort at facetiousness was far from expressing his real feelings. 314

It was distinctly disappointing to the girls to find that their visitors planned to continue their trip next morning. “My vacation’s up Saturday,” explained Jack Rynson. “And Graham thinks he’s loafed as long as he should.”

“And Elaine is going to-morrow,” sighed Peggy. “I almost wish–” She checked herself abruptly.

“Dear old Friendly Terrace,” Amy murmured. “Seems as if we’d been away a year.”

“Well, we’ll be starting in ten days or so,” said Priscilla, with an air of trying to make the best of

things.

Peggy flashed a surprised glance about the circle. “Girls, why, girls! I believe we’d all like to go home to-morrow! Then let’s.”

There was no doubt as to the popularity of the suggestion. The strain of those few hours when shadows darker than those of night hung over Dolittle Cottage, had implanted in the hearts of all the longing for home. In the clamor of eager voices there was no dissent, only questioning whether so hasty a departure were possible. And when this was decided in the affirmative, hilarity reigned.

“You must all stay to supper,” Peggy declared, overflowing in joyous hospitality. “There won’t be enough of anything to go around, but there’s any amount of things that must be eaten.” Graham and Jack accepted the invitation as a matter of course, and Lucy and Jerry yielded, after considerable insistence on Peggy’s part. And on the faces which surrounded the dinner-table, lengthened for the occasion by an extra leaf, there was little to call to mind the black dream of the night.

It was an unusual supper in many ways. There were only half a dozen ears of corn, and the lima beans served out a teaspoonful to a plate. It was understood that whoever preferred sardines to corned beef might have his choice, but that it was a breach of etiquette to take both. However, since several varieties of jellies and preserves graced the table, and there was an abundance of Mrs. Cole’s delicious bread, both white and brown, there was no danger that any one would rise from the meal with his hunger unsatisfied.

Peggy was busy planning while she ate. “Oh, dear, what in the world am I going to do with Hobo? I won’t leave him without a home, that’s sure. And I don’t know what Taffy’ll say to me if I bring back another dog.”

“I’ll take him off your hands,” said Jack Rynson.

Peggy leaned toward him with shining eyes. “Really? And would you like him? For I don’t want you to take him just to oblige me.”

Jack made haste to defend himself against such a charge. His home, it seemed, was on the outskirts of the city, and his mother sometimes complained that it was lonely, and would be glad, Jack was sure, of a good watch-dog. “And I’ll get Graham to give him a certificate on that score,” concluded Jack, with a meaning smile in the direction of his friend, who was always easily teased by references to the time when Hobo had rushed to the defence of Graham’s sister against Graham himself.

“Oh, that’s such a load off my mind,” Peggy declared. “He can go with you to-morrow, can’t he? And now there’s one thing more, and that’s his name.”

“Yes?” Jack looked a little puzzled.

“I named him myself, and I’ve been ashamed of it ever since. For he never was a tramp dog, really. He wanted a home all the time, and people of his own to love and protect and be faithful to. And, if you don’t mind, before he goes I’d like to change his name to Hero.”

The emphasis on the last word roused Hobo, who was sleeping in the next room. Perhaps his ear was not sufficiently trained to the niceties of the English language to distinguish between this name and the other by which he had been addressed all summer. Be that as it may, in an instant he was at Peggy’s elbow, looking up into her face, and wagging his tail.

“I believe he knows,” cried Peggy, while the table shouted. The new name was unanimously endorsed, and with his re-christening, Peggy’s canine protégé discarded the last survival of his life as a wanderer.

“And now about the chickens,” continued Peggy, whose face had lost its look of weariness in overflowing satisfaction. “I’m going to give them to you, Lucy. I’m sorry there’s only three of them, but–”

“Two,” Amy interrupted in a plaintive undertone from the other side of the table.

Peggy stared. “What! Has anything happened to Freckles?”

“No, he’s all right. And so’s the yellow hen, of course. But, Peggy, the other chicken has disappeared. Lucy noticed this morning that it was gone, and when all those people were here, she and I hunted everywhere. And the old hen keeps on scratching and clucking just the same.”

Peggy’s countenance reflected the disgust of Amy’s voice. “It isn’t much of a gift, Lucy. That yellow hen is really the worst apology for a mother I ever imagined. Freckles is a nice chicken, but he’s got some very bad faults. He *will* come into the house whenever the screen door is left open, and he seems to have a perfect mania for picking shoe-buttons and shoe-strings. I suppose it’s because of the way he’s been brought up, but he’s so fond of human society that he makes a perfect nuisance of himself.”

“Chicken pie would cure all those faults,” suggested Graham, and they all laughed again at Peggy’s expression of horror. “Didn’t you tell me they’d bring forty cents a pound,” the young man persisted, teasingly.

“Yes, but that was before I got acquainted with them. I couldn’t turn even the yellow hen into chicken pie, much as I dislike her. The wonder to me,” Peggy ended thoughtfully, “is that anybody ever makes money out of raising chickens.”

Between the supper and the early bedtime there was much to be done. Trunks were packed, except for the bedding and similar articles, which could not be dispensed with before the morning. The remnants of the groceries were bestowed on Mrs. Snooks, and some matters which the girls did not have time to attend to were left in charge of the capable Mrs. Cole. Against everybody's protest, Peggy insisted on running over to the Cole farmhouse to say good-by. Graham acted as her escort, and the two were admitted by Rosetta Muriel, at the sight of whom Peggy gave an involuntary start.

"Do you like it?" asked Rosetta Muriel, immediately interested. The fair hair which she usually arranged so elaborately, was parted and drawn back rather primly over her ears, giving her face a suggestion of refinement which was becoming, if a little misleading.

Peggy was glad she could answer in the affirmative. "Indeed, I do. The simple styles are so pretty, I think."

"There was a picture of Adelaide Lacey in the paper, with her hair done this way. She's going to 320
marry a duke, you know." It was characteristic of Rosetta Muriel thus to excuse her lapse into simplicity, but though the ingenuous explanation was the truth, it was not the whole truth. Even Rosetta Muriel was not quite the same girl for having come in contact with Peggy Raymond, and her poor little undeveloped, unlovely self was reaching out gropingly to things a shade higher than those which hitherto had satisfied her.

The news of the hasty departure was magically diffused. Amy said afterward that she began to understand what they meant when they talked about wireless telegraphy. For as the stage rattled and bumped along the dusty highway the next morning, figures appeared at the windows, handkerchiefs fluttered, and hands were waved in greeting and farewell. In many a harvest field, too, work halted briefly, while battered hats swung above the heads of the wearers, as a substitute for a good-by. And at the station, to the girls' astonishment, quite a company had collected in honor of their departure.

Graham and Jack had deferred their start till they had put the girls on the train, and they regarded the gathering in amazement. "Sure they're not waiting for a circus train?" Graham demanded. "Are you responsible for all this? Rather looks to me, Jack, as if we weren't quite as 321
indispensable as we fancied."

The stage was never early, and the girls hardly had time to make the rounds before the whistle of the train was heard. "Come back next summer," cried Mrs. Cole, catching Peggy in her arms, and giving her a motherly squeeze. "I declare it'll make me so homesick to drive by the cottage, with you girls gone, that I shan't know how to stand it."

Peggy was saying good-by all over again, but she saved her two special favorites for the last. "Now, Lucy," she cried, her hands upon the shoulders of the pale girl, whose compressed lips showed the effort she was making far self-control, "you must write me now and then. I want to know just how you're getting along."

"Yes, I'll write," Lucy promised. "But you mustn't worry about me. I'm not going to get discouraged again, no matter what happens." The train was coming to a snorting halt and Peggy had time for just one more word.

"Good-by, Jerry. Don't forget."

The girls scrambled aboard, followed by a chorus of good-byes. "What's this? Old Home week?" asked an interested old gentleman, dropping his newspaper and crossing the aisle, to get a better 322
view of the crowd on the platform. And, meanwhile, Amy was tugging at the window, crying excitedly, "Oh, help me, quick, Peggy, or it'll be too late."

The window yielded to the girls' combined persuasion. Amy's camera appeared in the opening, and a little click sounded just as the train began to move. "Oh, I hope it'll be good," cried Amy, whose successes and failures had been so evenly balanced that her attitude toward each new effort was one of hopeful uncertainty. "It would be so nice to have something to remember them by." But Peggy, looking back on the station platform, was sure that she needed no aid to remembrance, Amy's camera might be out of focus, and the plate blurred and indistinct, as so often happened, but the picture of those upturned, friendly faces was printed upon Peggy's heart, a lasting possession.

"Well, old man!" It was Jack Rynson speaking over Graham's shoulder. "Guess we might as well start. Come on, Hobo–beg pardon, Hero." And the dog who had whimperingly watched the train which bore Peggy out of sight, only restrained by Jack's hand on his collar from rushing in pursuit, yielded to the inevitable, and followed his new master with the curious loyalty which 323
does not change, no matter how often its object changes.

The people were breaking up into groups of twos and threes, and moving away, but Lucy Haines and Jerry stood motionless, their gaze following the vanishing speck which was the south-bound train. Then slowly Lucy's head turned. She had never been friendly with Jerry Morton. She had shared the disapproval of the community, intensified by her inherent inability to understand the temperament so unlike her own. Yet all at once she found herself feeling responsible for him. To be helped means an obligation to help, at least to unselfish natures.

She went toward Jerry half reluctantly. But when she was near enough to see that he was swallowing hard, apparently in the effort to remove some obstruction in his throat which would not "down," the discovery seemed to create a bond between them. Her voice was eager and sympathetic as she said: "It's fine that you're going to start school again, Jerry. And if I can help

you with anything, I'll be glad to." She hesitated, and then, in spite of her natural reserve, she added: "We mustn't disappoint her, either of us."



Jerry had to swallow yet again before he could reply. But his answer rang out with a manful sincerity which would have gladdened Peggy's heart had she heard it.

"Disappoint her! Not on your life!"

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