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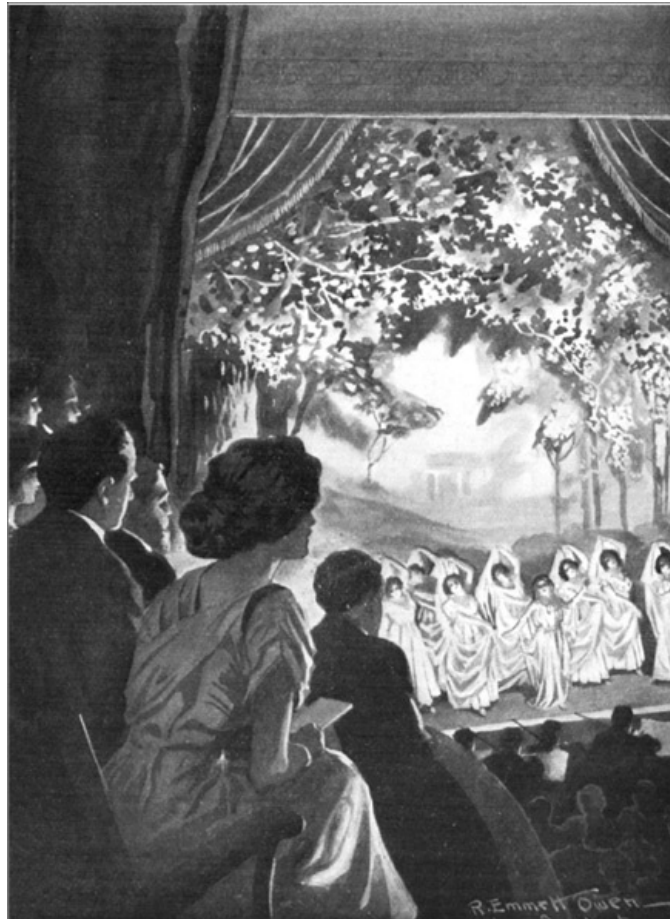
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY ***

The CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY



She truly did well in this performance.

THE
CORNER HOUSE GIRLS
IN A PLAY

HOW THEY REHEARSED

HOW THEY ACTED

AND WHAT THE PLAY BROUGHT IN

BY

GRACE BROOKS HILL

AUTHOR OF "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS," "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AT
SCHOOL," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
R. EMMETT OWEN

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BOOKS FOR GIRLS

The Corner House Girls Series
By Grace Brooks Hill

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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AT SCHOOL
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS UNDER
CANVAS
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS' ODD FIND
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A TOUR

(Other volumes in preparation)

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CHAPTER I

THE SOVEREIGNS OF ENGLAND

"I NEVER can learn them in the wide, wide world! I just know I never can, Dot!"

"Dear me! I'm dreadfully sorry for you, Tess," responded Dorothy Kenway—only nobody ever called her by her full name, for she really was too small to achieve the dignity of anything longer than "Dot."

"I'm dreadfully sorry for you, Tess," she repeated, hugging the Alice-doll a little closer and wrapping the lace "throw" carefully about the shoulders of her favorite child. The Alice-doll had never enjoyed robust health since her awful experience of more than a year before, when she had been buried alive.

Of course, Dot had not got as far in school as the sovereigns of England. She had not as yet heard very much about the history of her own country. She knew, of course, that Columbus discovered it, the Pilgrims settled it, that George Washington was the father of it, and Abraham Lincoln saved it.

Tess Kenway was usually very quick in her books, and she was now prepared to enter a class in the lower grammar grade of the Milton school in which she would have easy lessons in English history. She had just purchased the history on High Street, for school would open for the autumn term in a few days.

Mr. Englehart, one of the School Board and an influential citizen of Milton, had a penchant for beginning at the beginning of things. As he put it: "How can our children be grounded well in the history of our own country if they are not informed upon the salient points of English history—the Mother Country, from whom we obtained our first laws, and from whom came our early leaders?"

As the two youngest Kenway girls came out of the stationery and book store, Miss Pepperill was entering. Tess and Dot had met Miss Pepperill at church the Sunday previous, and Tess knew that the rather sharp-featured, bespectacled lady was to be her new teacher.

The girls whom Tess knew, who had already had experience with Miss Pepperill called her "Pepperpot." She was supposed to be very irritable, and she *did* have red hair. She shot questions out at one in a most disconcerting way, and Dot was quite amazed and startled by the way Miss Pepperill pounced on Tess.

"Let's see your book, child," Miss Pepperill said, seizing Tess' recent purchase. "Ah—yes. So you are to be in my room, are you?"

"Yes, ma'am," admitted Tess, timidly.

"Ah—yes! What is the succession of the sovereigns of England? Name them!"

Now, if Miss Pepperill had demanded that Tess Kenway name the Pleiades, the latter would have been no more startled—or no less able to reply intelligently.

"Ah—yes!" snapped Miss Pepperill, seeing Tess' vacuous expression. "I shall ask you that the first day you are in my room. Be prepared to answer it. The succession of the sovereigns of England," and she swept on into the store, leaving the children on the sidewalk, wonderfully impressed.

They had walked over into the Parade Ground, and seated themselves on one of the park benches in sight of the old Corner House, as Milton people had called the Stower homestead, on the corner of Willow Street, from time immemorial. Tess' hopeless announcement followed their sitting on the bench for at least half an hour.

"Why, I can't never!" she sighed, making it positive by at least two negatives. "I never had an idea England had such an awful long string of kings. It's worse than the list of Presidents of the United States."

"Is it?" Dot observed, curiously. "It must be awful annoying to have to learn 'em."

"Goodness, Dot! There you go again with one of your big words," exclaimed Tess, in vexation. "Who ever heard of 'annoyable' before? You must have invented that."

Dot calmly ignored the criticism. It must be confessed that she loved the sound of long words, and sometimes, as Agnes said, "made an awful mess of polysyllables." Agnes was the Kenway next older than Tess, while Ruth was seventeen, the oldest of all, and had for more than three years been the house-mother of the Kenway family.

Ruth and Agnes were at home in the old Corner House at this very hour. There lived in the big dwelling, with the four Corner House Girls, Aunt Sarah Maltby (who really was no relative of the girls, but a partial charge upon their charity), Mrs. MacCall, their housekeeper, and old Uncle Rufus, Uncle Peter Stower's black butler and general factotum, who had been left to the care of the old man's heirs when he died.

The first volume of this series, called "The Corner House Girls," told the story of the coming of the four sisters and Aunt Sarah Maltby to the Stower homestead, and of their first adventures in Milton—getting settled in their new home and making friends among their neighbors.

13

In "The Corner House Girls at School," the second volume, the four Kenway sisters extended the field of their acquaintance in Milton and thereabout, entered the local schools in the several grades to which they were assigned, made more friends and found some few rivals. They began to feel, too, that responsibility which comes with improved fortunes, for Uncle Peter Stower had left a considerable estate to the four girls, of which Mr. Howbridge, the lawyer, was administrator as well as the girls' guardian.

Now the second summer of their sojourn at the old Corner House was just ending, and the girls had but recently returned from a most delightful outing at Pleasant Cove, on the Atlantic Coast, some distance away from Milton, which was an inland town.

All the fun and adventure of that vacation are related in "The Corner House Girls Under Canvas," the third volume of the series, and the one immediately preceding the present story.

Tess was seldom vindictive; but after she had puzzled her poor brain for this half hour, trying to pick out and to get straight the Williams and Stephens and Henrys and Johns and Edwards and Richards, to say nothing of the Georges, who had reigned over England, she was quite flushed and excited.

"I know I'm just going to de-*test* that Miss Pepperpot!" she exclaimed. "I—I could throw this old history at her—I just could!"

"But you couldn't hit her, Tess," Dot observed placidly. "You know you couldn't."

"Why not?"

14

"Because you can't throw anything straight—no straighter than Sammy Pinkney's ma. I heard her scolding Sammy the other day for throwing stones. She says, 'Sammy, don't you let me catch you throwing any more stones.'"

"And did he mind her?" asked Tess.

"I don't know," Dot replied reflectively. "But he says to her: 'What'll I do if the other fellers throw 'em at me?' 'Just you come and tell me, Sammy, if they do,' says Mrs. Pinkney."

"Well?" queried Tess, as her sister seemed inclined to stop.

"I didn't see what good that would do, myself," confessed Dot. "Telling Mrs. Pinkney, I mean. And Sammy says to her: 'What's the use of telling you, Ma? You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn!' I don't think *you* could fling that hist'ry straight at Miss Pepperpot, Tess."

"Huh!" said Tess, not altogether pleased. "I *fee*/I could hit her, anyway."

"Maybe Aggie could learn you the names of those sov-runs——"

"Sovereigns!" exclaimed Tess. "For pity's sake, get the word right, child!"

Dot pouted and Tess, being in a somewhat nagging mood—which was entirely strange for her—continued:

"And don't say 'learn' for 'teach.' How many times has Ruthie told you that?"

15

"I don't care," retorted Dorothy Kenway. "I don't think so much of the English language—or the English sov-er-reigns—so now! If folks can talk, and make themselves understood, isn't that enough?"

"It doesn't seem so," sighed Tess, despondent again as she glanced at the open history.

"Oh, I tell you what!" cried Dot, suddenly eager. "You ask Neale O'Neil. I'm sure *he* can help you. He taught me how to play jack-stones."

Tess ignored this flagrant lapse from school English, and said, rather haughtily:

"I wouldn't ask a boy."

"Oh, my! *I* would," Dot replied, her eyes big and round. "I'd ask anybody if I wanted to know anything very bad. And Neale O'Neil's quite the nicest boy that ever was. Aggie says so."

"Ruth and I don't approve of boys," Tess said loftily. "And I don't believe Neale knows the sovereigns of England. Oh! look at those men, Dot!"

Dot squirmed about on the bench to look out on Parade Street. An erecting gang of the telegraph company was putting up a pole. The deep hole had been dug for it beside the old pole, and the men, with spikes in their hands, were beginning to raise the new pole from the ground.

Two men at either side had hold of ropes to steady the big pine stick. Up it went, higher and higher, while the overseer stood at the butt to guide it into the hole dug in the sidewalk.

16

Just as the pole was about half raised into its place, and a lineman had gone quickly up a neighboring pole to fasten a guy-wire to hold it, the interested children on the park bench saw a woman crossing the street near the scene of the telegraph company men's activities.

"Oh, Tess!" Dot exclaimed. "What a funny dress she wears!"

"Yes," said the older Kenway girl, eying the woman quite as curiously as her sister.

The strange woman wore a long, gray cloak, and a little gray, close bonnet, with a stiff, white frill framing her face. That face was very sweet, but rather sad of expression. The children could not see her hair and had no means of guessing her age, for her cheeks were healthily pink and her gray eyes bright.

These facts Tess and Dot observed and digested in their small minds before the woman reached the curb.

"Isn't she pretty?" whispered Tess.

Before Dot could reply there sounded a wild cry from the man on the pole. The guy-wire had slipped.

"Ware below!" he shouted.

The woman did not notice. Perhaps the close cap she wore kept her from hearing distinctly. The writhing wire flew through the air like a great snake.

Tess dropped her history and sprang up; but Dot did not loose her hold upon the rather battered "Alice-doll" which was her dearest possession. She clung, indeed, to the doll all the closer, but she screamed to the woman quite as loudly as Tess did, and her little blue-stockinged legs twinkled across the grass to the point of danger, quite as rapidly as did Tess' brown ones.

"Oh, lady! lady!" shrieked Tess. "You'll be killed!"

"Please come away from there—*please!*" cried Dot.

Their voices pierced to the strange lady's ears. Just as the pole began to waver and sink sidewise, despite the efforts of the men with the spikes, she looked up, saw the gesticulating children, observed the shadow of the pole and the writhing wire, and sprang upon the walk, and across it in time to escape the peril.

The wire's weight brought the pole down with a crash, in spite of all the men could do. But the woman in the gray cloak was safe with Tess and Dot on the greensward.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY IN THE GRAY CLOAK

"My dear girls!" the woman in the gray cloak said, with a hand on a shoulder of each of the younger Corner House girls, "how providential it was that you saw my danger. I am very much obliged to you. And how brave you both were!"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Tess, who seldom forgot her manners.

But Dot was greatly excited. "Oh, my!" she gasped, clinging tightly to the Alice-doll, and quite breathless. "My—my pulse *did* jump so!"

"Did it? You funny little thing," said the woman, half laughing and half crying. "What do you know about a pulse?"

"Oh, I know it's a muscle that bumps up and down, and the doctor feels it to see if you're better next time he comes," blurted out Dot, nothing loath to show what knowledge she thought she possessed.

"Oh, my dear!" cried the lady, laughing heartily now. And, dropping down upon the very bench where Tess and Dot had been sitting, she drew the two children to seats beside her. "Oh, my dear! I shall have to tell that to Dr. Forsyth."

"Oh!" ejaculated Tess, who was looking at the pink-cheeked lady with admiring eyes. "Oh! *we* know Dr. Forsyth. He is our doctor."

"Is he, indeed? And who are you?" responded the lady, the sad look on her face quite disappearing now that she talked so animatedly with the little Kenways.

"We are Dot and Tess Kenway," said Tess. "I'm Tess. We live just over there," and she pointed to the big, old-fashioned mansion across the Parade Ground.

"Ah, then," said the woman in the gray cloak, "you are the Corner House girls. I have heard of you."

"We are only two of them," said Dot, quickly. "There's four."

"Ah! then you are only half the quartette."

"I don't believe we are *half*—do you, Tess?" said Dot, seriously. "You see," she added to the lady, "Ruthie and Aggie are so much bigger than we are."

The lady in the gray cloak laughed again. "You are all four of equal importance, I have no doubt. And you must be very happy together—you sisters." The sad look returned to her face. "It must be lovely to have three sisters."

"Didn't you ever have any at all?" asked Dot, sympathetically.

"I had a sister once—one very dear sister," said the lady, thoughtfully, and looking away across the Parade Ground.

20

Tess and Dot gazed at each other questioningly; then Tess ventured to ask:

"Did she die?"

"I don't know," was the sad reply. "We were separated when we were very young. I can just remember my sister, for we were both little girls in pinafores. I loved my sister very much, and I am sure she loved me, and, if she is alive, misses me quite as much as I do her."

"Oh, how sad that is!" murmured Tess. "I hope you will find her, ma'am."

"Not to be thought of in this big world—not to be thought of now," repeated the lady, more briskly. She picked up the history that Tess had dropped. "And which of you little tots studies this? Isn't English history rather far advanced for you?"

"Tess is *nawful* smart," Dot hastened to say. "Miss Andrews says so, though she's a nawful strict teacher, too. Isn't she, Tess?"

Her sister nodded soberly. Her mind reverted at once to the sovereigns of England and Miss Pepperill. "I—I'm afraid I'm not very quick to learn, after all. Miss Pepperill will think me an awful dunce when I can't learn the sovereigns."

"The sovereigns?" repeated the woman in gray, with interest. "What sovereigns?"

So Tess (of course, with Dot's valuable help) explained her difficulty, and all about the new teacher Tess expected to have.

21

"And she'll think I'm awfully dull," repeated Tess, sadly. "I just *can't* make my mind remember the succession of those kings and queens. It's the hardest thing I ever tried to learn. Do you s'pose all English children have to learn it?"

"I know they have an easy way of committing to memory the succession of their sovereigns, from William the Conqueror, down to the present time," said the lady, thoughtfully. "Or, they used to have."

"Oh, dear me!" wailed Tess. "I wish I knew how to remember the old things. But I don't."

"Suppose I teach you the rhyme I learned when I was a very little girl at school?"

"Oh, would you?" cried Tess, her pretty face lighting up as she gazed admiringly again at the woman in the gray cloak.

"Yes. And we will add a couplet or two at the end to bring the list down to date—for there have been two more sovereigns since the good Queen Victoria passed away. Now attend! Here is the rhyme. I will recite it for you, and then I will write it down and you may learn it at your leisure."

Both Tess and Dot—and of course the Alice-doll—were very attentive as the lady recited:

"First William, the Norman,
Then William, his son;
Henry, Stephen, and Henry,
Then Richard and John;
Next Henry the Third;
Edwards one, two, and three,
And again after Richard
Three Henrys we see;
Two Edwards, third Richard,
If rightly I guess,
Two Henrys, sixth Edward,
Queen Mary, Queen Bess,
Then Jamie, the Scotchman,
Then Charles, whom they
slew,
Yet received after Cromwell
Another Charles, too;
Next James the Second
Ascended the throne;

22

Then good William and Mary
Together came on;
Till Anne, Georges four,
And fourth William, all past,
God sent Queen Victoria,
Who long was the last;
Then Edward, the Seventh
But shortly did reign,
With George, the Fifth,
England's present sovereign.'

There you have it—with an original four lines at the end to complete the list," laughed the lady.

Dot's eyes were big; she had lost the sense of the rhyme long before; but Tess was very earnest. "I—I believe I *could* learn 'em that way," she confessed. "I can remember poetry quite well. Can't I, Dot?"

"You recite 'Little Drops of Water, Little Grains of Sand' beautifully," said the smallest Corner House girl, loyally.

23 "Of course you can learn it," said the lady, confidently. "Now, Tess—is that your name—Theresa?"

"Yes, ma'am—only almost nobody ever calls me by it *all*. Miss Andrews used to when she was very, very angry. But I hope my new teacher, Miss Pepperill, won't be angry with me at all—if I can only learn these sovereigns."

"You shall," declared the lady in gray. "I have a pencil here in my bag. And here is a piece of paper. I will write it all out for you and you can study it from now until the day school opens. Then, when this Miss Pepperill demands it, you will have it pat—right on the end of your tongue."

"I hope so," said Tess, with dawning cheerfulness.

"'First William, the Norman,
Then William, his son;'

I believe I *can* learn to recite it all if you are kind enough to write it down."

The lady did so, writing the lines in a beautiful, round hand, and so plain that even Dot, who was a trifle "weak" in reading anything but print, could quite easily spell out the words.

"Weren't there any more names for kings when those lived?" the youngest Kenway asked seriously.

"Why, what makes you ask that?" asked the smiling lady.

24 "Maybe there weren't enough to go 'round," continued the puzzled Dot. "There are so many of 'em of one name—Williams, and Georges, and Edwardses. Don't English people have any more names to give to their sov-runs?"

"Sov-er-eigns," whispered Tess, sharply.

"That's what I mean," said the placid Dot. "The lady knows what I mean."

"Of course I do, dear," agreed the woman in the gray cloak. "But I expect the mothers of kings, like the mothers of other little boys, like to name their sons after their fathers.

"Now, children, I must go," she added briskly, getting up off the bench and handing Tess the written paper. "Good-bye. I hope I shall meet you both again very soon. Let me kiss you, Tess—and you, Dorothy Kenway. It has done me good to know you."

She kissed both children quickly, and then set off along the Parade Ground walk. Tess and Dot bade her good-bye shrilly, turning themselves toward the old Corner House.

"Oh, Dot!" exclaimed Tess, suddenly.

"What's the matter now?" asked Dot.

"We never asked the lady her name—or who she was."

"We-ell—would that be perlite?" asked Dot, doubtfully.

"Yes. She asked our names. We don't know anything about her—and I *do* think she is so nice!"

"So do I," agreed Dot. "And that gray cloak—"

25 "With the pretty little bonnet and ruche," added Tess.

"She isn't the Salvation Army," said Dot, remembering that that order was uniformed from seeing them on the streets of Bloomingburg, where the Kenways had lived before they had fallen heir to Uncle Peter Stower's estate.

"Of course not!" Tess cried. "And she don't look like one o' those deaconesses that came to see Ethel Mumford's mother when she was sick—do you remember?"

"Of course I remember—everything!" said the positive Dot. "Wasn't I a great, big girl when we came to Milton to live?"

"Why—why," stammered her sister, not wishing to displease Dot, but bound to be honest. "You aren't a very big girl, even now, Dot Kenway."

"Humph!" exclaimed Dot, quite vexed. "I wear bigger shoes and stockings, and Ruth is having Miss Ann Titus let down the hems of all my old dresses a full inch—so now!"

"I expect you *have* grown some, Dot," admitted Tess, reflectively. "But you aren't big enough even now to brag about."

The youngest Kenway might have been deeply offended by this—and shown that she had taken offence, too—had something new not taken her attention at the very moment she and Tess were entering the side gate of the old Corner House premises.

26

The house was a three story and attic mansion which was set well back from Main Street, but the side of which was separated from Willow Street by only a narrow strip of sward. The kitchen was in the wing nearest this last-named street, and there was a big, half-enclosed side porch, to which the woodshed was attached, and beyond which was the long grape arbor.

The length of the old Corner House yard, running parallel with Willow Street, was much greater than its width. The garden, summer house, henhouses, and other outbuildings were at the back. The lawn in front was well shaded, and there were plenty of fruit trees around the house. Not many dwellings in Milton had as much yard-room as the Stower homestead.

"Oh my, Tess!" gasped Dot, with deep interest, staring at the porch stoop. "Who is that—and what's he doing?"

"Dear me!" returned Tess, hesitating at the gate. "That's Seneca Sprague—the man who wears a linen duster and straw hat all the year round, and 'most always goes barefooted. He—he isn't just right, they say, Dot."

"Just right about what?" asked Dot.

"Mercy me, Dot!" exclaimed Tess, exasperated.

"Well, what *is* he?" asked Dot, with vigor.

"Well—I guess," said Tess, "that he thinks he is a minister. And, I do declare, I believe he's preaching to Sandyface and her kittens! Listen, Dot!"

27

CHAPTER III

BILLY BUMPS' BANQUET

ALMOST the first thing that would have caught the attention of the visitor to the old Corner House at almost any time, was the number of pets that hovered about that kitchen porch. Ruth, with a sigh, sometimes admitted that she was afraid she supported a menagerie.

Just at this hour—it was approaching noon—Mrs. MacCall, or the girl who helped her in the kitchen, might be expected to appear at the door with a plate of scraps or vegetable peelings or a little spare milk or other delicacy to tempt the appetites of the dumb creatures that subsisted upon the kindness of the Corner House family.

The birds, of course, got their share. In the winter the old Corner House was the rendezvous of a chattering throng of snow-buntings and sparrows and starlings, for the children tied suet and meat-bones to the branches of the fruit trees, as well as scattered crumbs upon the snow-crust. In summer the feathered beggars took toll as they pleased of the cherries and small fruits in the garden.

28

In the garden, too, was the only martin house in town, set upon a tall pole. There every spring a battle royal went on between the coming martins and the impudent sparrows, as the latter horde always appropriated the martin house during the absence of its proper owners in the South. Each cherry tree had its robin's nest—sometimes two. Mr. Robin likes to be near the supply of his favorite fruit. The wrens built under the eaves of the porch, and above the windows, in sheltered places. All the pigeons in the neighborhood flew here to strut and coo, and help eat any grain that might be thrown out.

What one saw now, waiting at the porch steps, was principally a family of cats. There were no less than nine posing expectantly before the queer looking character known to Milton folks as Seneca Sprague.

First of all, Sandyface, the speckled tabby-cat, sat placidly washing her face on the lower step. Close at her back, on the ground—one was even playing with its mother's steadily waving tail—was Sandyface's latest family, the four kittens bearing the remarkable names of Starboard, Port, Hard-a-lee and Mainsheet.

Grouped farther away from the mother cat were the four well-grown young cats, Spotty, Almira, Popocatepetl and Bungle.

29 Much farther in the background, and in the attitude of sleep, with his head on his forepaws, but with a blinking eye that lost nothing of what went on at the porch (for Mrs. MacCall might appear at any moment with his own particular dish) lay a big Newfoundland dog, with a noble head, intelligent brown eyes, and a muzzle now graying with age. This was the Corner House girls' newest and most valued pet, Tom Jonah.

In addition, on the clothes-drying green, was Billy Bumps. This suggestively named individual was a sturdy, wise-looking goat, with a face and chin-whisker which Mrs. MacCall declared was "as long as the moral law," and whose proclivity to eat anything that could be masticated was well-known to the Kenway children.

This collection of dumb pets the tall, lank, barefooted man in the broken straw hat and linen duster, now faced with a serious mien as though he were a real preacher and addressed a human congregation.

Seneca Sprague was a harmless person, considered "not quite right," as Tess had said, by his fellow-townsmen. Whether his oddities arose from a distraught mind, or an indulgence in a love of publicity, it would be hard to say.

His sharp-featured face and long, luxurious iron-gray hair, which he sometimes wore knotted up like a woman's, marked him wherever he went. Even those who thought him the possessor of a mind diseased agreed that he was quite harmless.

He came and went as he pleased, often preaching on street corners a doctrine which included a belief in George Washington as a supernatural being; and he was patriotic to the core.

30 Sometimes bad boys made fun of him, and followed and pelted him in the street; but, of course, the Corner House girls, who were kind to everybody and everything, would not have thought of harrying the queer old man, or ridiculing him.

Occasionally Seneca Sprague wrote and had printed a tract in which he ramblingly expressed his religious and patriotic beliefs, and an edition of this tract he was now selling from house to house in Milton. Ruth had, of course, purchased one and as Tess and Dot came into the old Corner House yard, Mr. Sprague was just turning away from the door, and had caught sight of the expectant congregation of pets gathered below him.

"Lo, and behold! lo, and behold!" ejaculated Seneca Sprague, in a solemn and resonant voice. "What saith the Scriptures? Him that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Every cat's ears were pricked forward expectantly and even Tom Jonah lifted his glossy ears—probably hearing Mrs. MacCall's step at the kitchen door. Billy Bumps lifted a ruminant head and blatted softly.

"Thus saith the prophet," went on Seneca Sprague, in his sing-song tone. "There is yet a little time in which man may repent. Then cometh the Crack o' Doom! Beware! beware! beware!"

Here Dot whispered to Tess: "How did Mr. Seneca Sprague come to know so much about prophets, and what's going to happen, and all that? And what *is* the Crack o' Doom?"

31 "Mercy, I don't know, child!" exclaimed Tess. "I'm sure *I* didn't crack it."

The queer old man was interrupted just here, too, by Ruth Kenway's reappearance upon the porch. Ruth was a very intelligent looking girl, if not exactly a pretty one. She was dark and her hair was black; she had warm, brown eyes and a sweet, steady smile that pleased most people.

"Oh, Mr. Sprague!" she said, attracting that queer individual's attention. He actually swept off his torn straw hat and bowed before her.

Ruth's voice was low and pleasant. Mrs. MacCall said she had an old head upon young shoulders. But there had been good reason for the oldest of the Corner House girls to show in her look and manner the effect of responsibility and burden of forethought beyond her years.

Before the fortune had come to them the little Kenways had had only a small pension to exist upon, and they had had to share that with Aunt Sarah Maltby. For nearly two years Ruth had taken her mother's place and looked after the family.

It had made her seem old beyond her real age; but it had likewise given her a confidence in herself which she otherwise would not have had. People deferred to Ruth Kenway; even Mr. Howbridge thought she was quite a wonderful girl.

32 "Oh, Mr. Sprague," she said again. "I meant to tell you that you are welcome to some of those fall pippins, down there by the hen-run—if you care to pick them up. Just help yourself. I know you don't use meat, and that you live on fruit and vegetables; and apples are hard to get at the store."

"Thank you—thank you," said the strange, old man, politely. "I will avail myself of the privilege you so kindly offer. It is true I live on the fruits of the earth wholly, for are we not commanded to shed no blood—no, not at all? Yea, verily, he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword—"

"And I hope you will like the pippins, Mr. Sprague," broke in Ruth, knowing how long-winded the old fellow was, and being cumbered by many cares herself just then.

"Ah! there you are, children," she added, addressing Tess and Dot. "Come right in and make ready for lunch. Don't let us keep Mrs. MacCall waiting. She and Linda are preserving to-day and they want to get the lunch over and out of the way."

The smaller girls hastened into the house, thus admonished, and up to the dressing room connected with the two, big, double bedrooms in the other wing, which the four sisters had occupied ever since coming to the old Corner House. Ruth went with them to superintend the washing of hands and face, smoothing of hair and freshening of frocks and ribbons. Ruth had to act as inspector after the youngest Kenway's ablutions, Tess declaring: "Dot doesn't always wash into all the corners."

"I do, too, Tess Kenway!" cried the smaller girl. "Ruthie has to watch us 'cause *you* button your apron crooked. You know you do!"

"I don't mean to," said Tess, "but I can't see behind me. I'd like to be as neat looking all the time as that lady in the gray cloak. Oh, Ruthie! who was she?"

"I have no idea whom you are talking about," said the elder sister, curiously. "'The lady in the gray cloak'? What lady in a gray cloak?"

At once Tess and Dot began to explain. They were both eager, they were both vociferous; and the particulars of the morning's adventure, including the meeting with Miss Pepperill, the falling of the telegraph pole, the woman in the gray cloak, and the sovereigns of England, became most remarkably mixed in the general relation of facts.

"Mercy! Mercy, children!" cried Ruth, in despair. "Let us go at the matter in something like order. Why did the lady in the gray cloak want you to learn the succession of the sovereigns of England? And did the telegraph pole hit poor Miss Pepperill, or was she merely scared by its fall?"

Tess stared at her older sister wonderingly. "Well, I do despair!" she breathed at last, repeating one of good Mrs. MacCall's odd exclamations. "I never did suppose you could misunderstand a body so, Ruthie Kenway."

Ruth threw back her head at that and laughed heartily. Then she endeavored to get at the meat in the nut by asking questions. Soon—by the time her little sisters were ready to descend to the dining room—Ruth had a fair idea of the happening and the reason for the interest Tess and Dot displayed in the identity of the woman in the gray cloak.

But Ruth could not help the little ones to discover the name of the stranger. They all went down to dinner when Uncle Rufus rang the gong at the hall door.

That front hall of the old Corner House was a vast place, with a gallery all around it at the level of the second story, out of which opened the "grand" bedrooms (only one of which had ever been occupied during the girls' occupancy of the house, and that by Aunt Sarah) and it had a broad staircase with beautifully carved balustrades.

Uncle Rufus was a tall (though stooped), lean and brown negro, with a fringe of snow-white wool around his brown, bald crown. He always appeared to serve at table in a long, claw-hammer coat, a white vest and trousers, and gray spats. He was the type of old Southern house servant one reads about, seldom finds in the North; and he had lived in the old Corner House and served Uncle Peter Stower "endurin' of twenty-four year," as he often boasted.

Uncle Rufus did much more than serve the table, care for the silver and linen, and perform the other duties of a butler. He was Ruth's chief assistant in and out of the house. Despite his age, and occasional attacks of rheumatism, he was "purty spry yit," according to his own statement. And since the Kenway girls had come to the old house, Uncle Rufus seemed to have taken a new lease on life.

Aunt Sarah Maltby was already in her place at the table when Ruth and the two smaller girls entered the dining room. She was a withered wisp of a woman, with bright brown eyes under rather heavy brows. There were three deep wrinkles between her eyes; otherwise Aunt Sarah did not show in her countenance many of the ravages of time.

Her hair was only a little frosted; she wore it crimped on the sides, doing it up carefully in little "pigtails" every night before she retired. She was scrupulous in the care of her hands, being one of those old ladies who almost never are seen bare-handed—wearing mits or gloves on all occasions.

Her plainly made dresses were starched and prim in every particular. She was a spinster who never told her age, and defied the public to guess it! Living a sort of detached life in the Kenway family, nothing went on in domestic affairs of which she was not aware; yet she was seldom helpful in any emergency. Usually, if she interfered at all, it was at a time when Ruth could have well excused her assistance.

Aunt Sarah had chosen the best bedroom in the house when first they had come to Milton to live; and, as well, she had the best there was to be had of everything else. She had, all her life, lived selfishly, been waited upon, and considered her own comfort first. It was too late now for Aunt Sarah to change in many particulars.

Mrs. MacCall bustled in from the kitchen, her face rather red and a burned stripe on her forearm which she had floured over to take out the smart. "Always get burned when I am driv' like I be to-day," declared the housekeeper, whom Ruth insisted should always eat at their table. Mrs. MacCall was much more than an ordinary houseworker; she was the friend and confidant of the Kenway sisters, and was nearer to all their hearts than was stiff and almost wordless Aunt Sarah.

"Do *you* know who the lady in the gray cloak is?" asked Tess, of Mrs. MacCall, having put the question fruitlessly to both Uncle Rufus and Aunt Sarah.

"What's that—a conundrum?" asked the housekeeper. "Don't bother me, child, with questions to-day. I've got too much on my mind."

"I guess," sighed Tess to Dot, "we never *shall* find out who she is."

"Don't mind," said the comforting Dorothy. "She gave you the list of sov-runs. You've got them, anyhow."

"But I *do* mind!" declared Tess. "She is just one of the nicest ladies I ever met. Of course I want ___"

But who is this bursting into the dining room like a young cyclone, and late to lunch? "Oh, Agnes! you are late again," said Ruth, admonishingly. Aunt Sarah glared at the newcomer, while Mrs. MacCall said:

"You come pretty near not getting anything more than cold pieces, child."

All their wrath was turned, however, by Agnes' smile—and her beauty. Nobody—not even Aunt Sarah Maltby—could retain a scowl and still look at Agnes Kenway, plump and pretty, and brown from the sea air and sun. Naturally she was light, blue-eyed and with golden-yellow hair. The hair was sunburned now and her round cheeks were as brown as fall leaves in the woods.

"Oh, dear! I couldn't really help being late," she said, dropping into the seat Uncle Rufus pulled out for her. The old darkey began at once heaping her plate with tidbits. He all but worshipped Ruth; but Agnes he petted and spoiled.

"I couldn't help being late," she repeated. "What do you think, Ruth? Eva Larry was just telling me at the front gate that Mr. Marks has threatened to forfeit all the basket ball games our team won in the half-series last spring against the other teams of the Milton County League, and will refuse to let us play the series out this fall. Isn't that *awful*?"

"I don't know," said Ruth, placidly; she was not a basket ball enthusiast herself. But Agnes had secured a place on the first team of the Milton Schools a few weeks before the June closing. She was athletic, and, although only in the grammar grade then, was big and strong for her age.

"I don't know just how awful it is," repeated the oldest sister. "What have you all done that the principal should make that ruling?"

"Goodness knows!" wailed Agnes. "I'm sure *I* haven't done anything."

"Of course you haven't, Aggie," put in Dot, warmly. "You never *do*!"

This made the family laugh. Dot's loyalty to Agnes was really phenomenal. No matter what Agnes did, it must be all right in the little one's eyes.

"Well, I don't care," repeated Dot, sturdily, "Agnes is awful good! 'Course, not the same goodness as Ruthie; but I know she doesn't break any school rules. And she knows a lot!"

"I wish she knew who my gray lady is," put in Tess, rather complainingly.

"What gray lady?" demanded Agnes, quickly.

Dot, the voluble, got ahead of her sister in this explanation. "She isn't the Salvation Army, nor she isn't a deaconess like Mrs. Mumford had come to see her; but she's something awfully religious, I know."

Tess managed to tell again about the sovereigns of England, too.

"Oh, I know whom you mean," Agnes said briskly. "I saw her with you up on the Parade. Eva Larry told me she was the matron of the Women's and Children's Hospital—and they're going to shut it up."

"The child means Mrs. Eland," said Mrs. MacCall, interestedly. "She is a splendid woman and that hospital is doing a great work. You don't mean they are really going to close it, Agnes?"

"So Eva says. They have to. There are no funds, and two or three rich people who used to help them every year have died without leaving the hospital any legacy. Mrs. Eland doesn't know what will become of her now. She's been matron and acting superintendent ever since the hospital was

opened, five years ago. Dr. Forsyth is the head visiting physician."

"Mercy, child!" gasped Ruth. "Where *do* you pick up so much gossip?"

"Eva Larry has been here," said Tess, soberly. "And, you know, she's a fluid talker. You said so yourself, Ruthie."

"Fluent! fluent!" gasped Agnes. "And Eva always does have the news."

"She is growing up to be a second Miss Ann Titus," said Ruth drily. "And I think Tess got it about right. She *is* a fluid speaker. When Eva talks it is just like opening the spigot and letting the water run."

It was later, after lunch was over, and Tess and Dot had wandered into the garden with their dolls. Tess said, reflectively:

40

"I wish awfully we might help that Mrs. Eland. She's such a lovely lady. And I know the sovereigns of England half by heart already."

Dot was usually practical. "Let's gather her some apples and take them to her," she suggested.

"We-ell," said Tess, slowly. "That won't keep the hospital going, but maybe she likes apples."

"Who doesn't?" demanded Dot, stoutly. "Come on."

When they reached the fall pippin tree which, that year, was loaded with golden fruit, the two little girls were quite startled at what they saw.

"O-o-oh!" gasped Dot. "See Billy Bumps!"

"For pity's sake! what's he doing?" rejoined Tess, in amazement.

The old goat had the freedom of the yard, as the garden was shut away from him by a strong wire fence. He liked apples himself, did Billy Bumps, and perhaps he considered the bagful that Mr. Seneca Sprague had picked up and prepared to carry away, a direct poaching upon his preserves.

Mr. Sprague had reclined on the soft grass under the wide-spreading tree and filled his own stomach to repletion, as could be seen by the cores thrown out in a circle about him. Billy Bumps had approached, eyed the long hair of the "prophet" askance, and finally began to nibble.

41

The luxuriant growth of hair that the odd, old man had allowed to grow for years, seemed to attract Billy Bumps' palate. Mr. Seneca Sprague slept and Billy gently nibbled at the hair on one side of Seneca's head.

It was just at this moment that Tess and Dot spied the tableau. Billy Bumps browsing on Seneca Sprague's hair was a sight to startle and amaze anybody.

"O-o-oh!" gasped Dot again.

"Billy! you mustn't!" shrieked Tess, realizing that all of the "prophet's" hair was in danger, and fearing, perhaps, that, snake-like, Billy might be about gradually to draw the whole of Mr. Seneca Sprague within his capacious maw.

"Billy! stop!" cried both girls together.

At this moment Mr. Sprague awoke. Between the shrieking of the little girls and the activities of Mr. Sprague when he learned what was going on, Billy Bumps' banquet was quite spoiled.

"Get out, you beast!" shouted the "prophet," but using most unprophetic language. "Ow! ow! ouch!"

For Billy had no idea of losing what he had already masticated. He pulled so hard that he drew Mr. Sprague over on his back, where he lay with his legs kicking in the air, wild yells of surprise and pain issuing from him.

Over the fence at the rear of the Corner House premises bobbed a flaxen head, and a boyish voice shouted: "What's the matter, girls?"

"Oh, Neale O'Neil!" shrieked Dot. "Do come! Quick! Billy Bumps is eating up Mr. Sneaker Sp'ague—and he's beginning at his hair."

42

CHAPTER IV

THE BASKET BALL TEAM IN TROUBLE

BILLY BUMPS backed away in time to escape the vigorous blow Neale O'Neil aimed at him with the stick he had picked up. But the old goat had managed to tear loose some of the hair on one side of the odd, old fellow's head, and now stood contemplating the angry and excited Sprague, with the hair hanging out of his mouth and mingling with his own long beard.

"Shorn of my locks! shorn of my locks! Samson has lost his glory and strength—yea, verily!" cried the owner of the hair, mournfully. "Yea, how hath the mighty fallen and the people imagined a vain thing! And if there were anything here hard enough to throw at that old goat!"

Thus getting down to a more practical and modern form of language, Seneca Sprague looked wrathfully around for a club or a rock, nothing less being sufficiently hard to suit him.

"Oh, you mustn't!" cried Dot. "Poor Billy Bumps doesn't know any better. Why, once he chewed up my Alice-doll's best dress. And *I* didn't hit him for it!"

43

A comparison of a doll's dress with his own hair did not please Mr. Sprague much. He shook his now ragged head, from which the lock of hair had been torn so roughly. Billy Bumps considered this a challenge and, lowering his horns, suddenly charged the despoiled prophet.

"Drat the beast!" yelled Seneca, forgetting his Scriptural language entirely; and leaped into the air just in time to make a passage for Billy Bumps between his long legs.

Neale, for laughter, could not help.

Slam! went Billy's horns against the end of the hen-house. Mr. Sprague was not there to catch the goat on the rebound, for, leaving his bag of apples, he rushed for the side gate and got out upon Willow Street without much regard for the order of his going, voicing prophecies this time that had only to do with Billy Bumps' immediate future.

The disturbance brought Ruth and Agnes running from the house, but only in time to see the wrathful Seneca Sprague, his linen duster flapping behind him, as he disappeared along Willow Street. When Ruth heard about Billy Bumps' banquet, she sent the bag of apples to Seneca Sprague's little shanty which he occupied, down on the river dock.

"Of all the ridiculous things a goat ever did, that is the most ridiculous!" exclaimed Agnes.

"There's more than one hair in the butter this time," repeated Neale O'Neil, with laughter.

"I can't laugh, even at that stale joke," sighed Agnes.

44

"What's the matter, Aggie?" demanded Neale. "Have you soured on the world completely?"

"I feel as though I had," confessed Agnes, her sweet eyes vastly troubled and her red lips in a pout. "What do you think, Neale?"

"A whole lot of things," returned the boy. "What do you want me to think?"

"Mr. Smartie! But tell me: Have you heard anything about our basket ball team being set back? Eva told me she'd heard Mr. Marks was dreadfully displeased at something we'd done and that he said we shouldn't win the pennant."

"Not win the pennant?" cried Neale, aghast. "Why, you girls have got it cinched!"

"Not if Mr. Marks declares all the games we won last spring forfeited. I think he's too, too mean!" cried Agnes.

"Oh, he wouldn't do that!" urged Neale.

"She says he is going to."

"Eva Larry doesn't always get things straight," said Neale, comfortingly. "But what does he do it for?"

"I don't know. I'm sure *I* haven't done anything."

"Of course not!" chuckled her boy friend, looking at her rather roguishly. "Who was it proposed that raid on old Buckham's strawberry patch that time, coming home from Fleeting?"

"Oh! he couldn't know about that," cried Agnes, actually turning pale at the suggestion.

45

"I don't know," Neale said slowly. "Trix Severn was in your crowd then, and she'd tell anything if she got mad."

"And she's mad all right," groaned Agnes.

"I believe she is—with you Corner House girls," added Neale O'Neil.

"She'd be telling on herself—the mean thing!" snapped Agnes.

"But she is not on the team. She was along only as a rooter. The electric car broke down alongside of Buckham's strawberry patch. Wasn't that it?"

"Uh-huh," admitted Agnes. "And the berries *did* look so tempting."

"You girls got into Buckham's best berries," chuckled Neale. "I heard he was quite wild about it."

"We didn't take many. And I really didn't think about it's being stealing," Agnes said slowly. "We just did it for a lark."

"Of course. 'Didn't mean to' is an old excuse," retorted the boy.

"Well, Mr. Buckham couldn't have known about it then," cried Agnes. "I don't believe Mr. Marks heard of it through him. If he had, why not before this time, after months have gone by?"

"I know. It's all blown over and forgotten, when up it pops again. 'Murder will out,' they say. But you girls only murdered a few strawberries. It looks to me," added Neale O'Neil, "as though somebody was trying to get square."

"Get square with *whom*?" demanded Agnes.

"Well—you were all in it, weren't you?"

"All the team?"

"Yes."

"I suppose so. But Trix and some of the others picked and ate quite as many berries as we did. The girls that went over to Fleeting to root for us were all in it, too."

"I know," Neale said. "If the farmer had been sure who you were, or any of the electric car men had told— Had the car all to yourselves, didn't you?"

"We girls were the only passengers," said Agnes.

"Then make up your mind to it," the wise Neale rejoined, "that if Mr. Marks has only recently been told of the raid, some girl has been blabbing. The farmer or the conductor or the motorman would have told at once. They wouldn't have waited until three months and more had passed."

"Oh dear, Neale! do you think that?"

"It looks just like a mean girl's trick. Some telltale," returned the boy, in disgust.

"Trix Severn might do it, I s'pose, because she doesn't like me any more."

"You remember what Mr. Marks told us all last spring when we grammar grade fellows were let into the high school athletics? He said that one's conduct outside of school would govern the amount of latitude he would allow us in school athletics. I guess he meant you girls, too."

"He's an awfully strict old thing!" complained Agnes.

"They tell me," pursued Neale O'Neil, "that once a part of the baseball nine played hookey to go swimming at Ryer's Ford, and Mr. Marks immediately forfeited all the games in the Inter-scholastic League for that year, and so punished the whole school."

"That's not fair!" exploded Agnes.

"I don't know whether it is or not. But I know the baseball captain this year was mighty strict with us fellows."

The topic of the promised punishment of the basket ball team for an old offense was discussed almost as much at the Corner House that evening as was the "lady in gray" and the sovereigns of England.

Tess kept these last subjects alive, for she was studying the rhyme and would try to recite it to everybody that would listen—including Linda, who scarcely understood ten words of English, and Sandyface and her family, gathered for their supper in the woodshed. Tess was troubled about the closing of the Women's and Children's Hospital, because of its effect upon Mrs. Eland, too.

"First William, the Norman,
Then William, the son;
Henry, Stephen and——"

I do hope," ruminated Tess, "that that poor Mrs. Eland won't be turned out of her place. Don't you hope so, Ruthie?"

"I am sure it would be a calamity if the hospital were closed," agreed the older sister. "And the matron must be a very lovely lady, as you say, Tess."

"She is awfully nice— isn't she, Dot?" pursued Tess, who usually expected the support of Dorothy.

"Just as nice as she can be," agreed the smallest Corner House girl. "Couldn't she come to live in our house if she can't stay in the horsepistol any longer?"

"At the *what*, child?" gasped Agnes. "What is it you said?"

"Well—where she lives now," Dot responded, dodging the doubtful word.

"Goodness, dear!" laughed Ruth, "we can't make the old Corner House a refuge for destitute females."

"I don't care!" spoke up Dot, quickly. "Didn't they make the Toomey-Smith house, on High Street into a home for indignant old maids?"

At that the older girls shouted with laughter. "'In-di-gent'—'in-di-gent'! child," corrected Agnes, at last. "That means without means—poor—unable to care for themselves. 'Indignant old maids,' indeed!"

"Maybe they *were* indignant," suggested Tess, too tender hearted to see Dot's ignorance exposed in public, despite her own private criticism of the little one's misuse of the English language. "See how indignant Aunt Sarah is—and *she's* an old maid."

This amused Ruth and Agnes even more than Dot's observation. It was true that Aunt Sarah Maltby was frequently "an indignant old maid."

But Tess endured the laughter calmly. She was deeply interested in the problem of Mrs. Eland's future, and she said:

"Maybe Uncle Peter ought to have left the hospital some of his money when he died, instead of leaving it all to us and to Aunt Sarah."

"Do you want to give up some of your monthly allowance to help support the hospital, Tess?" demanded Ruth, briskly.

"I—I— Well, I couldn't give *much*," said the smaller girl, seriously, "for a part of it goes to missions and the Sunday School money box, and part to Sadie Goronofsky's cousin who has a nawful bad felon, and can't work on the paper flowers just now—"

"Why, child!" the oldest Kenway said, with a tender smile, and putting her hand lightly on Tess' head, "I didn't know about that. How much of your pin money goes each month to charity already? You only have a dollar and a half."

"I—I keep half a dollar for myself," confessed Tess. "I could give part of that to the hospital."

"I'll give some of my pin money, too," announced Dot, gravely, "if it will keep Mrs. Eland from being turned out of the horsepistol."

Ruth and Agnes did not chide the little one for her mispronunciation of the hard word this time, but they looked at each other seriously. "I wonder if Uncle Peter was one of those rich people who should have remembered the institution in his will?" Ruth said.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Agnes. "If we go around hunting for duties Uncle Peter Stower left undone, and do them for him, where will *we* be? There will be no money left for ourselves."

"You need not be afraid," Ruth said, with a smile. "Mr. Howbridge will not let us use our money foolishly. He is answerable for every penny of it to the Court. But maybe he will approve of our giving a proper sum towards a fund for keeping the Women's and Children's Hospital open."

"Is there such a fund?" demanded Agnes.

"There will be, I think. If everybody is interested—"

"And how you going to interest 'em?" asked the skeptical Agnes.

"Talk about it! Publicity! That is what is needed," declared Ruth, vigorously. "Why! we might all do something."

"Who—all? I want to know!" responded her sister. "I don't have a cent more than I need for myself. Only two dollars and a half." Agnes' allowance had been recently increased half a dollar by the observant lawyer.

"All of us can help," said Ruth. "Boys and girls alike, as well as grown people. The schools ought to do something to raise money for the hospital's support."

"Like a fair, maybe—or a bazaar," cried Agnes, eagerly. "That ought to be fun."

"You are always looking for fun," said Ruth.

"I don't care. If we can combine business with pleasure, so much the better," laughed Agnes. "It's easier to do things that are amusing than those that are dead serious."

"There you go!" sighed Ruth. "You are becoming the slangiest girl. I believe you get it all from Neale O'Neil."

"Poor Neale!" sniffed Agnes, regretfully. "He gets blamed for all my sins and his own, too. If I had a wooden arm, Ruth, you'd say I caught it of him, you detest boys so."

Part of this conversation between her older sisters must have made a deep impression on Tess Kenway's mind. She went forth as an apostle for the Women's and Children's Hospital, and for Mrs. Eland in particular. She said to Mr. Stetson, their groceryman, the next morning, with profound gravity:

"Do you know, Mr. Stetson, that the Women's and Children's Hospital has got to be closed?"

"Why, no, Tess—is that so?" he said, staring at her. "What for?"

"Because there is no money to pay Mrs. Eland. And now she won't have any home."

"Mrs. Eland?"

52 "The matron, you know. And she's such a nice lady," pursued Tess. "She taught me the sovereigns of England."

Mr. Stetson might have laughed. He was frequently vastly amused by the queer sayings and doings of the two youngest Corner House girls, as he often told his wife and Myra. But on this occasion Tess was so serious that to laugh at her would have hurt her feelings. Mr. Stetson expressed his regret regarding the calamity which had overtaken Mrs. Eland and the hospital. He had never thought of the institution before, and said to his wife that he supposed they "might spare a trifle toward such a good cause."

Tess carried her tale of woe into another part of the town when she and Dot went with their dolls to call on Mrs. Kranz and Maria Maroni, on Meadow Street, where the Stower tenement property was located.

"Did you know about the Women's and Children's Hospital being shut up, Mrs. Kranz?" Tess asked that huge woman, who kept the neatest and cleanest of delicatessen and grocery stores possible. "And Mrs. Eland can't stay there."

"Ach! you dond't tell me!" exclaimed the German woman. "Ist dodt so? And vor vy do dey close de hospital yedt? Aind't it a goot vun?"

"I think it must be a very good one," Tess said soberly, "for Mrs. Eland is an awfully nice lady, and she is the matron. She taught me the sovereigns of England. I'll recite them for you." This she proceeded to do.

53 "Very goot! very goot!" announced Mrs. Kranz. "Maria can't say that yedt."

Maria Maroni, the very pretty Italian girl (she was about Agnes' age) who helped Mrs. Kranz in the store, laughed good-naturedly. "I guess I knew them once," she said. "But I have forgotten. I never like any history but 'Merican history, and that of Italy."

"Ach! you foreigners are all alike," Mrs. Kranz protested, considering herself a bred-in-the-bone American, having lived in the country so long.

Although she was scolding her brisk and pretty little assistant most of the time, she really loved Maria Maroni very dearly. Maria's mother and father—with their fast growing family—lived in the cellar of the same building in which was Mrs. Kranz's shop. Joe Maroni, as was shown by the home-made sign at the cellar door, sold

ISE COLE WOOD VERTABLES

and was a smiling, voluble Italian, in a velveteen suit and cap, with gold rings in his ears, who never set his bright, black eyes upon one of the Corner House girls but he immediately filled a basket with his choicest fruit as a gift for "da leetla padrona," as he called Ruth Kenway. He had an offering ready for Tess and Dot to take home when they reappeared from Mrs. Kranz's back parlor.

54 "Oh, thank you, Mr. Maroni," Tess said, while Dot allowed one of the smaller Maronis to hold the Alice-doll for a blissful minute. "I know Ruthie will be delighted."

"Si! si! *dee*-lighted!" exclaimed Joe, showing all his very white teeth under his brigand's mustache. "The leetla T'erssa ees seek?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Maroni!" denied Tess, with a sigh. "I am very well. But I feel very bad in my mind. They are going to close the Women's and Children's Hospital and my friend, Mrs. Eland, who is the matron, will have no place to go."

Joe looked a little puzzled, for although Maria and some of her brothers and sisters went to school, their father did not understand or speak English very well. Tess patiently explained about the good work the hospital did and why Mrs. Eland was in danger of losing her position.

"Too bad-a! si! si!" ejaculated the sympathetic Italian. "We mak-a da good mon' now. We geev somet'ing to da hospital for da poor leetla children—*si! si!*"

"Oh, will you, Mr. Maroni?" cried Tess. "Ruth says there ought to be a fund started for the hospital. I'll tell her you'll give to it."

"Sure! you tell-a leetla padrona. Joe geeve—sure!"

"Oh, Dot! we can int'rest lots of folks—just as Ruth said," Tess declared, as the two little girls wended their way homeward. "We'll talk to everybody we know about the hospital and Mrs. Eland."

55 To this end Tess even opened the subject with Uncle Rufus' daughter, Petunia Blossom, who chanced to be at the old Corner House when Tess and Dot arrived, delivering the clothes which she washed each week for the Kenways.

Petunia Blossom was an immensely fat negress—and most awfully black. Uncle Rufus often said: "How come Pechunia so brack is de mysteriest mystery dat evah was. She done favah none

o' ma folkses, nor her mammy's. She harks back t' some ol' antsistah dat was suttently mighty brack—yaas'm!"

"I dunno as I kin spar' anyt'ing fo' dis hospital, honey," Petunia said, seriously, when Tess broached the subject. "It's a-costin' me a lot t' keep up ma dues wid de Daughters of Miriam."

"What's the Daughters of Miriam, Petunia?" asked Agnes, who chanced to overhear this conversation on the back porch. "Is it a lodge?"

"Hit's mo' dan a lodge, Miss Aggie," proclaimed Petunia, with pride. "It's a beneficial ordah—yaas'm!"

"And what benefit do you derive from it?" queried Agnes.

"Why, I doesn't git nottin' f'om it yet awhile, honey," said Petunia, unctiously. "But w'en I's daid, I gits one hunderd an' fifty dollahs. Same time, dey's 'bleeged t' tend ma funeral."

56 "Dat brack woman suah is a flickaty female," grumbled Uncle Rufus, when he heard Agnes repeating the story of Petunia's "benefit" to the family at dinner that night. When nobody but the immediate family was present at table, Uncle Rufus assumed the privilege of discussing matters with the girls. "She's allus wastin' her money on sech things. Dere, she has got t' die t' git her benefit out'n dem Daughters of Miriam. She's mighty flickaty."

"What does 'flickaty' mean, Uncle Rufus, if you please?" asked Dot, hearing a new word, and rather liking the sound of it.

"Why, chile, dat jes' mean *flickaty*—das all," returned the old butler, chuckling. "Dah ain't nottin' in de langwidge what kin explanify dat wo'd. Nor dah ain't no woman, brack or w'ite, mo' flickaty dan dat same Pechunia Blossom."

CHAPTER V

THE STONE IN THE POOL

"GREAT oaks from little acorns grow." Tess Kenway, with her little, serious effort, had no idea what she was starting for the benefit of Mrs. Eland, and incidentally for the neglected Women's and Children's Hospital. And this benefit was not of the unpractical character for which Petunia Blossom was paying premiums into the treasury of the Daughters of Miriam!

Tess' advertisement, wherever she went, of the hospital's need, called the attention of many heretofore thoughtless people to it. Through Mr. Stetson and Mrs. Kranz many people were reminded of the institution that had already done such good work. They said, "It would be a shame to close that hospital. Something ought to be done about it."

Tess Kenway's word was like a stone dropped into a placid pool. The water stirred by the plunge of the stone spreads in wavelets in an ever widening circle till it compasses the entire pool. So with the little Corner House girl's earnest speech regarding the hospital's need of funds.

58 Tess and Dot did not see the woman in the gray cloak again—not just then, at least; but they thought about her a great deal, and talked about her, too. A bag of the pippins went to the hospital by Neale O'Neil's friendly hand, addressed to Mrs. Eland, and with the names of the two youngest Corner House girls inside.

"I do hope she likes apples," Tess said. "I'm *so* much obliged to her for the sovereigns of England."

Tess wondered, too, if she should take some of the apples to school that first day of the fall term to present to Miss Pepperill. Dot took *her* teacher some. Dot was to have the same teacher this term that she had had the last. Tess finally decided that the sharp and red-haired Miss Pepperill might think that she, Tess, was trying to bribe her to forget the sovereigns of England.

"And I am quite sure I know them perfectly. That is, if she doesn't fuss me too much when she asks the question," Tess said to Ruth, with whom she discussed the point. "I won't take her the apples, I guess, until after I have recited the sovereigns."

Despite the declaration that she had learned perfectly the rhyme Mrs. Eland had written out for her, Tess Kenway went into school that first day of the term feeling very sober indeed. Many of the girls in her class looked sober, too. Pupils who had graduated from Miss Pepperill's class had reported the red-haired lady as being "awfully strict."

59 Indeed, before the scholars were quite settled at their desks, they had a proof of Miss Pepperill's discipline. Some of the boys in Tess' class had reputations to maintain (or thought they had) for "not bein' scart of teacher." Sammy Pinkney often boasted to wondering and wide-

eyed little girls that "no old teacher could make him a fraid cat."

"What's your name—you with the black hair and warts on your hands?" demanded the new teacher, sharply and suddenly.

She pointed directly at the grinning and inattentive Sammy. There was no mistaking Miss Pepperill's meaning and some of the other boys giggled, for Sammy did have warts on his grimy little paws.

"What's your name?" repeated the teacher, with rising inflection.

"Sam—Sam Pinkney," replied Sammy, just a little startled, but trying to appear brave.

"Stand up when you reply to a question!" snapped Miss Pepperill.

Sammy stumbled to his feet.

"Now! What is your name? Again."

"Sam Pinkney."

"Sam-u-e-l?"

"Well—that's 'Sam,' ain't it?" drawled the boy, gaining courage.

60 But he never spoke so again when Miss Pepperill addressed him. That woman strode down the aisle to Sammy's seat, seized the cringing boy by the lobe of his right ear, and marched him up to her desk. There she sat him down "in the seat of penitence" beside her own chair, saying:

"I'll attend to your case later, young man. Evidently the long vacation has done you no good. You have forgotten how to speak to your teacher."

The girls were much disturbed by this manifestation of the new teacher's sternness. Sadie Goronofsky whispered to Tess:

"Oh! don't she get excited easy?"

The whites of Alfredia Blossom's eyes were fairly enlarged by her surprise and terror at this proceeding on the new teacher's part. After that, Alfredia jumped every time Miss Pepperill spoke.

Miss Pepperill noted none of this cringing terror on the part of her new pupils. Or else she was used to it. She marched up and down the aisles, seating and reseating the pupils until she had them arranged to her satisfaction, and suddenly she pounced on Tess.

"Ah!" she said, stopping before the Corner House girl's desk. "You are Theresa Kenway?"

Tess arose before replying. "Yes, ma'am," she said.

"Ah! Didn't I give you a question to answer this first day?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Tess, trying to speak calmly.

Miss Pepperill evidently expected to find Tess at fault. "What was the question, Theresa?" she asked.

61 "You told me to be prepared to recite for you the succession of the sovereigns of England."

"Well, are you prepared?" snapped Miss Pepperill.

"Yes, ma'am," Tess said waveringly. "I learned them in a rhyme, Miss Pepperill. It was the only way I could remember them all—and in the proper succession. May I recite them that way?"

"Let me hear the rhyme," commanded the teacher.

Tess began in a shaking voice, but as she progressed she gained confidence in the sound of her own voice, and, knowing the rhyme perfectly, she came through the ordeal well.

"Who taught you that, Theresa?" demanded Miss Pepperill, not unkindly.

"Mrs. Eland wrote it down for me. She said she learned it so when she was a little girl. At least, all but the last four lines. She said *they* were 'riginal."

"Ah! I should say they were," said Miss Pepperill. "And who is Mrs. Eland?"

"Mrs. Eland is an awfully nice lady," Tess said eagerly, accepting the opening the teacher unwittingly gave her. "She is matron of the Women's and Children's Hospital, and do you *know*, they say they are going to close the hospital because there aren't enough funds, and poor Mrs. Eland won't have any place to go. We think it's dreadful and, Miss Pepperill,—"

62 "Well, well!" interposed Miss Pepperill, with a grim smile, "that will do now, Theresa. I have heard all about that. I fancy you must be the little girl who is going around telling everybody about it. I heard Mr. Marks speak this morning about the needs of the Women's and Children's Hospital.

"We'll excuse your further remarks on that subject, Theresa. But you recited the succession of

the English sovereigns very well indeed. I, too, learned that rhyme when I was a little girl."

Tess thought the bespectacled teacher said this last rather more sympathetically. She felt rebuked, however, and tried to keep a watch on her tongue thereafter in Miss Pepperill's presence.

At least, she felt that she had comported herself well with the rhyme, and settled back into her seat with a feeling of thankfulness.

Miss Pepperill's mention of Mr. Marks' observation before the teachers regarding the little girl who was preaching the gospel of help for the hospital, made no impression at all on Tess Kenway's mind. She had no idea that she had made so many grown people think of the institution's needs.

Before the high school classes early in that first week of school, the principal incorporated in his welcoming remarks something of importance regarding this very thing.

63

"We open school this term with quite a novel proposal before us. It has not yet been sanctioned by the Board of Education, although I understand that that body is soon to have it under advisement. In several towns of Milton's size and importance, there were last winter presented spectacles and musical plays, mainly by the pupils of the public schools of the several towns, and always for worthy charitable objects.

"The benefit to be gained by the schools in general and by the pupils that took part in the plays in particular, looked very doubtful to me at a distance; but this summer I made it my business to examine into the results of such appearances in musical pieces by pupils of other schools. I find it develops their dramatic instinct and an appreciation of music and acting. It gives vent, too, to the natural desire of young people to dance and sing, and to 'act out' a pleasant story, while they are really helping a worthy work of charity.

"One of the most successful of these school plays is called *The Carnation Countess*. It is a play with music which lends itself to brilliant costuming, spectacular scenery, and offers many minor parts which can easily be filled by you young people. A small company of professional players and singers carry the principal parts in *The Carnation Countess*; but if we are allowed to take up the production of this play—say in holiday week—I promise you that every one who feels the desire to do so, may have a part in it.

64

"The matter is all unsettled at present. But it is something to think of. Besides, a very small girl, I understand, a pupil in our grammar grade, is preaching a crusade for Milton's Women's and Children's Hospital. Inspired or not, that child has, during the past few days, awakened many people of this town to their duty towards that very estimable institution.

"The Women's and Children's Hospital is poor. It needs funds. Indeed, it is about to be closed for lack of sufficient means to pay salaries and buy supplies. The *Post* has several times tried to awaken public interest in the institution, but to no avail.

"Now, this child, as I have said, has done more than the public press. And quite unconsciously, I have no doubt.

"This is the way great things are often done. The seed timidly sown often brings forth the abundant crop. The stone thrown into the middle of the pool starts a wave that reaches the very shore.

"However, if we act the play for the charity proposed or not, there is a matter somewhat connected with it," continued the principal, his face clouding for a moment, "that I am obliged to bring to your attention. Of course, it is understood that only the pupils who do their work satisfactorily to their immediate instructors, will have any share in the production of the play.

65

"This rule, I am sorry to say, will affect certain members of our athletic teams who, I find, have been anything but correct in their behavior. I shall take this serious matter up in a few days with the culprits in question. At present I will only say that the basket ball match set for next Saturday with the team from the Kenyon school, will be forfeited. All the members, I understand, of our first basket ball team are equally guilty of misbehavior at a time when they were on honor.

"I will see the members of the team in my office after the second session to-day. You are dismissed to your classes, young ladies and gentlemen."

The blow had fallen! Agnes was so amazed and troubled that she failed to connect Mr. Marks' observations about the child who was arousing Milton to its duty towards the Women's and Children's Hospital, with her own little sister, Tess.

66

CHAPTER VI

JUST OUT OF REACH

RUTH KENWAY, however, realized that it was Tess who was the instrument which was being used in arousing public interest in the Women's and Children's Hospital—and likewise in Mrs. Eland, who had given five years of faithful work to the institution.

She was particularly impressed on this very afternoon, when poor Agnes was journeying toward Mr. Marks' office with her fellow-culprits of the basket ball team, with Tess' preachment of the need of money for the hospital. Ruth came home from school to find Mr. Howbridge waiting for her in the sitting room with Tess, who had arrived some time before, entertaining him.

As the door was open into the hall, Ruth heard the murmur of their voices while she was still upstairs at her toilet-table; so when she tripped lightly down the broad front stairs it was not eavesdropping if she continued to listen to her very earnest little sister and the lawyer.

67 "But just supposing Uncle Peter *had* been 'approached,' as you say, for money for that hospital—and s'pose he knew just how nice Mrs. Eland was—don't you think he would have left them some in his will, Mr. Howbridge?"

"Can't say I do, my dear—considering what I know about Mr. Peter Stower," said the lawyer, drily.

"Well," sighed Tess, "I do wish he had met my Mrs. Eland! I am sure he would have been int'rested in her."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes! For she is the very nicest lady you ever saw, Mr. Howbridge. And I *do* think you might let us give some of the money to the hospital that Uncle Peter forgot to give—if he had been reminded, of course."

"That child should enter my profession when she grows up," said Mr. Howbridge to Ruth, when Tess had been excused. "She'll split hairs in argument even now. What's started her off on this hospital business?"

Ruth told him. She told, too, what Tess did each month with her own pin money, and the next allowance day Tess was surprised to find an extra half dollar in her envelope.

"Oh—ee!" she cried. "Now I *can* give something to the hospital fund, can't I, Ruthie?"

Meanwhile, Agnes, with Eva Larry, Myra Stetson, and others of her closest friends (Agnes had a number of bosom chums) waited solemnly in Mr. Marks' office. More than the basket ball team was present in anxious waiting for the principal's appearance.

68 "Where's Trix Severn?" demanded Eva in a whisper of the other girls. "She ought to be in this."

"In what?" demanded another girl, trying to play the part of innocence.

"Ah-yah!" sneered Eva, very inelegantly. "As though you didn't know what it is all about!"

"Well, I'm sure I don't," snapped this girl. "Mr. Marks sent for me. I don't belong to your old basket ball team."

"No. But you were with us on that car last May," said Agnes, sharply, "You know what we're all called here for."

"No, I don't."

"If you weren't told so publicly as we were to come here, you'll find that he knows all about your being in it," said Eva.

"And that will amount to the same thing in the end, Mary Breeze," groaned Agnes.

"I don't know at all what you are talking about," cried Miss Breeze, tossing her head, and trying to bolster up her own waning courage.

"If you don't know now, you'll never learn, Mary," laughed Myra Stetson. "We are all in the same boat."

"You bet we are!" added the slangy Eva.

"Every girl here was on that car that day coming from Fleeting," announced Agnes, after a moment, having counted noses. "You were in the crowd, Mary."

69 "What day coming from Fleeting?" snapped the girl, who tried to "bluff," as Neale O'Neil would have termed it.

"The time the car broke down," cried another. "Oh, I remember!"

"Of course you do. So does Mary," Eva said. "We were all in it."

"And, oh, weren't those berries good!" whispered Myra, ecstatically.

"Well, I don't care!" said Mary Breeze, "you started it, Aggie Kenway."

"I know it," admitted Agnes, hopelessly.

"But nobody tied you hand and foot and dragged you into that farmer's strawberry patch—so now, Mary!" cried Eva Larry. "You needn't try to creep out of it."

"Say! Trix seems to be creeping out of it," drawled Myra. "Don't you s'pose Mr. Marks has heard that she was in the party?"

"Sh!" said Agnes, suddenly. "Here he comes."

The principal came in, stepping in his usual quick, nervous way. He was a small, plump man, with rosy cheeks, eyeglasses, and an ever present smile which sometimes masked a series of very sharp and biting remarks. On this occasion the smile covered but briefly the bitter words he had to say.

70 "Young ladies! Your attention, please! My attention has been called to the fact that, on the twenty-third of last May—a Saturday—when our basket ball team played that of the Fleeting schools, you girls—all of you—on the way back from the game, were guilty of entering Mr. Robert Buckham's field at Ipswich Curve, and appropriated to your own use, and without permission, a quantity—whether it be small or large—of strawberries growing in that field. The farmer himself furnishes me with the list of your names. I have not seen him personally as yet; but as Mr. Buckham has taken the pains to trace the culprits after all this time has elapsed he must consider the matter serious.

"What particular punishment shall be meted out to you, I have not decided. As a general and lasting rebuke, however, I had thought of forfeiting all the games the team has already won in the county series, and refuse permission to you to play again this year. But by doing that the schools of Milton would be punished in total, for the athletic standing of all would be lowered.

"Now I have considered a more equitable way of making you young ladies pay the penalty of that very unladylike and dishonest proceeding. If the Board of Education sanctions a production of *The Carnation Countess* by the pupils of the Milton schools, all you young ladies will be debarred from taking any part whatever in the play.

71 "I see very well," pursued Mr. Marks, "that you who were guilty of robbing Mr. Buckham are girls who would be quite sure of securing prominent parts in the play. You are debarred. That, at present, is all I shall say on this subject. If the farmer claims damages, that will be another matter."

With his rosy face smiling and his eyeglasses sparkling, the principal dismissed the woeful party. They filed out of the office, very glum indeed. And Mary Breeze was more than a little inclined to blame Agnes.

"I don't care! I took only a few berries myself," she complained. "And we none of us would have thought of going over that fence and raiding the strawberry patch if it hadn't been for Agnes."

"Ah-yah!" repeated Eva, with scorn. "What's the use of saying that? Aggie may have been the first one over the fence; but we were all right after her. She may have a little the quickest mind in this crowd, but her limbs are no quicker."

"And how about Trix?" murmured Myra Stetson. "How is it she has escaped the deluge?"

That is what Neale O'Neil asked when he met Agnes just before she reached the old Corner House.

"Oh, Aggie, how did you come out?" he asked soberly. "Was Mr. Marks just as hard on you as he could be?"

"I think so," Agnes replied gravely. "We don't just know yet what he means to do. Only in part. But that part is just *awful!*"

"Was the row about Buckham's berries?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. What's he going to do to you? Make you forfeit all the games?"

72 "No. Maybe something worse than that."

"Worse? What is it?" asked Neale, in wonder.

"He says we none of us can act in that play he told about this morning."

"Huh!" muttered the boy, eyeing Agnes' flushed face and tearful eyes in surprise. "Do you care?"

"Oh, Neale! I *know* I can act. I love it. I've always been crazy for it. And now, when there's maybe a chance, I am not—going—to—be—let!"

"Goodness! do you really feel so bad about it, Aggie?"

"I—I— Why, my heart will be just *broken* if I can't act in *The Carnation Countess*," sobbed the

Corner House girl.

"Oh, cricky! Don't turn on the sprinkler again, Aggie," begged Neale, in a panic.

"I—I just can't help it! To think of there being a play acted in this town, and I might be in it!" wailed Agnes. "And now it's just out of my reach! It's too mean for anything, that's what it is!"

She threatened to burst into another flood, and Neale tried to head the tears off by saying:

"Don't cry again, Aggie. Oh, don't! If you won't cry I'll try to find some way of getting you out of the scrape."

"You—you can't, Neale O'Neil!"

"We—ell, I can try."

"And I wouldn't want to get out of it myself unless the other girls escaped punishment, too."

73 "You're a good little sport, Aggie. I always said so," Neale declared, admiringly. "Say, that reminds me!" he added, suddenly. "Were all the girls up before Mr. Marks?"

"All who went over to Fleeting that day, do you mean?"

"Yes. All that were in that car that broke down."

"Why—yes—I think so."

"Huh!" grunted Neale, thoughtfully.

"All but one anyway."

"Hullo! Who was that?"

"The girl who wasn't in Mr. Marks' office?"

"Yes. Who was missing of that bunch of berry raiders?" and Neale grinned.

"Why—Trix," said Agnes, slowly.

"Ah-ha! I smell a mouse!"

"What do you mean by that, Neale O'Neil?" cried the girl.

"Nothing significant in the fact that our festive Beatrice was not there?"

"No. Why should there be?" demanded Agnes.

"And who do you suppose furnished Mr. Marks with his information and the list of you girls' names?"

"Oh, the farmer!"

"Old Buckham?" cried Neale, startled.

"Yes," said Agnes. "Mr. Marks said so."

Neale looked both surprised and doubtful. "Then why didn't Buckham give in Trix's name, too?"

74 "Oh, I don't know, Neale. No use in blaming her just because she was lucky enough to escape."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll go to my Lady Beatrice, get down on my shin-bones, and beg her pardon, if I wrongfully suspect her," laughed Neale. "But, I say, Aggie! did Mr. Buckham come to see Mr. Marks about it? Did he say?"

"No. I think Mr. Marks said the farmer wrote."

"*Wrote?*" cried the boy. "Why, I don't believe Bob Buckham *can* write. He's a smart enough old fellow, but he never had any schooling. He told me so. He's not a bad sort, either. He must have been awfully mad about those strawberries to hold a grudge so long as this. I worked for him a while, you know, Aggie."

"Oh, so you did, Neale."

"Yes. I don't believe he is the sort who would make so much trouble for a bunch of girls. Somebody must have egged him on," said Neale, gloomily.

"There you go again, Neale," groaned Agnes. "Hinting at Beatrice Severn."

"Well," grinned Neale, "you want me to help you out of your scrape, don't you?"

"At nobody else's expense," said Agnes.

"Don't know what to make of it," grumbled Neale. "It looks fishy to me. Mr. Buckham writing Mr. Marks! I'm going to find out about *that*. Keep up your pluck, Aggie. I'll see what can be done," and Neale, with his cap on the back of his flaxen head and his hands in his pockets, went off whistling.

CHAPTER VII

THE CORE OF THE APPLE

DOT KENWAY came home a day or two after this, quite full of her first "easy lessons in physiology." It always seemed to Dot that when she learned a new fact it was the very first time it had ever been learned by anybody.

"Dot is just like a hen," Neale O'Neil said, chuckling. "She gets hold of a thing and you'd think nobody ever knew it before she did. She is the original discoverer of every fact that gets into her little noddle."

"But how does that make her like a hen?" demanded Ruth.

"Why, a hen lays an egg, and then gets so excited about it and makes such a racket, that you'd think that was the first egg that had been laid since the world began."

"What is all this you learned, Dottie?" demanded Neale, as they all sat around the study lamp; for Neale was often at the old Corner House with his books in the evening. He and Agnes were in the same grade.

"Oh, Neale! did you know you had a spinal cord?" demanded the smallest Corner House girl.

"No! you don't tell me? Where is it?" asked the boy, quite soberly.

"Why," explained the literal Dot, "it's a string that runs from the back of your head to the bottom of your heels."

At the shout of laughter that welcomed this intelligence, Tess said, comfortingly:

"Don't mind, Dot. That isn't half as bad as what Sammy Pinkney said to Miss Pepperill the other day. She asked us which was the most important to keep clean, your face or your teeth, and Sammy shouted: 'Your teeth, teacher, 'cause they can rot off and your face can't.'"

"And I guess that awful Miss Pepperpot punished him for that," suggested Dot, awed.

"Yes. Sammy is always getting punished," said Tess. "He never *does* manage to say the right thing. And I think Miss Pepperill is kind of hard on him. But—but she's real nice to me."

"Well, why shouldn't she be, honey?" Ruth said. "You're not to be compared with that rude boy, I am sure," for Ruth Kenway did not much approve of boys, and only tolerated Neale O'Neil because the other children liked him so much.

"I should hope not!" agreed Agnes, who did like boys, but did not like the aforesaid scapegrace, Sammy Pinkney.

"I guess it was the sovereigns of England that makes her nice to me," said Tess, thoughtfully. "I 'spected to have an awfully hard time in Miss Pepperill's class; but she has never been real cross with me. And what do you s'pose?"

"I couldn't guess," Ruth said smilingly.

"To-day she asked me about Mrs. Eland."

"Mrs. Eland?"

"Yes," said Tess, nodding. "She asked me if I'd seen Mrs. Eland lately, and if she'd found her sister. For you see," explained Tess, "I'd told her how poor Mrs. Eland felt so bad about losing her sister when she was a little girl and never being able to find her."

"Oh, yes, I remember," Ruth said.

"But I had to tell Miss Pepperill that I'd only seen her the one time—when she taught me the sovereigns of England. I'd really love to see Mrs. Eland once more. Wouldn't you, Dot?"

"Dear me, yes!" agreed the smaller girl. "I wonder if she ever got those apples?"

"Of course she did," put in Neale. "Didn't I tell you I took them to the hospital myself?"

"We—ell! But she never told us so—did she, Dot?" complained Tess.

However, the very next day the children heard from the bag of apples. A delightfully suspicious package awaited Tess and Dot at the old Corner House after school. It had been delivered by no less a person than Dr. Forsyth himself, who stopped his electric runabout in front of the old Corner House long enough to run in and set the pasteboard box on the sitting room table.

"What forever is that, Doctor?" demanded Mrs. MacCall.

"I hope it's something to make these children sick," declared the doctor, gruffly. "They are too disgracefully healthy for anything."

"Yes, thank our stars!" said the housekeeper.

"Oh, yes! oh, yes!" cried the apparently very savage medical man. "But what would become of all us poor doctors if everybody were as healthy as this family, I'd like to know?" and he tramped out to his car again in much make-believe wrath.

Dot came first from school and was shown the box. It was only about six inches square and it had a card tied to it addressed to both her and Tess. Dot eyed it with the roundest of round eyes, when she heard who had brought it.

"Why don't you open it, child?" demanded Aunt Sarah, who chanced to be downstairs. "Bring it here and I'll snip the string for you with my scissors."

"Oh! I couldn't, Aunt Sarah!" Dot declared.

"Why not, I should admire to know?" snapped the old lady. "It's not too heavy for you to carry, I should hope?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. But I can't open it till Tess comes," said Dot.

"Why not, I should admire to know?" repeated Aunt Sarah, in her jerky way.

"Why, it wouldn't be fair," said the smallest Corner House girl, gravely.

"Huh!" snorted the old lady.

"Tess wouldn't do that to me," Dot said, with assurance.

79 Agnes chanced to get home next. "What ever do you s'pose is in it, Dottums?" she cried. "There's no name on it except yours and Tess'. And the doctor brought it!"

"Yes. But I know it isn't pills," declared Dot, seriously.

"How do you know that?" laughed Agnes.

"The box is too big," was the prompt reply. "He brings pills in just the *cunningest* little boxes."

"Maybe it's charlotte russe," suggested Agnes. "They put them in boxes like this at the bakery."

"Oh! do you think so?" gasped Dot, scarcely able to contain herself.

"If they are charlotte rushings," chuckled Neale, who had brought home Agnes' books for her, "be careful and not be so piggish as the country boy who ate the pasteboard containers as well as the cake and cream of the charlotte russe. He said he liked them fine, only the crust was tough."

"Mercy!" ejaculated Agnes. "That's like a boy."

"I *do* hope Tess comes pretty quick!" murmured Dot. "I—I'm just about going crazy!"

Tess came finally; but at first she was so excited by something that had happened in school that she could not listen to Dot's pleading that she should "come and look at the box."

Of course, Sammy Pinkney was in difficulties with the teacher again. And Tess could not see for once why he should be punished.

80 "I'm sure," she said earnestly, "Sammy did his best. And I brought the composition he wrote home for you to see, Ruthie. Sammy dropped it out of his book and I will give it to him to-morrow.

"But Miss Pepperill acted just like she thought Sammy had misbehaved himself. She said she hoped she hadn't a 'humorist in embryo' in her class. What did she mean by that, Ruthie? What's a humorist in embryo!"

"A sprouting funny man," said Agnes, laughing. "Maybe Sammy Pinkney will grow up to write for the funny columns in the newspapers."

"Let us see the paper, Tess," said Ruth. "Maybe that will explain just what Miss Pepperill meant."

"And poor Sammy's got to stay after school for a week," said Tess, sympathetically, producing a much smudged and wrinkled sheet of composition paper.

"*Do* come and see the box!" wailed Dot.

Tess went with her smaller sister then, leaving Ruth to read aloud for the delight of the rest of the family Sammy Pinkney's composition on

"THE DUCK

81 "The duck is a low heavysset bird he is a mighty poor singer having a coarse voice like crows only worse caused by getting to many frogs in his neck. He is parshal to water and aks like hed swallowed a toy balloon that keeps him from sinking the best he can do is to sink his head straight down but his tail fethers is always above water. Duks has only two legs and they is set so far back on his running gears by Nachur that they come pretty near missin' his body altogether.

Some ducks when they get big curls on their tails is called drakes and don't have to set or hatch but just loaf and go swimming and eat ev'rything in sight so if I had to be a duck I'd ruther be a drake. There toes are set close together the web skin puts them in a poor way of scratching but they have a wide bill for a spade and they walk like they was tipsy. They bounce and bump from side to side and if you scare them they flap there wings and try to make a pass at singing which is pore work. That is all about ducks."

"Do you suppose," cried Agnes in wonder, "that that boy doesn't know any better than that composition *sounds*?"

"Evidently Miss Pepperill thinks he does," laughed Ruth. "But it *is* funny. I wonder what will happen to Sammy Pinkney when he grows up?"

"The question is, what will happen to him before he grows up," chuckled Neale. "That kid is a public nuisance. I don't know but that the dog-catchers will get him yet."

82 Meanwhile the two little girls had secured the paper box and opened it. Their squeals drew all the others to the sitting room. Inside the neatly wrapped box was a round object in silver and gold foil, and when this was carefully unwound, a big, splendid golden pippin lay on the table.

"Why!" cried Dot, "it's one of our own apples."

"It is surely off our pippin tree," agreed Agnes.

"Who could have sent it?" Tess surmised. "And Dr. Forsyth brought it."

"Bringing coals to Newcastle," chuckled Neale.

But when Tess took up the apple, it broke in half. It had been cunningly cut through and through, and then the core scooped out, and the halves of the apple fastened together again.

"Oo-ee!" squealed Dot again.

For in the core of the apple was a wad of paper, and Tess spread this out on the table. It was a note and the reading of it delighted the two smaller girls immensely:

"My dear Lesser Half of the Corner House Quartette," it began. "Your kindness in sending me the nice bag of apples has not been overlooked. I wanted to come and see you, and thank you in person; but my duties at present will not allow me to do so. We are short-handed here at the Women's and Children's Hospital and I can not spare the time for even an afternoon call.

83 "I would, however, dearly love to have you little girls, Theresa and Dorothy, both come to call on me, and take tea, some afternoon—the time to be set by your elder sister, Miss Ruth. Ask her to write to me when you may come—on your way home from school, if you like.

"Hoping I shall have the pleasure of entertaining you soon, I am,

"Your loving and sincere friend,
MARION ELAND."

"I think that is just too sweet for anything of her," sighed Tess, ecstatically. "To call and take tea with her! Won't that be fine, Dot?"

"Fine!" echoed Dot. She bit tentatively into her half of the apple which had contained the invitation. "This—this apple isn't hurt a mite, Tess," she added and immediately proceeded to eat it.

CHAPTER VIII

LYCURGUS BILLET'S EAGLE BAIT

RUTH set the day—and an early one—for Tess and Dot to take tea with their new friend, Mrs. Eland. She wrote a very nice note in reply to that found in the core of the apple, and the little girls looked forward with delight to seeing the matron of the Woman's and Children's Hospital.

But before the afternoon in question arrived something occurred in which all the Corner House girls had a part, and Neale O'Neil as well; and it was an adventure not soon to be forgotten by any of them. Incidentally, Tom Jonah was in it too.

Ruth tried, on pleasant Saturdays, to invent some game or play that all could have a part in. This kept the four sisters together, and it was seldom that any Corner House girl found real pleasure away from the others. Ruth's only cross was that Agnes would drag Neale O'Neil into their good times.

85 Not that Ruth had anything against the white-haired boy. In spite of the fact that Neale was brought up in a circus—his uncle was Mr. Bill Sorber of Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie—he was quite the nicest boy the Corner House girls knew. But Ruth did not approve of boys at all; and she thought Agnes rude and slangy enough at times without having her so much in the company of a real boy like Neale.

She suggested a drive into the country for this late September Saturday, chestnuts being their main object, there having been a sharp frost. Of course Neale had to arrange for the hiring of the livery team, and the stableman refused to let them have a spirited span of horses unless Neale drove.

"Well, get an automobile then!" exclaimed Agnes. "It's only three dollars an hour, with a man to drive, at Acton's garage. Goodness knows I'm just *crazy* to ride in an auto—one of those big, beautiful seven-passenger touring cars. I wish we could have one, Ruthie!"

"I wish we could," said Ruth, for she, too, was automobile hungry like the rest of the world.

"Do! *do!* ask Mr. Howbridge," begged Agnes.

"Not for the world," returned Ruth, decidedly. "He'd think we were crazy, indeed. There is money enough to educate us, and clothe and feed us; but I do not believe that Uncle Peter's estate will stand the drain of automobiles—no indeed!"

"Well," sighed Agnes. "We're lucky to have Neale about. You know very well if it were not for him the livery man would give us a pair of dead-and-alive old things. Mr. Skinner knows Neale is to be trusted with any horse in his stable."

86 This was true enough; but it added Neale O'Neil to the party. When they were about to depart from the old Corner House there was another unexpected member added to the company.

Tess and Dot were squeezed in beside Neale on the front seat. Ruth and Agnes occupied the back of the carriage with wraps and boxes and baskets of eatables. This was to be an all day outing with a picnic dinner in the chestnut woods.

"All aboard?" queried Neale, flourishing the whip. "Got everything? Haven't left anything good to eat behind, have you?"

"Oh, you boys!" groaned Ruth. "Always thinking of your stomachs."

"Well! why were stomachs put in front of us, if not to be thought of and considered?" Neale demanded. "If not, they might as well have been stuck on behind like a knapsack, or like our shoulder-blades."

"I say, Mrs. MacCall," proceeded the irrepressible boy. "Plenty of baked beans and fishcakes for supper to-night. I see very plainly that these girls have brought very little to eat along of a solid character. I shall be hungry when we get back."

At that moment Tess cried: "Oh, poor Tom Jonah!" And Dot echoed her: "Poor Tom Jonah!"

"Look how eager he is!" cried Agnes.

87 The big dog stood at the gate. Old as he was, the idea of an outing pleased him immensely. He was always delighted to go picnicking with the Corner House girls; but as the legend on his collar proclaimed, Tom Jonah was a gentleman, and nobody had invited him to go on this occasion.

"Oh, Ruth! let him come!" cried the three younger girls in chorus.

"Why not?" added Agnes.

"Well, I don't know," said Ruth.

"It will be a long march for him," said Neale, doubtfully. "He'll get left behind. The horses are fast."

"Well, you are the one to see that he isn't left behind, Neale O'Neil," asserted Ruth.

"All right," said the boy, meekly, but winking at Uncle Rufus and Mrs. MacCall. Neale had wanted the old dog to go all the time, and his remark had turned the scale in Tom Jonah's favor.

"Come, boy! you can go, too," Ruth announced as the horses started.

Tom Jonah uttered a joyful bark, circled the carriage and pair two or three times in the exuberance of his delight, and then settled down to a steady pace under the rear axle. Neale saw to it that the lively ponies did not travel too fast for the old dog.

The carriage rattled across Main Street and out High Street. The town was soon left behind, Neale following the automobile road along which ran the interurban electric tracks to Fleeting and beyond.

"Oh, yes!" said Agnes, gloomily. "I know this is the way to Fleeting, Neale O'Neil. Wish I'd never been there."

88

"Has Mr. Marks ever said anything further to you girls about Bob Buckham's strawberries?" asked her boy friend.

"No. But you see, we haven't played any more outside games, either. And I *know* they'll give *The Carnation Countess* this winter and we won't any of us be allowed to play in it."

"I'm going to be a bee," announced Dot, seriously, "if they have the play. I'll have wings and a buzzer."

"A buzzer?" demanded Tess. "What's that?"

"Well, bees buzz, don't they? If they make bees out of us, as teacher says they will, we'll have to buzz, won't we? We're learning a buzzing song now."

"Goodness! and you'll be provided with a stinger, too, I suppose!" exclaimed Agnes.

"Oh! we shall be tame bees," Dot said. "Not at all wild. The song says so.

"We are little honey-bees,
Honey sweet our disposition.
We appear here now to please,
Making sweets our avocation.
Buzz! buzz! buzz-z-z-z!"

That's a verse," concluded Dot.

"Miss Pepperill," observed Tess, sadly, "said only yesterday that if we were in the play at all we might act the part of imps better than anything else. It would come natural to us."

89

"Poor Miss Pepperpot!" laughed Agnes. "She must find your class a great cross, Tess. How's Sammy standing just now?"

"He hasn't done anything to get her very mad since he wrote about the duck," Tess said gravely. "But Sadie Goronofsky got a black mark yesterday. And Miss Pepperill laughed, too."

"What for?" asked Ruth.

"Why, teacher asked why Belle Littleweed hadn't been at school for two days and Alfredia Blossom told her she guessed Belle's father was dead. He was 'spected to die, you know."

"Well, what about Sadie?" asked Agnes, for Tess seemed to have lost the thread of her story.

"Why, Sadie speaks up and says: 'Teacher, I don't believe Mr. Littleweed is dead at all. I see their clothes on the line and they was all white—nightgowns and all.'"

"The idea!" giggled Agnes.

"That's what Miss Pepperill said. She asked Sadie if she thought folks wore black nightgowns when they went into mourning, and Sadie says: 'Why not, teacher? Don't they feel just as bad at night as they do in the daytime?' So then Miss Pepperill said Sadie ought not to ask such silly questions, and she gave her a black mark. But I saw her laughing behind her spectacles!"

"My! but Tess is the observant kid," said Neale, laughing. "She laughed behind her spectacles, did she?"

90

"Yes. I know when she laughs, no matter how cross her voice sounds," declared Tess, confidently. "If you look right through her spectacles you'll see her eyes jumping. But I guess she's afraid to let us all see that she feels pleasant."

"She's afraid to spoil her discipline, I suppose," said Ruth. "But if ever I teach school I hope I can govern my scholars by making them love me—not through fear."

"Why, of course they'll all fall in love with you, Ruthie!" cried Agnes, with assurance. "Who wouldn't? But that old Pepperpot is another proposition."

"Perhaps she is a whole lot better than she appears," Ruth said mildly. "And I don't think we ought to call her 'Pepperpot.' Tess certainly has found her blind side."

"Ah, of course! Tess is like you," rejoined Agnes. "She would disarm a wild tiger."

"Oh! oh!" cried Neale, hearing this remark—and certainly what Agnes said was wilder than any tiger! "How would you go to work to disarm a tiger, Aggie? Never knew they had arms."

"Oh, Mr. Smartie!"

"I don't know how smart I am," said Neale. "I was setting here thinking——"

"You mean you were *sitting*," snapped Agnes. "You're neither a hen nor a mason."

"Huh! who said I was?" asked Neale.

"Why," returned the girl, "a hen *sets* on eggs, and a mason *sets* the stone in a wall, for instance.

You *sit* on that seat, I should hope."

91

"Oh, cricky! Get ap, Dobbin and Dewlap! What do you know about Aggie's turning critic all of a sudden?" cried Neale.

"Alas for our learning!" chuckled Ruth. "A hen *sets* only in colloquial language. To a purist she always *sits*—according to my English lesson of yesterday.

"But you'd better see where you are turning to, young man," she went on, briskly. "Isn't yonder the road to Lycurgus Billet's place? He owns the chestnut woods."

"We can go that way if you like," admitted Neale. "But I want to come around by the Ipswich Curve on the interurban, either going or coming."

"What for?" asked Ruth, while Agnes cried:

"Oh, don't Neale! I never want to see that horrid place again."

"I just want to," said Neale to Ruth. "Mr. Bob Buckham lives near there and I worked for him once."

Until Neale's uncle, Mr. William Sorber, had undertaken to pay for the boy's education, Neale had earned his own living after he had run away from the circus.

"Oh, don't, Neale!" begged Agnes, faintly.

"Why shouldn't we drive back that way?" asked Ruth, surprised at her sister's manner and words. Ruth did not know all about Agnes' trouble over the raid on the farmer's strawberry patch. "But let's drive direct to the chestnut woods now."

92

"All right," said Neale, turning the horses. "Go 'lang! We'll have to stop at Billet's house and ask permission. He is choice of his woods, for there's a lot of nice young timber there and the blight has not struck the trees. He's awfully afraid of fire."

"Isn't that Mr. Billet rather an odd stick?" asked Ruth. "You know, we never were up this way but once. We saw him then. He was lying under a wall with his gun, watching for a chicken hawk. His wife said he'd been there all day, since early in the morning. *She* was chopping wood to heat her water for tea," added Ruth with a sniff.

Neale chuckled. "Lycurgus ought to have been called 'Nimrod,'" he said.

"Why?" demanded Agnes.

"Because he is a mighty hunter. And that is really all he does take any interest in. I bet he'd lie out under a stone wall for a week if he thought he could get a shot at a snowbird! And he'd shoot it, too, if he had half a chance. He never misses, they say."

"Such shiftlessness!" sniffed Ruth again. "And his wife barefooted and his children in rags and tatters."

"That girl was a bright-looking girl," Agnes interposed. "You know—the one with the flour-sack waist on. Oh, Neale!" she added, giggling, "you could read in faint red marking, 'Somebody's XXXX Flour,' right across the small of her back!"

93

"Poor child," sighed Ruth. "That was Sue—wasn't that her name? Sue Billet."

"A scrawny little one with a tip-tilted nose, and running bare-legged, though she must be twelve," said Neale. "I remember her."

"Poor child," Ruth said again.

There were other things to arouse the oldest Corner House girl's sympathy about the Billet premises when the picnicking party arrived there. Two lean hounds first of all charged out from under the house to attack Tom Jonah.

"Oh!" cried Dot. "Stop them! They'll eat poor Tom Jonah up, they are so hungry."

Tess, too, was somewhat disturbed, for the hounds seemed as savage as bears. Tom Jonah, although slow to wrath, knew well how to acquit himself in battle. He snapped once at each of the hounds, and they fled, yelping.

"And serves 'em just right!" declared Agnes. "Oh! here comes Mrs. Lycurgus."

A slatternly woman in a soiled wrapper, men's shoes on her stockingless feet and her black, stringy hair hanging down her back, came from around the corner of the ramshackle, tumble-down house.

"Why—ya'as; I reckon so. You ain't folks that'll build fires in our woodlot an' leave 'em careless like. Lycurgus, he's gone up that a-way hisself. There's a big eagle been seed up there, an' he's a notion he might shoot it. Mebbe there's a pair on 'em. He wants ter git it, powerful. Sue, she's gone with her pap. But I reckon you know the way?"

94

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Neale. Then, after he had driven on a few yards, he said to the girls: "Say! wouldn't it be great to catch sight of that eagle?"

"An eagle?" repeated Agnes, in doubt. "Do you suppose there really is an eagle so near to civilization?"

"You don't call Mrs. Lycurgus really civilized?" chuckled Neale. "And the Billets and Bob Buckham are the nearest neighbors for some miles to his eagleship, in all probability."

"I suppose it is lonely up here," admitted Ruth.

"This is a hilly country. There are plenty of wild spots back on the high ground, within a very few miles of this spot, where eagles might nest."

"An eagle's eyrie!" said Agnes, musingly. "And maybe eaglets in it."

"Like Mrs. Severn wears on her hat," said Dot, suddenly breaking in.

"What! Eaglets on her hat?" cried Agnes.

"Eaglets to trim hats with?" chuckled Neale. "That is a new style, for fair."

"Oh, dear me," said Ruth, with a sigh. "The child means aigrets. Though I am sorry if Mrs. Severn is cruel enough to follow such a fashion. That's a different kind of bird, honey."

"Anyway, there will not be young eagles at this time of year, I guess," Neale added.

95 "How would we ever climb up to an eyrie?" Tess asked. "They are in very inaccessible places."

"As inac—accessible," asked Dot, stumbling over the big word, "as Mrs. MacCall's highest preserve shelf?"

"Quite," laughed Ruth.

The road through which they now drove was really "woody." The leaves were changing from green to gold, for the sap was receding into the boles and roots of the trees. The leaves seemed to be putting on their bravest colors as though to flout Jack Frost.

Squirrels darted away, chattering and scolding, as the party advanced. These little fellows seemed to suspect that the woods were to be raided and some of the nuts, which they considered their own lawful plunder, taken away.

The Corner House girls, with their boy friend, did indeed find a goodly store of nuts. They camped in a pretty glade, where there was a spring, and tethered the horses where they could crop some sweet clover. And Neale built a real Gypsy fire, being careful that it should do no damage; and three stout stakes were set up over the blaze, a pot hung from their apex, and the tea made.

96 And the chestnuts! how they rained down when Neale climbed up the trees and swung himself out upon the branches, shaking them vigorously. The glossy brown nuts came out of their prickly nests in a hurry and were scattered widely on the leaf-carpeted ground.

Sometimes they came down in the burrs—maybe only "peeping" out; and getting them wholly out of the burrs was not so pleasant an occupation.

"Why is it," complained Dot sucking her fingers, stung by the prickly burrs, "that they put such thistles on these chestnuts? It's worse than a rosebush—or a pincushion. Couldn't the nuts grow just as good without such awfully sharp jackets on 'em?"

"Oh, Dot," said Tess, to whom the smallest Corner House girl addressed this speech. "I suspect the burrs are made prickly for a very good reason. You see, the chestnuts are not really ripe until the burrs are broken open by the frost. Then the squirrels can get at them easily."

"Well, I see *that*," agreed Dot.

"But don't you see, if the little squirrels—the baby ones—could get at the chestnuts before they were ripe, they would all get sick, and have the stomach-ache—most likely be like children, boys 'specially, who eat green apples? You know how sick Sammy Pinkney was that time he got into our yard and stole the green apples."

"Oh, I see," Dot acknowledged. "I s'pose you're right, Tess. But the burrs are dreadful. Seems to me they could have found something to put 'round a chestnut besides just old prickles."

97 "How'd they do it?" demanded Tess, rather exasperated at her sister's obstinacy. Besides, the "prickles" were stinging her poor fingers, too. "How do you suppose they could keep the little squirrels from eating the chestnuts green, then?"

"We—ell," said Dot, thoughtfully, "they might do like our teacher says poison ought to be kept. She read us about how dangerous it is to have poison around—and I read some in the book about it, too."

"But chestnuts aren't poison!" cried Tess.

"They must be when they are green," declared the smaller girl, confidently, possessing just enough knowledge of her subject to make her positive. "Else the squirrels wouldn't have the stomach-ache. And you say they *do*."

"I said they *might*," denied Tess, hastily.

"Well, poison is a very dang'rous thing," went on Dot, pleased to air her knowledge. "It ought to be doctored at once and not allowed to run on—for *that's* very ser'ous indeed. And we mustn't treat poison rough; it's li'ble to run into blood poison."

"Oh!" gasped Tess, who had not had the benefits of "easy lessons in physiology" when she was in Dot's grade, that being a new study.

"You ought to keep poison," went on Dot, nodding her dark little head vigorously, "in a little room under lock and key in a little bottle and the cork in so it can't get out, and hide the key and have a skeleton on the bottle and not let nobody go there!" and Dot came out, breathless but triumphant, with this complete and efficacious arrangement.

The bigger girls had gathered a great heap of the brown nuts before the picnic dinner was served. Neale had done something beside shake down the nuts. He had stripped off great pieces of bark from the yellow birch trees and cut them into platters and plates on which the food could be served very nicely. Neale was so resourceful, indeed, that Ruth had to acknowledge that boys really were of some account, after all.

When they sat down, Turk-fashion, around the tablecloth which had been spread, the oldest Corner House girl sighed, however: "But mercy! he eats his share. Where do you suppose he puts it all, Aggie?"

"I wouldn't be unladylike enough to inquire," returned the roguish sister, with a toss of her head. "How dreadful you are, Ruth!"

It was a very pleasant picnic. The crisp air was exhilarating; the dry leaves rustled every time the wind breathed on them; and the tinkle of the spring made pleasant music. Squirrels chattered noisily; jays shrieked their alarm; the lazy caw of a crow was heard from a distance.

The tang of balsam was in the air and the fall haze looked blue and mysterious at the end of the aisles made by the rows of tall trees. It was after dinner that a seemingly well-beaten path attracted them, and the whole party, including Tom Jonah, started for a stroll.

The path led them to an opening in the forest where a stake-and-rider fence was all that separated them from a great rolling pasture. In the distance were the craggy hills, where great boulders cropped out and the forest was thin and straggly.

It was a narrow valley that lay before the young explorers. Directly opposite was a crag as barren as a bald head.

"Look at the cloud shadow sailing over the field," said Ruth, contemplatively.

Her remark might have passed without comment had not the shadow, thus mentioned, changed form and darted suddenly to one side.

"Hi!" exclaimed Neale. "That's no cloud shadow."

"Look! look!" squealed Tess. "See the aeroplane!"

A flying machine had been exhibited at Milton only a few weeks before, and the aviator had done some fancy flying over the house-roofs of the town. Little wonder that Tess thought this must be another aeroplane, for the huge bird that swooped earthward cast a shadow quite as large as had the aeroplane she had seen.

"The eagle!" exclaimed Neale. "Oh, look! look!"

The whole party—even Tom Jonah—was transfixed with wonder as they observed a huge bird sail slowly across the valley toward them and finally alight upon a bare branch of a tall, dead pine at the edge of the field. There the eagle poised for a few moments, its wings half spread, "tip-tilting," as Agnes said, till he had struck the right balance. Then he settled more comfortably on his perch, turned his head till his harsh beak and evil eye were aimed over his shoulder, steadily viewing something in the field below him.

The bird did not see the party of spectators at the boundary fence; but they quickly discovered the object which the bird of prey observed.

"There! Oh, look there!" gasped Agnes. "*That thing's moving!*"

"It's a girl!" murmured Ruth.

"Sue Billet—as sure as you live," muttered Neale. "There's Lycurgus—over behind the fence—he's after the eagle!"

"What a dreadful thing!" exclaimed Ruth, aloud. "Is he using his own child for bait! That's what he's doing! Oh, Neale! Oh, Agnes! He's sent that child out there to attract the eagle's attention," Ruth went on to cry. "What a wicked, wicked thing to do!"

CHAPTER IX

BOB BUCKHAM TAKES A HAND

RUTH's low cry was involuntary. She did not mean to frighten the little Corner House girls; but they saw and understood as well as the older spectators. Tess and Dot clung together and Dot began to whimper.

"Oh, don't cry, Dot! Don't cry!" begged Tess.

"That—that awful aigret!" gasped Dot, getting things mixed again, but quite as much frightened as though she were right. "It will bite that little girl."

"No. We'll set Tom Jonah on him!" exclaimed Tess, bravely.

"Hush!" exclaimed Neale, in a low, tense voice. "Lycurgus is going to shoot it."

"Go right on, Sue!" they heard the hunter say to his little daughter, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, but very penetrating. "Walk right out in that there field. I got my eye on you."

"You keep your eye on that ol' eagle, Pap—never mind watchin' me," was the faint reply of little Sue Billet.

"Don't you have no fear," Lycurgus said in his sharp wheeze. "I'm a-gwine to shoot that fow-el. He's my meat."

102

The eagle raised his wings slowly; they quivered and he stretched his neck around so that he could glare again at the trembling little girl. It was no wonder Sue was frightened, and stumbled, and fell into a bed of nettles, and then—screamed!

"Drat the young 'un!" exclaimed Lycurgus, just as the eagle made an awkward spring into the air.

But the bird did not fly away; instead it swooped around in a circle, displaying great strength and agility in its motion. Its wings spread all of six feet. They beat the air tremendously, and then the bird sailed low, aiming directly for the child just climbing out of the bed of nettles.

It was plain that Lycurgus had not been quite ready for the eagle's swoop. He had to try for the bird, however. The screaming Sue could not extricate herself from the dangerous situation in which her father had placed her. Lycurgus shouldered his gun and pulled the trigger.

He may have had a reputation for never missing his quarry; but his gun missed that time, for sure! Not a feather flew from the great bird. Its pinions beat the air so terribly that poor little Sue was thrown to the ground once more.

Agnes shrieked. The two smaller girls were awestruck. Neale O'Neil fairly groaned. It seemed as though the child must fall a victim to the eagle's beak and claws.

Its huge wings, beating the air, drowned most other sounds. Lycurgus struggled to slip another shell into his old-fashioned rifle. Somehow the mechanism had fouled.



At the moment the eagle dropped with spread talons, the big dog leaped. [Page 103](#)

103

"Pap! Pap!" screeched the girl at last. "He's goin' to git me!"

At that shrill and awful cry the man flung away his gun and leaped the rail fence into the open field. What he thought he might do with his bare hands against the talons and armed beak of the bird of prey, it would be impossible to say. But whatever fault might be found with Lycurgus Billet, he was no coward.

Bare-handed, hatless, and as white as paper, the man ran toward his little girl. The shadow of the swooping eagle covered them both.

Then it was that Tess Kenway awoke from her trance. She shrieked, suddenly: "Tom! Tom Jonah! Do, *do* catch it! Tom Jonah! *Sic him, boy!*"

The growling dog needed no second urging. He flung himself through the fence and dashed across the intervening space. At the moment the eagle dropped with spread talons, the big dog leaped.

Tom Jonah's teeth gained a grip upon the bird's leg. The eagle screamed with pain and rage. Its wings beat the air mightily, and it rose several feet from the ground, carrying Tom Jonah with it!

Lycurgus leaped in and seized Sue. With her clasped close to his chest he ran for the shelter of the woods.

104

But the Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil, with excited cries, followed in the wake of the lumbering eagle. It plowed across the field, rising and falling with alternate strokes of its wings. Tom Jonah seemed in a very precarious situation, indeed.

The old dog had no idea of letting go his hold, however. When once his jaws were clamped upon an enemy, he was there to stay. Tess was wildly excited. Dot was crying frankly. Agnes called encouragement to Tom Jonah. Ruth and Neale were as anxious as the others for the safety of the old dog, but they saved their breath. All ran as hard as they could run after the eagle and Tom Jonah.

For, scream and beat his wings as he might, the bird could not dislodge the dog. Half the time Tom Jonah was on the ground, and when he felt the earth he dragged back and tore at his feathered antagonist with an obstinacy remarkable.

The eagle could not thrash Tom Jonah with his wings to any purpose; nor could he fix his talons in the dog, or spear him with his beak, while they both were in the air. As the huge bird sprang up the dog bounced into the air, too; but only for a moment or two at a time. The bird was

growing weaker.

Finally the eagle changed its tactics, and for a moment the two antagonists whirled over and over on the ground. How the feathers flew! In some way the bird's talons found the dog's flesh.

105

It was then, when reckless Neale was trying to find a stone or club, that a hoarse voice was heard shouting:

"Get away! stand back! I'm going to shoot that critter!"

"Oh!" shrieked Tess Kenway, not at all the timid and mild little girl she usually was. "Oh! don't you dare shoot Tom Jonah!"

There sounded the heavy explosion of a gun. The eagle screamed no more. Its great wings relaxed and it tumbled to the earth. Tom Jonah sprang away from the thrashing bird, which died hard. The man who had shot it strode in from the other side of the field.

It was not Lycurgus Billet. It was an oldish man, with a big, bushy head of hair and whiskers. He carried his smoking gun in the hollow of his arm.

"By cracky! I made a good shot that time, for a fact!" this stranger declared.

But he was not a stranger to, at least, one of the picnic party. Neale O'Neil cried out: "Oh, Mr. Buckham, that was a fine shot! And just in the nick of time."

Agnes almost fell over at this exclamation of her boy friend. She clung to Neale's jacket sleeve, whispering:

"Oh, dear me! Let's not speak to him! Come, Neale! let's run. I—I am *so* ashamed about those strawberries."

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"Step on that furdurineest wing, young feller," said the big, old man to Neale. "He's dead—jest as dead as though he'd laid there a year. He's jest a-kickin' like a old rooster with his head off. Don't *know* he's dead, that's all. Step on that wing; it'll keep him from thrashin' hisself to pieces," added the farmer, as Neale O'Neil obeyed him.

The girls looked on in awe. Tom Jonah stood by, panting, his tongue out and his plume waving proudly.

"That's a great dog," said Mr. Bob Buckham.

"And—— Why, hullo, son! you used to work for us, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Buckham," replied Neale.

"Ho, ho!" shouted the bushy-headed old man, spying Lycurgus and Sue coming from the edge of the woods. "I beat ye to it that time, Lycurgus. And what was little Sissy doing out there where the old eagle could git his eye on her? I swow! if it hadn't been for the dog, mebbe the eagle would ha' pecked her some—eh?"

"The eagle would have carried her off—the poor little thing," said Ruth, indignantly.

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Buckham.

"I believe it would, sir," Neale said.

"And that isn't the worst of it," went on the wrought up Corner House girl.

"What ain't the worst of it, miss?" asked the farmer.

"That poor little thing was sent out there by her father to attract the eagle."

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"What?" roared Bob Buckham, his great face turning red with anger and his deep-set eyes flashing. "You mean to tell me he set little Sissy for eagle bait?"

He strode forward to meet Lycurgus Billet, leaving the dead bird behind him. The chagrined hunter smiled a sickly smile as big Bob Buckham approached.

"The old gun went back on me that time—she sure did, Bob," Billet said. "I would ha' got that critter, else. Hullo! what's the matter?"

For the farmer reached out a ham-like hand and seized the wiry Lycurgus by the shoulder, and shook him.

"Hey! what you doin'?" the smaller man repeated.

"I've a mind to shake the liver-lights out'n you, Lycurgus Billet!" declared the farmer. "To send little Sissy out to be eagle bait fer ye! I—I—That's the worst I ever heard of!"

"Say!" sputtered Lycurgus. "What d'ye mean? I 'spected ter shoot the critter, didn't I?"

"But ye didn't."

"Just the same she warn't hurt. Air you, Sue?" demanded the little girl's father.

Sue shook her head. She hadn't got over her scare, however. "My!" she confessed, "I thought

he was a-goin' to grab me—I sure did! And he had sech a wicked eye."

"You hear that?" demanded old Bob Buckham, fiercely, and Lycurgus shrank away from the indignant farmer as though he expected to feel the heavy hand again—and to sterner purpose this time.

"You ain't no business with a young'un like Sissy—you ornery pup!" growled the old man in the culprit's ear. "I wish she was mine. You ain't fitten to own little Sissy."

It was evident that the old farmer thought a good deal of the backwoods' child. Lycurgus said no further word. He walked over to the eagle and looked down at it.

"He's a whopper!" he observed, smiling in his weak way at the Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil.

Ruth only nodded coolly. Agnes turned her back on him, while the little girls stared as wonderingly at Lycurgus Billet as they would had he been a creature from another world.

Bob Buckham and little Sissy, as he called her, were having a talk at one side. Something that shone brightly passed from the farmer's hand into the child's grimed palm.

"Come on, Pap!" said Sue, bruskiy. "Let's go home. These folks don't want us here."

"Lazy, shiftless, inconsequential critter," growled Bob Buckham, coming back to the dead eagle, as Lycurgus and his daughter moved slowly away across the field.

But then the old man's face cleared up quickly, though he sighed as he spoke.

"That only goes to show ye! Some folks never have no chick nor child and others has got 'em so plentiful that they kin afford ter use 'em for eagle bait."

His lips took a humorous twist at the corners, his eyes sparkled, and altogether his bewhiskered countenance took on a very pleasant expression. The Corner House girls—at least, Ruth and Tess and Dorothy—began to like the old farmer right away.

"Got to take that critter home," declared Mr. Bob Buckham, as enthusiastic as a boy over his good luck. "Don't know how I come to lug my old gun along to-day when I started down this way. I never amounted to much as a hunter before. Always have left that to fellers like Lycurgus."

"It was very fortunate for that poor little Sue that you had your rifle," Ruth said warmly.

"Oh, no, ma'am," returned Mr. Buckham. "It was that dog of yourn saved little Sissy. But I reckon I saved the dog."

"And we're awfully much obliged to you for *that*, sir," spoke up Tess. "Aren't we, Dot?"

"Oh, yes!" agreed the smallest Corner House girl. "I thought poor Tom Jonah was going to be carried right up in the air, and that the aigrets would eat him!"

"The *what* would eat him?" demanded the farmer, paying close attention to what the little girls said, but puzzled enough at Dot's "association of ideas."

Tess explained. "She means the young eagles. She expects the nest is full of hungry little eagles. It would have been dreadful for Tom Jonah to have been carried off just like a lamb. I've seen a picture of an eagle carrying away a lamb in his claws."

"And many a one I reckon this big critter has stole," agreed the farmer. "Right out of my own flock, perhaps. But your dog was too big a load for him."

"Now, son," he added, briskly to Neale, "you give me a h'ist with the bird. I'm going to take him home across my shoulders. Don't dare leave him here for fear some varmint will git him. I'll send the carcass right to town and have it stuffed." "Goodness!" murmured the startled Tess. "You don't *eat* eagles, do you, sir?"

"Ho, ho!" laughed the farmer. "No-sir-ree-sir! I mean we'll have the skin stuffed. When Mr. Eagle is mounted, you'll see him looking down from the top of that old corner cupboard of mine in the sittin' room—you remember it, Neale?"

"Yes, sir," said Neale, as he helped lift the heavy bird to the farmer's shoulders.

"What are you and these young ladies doin' around here to-day, Neale?" asked Mr. Buckham.

Neale told him. "Got a team, have you?" said the farmer. "Then drive right around to the house. You know the way, boy. I wanter git better acquainted with these little gals," and he smiled broadly upon Tess and Dot.

Ruth was doubtful. Agnes shook her head behind the old man's back and pouted "No!"

"I see that dog's ear is torn," went on Mr. Buckham. "I wanter doctor it a bit. These eagle's talons may be pizen as nightshade."

So Ruth politely thanked Mr. Bob Buckham and said they would drive to his house. So near was the farmhouse, indeed, that Tess and Dot begged to walk with the farmer and so be assured that Tom Jonah should have "medical attention" immediately. Of course, the old dog would not leave the children to go with the strange man alone.

"We can open the gates, too, for Mr. Buckham," said Tess.

"Run along, then, children," the eldest sister said. "We will soon drive over with the chestnuts." Then she added rather sharply, but under her breath, to Agnes: "I don't see what your objection is to going to Mr. Buckham's house. I think he is a real nice old man."

"Oh, I know he is," wailed her sister. "But you never stole his berries!"

"Aggie's conscience is troubling her," chuckled Neale O'Neil. "But don't you fret, Aggie. Old Bob Buckham won't know that *you* were one of the raiders last May."

"Of course he will. When he knows my name. Didn't he send my name to Mr. Marks with the others?"

"Did he?" returned Neale. "I wonder!"

CHAPTER X

SOMETHING ABOUT OLD TIMES

By the time Tess and Dot Kenway arrived at the rambling old farmhouse at Ipswitch Curve, where Mr. Buckham lived, they were as chatty and chummy with the man who had shot the eagle as though he were a life-long friend.

Without any doubt Mr. Bob Buckham loved children—little girls especially. And Mrs. Bob Buckham loved them, too.

There was a big-armed, broad-shouldered country girl in the wide, clean kitchen into which the children were first ushered. She was the maid-of-all-work, and she welcomed Tess and Dot kindly, if she did scold Mr. Buckham for tracking up her recently scrubbed floor with his muddy boots.

"Now, you jest hesh, Posy," he told her, good-naturedly. "You know you wouldn't have work enough to keep you interested, if 'twarn't for me. Where's marm?"

"In the sittin' room, Mr. Buckham—and don't you darst to go in there without scrapin' your feet. And *do* put that nasty, great bird down outside."

"Don't darst to," said Mr. Buckham. "The dogs'll tear it to pieces. I wanter fix this Tom Jonah's ear. He's a brave dog, Posy. If it hadn't been for him, I swow! Lycurgus Billet's Sue would have been kerried off by this old eagle," and he told the wondering girl about the adventure.

"Now, you take these little gals in to marm, while I fix up Tom Jonah," Mr. Buckham urged.

So Tess and Dot were ushered into the sitting room by the big girl, Posy. Mrs. Buckham was not likely to be found anywhere but in her chair, poor woman, as the children very soon learned. She was a gentle, gray-haired, be capped old lady who never left her chair, saving for her bed at night. She was a paralytic and could not walk at all; but her fingers were busy, and she was fairly surrounded by bright colored worsteds and wools, finished pieces of knitting and crocheting, and incompleting work of like character.

Out of this hedge of bright-hued fancy-work, Mrs. Buckham smiled upon the smaller Corner House girls quite as warmly as did Mr. Buckham himself.

"I do declare! this is a pleasure," she cried, drawing one little girl after the other to her to be kissed. "Little flower faces! Aren't they, Posy? Wish I had a garden full o' them—that I do!"

"My mercy, Mrs. Buckham! I'm glad you ain't," laughed the maid. "Not if they all favored Mr. Buckham and brought as much mud in on their feet as he does."

"Never mind, Posy," cried the very jolly invalid. "I don't track up your clean floors—and that's a blessing, isn't it?"

Dot looked rather askance at the bright-colored afghan that hid the crippled legs of the good woman. The legs were so still, and the afghan covered them so completely, that to the little girl's mind it seemed as though she had no lower limbs at all!

She and Tess, however, were soon quite friendly with the invalid. Posy bustled about between kitchen and sitting room, laying a round table in the latter room for tea for the expected guests. Mr. Buckham, having scraped his boots, came in.

"Well, how be ye, Marm?" he asked his wife, kissing her as though he had just returned from a long journey.

"Just the same, Bob," she replied, laughing. "I ain't been fur from my chair since you was gone."

Mr. Buckham chuckled hugely at this old pleasantry between them. They both seemed to accept her affliction as though it were a joke, or a matter of small importance. Yet Mrs. Buckham had been confined to her chair and her bed for twenty years.

115 Before Ruth and Agnes, with Neale O'Neil, reached the farmhouse, driving over from Lycurgus Billet's chestnut woods, Tess and Dot were having a most delightful visit. Dot was amusing Mrs. Buckham with her chatter, and likewise holding a hank of yarn for the invalid to wind off in a ball; while Tess, of course, had got upon her favorite topic of conversation, and was telling Mr. Buckham all about the need of the Women's and Children's Hospital, and about Mrs. Eland.

"You see, she's such an awfully nice lady—and so pretty," said Tess, warmly. "It would be an awful thing if she had to go away—and she hasn't any place to go. But the hospital's *got* to have money!"

"Eland—Eland?" repeated Mr. Bob Buckham, reflectively. "Isn't that name sort o' familiar, Marm?" he asked his wife.

"The Aden girl married an Eland," said Mrs. Buckham, quickly. "He died soon after and left her a widow. Is it the same? Marion Aden?"

"Mrs. Eland's name is Marion," said Tess, confidently. "She signed it to a note to us. Didn't she, Dot?"

"In the apple," replied Dot, promptly.

"What does the child mean—'in the apple'?" queried the laughing Mrs. Buckham.

"That's how she sent us our invitation to her party," said Dot.

"Only to an afternoon tea, child!" exclaimed Tess, quickly. "That isn't a party." Then she explained to Mrs. Buckham about the apples and the one that came back with the note inside. Meanwhile the farmer was very quiet and thoughtful.

116 "So," finished Tess, breathlessly, "we're going to stop at the hospital on our way home from school next Monday afternoon. Aren't we, Dot?"

"Ye-es," said the smaller girl, this time doubtfully. "If Mrs. MacCall finishes my Alice-doll's new cloak. Otherwise she can't go, and of course I can't go without her. She hasn't a thing fit to wear, now it's come fall."

"You ask Mrs. Eland," broke in Mr. Buckham, "if she happens to be any relation to Lemuel Aden."

"Now, Bob!" said his wife in an admonitory undertone, "never mind raking up dead and gone happenings."

"But I'm just curious—just curious," said the farmer. "Nothing to be done now about it——"

"Bob!"

"Well," subsided the farmer, "a man can't help thinkin' about money that he's lost. And that five hundred dollars was stole from us as sure as you're alive to-day, Marm."

"Never mind," his wife said lightly. "You've earned several five hundreds since that happened—you know you have, Bob Buckham. What's the good of worrying?"

"Ain't worrying," denied the farmer, quickly. "But I do despise a thief. I was brought up on the motter:

""'Tis a sin
To steal a pin;
'Tis a greater
To steal a 'tater!"

Ain't that so, children?" he concluded, chuckling.

117 Now, Ruth and Agnes were being ushered into the room by the broadly smiling Posy just as Mr. Buckham recited this old jingle. Agnes flushed to the roots of her hair, and then paled with alarm. She expected, then and there, to be accused with the heinous offence of having picked strawberries without permission in Mr. Bob Buckham's field!

"Oh! what a pretty girl!" cried the invalid. "Come here, my dear, and let me pinch those cheeks. You need not blush so; I'm sure you've been told you were pretty before—and I hope it hasn't spoiled you," and Mrs. Buckham laughed heartily.

"I should know you were little Theresa's sister," continued the lady, as Agnes tremblingly approached. "She will be just such another when she gets to be as old as you, I am sure."

"And of course, this is Ruth," and she welcomed the oldest Corner House girl, too. "Four such splendid girls must make their mother's heart glad."

"I hope we did make her glad when she was with us," Ruth said quietly. "But we have no

mother now; and no father."

"Oh, my dear!" cried the invalid, in quite a shocked tone. "I had no idea——"

"We miss our mother and our father. Even Dot can remember them both," said Ruth, still calmly. "But it happened so long ago that we do not cry about it any more—do we, girls?"

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As the oldest sister spoke, the other three seemed to be involuntarily drawn to her. Dot took one hand and snuggled it against her soft, dark cheek. Tess put both arms about Ruth's neck and warmly kissed her. Agnes already had her arm around her elder sister's waist.

"I see," said Mrs. Buckham, with sudden appreciation. "The others do not miss the lost and gone mother, for a very good reason. I am sure you have done your duty, Ruth Kenway."

"I have tried to," Ruth said simply. "And they have all been good children, and helped."

"I ain't a doubt of it—I ain't a doubt of it," repeated Mrs. Buckham, briskly.

Agnes was watching the changing expression of the old lady's face, wondering if—as Neale had said—Mr. Buckham could not write, the invalid had sent in the list of girls' names to the principal of the Milton High. The old farmer himself might be unlettered; but Mrs. Buckham, Agnes was sure, must have had some book education.

Right at the invalid's hand, indeed, were two shelves fastened under the window sill, filled with books—mostly of a religious character. And their bindings showed frequent handling.

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Posy brought in the steaming tea urn. "Come on now, folks," said Mrs. Buckham. "I'm just a honin' for a cup of comfort. That's what I call it. Tea is my favorite tippie—and I expect I'm just as eager for it as a poor drunkard is after liquor. Dear me! I never could blame them that has the habit for drink. I love my cup of comfort too well."

Posy was putting Tess and Dot into their chairs. The farmer awoke from his brown study, got up, stretched himself, and, with a smile, wheeled his wife's chair to the table.

"There ye be, Marm," he said. "All right?"

"All right, Bob," she assured him.

"Yes," the farmer said, turning to the children with a broader smile, "you ask your friend, Mrs. Eland, if she's related to Lemuel Aden. Seems to me she is his brother Abe's darter. Lem was a sharper; but Abe was a right out an' out——"

"Now, Bob!" interposed his wife. "That's all gone and done for."

"Well, so 'tis, Marm. But I can't never forget it. I was a boy and my marm was a widder woman. The five hundred dollars was all we had—every cent we had in the world," he added, looking about at the interested faces of his visitors.

"Abe Aden was a lawyer, or suthin' like that. He was a dabster at most things, includin' horse-tradin'. My father had put all the money he had in the world in Abe's hands, in some trade or other. We tried to get it back when father was kill't so sudden in the sawmill.

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"Just erbout then Abe got inter trouble in a horse-trade. He was a good deal of a Gyp—so 'twas said. He left everything in Lem's hands and skedaddled out West. But he didn't leave no five hundred dollars in Lem's hands for *us*—no, sir!" and the old man shook his head ruminatively.

"No, sir. He likely got away with that five hundred to pay his fare, and so escaped jail."

"You don't know that, Bob," said his wife, gravely.

"No. I don't know it. But I know that my marm and I suffered all that winter because of losin' the five hundred. I was only a boy. I hadn't got my growth. She overworked because of that rascal's dishonesty, and it broke her down and killed her. I loved my marm," he added simply.

"'Course you did—'course you did, Bob," said his wife, briskly. Then she smiled about at the tableful of young folk, and confessed: "He begun callin' *me* 'marm,' like he did his mother, right away when we was married. She'd been dead since he was a little boy, and I considered it the sweetest compliment Bob could pay me. I've been 'marm' to him ever since."

"You sure have," declared Mr. Buckham, stoutly. "But that ain't bringin' my poor old marm back—nor the five hundred dollars. We never did hear direct from Abe Aden; but by and by a leetle gal wandered back here to the neighborhood. Said she was Abe's darter. He and her mother was lost in a big fire in some Western city; and she'd lost her sister, too."

"Poor child!" sighed the old lady. "You couldn't hold a grudge against the child, Bob."

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"Who says I done so?" demanded the farmer. "No, sir! I never even seed the child more'n once or twice. But I know her name was Marion. And I heard her tell her story. The Chicago fire was a nine days' wonder, and this fire the gal's parents were lost in, was much similar, I should say. She'd seen her father and mother and the house they lived in, all swept away together—in a moment, almost. She and her sister escaped, but were separated in the refugees' camp and she couldn't never find the other child again. This Marion was old enough to remember about her Uncle Lem, and where he used to live; so the Relief Committee sent her here—glad ter git rid of

her on sech easy terms, I s'pose. But Lem Aden had drapped out o' sight before then, and none of us folks knowed where he'd gone to."

"And that little girl was Mrs. Eland?" Ruth ventured to ask, for the farmer's remembrances of old times did not interest the little girls. Posy was heaping their plates with good things to eat. The picnic dinner in the woods had been forgotten.

"Yes. I reckon so," Mr. Buckham said, in answer to Ruth's inquiry. "She was kep' to help by some good people around here—just as we took Posy, marm and me. The child drifted away later. She got some schoolin'. I guess she went to a hospital and l'arned to be a nurse. Then she married a man named Eland, but he was sickly. I dunno as she ever did see her Uncle Lem."

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CHAPTER XI

THE STRAWBERRY MARK

AGNES KENWAY had never been so uncomfortable in her life as she was sitting at that pleasant tea-table, at which the invalid, Mrs. Buckham, presided. And for once her usually cheerful tongue was stilled.

"What's the matter with Aggie?" asked Neale O'Neil. "Lost your tongue?"

"I believe our pretty one is bashful," suggested Mrs. Buckham, smiling upon the next to the oldest Corner House girl.

"Well, if she is, it's the first time," murmured Neale. But he said no more. Neale suddenly guessed what was troubling his girl friend, and had tact enough to keep his lips closed.

Agnes was just as honest a girl at heart as ever breathed. She did not need the reminder of the farmer's old doggerel to keep her from touching that which was not hers.

At the time when she had led the raid of the basket ball team and their friends upon Mr. Buckham's strawberry patch, she had been inspired by mere thoughtlessness and high spirits. The idea that she was trespassing—actually stealing—never entered her helter-skelter thoughts until afterward.

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The field was so large, there were so many berries, and she and her mates took so few, that it really did not seem like stealing to thoughtless Agnes—no, indeed! It was just a prank.

And now to hear Bob Buckham express his horror of a thief!

"And that's what I am!" thought the bitterly repentant Agnes. "No, not a thief *now*. But I was at the time I took those berries. I am awfully sorry that I did such a thing. I—I wish I could tell him so."

That thought took fast hold upon the girl's mind. Her appreciation of the enormity of her offence had not been so great before—not even when Mr. Marks, the principal of the Milton High School, was talking so seriously to the girls about their frolic.

Then she had felt mainly the keen disappointment the punishment for her wrong-doing had brought. Not to be allowed to take part in the play which she felt sure would be enacted by the pupils of the Milton schools for the benefit of the Women's and Children's Hospital was a bitter disappointment, and that thought filled her mind.

Now she felt a different pang—far different. Shame for her act, and sorrow for the wrong she had done, bore Agnes' spirit down. Little wonder that she was all but dumb, and that her flowerlike face was overcast.

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Tea was over and Mr. Buckham drew his wife's wheel-chair back to its usual place by the window. The light was fading even there, and Ruth said that they must start for home.

"Don't run away, sis," said the old farmer. "Marm and me don't have many visitors like you; an' we're glad to have ye."

"I fear that Mrs. MacCall will be afraid for us if we remain away much after dark," Ruth said cheerfully. She had already explained about Mrs. MacCall and Aunt Sarah, and even about Uncle Rufus.

"But we all have had such a nice time," Ruth added. "I know we shall only be too glad to come again."

"That's a good word," declared the invalid. "You can't come too often."

"Thank you," said Ruth. "If Neale will get the ponies ready——"

"And while he's doin' so, I'll take a look at that dog's ear again," said Mr. Buckham, cheerfully. "Wouldn't want nothin' bad to happen to such a brave dog as Tom Jonah."

"He's layin' out behind my kitchen stove, and he behaves like a Christian," Posy declared.

"He's a gentleman, Tom Jonah is," said Tess, proudly. "It says so on his collar," and she proceeded to tell the good-natured maid-of-all-work Tom Jonah's history—how he had first come to the old Corner House, and all that he had done, and how his old master had once unsuccessfully tried to win him back.

"But he wouldn't leave us at all. Would he, Dot?" she concluded.

"Of course not," said the smallest girl. "Why should he? Aren't we just as nice to him as we can be? And he sleeps in the kitchen when it's cold, for Mrs. MacCall says he's too old to take his chances out of doors these sharp nights."

"That's very thoughtful of your Mrs. MacCall, I do allow," agreed the jolly invalid. "And do you suppose she will get your doll's cloak done in time for your call on Mrs. Eland?"

"My Alice-doll's cloak? I do hope so," said Dot, with a sigh of anxiety.

"Wouldn't you go to call on the lady without her, if the cloak shouldn't be done?" asked the farmer's wife, much amused.

"Oh, no! I couldn't do that," said Dot, gravely. "You see, I promised her."

"Who, Mrs. Eland?"

"No, ma'am. My Alice-doll. I told her she should go with us. You see," said the smallest Corner House girl, "she was with us when we made the acquaintance of Mrs. Eland—Tess and me. And my Alice-doll liked her just as well as Tess and me. So there you are!"

"I see," agreed Mrs. Buckham, quite seriously. "You couldn't disappoint the child."

"Oh, no indeed!" said Dot. "I wouldn't want to! You see—she's not very strong. She hasn't been since that time she was buried alive."

"Buried alive!" gasped the lady in horror and surprise.

"Yes, ma'am. With the dried apples."

"Buried with dried apples?" repeated Mrs. Buckham, her wonder growing. "What for?"

"It was a most awful cat's-triumph," said Dot, shaking her head, and very, very solemn, "and it makes my Alice-doll very nervous even to hear it talked about. If she were here I wouldn't mention it——"

"What? *What* did you say, child?" gasped Mrs. Buckham. "About a cat, I mean, my dear?"

"She means 'catastrophe,'" said Tess, coming to the rescue. "I really wish, Dot Kenway, that you wouldn't use words that you can't use!"

Mrs. Buckham's mellow laughter rang out and she hugged the smallest Corner House girl close to her side.

"Never mind, honey," she said. "If you want to make up a new word, you shall—so there!"

Meanwhile Agnes had followed the farmer out into the big kitchen. The old man sat in a low chair and pulled Tom Jonah tenderly between his huge knees, till the dog laid his muzzle in his lap, looking up at the man confidently out of his big, brown eyes.

Mr. Buckham had put on a pair of silver-bowed spectacles and had the salve-box in his hand. He laid the badly torn ear carefully upon his knee and began to apply the salve with a gentle, if calloused, forefinger.

"This'll take the pizen out, old feller," said the farmer, crooningly.

Tom Jonah whined, but did not move. The application of the salve hurt the dog, but he did not pull away from the man's hand.

"He sure *is* a gentleman, jest as the little gal says," chuckled Bob Buckham.

He looked so kindly and humorously up at Agnes standing before him, that the troubled Corner House girl almost broke out into weeping. She gripped her fingers into her palms until the nails almost cut the tender flesh. Her heart swelled and the tears stung her eyelids when she winked them back. Agnes was a passionate, stormy-tempered child. This was a crisis in her young life. She had always been open and frank, but nobody will ever know what it cost her to blurt out her first words to Mr. Bob Buckham.

"Oh, Mr. Buckham! do you *hate* anybody who steals from you?"

"Heh?" he said, startled by her vehemence. "Do I hate 'em?"

"Yes."

"Goodness me, gal! I hope not. I'm a communin' Christian in our church, an' I hope I don't have

no hatred in my heart against none o' my fellermen. But I hate some things that poor, weak, human critters does—yes, ma'am! 'Specially some of the ornery things Bob Buckham's done."

"Oh, Mr. Buckham! *you* never stole," blurted out Agnes.

"Ya-as I have. That's why I hate stealin' so, I reckon," said the farmer, slowly.

"Not, really?" cried Agnes.

"Yep. 'Twas a-many year ago. Marm and me had jest come on this farm. She was young an' spry then, God bless her! And it was well she was. Bob Buckham wouldn't never have owned the place and stacked up the few dollars he has in bank, if it hadn't been for her spryness.

"I'd jest got my first strawberry patch inter bearin'——"

"Oh! Strawberries!" gasped Agnes.

"Ya-as'm. Them's what I've made most of my money on. I only had a small patch. They was fust-class berries—most on 'em. They packed well, and we had ter put 'em into round, covered, quart boxes to ship in them days. I got a repertation with the local shipper for havin' A-number-one fruit.

"Wal! Marm an' me was mighty hard up. We was dependin' on the *re*-turns from the strawberry crop to pay mortgage, int'rest and taxes. And one end of the strawberry patch—the late end—had the meachinest lookin' berries ye ever seen."

Old Bob chuckled at the remembrance. His gaze sought the firelight flashing through the bars of the grate of the big cookstove.

"Wal!" he said. "That was a bad time. We needin' the money so, and the berry crop likely to be short of what we figgered. Them little old barries at that last end of the patch began to ripen up fast; but I see they wouldn't bring me no price at all—not if the shipper seed 'em.

"'Course, he was buyin' from a score o' farmers ev'ry day. My boxes didn't have my name on 'em. They had his'n. He furnished the boxes and crates himself.

"The devil tempted me," said Bob Buckham, solemnly, "and I fell for him. 'Course we had always to 'deacon' the boxes—we was expected to. The top layer of berries had to be packed in careful, hulls down, so's to make a pretty showin'.

"But I put a lot of them meachin' little berries at the bottom of each box and covered 'em with big, harnsome fruit. They looked like the best o' the crop. I knew my man would never question 'em. And it made a difference of ten dollars to me on that one load.

"I done it," said the farmer, blowing a big sigh. "I done it with as little compunction as I ever done anything in my whole endurin' life."

"Oh, Mr. Buckham! Didn't you think it was wicked?"

"If I did," he said, with a grin, "it didn't spile my appetite. Not *then*. Not that day. I seen the carload shipped and never said a word. I went home. I eat my dinner just as hearty as ever and made preparations to work the next day's load the same way. Ye see, marm, *she* didn't know a thing about it.

"Wal!" continued the old man, "it come bed-time and we went to bed. I was allus a sound sleeper. Minute my head touched the husk piller, that minute I begun ter snore. I worked hard and I slept hard.

"But—funny thing—I didn't git to sleep. No reason—'parently. Wasn't worried. I was kinder tickled at what I'd done, and the slick way I'd done it. I never had cheated before to my knowledge; but I was happy at the thought of that extry ten dollars, and the other extry money that was ter foller."

"And—and didn't your conscience trouble you?" asked Agnes, wonderingly.

"Nope, not a mite. I was jest as quiet and contented as though they'd left a conscience out o' me when I was built," and the old man chuckled again, heartily.

"Marm says she believes more folks lay awake at night because of empty stomachs than from guilty consciences, an' so she always has a plate of crackers by her side o' the bed. Wal! I lay as calm as a spring mornin'; but after a while I gotter countin' sheep jumpin' through a gap in a stone-fence, and had jest about lulled myself ter sleep, when seems ter me there was a hand writin' on the wall opposite the foot of our bed. I didn't see the hand, mind you; but I seen the writin'. It was in good, big print-text, too, or I couldn't have read it at all—for you know I never had no schoolin', an' I kin jest barely write my name to this day.

"But that print showed up plain as plain! And it was jest one word—kinder 'luminated on the wall. It was *strawberry*. That's all, jest *strawberry*. You'd think it would ha' been somethin' like *thief* or *cheat*. Nope. It was jest *strawberry*. But I had to lay there all night with my eyes propped open, seeing that word on the wall.

"When daylight come it was still there. I seen it when I was dressin'. I carried it with me out to the stable. Everywhere I looked against a wall, I seed that word. If I hung my head and looked at

the ground, it was there.

"I knowed if what I'd done about those meachin' little berries was ever knowed in the community, like enough I'd never be called by my right name any more. They'd call me 'Strawberry Bob.' I knowed it. That was goin' to be my punishment fur stealin'."

"Oh, Mr. Bob!" groaned Agnes, much moved by his earnestness.

"It's my belief," said old Bob Buckham, "that we don't hafta wait till the hereafter ter git our punishment for wrong-doin' here. I reckon most times we git it right here and now.

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"Wal! I went erbout all that forenoon seein' *strawberry* marked up everywhere. I snum! it was right acrosst marm's forehead when I looked at her—and there warn't no other mark there in them days, you may be sure.

"I started in to pack berries jest the same as I did the day before. Then, of a sudden, I says to myself, 'Bob Buckham, you derved thief! Stop it! Ten dollars a day won't pay you for bein' called "Strawberry Bob"!'"

"So I boxed them poor berries separate and I told the shipper what I'd done the day before. I told him to take ten dollars off my order. He grinned at me.

"There was a railroad wreck yesterday, Bob, and our car went to pot. I'll git full damages from the railroad company.'

"Not for them berries of mine, Silas,' I told him. He was Silas Wales. 'You *de*-duct what my berries cost you in full, and I'll turn back my hull order to ye!'"

"He hummed and hawed; but he done it. He axed me was I havin' a hard time meetin' the int'rest on my mortgage, an' I told him the trewth. When the mortgage come due that year he come 'round and offered to let me have the money at a cheaper rate than I'd been payin', an' all the time I wanted. Ye see, that was a cheap way of gittin' a reperation for bein' honest, after all."

"And didn't you see the strawberry mark after that?" sighed Agnes.

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"Nope. Nor they never called me 'Strawberry Bob,' though I've been raisin' more berries than most folks in this locality, ever since," said Bob Buckham.

"Oh, Mr. Buckham!" exclaimed Agnes. "I ought to be called 'Strawberry Agnes'!"

"Heh? What for?" asked the startled farmer.

"Because I stole berries! I stole them from you! Last May!" gulped the girl. "You know when those girls raided your field? I was one of them. I was the first one over the fence and picked the first berry. I—I'm awfully sorry; but I really didn't think how wrong it was at the time. And I wish I'd come to you and told you before, instead of waiting until the principal of our school—Mr. Marks—and everybody, knew about it."

"Sho, honey!" exclaimed Mr. Buckham, softly. "Was you one o' them gals? I'd no idee. Wal! say no more about it. What you took didn't break me," and he laughed. "And I won't tell nobody," he added, patting Agnes' shoulder.

As Agnes dried her eyes before joining her sisters and Neale O'Neil at the door, she thought that it was rather unnecessary for the farmer to make that promise. When he had caused the list of girls' names to be sent to the school principal, he had assured her punishment.

While Bob Buckham was saying to himself: "Now, that's a leetle gal after my own heart. She's a hull sight nicer than that other one. And she's truly repentant, too."

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CHAPTER XII

TEA WITH MRS. ELAND

NEALE was right. At the supper table at the old Corner House that night (the Saturday night supper was always a gala affair) Mrs. MacCall asked, anxiously:

"What's the matter with you, boy? Are you sick?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. MacCall. Do I look sick?" responded the white-haired boy, startled.

"Must be somethin' the matter with you," said the housekeeper, with conviction. "Otherwise you wouldn't stop at only two helpings of beans and only four fishcakes. I'll have to speak to Mr. Con Murphy," she added grimly. "He'd better see that you have a good course of jalap. You're getting puny."

Uncle Rufus chuckled unctiously from the background. "Dat boy," he murmured, "ain't sickenin' none. He done et a peck o' chestnuts, I reckon, already."

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In spite of Neale's "puny" appetite, they had a great chestnut roast that evening. Eva Larry and Myra Stetson came in unexpectedly, and the Corner House girls had a very hilarious time. Neale was the only boy present; but he was rather used, by this time, to playing squire to "a whole raft of girls."

"And, oh, girls," cried the news-bearer, Eva, "what do you think? The School Board has voted to let us give *The Carnation Countess*. I heard it to-day. It's straight. The parts will be given out this next week. And, oh! poor us!"

"Miss Lederer said we would have quite important parts in the play," Ruth said complacently.

"And *we* can only look on," wailed Myra Stetson, quite as lugubriously as Eva.

"And I'm going to be a bee—I'm going to be a bee!" Dot danced around the table singing this refrain.

"I hope you won't be such a noisy one," Tess said admonishingly. "You're worse than a bumblebee, Dot Kenway."

Agnes really felt too bad to say anything for a minute or two. It was true she felt better in her heart since she had confessed to Mr. Bob Buckham; but the fact that she could not act in the musical play was as keen a disappointment as lively, ambitious Agnes Kenway had ever suffered.

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For once Eva Larry's news was exact. It was announced to all grades of the Milton Public Schools on Monday morning that *The Carnation Countess* was to be produced at the Opera House, probably during the week preceding Christmas, and all classes were to have an opportunity of helping in the benefit performance.

A certain company of professional players, headed by a capable manager and musical director, were to take charge of the production, train the children when assembled, and arrange the stage setting. Half the proceeds of the entertainment were to go to the Milton Women's and Children's Hospital—an institution in which everybody seemed now to be interested.

The fact that a certain little girl named Tess Kenway, had really set the ball of interest in motion, was quite forgotten, save by a few. As for the next to the youngest Corner House girl, she never troubled her sweet-tempered little self about it. "Oh! I'm so glad!" she sighed, with satisfaction. "Now my Mrs. Eland can stay."

"What's that you say, Theresa?" Miss Pepperill's sharp voice demanded.

Tess repeated her expression of gratitude.

"Humph!" ejaculated the red-haired teacher. "So you are still interested in Mrs. Eland, are you? Have you seen her again?"

"I am going to take tea with her this afternoon," said Tess, eagerly. "So is my sister, Dot."

"You don't know if she has found *her* sister yet?" asked Miss Pepperill, but more to herself than as though she expected a reply. "No! of course not."

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Tess hurried to meet Dot after school. She found her sister at the girls' gate of the primary department, hugging the Alice-doll (of course, in a brand new cloak) and listening with wide-eyed interest to the small, impish, black-haired boy who was talking earnestly to her.

"And then I shall run away and sail the rollin' billers," he declared. "I hope they won't find old Pepperpot after I tie her to her chair—not—not from Friday afternoon till Monday mornin', when they open school again. That's what I hope. And by that time I can sail clean around the Cape of Good Hope to the Cannibal Islands, I guess."

"Oh-ee!" gasped Dot. "And suppose the cannibals eat you, Sammy Pinkney? What would your mother say?"

"She'd be sorry, I guess," said Sammy, darkly. "And so would my pop. But shucks!" he added quickly. "Pirates never get eat by cannibals. They're too smart."

"That's all you know about it, Sammy Pinkney!" said Tess, sternly, breaking in upon the boasting of the scapegrace, who dearly loved an audience. "We met a man this summer that knew all about pirates—or *said* he did; didn't we, Dot?"

"Oh, yes. The clam-man," the smallest Corner House girl agreed. "And he had a wooden leg."

"Did he get it bein' a pirate?" demanded Sammy.

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"He got it fighting pirates," Tess said firmly. "But the pirates got it worse. They got their legs mowed off."

"We-ell. Huh! I guess it would be fun to have a wooden leg, at that," the boy stoutly declared. "Anyway, a feller with a wooden leg wouldn't have growin' pains in it; and I have 'em awful when I go to bed nights, in *my* legs."

As the little girls went on to the hospital, Dot suddenly felt some hesitancy about going, after

all. "You know, Tess, they do such *awful* things to folks in horsepistols!"

"For pity's sake! stop calling it *that*," begged Tess. "And they don't do awful things in hospitals."

"Yes they do; they take off folkses legs and arms and pull their teeth and——"

"They don't!" denied Tess, flatly. "Not in this hospital, anyway. Here, they cure sick ladies and little children that are lame and sick. Oh! it's a be-a-utiful place!"

"How do you know?" asked Dot, doubtfully.

"Sadie Goronofsky's cousin was there," Tess said, with confidence. "Sadie went to see her—and she had jelly and oranges and farina puddings and all kinds of nice things to eat. Sadie knows, because she let her lick the tumblers and dishes. Besides, we're not going to be patients there," Tess declared. "We're only calling on Mrs. Eland."

"I hope she has some of that nice farina pudding for tea," sighed Dot. "I'm fond of that."

"Don't be a little gobbler, Dot, if she gives us anything good," said Tess, with her most elder-sisterly air. "Remember, we promised Ruth to be little ladies."

"But goodness!" gasped Dot, "that doesn't mean that we can't eat *at all*, does it? I'm dreadful hungry. I always am after school and you know Mrs. MacCall lets us have a bite. If being a *lady* means going *hungry*, I don't want to be one—so there, Tess Kenway!"

This frank statement, and Dot's vehemence, might have caused some friction between the sisters (for of course Tess felt her importance, being the older, and having been particularly charged by Ruth to look after her sister) had they not met Neale O'Neil coming from the clothing store on High Street. He had a big bundle under his arm.

"Oh, I know what you've got, Neale!" cried Tess. "Those are your new clothes."

"You're a good little guesser, Tess Kenway," laughed the boy. "And it's a Jim-dandy suit. Ought to be. It cost me eight dollars of my hard earned lucre."

"What's that?" demanded Dot, hearing something new.

"Lucre is wealth. But eight dollars isn't much wealth, is it?" responded Neale, and passed on, leaving the two little girls at the steps of the main entrance to the hospital.

There was no time now for discussing what Mrs. MacCall called "pros and cons," for the hall door was opened and a girl in a blue uniform and white cap beckoned the two little visitors up the steps.

"You are the two children Mrs. Eland is expecting, aren't you?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said Tess, politely. "We have a 'pointment with her."

"That's right," laughed the nurse. "She's waiting for you in her room. And the tea smells good."

"Is—is there farina pudding?" asked Dot, hesitatingly. "Did you smell that, too?"

Tess tugged at the smaller girl's coat and scowled at her reprovingly; but the pretty nurse only laughed. "I shouldn't be surprised if it were farina pudding, little girl," she said.

And it was! Dot had two plates of it, besides her pretty cup of cambric tea. But Tess talked with Mrs. Eland in a really ladylike manner.

In the first place the matron of the hospital was very glad to see the two Corner House girls. She did not have on her gray cloak or little bonnet with the white ruche. Dot's Alice-doll's new cloak was a flattering imitation of the cut and color of the hospital matron's outdoor garment.

Mrs. Eland was just as pink-cheeked and pretty as ever indoors; but the children saw that her hair was almost white. Whether it was the white of age, or of trouble, it would have been hard to say. In either case Mrs. Eland had not allowed the cause of her whitening hair to spoil her temper or cheerfulness.

That her natural expression of countenance was sad, one must allow; but when she talked with her little visitors, and entertained them, her sprightliness chased the troubled lines from the lady's face.

"And—and have you found your sister yet, Mrs. Eland?" Tess asked hesitatingly in the midst of the visit. "I—I wouldn't ask," she hastened to say, "but Miss Pepperill wanted to know. She asked twice."

"Miss Pepperill?" asked the matron, somewhat puzzled.

"Yes, ma'am. Don't you 'member? She's my teacher that wanted me to learn the sovereigns of England."

"Why, of course! I had forgotten," admitted Mrs. Eland. "Miss Pepperill."

"Yes. And she's much int'rested in you," said Tess, seriously. "Of course, everybody is. They are going to make a play, and we're going to be in it——"

"I'm going to be a bee," said Dot, in a muffled voice.

"And it's going to be played for money so's you can stay here in the hospital and be matron," went on Tess.

"Ah, yes, my dear! I know about that," said Mrs. Eland, with a very sweet smile. "And I know who to thank for it, too."

142 "Do you?" returned Tess, quite unconscious of the matron's meaning. "Well! you see, Miss Pepperill's interested, too. She only asked me for the second time to-day if I'd seen you again and if you had found your sister."

"No, no, my dear. I never can hope to find her now," said Mrs. Eland, shaking her head.

"She was lost in a fire," said Dot, suddenly.

"Why, yes! how did you know?" queried the lady, in surprise.

"The man that shot the eagle said so," Dot replied. "And he wanted to know if you were much related to Lem—Lemon——"

"*Lem-u-el!*" almost shrieked Tess. "Not Lemon, child. Lemuel Aden."

"Oh, yes!" agreed the smaller girl, quite calmly. "That's just as though I said Salmon for Samuel—like Sammy Pinkney. Well! It isn't such a great difference, is it?"

"Of course not, my dear," laughed Mrs. Eland. "And from what people tell me, my Uncle Lemuel must have been a good deal like a lemon."

"Then he was your uncle?" asked Tess.

"And—and was he real puckrative?" queried Dot. "For that's what Aunt Sarah says a lemon is."

143 "He was a pretty sour man, I guess," said Mrs. Eland, shaking her head. "I came East when I was a little girl, looking for him. That was after my dear father and mother died and they had taken my sister away from me," she added. "But what about the man that shot the eagle? Who was he?"

Tess told her about their adventures of the previous Saturday in the chestnut woods and the visit to the farmhouse afterward. Dot added:

"And that eagle man don't like your Uncle Lem-u-el, either."

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Eland, quickly, and flushing a little.

Before Tess could stop the little chatterbox—if she had thought to—Dot replied: "'Cause he says your uncle's brother stole. He told us so. So he did, Tess Kenway—now, didn't he?"

"You mustn't say such things," Tess admonished her.

But the mischief was done. The matron lost all her pretty color, and her lips looked blue and her face drawn.

"What do you suppose he meant by that?" she asked slowly, and almost whispering the question. "That my Uncle Lem's brother was a thief? Why, Uncle Lem only had one brother."

"He was the one," Dot said, in a most matter-of-fact tone. "It was five hundred dollars. And the eagle man said he and his mother suffered for that money and she died—his mother, you know—'cause she had to work so hard when it was gone. Didn't she, Tess?"

144 The conversation had got beyond Tess Kenway's control. She felt, small as she was, that something wrong had been said. By the look on Mrs. Eland's pale face the kind-hearted child knew that she was hurt and confused—and Tess was the tenderest hearted child in the world.

"Oh, Mrs. Eland!" she crooned, coming close to the lady who sat before her little stove, with her face turned aside that the children should not see the tears gathering in her eyes. "Oh, Mrs. Eland! I guess Mr. Buckham didn't mean that. Of course, none of *your* folks could be thieves—of course not!"

In a little while the matron asked the children a few more questions, including Mr. Buckham's full name, and how he was to be reached. She had not been in the neighborhood of Ipswich Curve since she had first come from the West—a newly made orphan and with the loss of her little sister a fresh wound in her poor heart. So she had forgotten the strawberry farmer, and most of the other people in the old neighborhood where her father had lived before going West.

Dot Kenway was quite unconscious of having involuntarily inflicted a wound in Mrs. Eland's mind and heart that she was doomed not to recover from for long weeks. As the sisters bade the matron good-bye, and started for the old Corner House, just as dusk was falling, Tess felt that her friend, Mrs. Eland, was really much sadder than she had been when they had begun their call.

Tess, however, could not understand the reason for this.

CHAPTER XIII

NEALE SUFFERS A SHORTENING PROCESS

NATURALLY, Neale O'Neil stopped at the old Corner House on his way home with his new suit of clothes, to display them to Agnes and the others. In spite of Ruth's pronounced distaste for boys, she could not help having a secret interest in Neale O'Neil, and Agnes and Mrs. MacCall were not the only inmates of the Stower mansion that wanted to see the new suit on the boy, to be sure, before he appeared at church in it the next Sunday, that it fitted him properly.

"There!" exclaimed the housekeeper, the moment Neale came back from the bathroom where he had made the change, and she saw how the gray suit looked. "I never knew that Merrieffield, the clothier, to sell a suit but what either the coat was too big, the vest too long, or the pants out o' kilter in some way. Look at them pants!" she added, almost tragically.

"Wha—what's the matter with them?" queried Neale, somewhat excited, and trying to see behind him. He was quite an acrobat, but he could not look down his spinal column. "Are they torn?"

"Tore? No! Only tore off a mile too long," snorted Mrs. MacCall.

"I declare, Neale," chuckled Agnes, "they are awfully long. They drag at the heel."

"And I've got 'em pulled up now till I feel as though I was going to be cut in two," complained the boy.

"Made for a man—made for a man," sniffed Aunt Sarah, who chanced to be in the sitting room. She did not often take any interest in Neale O'Neil—or appear to, at least. But she eyed the too long trousers malevolently. "Ought to be cut off two inches."

"Yes; a good two inches," agreed Mrs. MacCall.

"Leave the pants here, Neale, and some of us will get time to shorten them for you before next Sunday. You won't want to wear them before then, will you?" said Ruth.

"Oh, no," returned Neale. "I'm not going to parade these to school, first off—just as Agnes does every new hair-ribbon she buys."

"Thank you, Mr. Smartie. Hair-ribbons aren't like suits of clothes, I should hope."

"If they were," chuckled the boy, "I s'pose you'd have a pair of my trousers tied on your pigtail and hanging down your back."

For that she chased him out of the house and they had a game of romps down under the grape-arbor and around the garden.

"Dear me!" sighed Ruth, "Neale makes Aggie so tomboyish. I don't know what to do about it."

"Sho, honey!" observed the housekeeper. "What do you care as long as she's healthy and pretty and happy? Our Aggie is one of the best."

"Of course she is," rejoined the oldest Corner House girl. "But she's getting so big—and is so boisterous. And see what trouble she has got into about that frolic last spring. She can't play in this show that the others are going to act in."

"That's too bad," said Mrs. MacCall, threading her needle. "If ever there was a girl cut out to be a mimic and actress, it's Aggie Kenway."

"Don't for pity's sake tell her that!" cried Ruth, in alarm. "It will just about make her crazy, if you do. She is being punished for raiding that farmer's field—and it's right she should be punished—"

"Mean man!" snapped Aunt Sarah, suddenly. "Those gals couldn't have eat many of his old berries."

"Oh! I don't think Mr. Bob Buckham is mean," Ruth observed slowly, surprised to see Aunt Sarah take up cudgels for Agnes, whom the old lady often called "hare-brained." "And he is not punishing the girls of the basket ball team. Mr. Marks is doing that."

"How did Mr. Marks know about it?" put in Aunt Sarah again.

"Well, we suppose Mr. Buckham told him. So Mr. Marks said, I believe."

"Mean man, then!" reiterated the old lady.

That was her only comment upon the matter. But once having expressed her opinion of the strawberry man, nothing on earth could have changed Aunt Sarah's mind toward him.

Agnes herself could not hold any hard feeling toward Mr. Buckham. Not after listening to his

story, and being forgiven so frankly and freely her part in the raid on the strawberry patch.

However much her sisters and the rest of the family felt for Agnes, the latter suffered more keenly as the week went by. The teachers in each grade took half an hour a day to read the synopsis of *The Carnation Countess* to their pupils and to explain the part such pupils would have in the production. Also the training of those who had speeches or songs began. Of course, the preliminary training for the dance steps was left to the physical culture teachers on Friday afternoon.

Agnes and her fellow culprits had to sit and listen to it all, knowing full well that they could have no part in the performance.

"But just think!" Myra Stetson said, as they came out of school on Thursday. "Just think! Trix Severn is going to be Innocent Delight, that awfully nice girl who appears in every act. Think of it! She showed me the part Professor Ware gave her. Think of it—*Innocent Delight!*"

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"Oh! oh! oh!" gasped the chorus of unhappy basket ball players.

"And she is every bit as guilty as we are," added Eva Larry.

"Hush!" commanded Agnes. "Somebody'll hear you."

"What if?"

"We don't want Trix to say that we dragged her into our trouble when she was lucky enough to escape."

"And I'd just like to know how she did escape," murmured Myra.

"I think Mr. Marks is just as mean!" exclaimed Mary Breeze. "Miss Lederer said I had a good chance to be Bright Thoughts—she would have picked me for that part. And now I can't be in the play at all!"

"Goodness, no! We can't even 'carry out the dead,' as my brother calls it," said another girl. "The door is entirely shut to us."

"We all ought to have had a bright thought and have stayed out of that farmer's field," growled Eva. "Mean old hunks!"

"Who?" cried Agnes.

"That Buckham man."

"No, he isn't!" said the Corner House girl, stoutly. "He's a fine old man. I've talked with him."

"Oh, Agnes!" cried Myra. "Did you see him and try to beg off for us?"

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"No. I didn't do that. I didn't see that that would help us. Mr. Marks has punished us, not Mr. Bob Buckham."

"I bet she did," said Mary Breeze, unkindly. "At least, I bet she tried to beg off for herself."

"Now, Mary, you know you don't believe any such thing," Eva said. "We know what kind of girl Agnes Kenway is. She would not do such a thing. If she asked, it would be for us all."

"No," said Agnes, shortly. "I did not do that. I just told Mr. Buckham how sorry I was for taking the berries."

"Oh! What did he say, Aggie?" asked another girl.

"He forgave me. He was real nice about it," Agnes confessed.

"But he told on us. Otherwise we wouldn't be in this pickle," Mary Breeze said. "I don't call that nice."

Agnes had it on her tongue to say that she did not believe Mr. Bob Buckham had sent the list of the culprit's names to Mr. Marks. Although she had said nothing more to Neale O'Neil about it, she knew that the boy was confident that the list of girls' names reached the principal of the Milton High through some other channel than that of the farmer. Agnes herself was assured that Mr. Buckham could not write. Nor did he and his wife seem like people who would do such a thing. Besides, how had the farmer obtained the girls' names, in the first place?

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Like Neale, too, Agnes had a feeling that Trix Severn somehow held the key to the mystery. But the Corner House girl would not say so aloud. Indeed, she had refused to acknowledge this belief to Neale.

So now she kept still and allowed the other girls to do the talking and surmising.

"Well, say what you may," Myra Stetson said at last. "Trix is one lucky girl. But she'll make a fine Innocent Delight——"

"I don't think!" finished Eva. "Aggie is the one for that. A blonde. Who ever but Professor Ware would think of giving such a part to a dark girl?"

"Let's not criticise," Agnes said, with a sigh. "We can't be in it, but we mustn't knock."

"Right-oh!" said Myra, the cheery one. "We can go to the show and root for the others."

"Well!" gasped Eva, "I'd like to see myself applaud Trix Severn as Innocent Delight! I—guess—not!"

Although Ruth Kenway had not been selected for one of the speaking parts, she was quite as excited, nevertheless, as those who had been thus chosen. To keep one's mind upon lessons and *The Carnation Countess* at the same time, was difficult even for the steady-minded Ruth.

Dot went "buzzing" about the house like a veritable bee, singing the song that was being taught her and her mates. Tess' class were to be butterflies and hummingbirds. And—actually!—Tess had been given a part to speak.

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It was not very long, but it was of some importance; and her name, Theresa Kenway, would appear on the programme, as Swiftwing.

It really was a mystery how Tess came to be chosen for the part. She was such a quiet, unobtrusive child that she never would be noticed in a crowd of other children of her age. But when Professor Ware, the musical director, came around to Miss Pepperill's class to "look the talent over," as he expressed it, he chose Tess without the least hesitancy for Swiftwing, the hummingbird.

"You lucky dear!" Agnes said. "Well! at least the Kenways will be represented on the programme, if I can't do anything myself."

Others, besides her immediate girl friends, said abroad that Agnes Kenway should be Innocent Delight. She was just fitted for the part. Miss Shipman, Agnes' old teacher, joined Miss Lederer in petitioning that the second oldest Corner House girl be given the part instead of Trix Severn. Trix, as a very pronounced brunette, would much better be given a part like Tom-o'-Dreams or Starlight.

But Mr. Marks was obdurate. None of the girls who had entered into the reprehensible prank on the way back from the basket ball game at Fleeting could have any part in the performance of *The Carnation Countess*.

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"The farmer wrote me of their stealing the berries in such a strain that I fear he may take legal action against the parents of the foolish girls. It would be a lasting disgrace for any of the names of these girls to appear on our programme and in court proceedings at the same time," added the principal, though smiling at this conceit. "I do not see how I can change my ruling."

But Agnes could not understand Mr. Bob Buckham. His letter to Mr. Marks must have been really vindictive; yet he did not seem to be at all the sort of person who would be so stern and uncompromising.

Just what Neale had done toward getting his girl chum out of "the mess," as he called it, Agnes did not know. At this time Neale suffered something which quite took up his attention.

Those trousers that were too long!

Saturday of this very busy week came, and Agnes, in dusting the sitting-room, found Neale's new gray trousers, neatly folded, on Ruth's sewing-table.

"Oh, Ruthie!" she said. "You never fixed these pants."

"I'm going to," her sister replied, and sat right down, there and then, carefully ripped the hem at the bottom of each trouser-leg, cut off two inches and stitched a new hem very carefully, putting back the stiffening and sewing on the "heel-strap" in a very workmanlike manner.

Agnes ran to the kitchen for an iron and pressed the bottom of the trouser-legs to conform with the tailor's creases. "There! that's done," she said, "and done right."

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It most certainly was done, whether right or not, the sequel was to show. After supper Neale started for home and Agnes gave him the new trousers.

"I suppose you'll want to wear that fancy suit of yours to church to-morrow morning," she said.

"Bet you!" he replied cheerfully. "Did you cut 'em down?"

"Ruthie did," said Agnes.

"Good for her! Tell her 'Thanks!'"

As he went through the front hall Aunt Sarah put her head over the balustrade and asked:

"Did you get them pants, boy?"

She never by any possibility called Neale by his right name, and her voice now was just as sharp as ever.

"Yes, ma'am—thank you," Neale said politely.

In the kitchen Mrs. MacCall said, with a smile: "The pants all right, Neale?"

"Sure they are," he declared, as he went out. Then he thought: "Dear me! seems as though everybody has a lot of interest in my new clothes."

In the morning, early, when he put the suit on to display it to the old cobbler with whom Neale lived, the boy experienced a sudden and surprising interest in the trousers himself.

The Corner House girls were at breakfast when, with a great clatter, Neale rushed in at the back door, through the kitchen, and into the dining room. He had on his new jacket and vest, but around his waist was tied a voluminous kitchen apron that Mr. Con Murphy wore when he cooked, which covered Neale to his insteps.

"Dear me! what is the matter, Neale?" asked Ruth, with some vexation.

"Matter? Matter enough!" cried the white-haired boy, very red in the face. "*Look what you did to my pants!*"

He lifted the apron and displayed a wealth of blue yarn sock above his shoe-tops, and hose supporters as well.

"For the good Land o' Goshen!" ejaculated Aunt Sarah.

"I *never*—in all my life!" cried Mrs. MacCall.

"Ma soul an' body!" chuckled Uncle Rufus from the background. "Somebody done sawed off dat boy's pants too short, for suah!"

"Dear suz!" added the housekeeper. "I'm sure I never did *that*."

"You can't tell me 'twas *me* done it," snapped Aunt Sarah.

"Oh, Neale!" wailed Ruth. "I didn't cut off but two inches."

"*You*, Niece Ruth?" exclaimed Aunt Sarah.

"That's what *I* done."

"Oh, oh!" sharply cried Mrs. MacCall. "I cut 'em off, too!"

Uncle Rufus almost dropped the dish of ham and eggs he was serving. Agnes shouted:

"Oh, my heart alive! *Six inches off the bottom of those trousers!* You have gone back into short pants, Neale O'Neil, that's sure!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIRST REHEARSAL

So Neale O'Neil did not parade his new grey suit to church on that particular Sunday. Before the next came around Ruth had purchased another pair of trousers that fitted the white-haired boy, and the much cut-down pair was saved for patches.

Something quite as interesting to him and the Corner House girls as a new suit, appeared at the First Church, however, which they all attended. Mr. Bob Buckham was at the morning service.

The girls and Neale did not see the farmer till after the sermon. Then it was Agnes who first spied him, and she hurried back to where the old man was shaking hands with two or three of the elderly members of the congregation, who knew him.

Mr. Buckham in his Sunday clothes looked no more staid and respectable than he did at home; and his eyes twinkled as merrily and his smile was just as kind as on week-days.

"Hullo! here's one of my smart little friends," he exclaimed, welcoming Agnes. "How's your mind now, miss? Quite calm *and* contented?"

"I feel better than I did," confessed Agnes. "But I'm paying for my wrong-doing just the same. You know, Mr. Buckham, you said you thought we almost always got punished for our sins right here and now. We are. We girls who stole from you, you know."

"Sho'! didn't I tell you to say no more about that?" cried the farmer.

"But Mr. Marks, our principal, is punishing us," Agnes told him.

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Mr. Buckham, innocently.

"Eva and Myra and Mary and a lot of them, as well as myself, are forbidden to take any part in the play that is going to be given for the benefit of the Women's and Children's Hospital."

"Wal, that's what I call rough!" the farmer admitted. "To my mind the berries weren't worth all

this catouse over 'em. No, sir!"

"But what did you *suppose* he would do to us?" asked the Corner House girl, desperately.

"Who?"

"Mr. Marks."

"Why—I dunno," said the puzzled farmer. "It re'lly is too bad he l'arned about you gals playin' that prank, ain't it?"

Agnes stared at him. She could not understand this at all. And immediately Mr. Buckham went on to say: "The Women's and Children's Hospital, eh? That's where your friend, Mrs. Eland, is matron, isn't it?"

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"She is Tess' and Dot's friend," explained Agnes.

"Wal! I come inter town pertic'lar to-day to see her. I got kind of a funny letter from her this week."

"From Mrs. Eland?"

"Yep. Marm said I'd better answer it in person. Word o' mouth ain't so ha'sh as a letter, ye know. And I ain't no writer myself."

Had he said this to Ruth, for instance, she would doubtless have been interested enough to have asked some questions, and so discovered what trouble Dot's busy tongue had started. Agnes, however, only listened perfunctorily to the farmer's speech. Her mind was too perplexed about the letter which had reached Mr. Marks purporting to come from Mr. Buckham, in which he had complained of the girls stealing his berries. Mr. Buckham spoke as though he had no knowledge of the information lodged with the principal of the high school.

Now Tess and Dot saw "the eagle man" and they came clamoring about him. Ruth came, too; and Neale followed. The boy had had no opportunity of talking to the farmer alone the day of the chestnutting party. Now he invited Mr. Buckham to go home with him to Mr. Con Murphy's for dinner, and the old farmer accepted.

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"That pretty, leetle gal's mighty bothered about her and her friends playin' hob in my berry patch last May," Mr. Bob Buckham said, as he and Neale crossed the Parade Ground. "How'd that school teacher l'arn of it? Too bad! I reckon the gals didn't mean no harm."

"Why," cried Neale, flushing, and looking at the old man curiously. "Somebody told on them."

"Told the teacher, you mean?"

"Yes. Wrote a letter to Mr. Marks giving all their names."

"Sho! ain't that a shame?" said Mr. Buckham, calm as a summer sea.

"Pretty mean I think myself, sir," Neale said warmly. "It stirred Mr. Marks all up. He says he thinks you may intend making the girls pay for the berries they took."

"*What's that?*" demanded the farmer, stopping stock still on the walk.

"He says your letter sounds as though you would do just that."

"*My* letter?"

"Mr. Marks says the letter came from you."

"Why, Neale, you know I ain't no writest," gasped the farmer. "It ain't possible he thinks I'd write him about a peck or two of strawberries? They was some of my best and earliest ones, and I was mad enough about it at the time; but, shucks! old Bob Buckham ain't mean enough to harry a pack of gals about sech a thing, I should hope!"

Neale stared at him with a look of satisfaction on his face.

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"Don't mean to tell me that Pretty thinks that of me, do ye?" added the old gentleman, much worried.

"Yes, sir. She thinks you sent the letter."

"Wal! she treats me mighty nice, then. I'd des-arve snubbin'—I most surely would—at her han's if she thinks I am that mean. She's a mighty nice gal."

"She's the best little sport ever, Aggie is!" declared the boy, enthusiastically. Then he added: "I knew it wasn't like you to do such a thing, and it's puzzled me. But somebody wrote in your name and listed all the girls that raided your berry patch—*but one*."

"All but one gal?"

"Yes, sir. One girl's name was left off the list," Neale said confidently.

"Oh, dear me! Dear, dear me!" murmured the old farmer, pursing his lips and eyeing Neale very gravely.

"And that particular girl is going to have one of the best parts in the show they are giving for the hospital benefit," Neale pursued.

"You don't say so?" said old Bob Buckham, still seriously.

"And that very part is just what would be given our Aggie if she were not in disgrace—yes, sir!"

"Not little Pretty?" demanded the farmer.

"Yes, sir."

"My! my!"

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"This one girl whose name did not reach Mr. Marks was just as guilty as the others. That's right, Mr. Buckham. And she's got out of it——"

"Hi!" exclaimed the farmer, sharply. "You're accusin' her of makin' all the trouble for her mates."

"If you didn't, Mr. Buckham," said Neale, boldly.

"I most sartainly didn't!" exclaimed Mr. Buckham. "You know I wouldn't, Neale O'Neil; don't you?"

"I never did think you did so mean a thing," declared Neale, frankly.

"But somebody told your teacher."

"Wrote him."

"And he thinks I done it?"

"Whoever it was must have signed your name to the letter."

"Nobody but marm does that," said the old man, quickly. "'Strawberry Farm'—that is what we call the place, you know, Neale."

"Yes, sir."

"An' I got it printed on some letter paper, and marm always writes my letters for me on that paper. Then, if it's a *very* pertic'lar one, I sign it myself. But you know, Neale, I ain't no schollard. I handle a muck-fork better'n I do a pen."

"I know—yes, sir," agreed the boy.

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"Now," continued the farmer, vigorously, "you find out if this here letter that was writ, and your teacher received, was writ on one of our letterheads. Of course, marm never done it; but—p'raps —— Wal! you find out if it re'lly did come from Strawberry Farm, and if Bob Buckham's name is onto it. That's all."

And Mr. Buckham refused to discuss the matter any further at that time.

The busy fall days were flying. It was already the middle of October. Hallowe'en was in prospect and Carrie Poole, who lived in a modernized farmhouse out of town on the Buckshot Road, planned to give a big Hallowe'en party. Of course the two Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil were invited.

Looking forward to the party divided interest among the older girls with the preparations for the performance of *The Carnation Countess*.

A full fortnight before the thirty-first of October, came the first general rehearsal of the musical play. It could not be rehearsed with the scenery, of course, nor on the Opera House stage. The big hall of the high school building had a large stage and here the preliminary rehearsals were to be conducted.

That was a Saturday afternoon eagerly looked forward to. Although the boys claimed to have much less interest in the play than the girls, even they were excited over the rehearsal. Few of the boys had speaking parts in *The Carnation Countess*, but all who had good voices were drafted by Professor Ware for the choruses.

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"And even those fellows whose voices are changing, and sound more like bullfrogs than anything human," chuckled Neale O'Neil, "have got to help swell the 'Roman populace' or carry out the dead."

"Now, Neale O'Neil! you know very well," said Tess, reprovingly, "that the Romans aren't in this play at all, and there will be no dead to carry out."

"Buzz! buzz! buzz-z-z-z!" crooned Dot, rocking her Alice-doll to sleep.

"Somebody'll slap at that bumblebee and try to kill it, if it doesn't look out," promised Agnes, pouting. "I wish you folks wouldn't talk about the old play. You—make—me—feel—so—bad!"

"You'll feel worse when you see that Trix Severn trying to play *Innocent Delight*," sniffed Eva Larry, who chanced to be present in the Corner House sitting-room where the discussion was going on.

"I don't suppose she is really *bad* in it, Eva," Ruth said.

"Not bad? She's—worse!" proclaimed the boisterous one. "Just wait. I know Miss Lederer is heart-broken over her."

"She'll spoil the play, won't she?" asked Tess, the anxious. "I hope I won't spoil it, with my Swiftwing part."

"Oh, you're all right, honey," Agnes assured her. "You know your part already, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. It's not nearly so hard to remember as the sovereigns of England. And that's how I come to get the part of Swiftwing, I guess."

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"What is the way?" asked Ruth, curiously.

"She means the reason," Agnes put in, who had lately begun to criticise the family's use of English.

"The reason I got the part?" queried Tess, gravely. "'Cause I could recite the sovereigns of England so well. I guess Miss Pepperill told Professor Ware, and so he gave me the part in the play."

"Of course!" whispered Neale. "Of course, it couldn't be that they gave a certain person her part because, if it hadn't been for her, nobody would ever have thought of having a play for the benefit of the hospital."

"I hope they gave it to her because they believed she was best fitted for the part," said Ruth, placidly.

"Well, believe me!" exclaimed the slangy Eva, "Trix Severn is not fitted for her part. Wait till to-morrow afternoon!"

"I have a good mind not to go to the rehearsal at all," sighed Agnes.

But she did not mean that. If she could not be one of the performers herself, she was eager to see her fellow-pupils try their talents on the stage.

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There was no orchestra, of course; but the pianist gave the music cues, and the stage-manager lectured the various choruses and dancers, while Professor Ware put them through their musical parts. Most of the song numbers had become familiar to the young performers. Even Dot Kenway's class went through with their part quite successfully. And if they had all been "buzzing" as indefatigably as the smallest Corner House girl at home and abroad, it was not surprising that they were letter perfect.

The dancing was another matter entirely. To teach a few pupils at a time certain steps, and then to try to combine those companies in a single regiment, each individual of which must keep perfect time, is a greater task than the inexperienced would imagine.

The training of the girls and boys to whom had been assigned the rôles of the more or less important characters in the play, was an unhappy task in some instances. While most children can be taught to sing, and many take naturally to dancing, to instruct them in the mysteries of elocution is a task to try the patience of the angels themselves.

None of the professional principals in the cast were present at this rehearsal save the gracious lady who was to represent The Carnation Countess. She was both cheerful and obliging; but she did lose her temper in one instance and spoke sharply.

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A certain portion of the first act had been gone over and over again. It had been wrecked each time by one certain actor. They had left it and gone on with further scenes, and had then gone back to the hard part again. It was no use; the girl who did not express her part properly balked them all.

"I declare, Professor," the professional said tartly, "you must have selected this Innocent Delight with your eyes shut. In the first place, *why* a brunette when the part calls for a blonde, if any part ever called for one? It distresses me to say it, but if this Innocent Delight is a sample of what your Milton girls can do in a play, you would much better change your plans and put on *Puss in Boots*, instead of a piece like *The Carnation Countess*. The former would compass the calibre of your talent, I should say."

"What did I tell you?" hissed Eva in Agnes' ear. "Trix Severn will spoil the whole show!"

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CHAPTER XV

THE HALLOWE'EN PARTY

It had become an established custom now for Tess and Dot to call on Mrs. Eland each Monday afternoon.

"She is such a nice lady. I wish you could meet my Mrs. Eland," Tess said to Mrs. Adams, who lived not far from the old Corner House, on Willow Street, and who was one of the first friends the Kenway sisters had made in Milton.

Tess had been sent to Mrs. Adams on an errand for Mrs. MacCall, and now lingered at the invitation of the lady who loved to have any of the Corner House girls come in. "I wish you could meet my Mrs. Eland," repeated Tess. "I believe it would do her good to have more callers. They'd liven her up—and she's so sad nowadays. I know *you'd* liven her up, Mrs. Adams."

"Well, child, I hope I wouldn't make her unhappy, I'm sure. I believe in folks being lively if they can. I haven't a particle of use for *grumps*—no, indeed! 'Laugh and grow fat' is a pretty good motto."

"But you're not fat," suggested Tess; "and you are 'most always laughing."

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"That's a fact; but it's not worrying that keeps me lean. 'Care killed the cat' my mother used to say; but care never killed her, I'm certain! Some folks is born for leanness, and I'm one of 'em."

"Well, it's real becoming to you," said Tess, kindly, eyeing the rather bony woman with reflective gaze. "And you're not as thin as Briggs, the baker. Mrs. MacCall says he doesn't cast a shadow."

"My soul! No!" exclaimed Mrs. Adams. "And his loaves of bread have got so't they don't cast much of a shadow. I've been complaining to him about his bread. The rise in the price of flour can't excuse altogether the stinginess of his loaves."

"He came here the other day about dark, and I had my porch door locked. I heard him knock and I asks, 'Who's there?'"

"'It's the baker, ma'am,' says he. 'Here's your bread.'"

"'Well, bring it in,' says I, forgetting the door was locked."

"'I don't see how I can, ma'am,' he says, 'nless I put it through the keyhole, ma'am,' and he begun to giggle. But I put the come-up-ance on him," declared Mrs. Adams, with satisfaction. I says:

"'I don't see what's to stop you, Myron Briggs. The goodness knows your loaves are small enough to go through the keyhole.' And he didn't have nothin' more to say to me."

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"Why, I think that's very funny," said Tess, in her sober way. "I'll tell that to Mrs. Eland. Maybe it will amuse her."

But on the next occasion when the two younger Corner House girls went to the hospital, Tess did not try to cheer the matron's spirits by repeating Mrs. Adams's joke on the baker.

Mrs. Eland had been crying. Even usually unobservant Dot noticed it. Her eyes were red and her face pale and drawn. The pretty pink of her cheeks and the ready twinkle in her gray eyes, were missing.

On the table by the matron's side were some faded old letters—quite a bundle of them, in fact—tied with a faded tape. They were docketed carefully on their ends with ink that had yellowed with age.

"These are letters from my uncle—'Lemon' Aden, as our little Dot called him," Mrs. Eland said, with a sad smile. "To my—my poor father. Those letters he put into my hand to take care of when we knew that awful fire that destroyed most of our city, was going to sweep away our home."

"I took the letters and Teeny by the hand—"

"Was Teeny your sister's name, Mrs. Eland?" asked Tess, deeply interested.

"So we called her," the matron said. "She was such a little fairy! As small and delicate as Dot, here. Only she was light—a regular milk-and-rose complexion and with red-gold hair."

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"Like Tess' teacher's hair?" asked Dot, curiously. "She's got red hair."

"Oh, goodness!" cried Tess, "she's not pretty. That's sure, if her hair is red!"

"Teeny's hair was lovely," said Mrs. Eland, ruminatively. "I can remember just how she looked. I was but four years older than she; but I was a big girl."

"You mean when that awful fire came?" asked Tess.

"Yes, my dear. Father told me to take care of these letters; they were important. And to keep tight hold of Teeny's hand."

"And didn't you?" asked Dot, to whose thoroughly Sunday-school-trained mind, all punishment directly followed disobedience.

"Oh, yes. I did as he told me. He went back into the house to get mother. She was an invalid, you know."

"Like Mrs. Buckham," suggested Tess.

A spasm of pain crossed the hospital matron's face, and she turned away for a moment. After a little she continued her story.

"And then the fire came so suddenly that it swallowed the house right up!"

"Oh!" gasped Dot.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Eland," whispered Tess, patting her arm.

"It was very dreadful," said the gray lady, softly. "Teeny and I were grabbed up by some men in a wagon, and the horses galloped us away to safety. But our poor mother and father were buried in the ruins of the house."

"And you saved the letters?" said Tess.

"But lost Teeny," said Mrs. Eland, sadly. "There was such confusion in the camp of the refugees that many families were separated. By and by I came East—and I brought these letters. But—but they do me no good now. I can prove nothing by them. 'Corroborative evidence,' so the lawyers say, is lacking—"

"Well, well, well!" she said, breaking off suddenly. "All that does not interest you little ones."

"So you couldn't give the letters to your Uncle Lem-u-el?" questioned Dot, careful to get the name right this time.

"I never could even see my Uncle Lemuel," said Mrs. Eland, with a sigh. "I believe he knew I was searching for him during the last few years of his life; but he always kept out of my way."

"Oh! wasn't that bad of him!" cried Tess.

"I don't know. His end was most miserable. People said he must have at one time accumulated a great deal of money. He was supposed to be as rich a man as lived in Milton—richer than your Uncle Peter Stower. But he must have squandered it all in some way. He died finally in the Quoharis poorhouse. He did not belong in that town; but he wandered there in a storm and they took him in."

"And didn't they find lots of money in his clothes when he was dead?" queried Dot, who had heard something about misers.

"Mercy, no! He had no money, I am quite sure," said the lady, confidently. "The old townfarm keeper over there tells me that Mr. Lemuel Aden left nothing but some worthless papers and letters and a little memorandum book, or diary. I suppose they are hardly worth my claiming them. At least, I never have done so, and Uncle Lemuel died quite fifteen years ago."

After that Mrs. Eland had no more to say about Lemuel Aden for the time being, but tried to amuse her little visitors, as usual. And Tess never told that joke about Briggs, the baker.

This brings us, naturally, to the eve of All Saints, an occasion much given over to feasting and foolery. "When churchyards yawn—if they ever do yawn," suggested Neale, as he and the two oldest Corner House girls set forth on the crisp evening in question, to walk out to Carrie Poole's place.

"I guess folks yarn about them, more than the graves yawn," said Agnes, roguishly. "Remember the garret ghost, Ruth?"

"You mean what Dot thought was a goat?" laughed the older girl. "I believe you!" she went on, caught in the contagion of slang.

"That was before my time in Milton," said Neale, cheerfully. "But I have heard how you Corner House girls laid the ghost that had haunted the old place so long."



They saw two huge pumpkin lanterns grinning a welcome from the gateposts. [Page 173](#)

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"I believe Uncle Peter must have known what it really was," said Ruth, thoughtfully. "But it delighted him, I suppose, to have people talk about the old house, and be afraid to visit him. He was a recluse."

"And a miser, they say," Neale observed bluntly.

"I don't think we should say that," Ruth replied quickly. "Everybody tried to get money from Uncle Peter. Everybody but our mother and father, I guess. That is why he left most everything to us."

"Well," Agnes said, "they all declared he haunted the place himself after he died."

"That's a wicked story!" Ruth sharply exclaimed. "I don't believe there is such a thing as a ghost, anyway!"

"And you, going to a ghost party right now?" cried Neale, laughing.

"These will be play ghosts," returned Ruth.

"Oh, *will* they? You just wait and see," chuckled the boy, for he and his close chum, Joe Eldred, were masters of ceremonies, and they had promised to startle Carrie and her guests with "real Hallowe'en ghosts."

Before the Corner House girls and their escort reached the top of the hill on which the Poole house stood they saw the two huge pumpkin lanterns grinning a welcome from the gateposts. There was a string of smaller Hallowe'en lanterns across the porch before the entrance to the house. And every time anybody pushed open the gate, a ghostly apparition with a glowing head rose up most astonishingly behind the porch railing to startle the visitor.

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Neale and Joe had been at the house all the afternoon, putting up these and other bits of foolery. Joe's father, who was superintendent of the Milton Electric Light Company, allowed his son considerable freedom in the shops. Joe and Neale had brought out a good-sized battery outfit and the necessary wires and attachments; and when the girls stopped on the mat at the door to remove their overshoes, each got a distinct shock, to the great delight of the earlier guests who stood in the hall to observe the fun.

"A ghost pushed you, Ruth Kenway!" cried Carrie, from the stairs.

"Do you dare look down the well with a candle and see if you will see your future husband's face floating in the water, Aggie?" demanded Lucy Poole, Carrie's cousin.

"Don't want to see my future husband," declared Agnes. "It will be bad enough to see him in reality when the awful time arrives."

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIVE-DOLLAR GOLD PIECE

"HUSH!"

"A deep, deep silence, please!"

"Don't crowd so close—don't, Mary Breeze! If there are ghosts I can't protect you from them," came in Eva Larry's shrill whisper. "I'm sure I've not been vaccinated against seeing spirits."

This was after all the visitors had arrived, had removed their wraps, had been ushered into the big double parlors and seated. Across the far end of the room was drawn a sheet, and the lights were very dim.

A figure in long cloak and conical cap, leaning on a long wand, appeared suddenly beside the curtain. A blue light seemed to glimmer faintly around the Hallowe'en figure and outline it.

"Oh!" gasped Lucy Poole, "there's the very Old Witch of them all, I do declare!"

"The Old Wizard, you mean," laughed Agnes, who knew that Neale O'Neil was hidden behind the long cloak and the false face. He looked quite as feminine in this rig as any witch ever does look.

"Silence!" commanded again the husky voice from behind the screen.

With some little bustle the party fell still. The Hallowe'en Witch raised the wand and rapped the butt three times upon the little stand near by.

"Oh! oh! real spirits," gasped Eva. "They always begin with table-rappings, don't they?"

"Hush!" commanded the husky voice once more.

"This is a perverse and unbelieving generation," croaked the witch. "Ye all doubt black magic and white astrology, and ghostly visitations. I am sent by Those Who Fly By Night—at the head of whom flies the Witch of Endor—who commune with goblins and fays—I am sent to convert you all to the truth.

"Ha! Thunder! Lightning!"

The ears of the company were almost deafened and their eyes blinded by a startling crash like thunder behind the screen and a vivid flash of zig-zag light across it.

"See!" croaked the supposed hag. "Even Thunder and Lightning do my bidding. Now! Rain! Sleet! Advance!"

The wondering spectators began to murmur. An almost perfect imitation of dashing sleet against the window panes and rain pouring from the water-spouts followed. Joe Eldred, behind the scenes, certainly managed the paraphernalia borrowed from the Milton Opera House with good effect.

As the murmurs subsided the voice of the Hallowe'en Witch rose again:

"To prove to you our secret knowledge of all that goes on—even the innermost thoughts of your hearts—I will answer any question put to me—marvelously—in the twinkling of an eye. Watch the screen!"

Primed beforehand, one of the boys in the back of the room shouted a question. The witch whirled about and pointed to the screen. Letters of fire seemed to flash from the point of the wand and to cross the sheet, forming the words of a pertinent reply to the query that had been asked.

The girls laughed and applauded. The boys stamped and cheered.

Question followed question. Some were spontaneous and the answers showed a surprisingly exact knowledge of the questioners' private affairs, or else a happy gift at repartee. Of course, the illuminated writing was some trick of electricity; nevertheless it was both amusing and puzzling.

References to school fun, jokes in class-room, happenings known to most of those present who attended the Milton schools, suggested the most popular queries.

Suddenly Eva Larry's sharp voice rang through the room. Her question was distinctly personal, and it shocked some few of the listeners into silence.

"Who told on the basket ball team and got us all barred from taking part in the play?"

"Oh, Eva!" groaned Agnes, who sat beside her loyal, if unwise friend.

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The witch's wand poised, seemed to hesitate longer than usual, and then the noncommittal answer flashed out:

The Traitor is Here!

There was a general shuffling of feet and murmur of surprise. The lights went up. The Hallowe'en Witch had disappeared and that part of the entertainment was over.

"I'd like to have seen Trix Severn's face when that last question was sprung," whispered Myra Stetson to Agnes.

"Oh! it was awful!" murmured the Corner House girl. "Why did you do it, Eva?" she demanded of the harum-scarum girl on her other side.

"Huh! do you s'pose I thought that all up by myself?" demanded Eva.

"Why! didn't you?"

"No, ma'am! Neale O'Neil gave it to me written on a piece of paper and told me when to shout it out. So now! I guess there's more than just us who have suspected that pussy-cat, Trix Severn."

"Oh, don't, girls, don't!" begged Agnes. "We haven't any proof—nor has Neale, I'm sure. I'll just tell him what I think about it."

But she had no opportunity of scolding her boy chum on this evening. He was so busy preparing the other tricks and frolics which followed that Agnes could scarcely say a word to him.

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In the big front hall was a booth of black cloth, decorated with crescents, stars, and astronomical signs in gilt.

Some of the girls were paring apples in long "curls" and throwing the curls over their shoulders to see if the parings would form anything like an initial letter on the floor. It was something of a trick to get all the skin off the apple in one long, curling piece. But Agnes succeeded and threw the peeling behind her.

"I don't see as that's much of any thing," Eva said, reflectively. "Oh, Aggie, it's a U!"

"It's a *me*!" laughed the Corner House girl. "Then I'm going to be my own best friend. Hurrah!"

"No, little dunce; I mean it's the letter U," said Eva, squeezing her.

"I think it looks more like E, dear," returned Agnes. "So it must stand for Eva. You and I are going to be chums *forever*!"

Afterward Agnes remembered that U was an N upside down!

When the girls proposed going out to the spring-house and each looking down the well to see whose reflection would appear in the water in the light of a ghostly candle, Carrie's mother vetoed it.

"I guess not!" she said vigorously. "I'm not going to have candle-grease dripped down my well. Yes! I did it when I was a foolish girl—I know I did, Carrie. Your father had no business telling you. What he didn't tell you was that your grandfather was a week cleaning out the well, and it was right at the beginning of a long, dry spell."

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"Who did you see in the well, Mother?" asked Carrie, roguishly.

"Never mind whom I saw. It wasn't your father, although he had begun to shine around me, even then," laughed Mrs. Poole.

Suddenly two of the girls screamed. A mysterious light had appeared in the black-cloth booth. The gilt signs upon it showed more plainly. There was a rustling noise, and then the flap of the booth was pushed back. The Hallowe'en Witch appeared in the opening.

"Money!" cried the witch. "Bright, golden coin. It's that for which all witches are supposed to sell themselves. See!"

Between thumb and finger the witch held up a shiny five-dollar gold piece. In the other hand was held a shallow pan of water.

"To gain gold one must cross water," intoned the witch, solemnly. "This gold piece is freely the property of whoever can take it out of the pan of water," and with a tinkle the five-dollar coin was dropped into the pan.

"The pan," said the witch, being careful not to turn so as to hide the pan, but, placing it on a taboret inside the tent, "remains in sight of all. One at a time ye may try to pick the coin out of the pan—one at a time. That all may have an equal chance, I will declare that as soon as one

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candidate gets the coin another gold piece will be deposited in the pan for the next person attempting the feat."

"Why, how silly!" cried Trix Severn, from the background. "If you want to give us each a counterfeit five dollars, why not hand it to us?"

"If such exchange is desired, our master, Mr. Poole, stands ready to exchange each coin secured by the neophytes for a perfectly good, new, five-dollar bill," proceeded the witch.

"There's your chance, Trix!" laughed one of the boys.

"Oh! he's only fooling," replied the hotel-keeper's daughter. She loved money.

"Each and every one who wishes may try," went on the witch. "But there is a condition."

"Oh!" muttered Trix. "Thought there was some string hitched to it."

"And you're right, there, Trix," murmured Eva Larry.

"Silence!" cried somebody.

"A condition," went on the Hallowe'en Witch. "That condition will be whispered in the ear of each candidate who tries to seize the coin."

"No, thank you! I won't try," cried Lucy Poole, laughing and shaking her curls. "When he goes to make believe whisper in your ear, he'll bite you! I wouldn't trust that old witch!"

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The others laughed hilariously at this; but Trix Severn was pushing forward. If there was a gold piece to be given away, she wanted first chance at it—string, or no string.

"Keep your eyes on the pan!" cried the witch, waving empty hands in the air all about the pan and taboret, to show that there was "no flim-flam," as the boys called it. "Now! first neophyte step forward!"

"I don't believe he knows what that means," giggled Myra Stetson. "I don't."

But she could not step in before Trix. Miss Severn pushed to the front and was nearest to the master of ceremonies.

"Give me a chance!" she cried. "You're going to lose your old gold piece."

"It's a perfectly new one, Trixie," whispered somebody, shrilly. "It isn't old at all!"

Without a word the witch beckoned the girl inside the booth. The flap of it dropped and they were hidden. The light was cast from a dim, green globe hung at the apex of the little tent. It made a ghostly glow over all inside.

"Advance!" whispered the witch, with lips close to Trix Severn's pretty ear. "Advance, neophyte! The gold piece is yours for the taking. But only she who has no guilt and treachery upon her heart may seize the shining coin. *If you are faithful to your friends, take the coin!*"

Trix started and her pretty face was cast in an angry look as she glanced aside at the masquerader. But she made no reply save by her out-thrust hand which dived into the water.

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Instantly the crowd outside heard a piercing scream from Trix Severn. She burst out of the tent, and, amid the laughter and jeers of her comrades, sought shelter in another room.

"Did you get the gold piece, Trix?" cried some.

"Divide with a fellow, will you?"

"Say! there are more tricks than are dreamed of in your philosophy, eh, Trix?" gibed Eva Larry.

And for that atrocious pun she was pushed forward to the tent, to be the next victim on the altar of the boys' perfectly harmless, though surprising joke.

Nobody was able to pick the gold piece out of the pan of water, thanks to the electric battery that Joe Eldred had so skillfully connected with it.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER

"You scared her," declared Agnes to Neale, on the way home from the party.

"Scared who?" demanded the boy, with apparent innocence.

"Trix."

"What if I did? I scared a lot of them."

"But you scared her worse than all the rest," Agnes said. "She was crying in the bedroom upstairs. Lucy told me."

"Crying because she couldn't get that five-dollar gold piece," chuckled Neale. "I wish I could believe they were tears of repentance."

"Who made you a judge, Neale O'Neil?" asked Ruth, with asperity.

"I'm not. Never was in politics," grinned the boy.

"Smartie!" said Agnes.

"Trix was judged by her own conscience," Neale added soberly. "I never said a word to her about that letter."

"What letter do you mean?" demanded Ruth.

But Neale shut his lips on that. When Ruth was not by, however, he admitted to Agnes that he had borrowed from Mr. Marks the letter that gentleman had received in reference to the strawberry raid. Neale was going to show it to Mr. Bob Buckham.

"I told Mr. Marks there was some funny business about it. I knew Mr. Buckham never intended to report you girls to the principal. He didn't even know your names. Mr. Marks told me to find out about it and report to him. He knows that I once worked for Bob Buckham and that he's a friend of mine."

"Oh, Neale!" groaned Agnes. "That won't help me."

"Help you to what?"

"To get a chance to act in the play," sighed the girl. "I did take the berries! So did the other girls. We deserve our punishment. Mr. Marks won't change his mind."

But Neale was not altogether sure of that. There were things happening just then which pointed to several changes in the character parts of *The Carnation Countess*. It was being discovered by the director and stage manager that many of the characters should be recast. Some of the girls and boys to whom the parts had been allotted could not possibly compass them.

This was particularly plain in the case of Innocent Delight and some others of the female rôles. Some of the very brightest girls in the high school were debarred from taking part in the play because of Mr. Marks' ruling against the first basket ball team and some of their friends.

Neale O'Neil determined to see Mr. Bob Buckham as soon as possible. Another rehearsal would occur on this Saturday afternoon; so Friday evening it was arranged that the interests of the Corner House girls should be divided for one Saturday, at least.

Tess and Dot were going to the hospital in the forenoon. Uncle Rufus had coaxed many fall flowers into late blooming this year and the little girls were to carry great bunches of asters and garden-grown chrysanthemums to decorate the children's ward for Thanksgiving, which came the very next Thursday.

Ruth had shopping to do and must confer with Mr. Howbridge about a Thanksgiving treat for the Meadow Street tenants. "A turkey for each family—and perhaps vegetables," she declared. "So many of them are foreigners. They have learned to celebrate our Fourth of July—why not our Thanksgiving?"

Therefore, it was easy for Neale and Agnes to obtain permission to drive out to Strawberry Farm. Neale got a horse and runabout from the stableman for whom he occasionally drove, and Agnes was proud, indeed, when she came out in her furs and pretty new hat, with the fur-topped boots she had just purchased, and stepped into the carriage beside her friend.

Tom Jonah looked longingly after them from the yard, but Agnes shook her head. "Not to-day, old fellow," she told the good old dog. "We're going to travel too fast for you," for the quick-stepping horse was anxious to be on the road.

They departed amid the cheers of the whole family—and Sammy Pinkney, who threw a big cabbage-stalk after them for good luck and yelled his derisive compliments.

"Fresh kid!" muttered Neale.

"I'd like to spank that boy," sighed Agnes. "There never was so bad a boy since the world began, I believe!"

"I expect that's what the neighbors said about little Cain and Abel," chuckled Neale, recovering his good-nature at once.

"Well," said Agnes, "Sammy's worse than little Tommy Rooney, who ran away from Bloomingsburg to kill Indians."

"Did he kill any?" asked Neale.

"Not here in Milton," Agnes said, laughing. "But he came near getting drowned in the canal."

They drove on by the road that led past Lycurgus Billet's. The tumbled-down house looked just as forlorn as ever, its broken windows stuffed with old hats and gunny-sacks and the like, its broken steps a menace to the limbs of those who went in and out.

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Mrs. Lycurgus was picking up chips around the chopping-block and was not averse to stopping for a chat. "No, Lycurgus ain't here," she drawled. "He's gone huntin'. This yere's the first day the law's off'n deer an' Lycurgus 'lows ter git his share of deer-meat. He knows where there's a lick," and she chuckled in anticipation of a full larder.

"Sue? Naw, she ain't here nuther. Mrs. Buckham—her that's the invalid—has sorter took a fancy ter Sue. She's been a-stoppin' there at that Strawberry Farm, right smart now.

"You goin' there? Then you'll likely see her. She likes it right well; but she's a wild young 'un. I dunno's she'll stand it for long."

"Don't you miss her?" asked Agnes, as Neale prepared to drive on.

"Miss Sue? My soul!" ejaculated Mrs. Billet, showing a ragged row of teeth in a broad smile. "Dunno how I *could* miss one young 'un! There's a-plenty others."

At the Buckham farm little Sue Billet was much in evidence. She was tagging right after the old farmer all the time, and it was plain whose companionship it was that made the half-wild child contented away from home.

The farmer was hearty in his greeting, and he insisted that the visitors go right in "to see marm."

"Wipe yer feet on the door-mat," advised the old man. "Me and Sue haster, or else Posy'll put us out. I never did see a gal with sech a mania for cleanin' floors as that Posy gal."

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The invalid in her bower of bright-colored wools welcomed Agnes warmly. "Here's my pretty one! I declare you are a cure for sore eyes," she cried. "And how are the sisters? Why didn't they come to-day?"

Neale remained outside to speak with Mr. Buckham for some minutes. The old farmer, with his silver-bowed spectacles on his nose looked hard at the letter Neale had brought.

"Not that I kin read it," he said ruefully, "or could if it was writ in letters of gold. But I kin see it ain't marm's hand of write—no, sir."

"I was very sure of that," Neale said quickly. "Let me read it to you, sir. You see it's written on your own stationery."

"I see that," admitted the farmer. "Oh, yes; I see that."

Neale began:

"*Mr. Curtis G. Marks,*
"*Principal Milton High School.*

"DEAR SIR: Mr. Robert Buckham wishes to bring to your attention the fact that on May twenty-third last, a party of your girls, including the members of the first basket ball team, on their way home from Fleeting, were delayed by an accident to the car, right beside his strawberry field; and that the girls named below entered the field without permission, and picked and ate a quantity of berries, beside destroying some vines. Mr. Buckham wishes to call your serious attention to the matter and may yet take steps to punish the culprits himself."

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Then followed the names of all the girls whom Mr. Marks considered it his duty to punish. There was no signature at all to the letter; but it purported to come from the old farmer, and to be written at his instance.

"I dunno as ye kin call it forgery," muttered Mr. Buckham; "but it's blamed mean—that's what it is! It gives me a black eye with these gals, and the gals a black eye with the teacher. Sho! it's a real mean thing to do."

"But who did it?" demanded Neale, earnestly.

"Ya-as! That's the question," returned Mr. Bob Buckham. "If we knowed that——"

"Are you sure we don't know it?"

The old man eyed him contemptively. "You suspect somebody," he said.

"Well! and so do you," declared the boy, warmly. "Only you've got some evidence, and we haven't."

"Humph!"

"You must know who would have a chance to get your letter paper and write such a letter as that?"

"Humph!" repeated the old man, reflectively.

"I don't know how that girl came to be out here. But you know you saw her—and like enough she spoke of the strawberry raid—and she went in to see Mrs. Buckham—and she saw the writing paper——"

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All the time that Neale was drawling out these phrases he was watching the old farmer's grim face keenly for some flicker of emotion. But it was just as expressionless as a face of stone.

"It's fine weather, we're having, Neale," said Mr. Buckham, finally.

At that the boy lost his temper. "I tell you it's a mean shame!" he cried. "Poor Aggie can't act in that old play, and she wants to. And Trix Severn is spoiling the whole show, and she oughtn't to be allowed to. And if she was the cause of making all these other girls get punished, she ought to be shown up."

"Let's see that letter agin, son," said the old man, quietly. He peered at the handwriting intently for a minute. Then he said, with perfectly sober lips but a twinkle in his eye:

"Ye sure marm didn't write it?"

"Just as sure as I can be! I know her handwriting," cried Neale. "You're fooling."

"So all handwriting don't look alike, heh?" was the farmer's final comment, and he returned the letter to the boy's care.

Neale looked startled for a moment. Then he folded the letter carefully and put it away in his pocket. On the way home he said to Agnes:

"Say, Aggie!"

"What is it?"

"Can you get me a sample of Trix Severn's handwriting?"

"*What?*" gasped Agnes.

"Just something she's written—a note, or an exercise, or something."

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Agnes stared at him in growing horror. "Neale O'Neil!" she cried.

"Well?" he demanded gruffly.

"You're going to try to put that letter upon her—you are going to try to prove that she made all this trouble."

"Well! what if?" he asked, still without looking at her.

"Never! Never in this world will I let you do it," said Agnes, firmly.

"Huh! And I was only trying to see if there wasn't some way out of the mess for you," said Neale, as though offended.

"I wouldn't want to get out of it—even if you could help me—at such a price. Because *she* may have been a tale-bearer, do you think *I'd* be one?"

"Not even to get a chance to act in *The Carnation Countess*?" asked Neale, with a sudden smile.

"No! And—and *that* wouldn't help me, anyway!" she added, quite despairingly.

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CHAPTER XVIII

MISS PEPPERILL AND THE GRAY LADY

TESS and Dot Kenway set off for the hospital in good season that Saturday morning, their arms laden with great bunches of flowers, all wrapped about with layers of tissue paper, for the November air was keen.

On the corner of High Street, the wind being somewhat blusterous, Dot managed to run into somebody; but she clung to the flowers nevertheless.

"Hoity-toity!" ejaculated a rather sharp voice. "Where are you going, young lady?"

"To—to the horsepistol," declared the muffled voice of the matter-of-fact Dot.

"Hospital! hospital!" gasped Tess, in horror. "This is Miss Pepperill."

"Ah! So it is Theresa and her little sister," said the teacher. "Humph! A child who mispronounces the word so badly as that will never get to the institution itself without help. Let me carry those flowers, Dorothy. I am going past the Women's and Children's Hospital myself."

"Thank her, Dot!" hissed Tess. "It's very kind of her."

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"You can carry the flowers, Miss Pepperill," said the smallest Corner House girl, "if you want to. But I want Mrs. Eland to know I brought some as well as Tess."

The red-haired lady laughed—rather a short, brusque laugh, that might have been a cough.

"So you are going to see your Mrs. Eland, are you, Theresa?" she asked her pupil.

"Yes, Miss Pepperill. We always see Mrs. Eland when we go to the hospital," said Tess. "But we like to see the children, too."

"Yes," said Dot; "there is a boy there with only one arm. Do you suppose they'll grow a new one on him?"

That time Miss Pepperill *did* laugh in good earnest; but Tess despaired. "Goodness, Dot! they don't grow arms on folks."

"Why not?" demanded the inquisitive Dorothy. "Our teacher was reading to us how new claws grow on lobsters when they lose 'em fighting. But perhaps that boy wasn't fighting when he lost his arm."

"For pity's sake! I should hope not," observed Miss Pepperill. In a minute they came in sight of the hospital, and she added, in her very tartest tone of voice: "I shall go in with you, Theresa. I should like to meet your Mrs. Eland."

"Yes, ma'am," Tess replied dutifully, but Dot whispered:

"I don't like the way she says 'Theresa' to you, Tess. It—it sounds just as though you were going to have a tooth pulled."

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Miss Pepperill had stalked ahead with Dot's bunch of flowers. Dot did not much mind having the flowers carried for her; but she did not propose letting anybody at the hospital make a mistake as to who donated that particular bouquet. As they went in she said to the porter, who was quite well acquainted with the two smallest Corner House girls by this time:

"Good morning, Mr. John. *We* are bringing some flowers for the children's ward, Tess and me. That lady with—with the light hair, is carrying mine."

Fortunately the red-haired school teacher did not hear this observation on the part of Dot.

Half-way down the corridor, Mrs. Eland chanced to come out of one of the offices to meet the school teacher, face to face. "Oh! I beg your pardon," said the little, gray lady—for she dressed in that hue in the house as well as on the street. "Did you wish to see me?"

The matron was small and plump; the teacher was tall and lean. The rosy, pleasant face of Mrs. Eland could not have been put to a greater contrast than with the angular and grim countenance of the bespectacled Miss Pepperill.

The latter seemed, for the moment, confused. She was not a person easily disturbed in any situation, it would seem; but she was almost bashful as the little matron confronted her.

"I—I— Really, are you Mrs. Eland?" stammered the school teacher.

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"Yes," said the quietly smiling gray lady.

"I—I have heard Theresa, here, speak so much of you——" She actually fell back upon Tess for support! "Theresa! introduce me to Mrs. Eland," she commanded.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Eland," said the cordial Tess. "I wanted you to meet Miss Pepperill. You know—she's my teacher."

"Oh! who wanted you to learn the succession of the rulers of England?" said Mrs. Eland, laughing, with a sweet, mellow tone.

"Yes, ma'am. The sovereigns of England," Tess said.

"Of course!" Mrs. Eland added:

"First William, the Norman,
Then William, his son."

"That old rhyme!" Miss Pepperill said, hastily, recovering herself somewhat. "You taught it to Theresa?"

"I wrote it out for her," confessed Mrs. Eland. "I could never forget it. I learned it when I was a very little girl."

"Indeed?" said Miss Pepperill, almost gasping the ejaculation. "So did I."

"That was some time ago," Mrs. Eland said, in her gentle way. "My mother taught me."

"Oh! did she?" exclaimed the other lady.

"Yes. She was an English woman. She had been a governess herself in England."

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"Indeed!" Again the red-haired teacher almost barked the expression. She seemed to labor under some strong emotion. Tess noted the strange change in Miss Pepperill's usual manner as she spoke to the matron.

"I think it must have been my mother who taught me," the teacher said, in the same jerky way. "I'm not sure. Or—perhaps—I picked it up from hearing it taught to somebody else."

"'First William, the Norman,
Then William, his son,——'

Not easily forgotten when once learned."

"Very true," Mrs. Eland said quietly. "I believe my little sister learned it listening to mother and me saying it over and over."

"Ah! yes," Miss Pepperill observed. "Your sister? I suppose much younger than you?"

"Oh, no; only about four years younger," said Mrs. Eland, sadly. "But I lost her when we were both very young."

"Oh! ah!" was Miss Pepperill's abrupt comment. "Death is sad—very sad," and she shook her head.

At the moment somebody spoke to the matron and called her away. Otherwise she might have stopped to explain that her sister had been actually lost, and that she had no knowledge as to whether she were dead or alive.

The red-haired teacher and the two little Corner House girls went on to the children's ward.

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CHAPTER XIX

A THANKSGIVING SKATING PARTY

THE rehearsal of *The Carnation Countess* that afternoon went most dreadfully.

"It really is a shame!" chuckled Neale to Agnes, as he sat beside her for a few minutes after the boys acquitted themselves very well in their part. "It really is a shame," he went on, "what some of you girls can do to a part when it comes to acting. Talk about Hamlet's father being murdered to make a Roman holiday!"

"Hush, you ridiculous boy! That isn't the quotation at all," admonished Agnes.

"No? Well, Hamlet's father was murdered, wasn't he?"

"I prefer to believe him a mythical character," said Agnes, primly.

"At any rate, something as bad will happen to you, Neale O'Neil, if you revile the girls of Milton High," declared Eva Larry, who was near enough to hear the boy's comment. "Oh, dear me! I believe I could make something of that part of Cheerful Grigg, myself. Rose Carey is a regular stick!"

"Hear! hear!" breathed Neale, soulfully. "I'm sorry for Professor Ware."

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"Well! he gave them the parts," snapped Eva. "I'm not sorry for him!"

The musical director was a patient man; but he saw the play threatened with ruin by the stupidity of a few. If his voice grew sharp and his manner impatient before the rehearsal was over, there was little wonder.

The choruses, and even the little folks' parts, went splendidly—with snap and vigor. Some of the bigger girls walked through their rôles as though they were in a trance.

"I declare I should expect more animation and a generally better performance from marionettes," cried the despairing professor.

Mr. Marks came in, saw how things were going, and whispered a few words to Professor Ware. The latter fairly threw up his hands.

"I give it up for to-day," he cried. "You all act like a set of puppets. Pray, pray, young ladies! try to get into the spirit of your parts by next Friday. Otherwise, I shall be tempted to recommend

that the whole play be given up. We do not want to go before the Milton public and make ourselves ridiculous."

Neale said to Agnes as he walked home with her: "Why don't you learn the part of Innocent Delight? I bet you couldn't do it so much better than Trix, after all."

200 She looked at him with scorn. "Learn it?" she repeated. "I know it by heart—and all the other girl's parts, too. I've acted them all out in my room before the mirror." She laughed a little ruefully. "Lots of good it does me, too! And Ruth says I will have to sleep in another room, all by myself, if I don't stop it.

"If I couldn't do the part of Innocent Delight better than Trix Severn——"

She left the remainder of the observation to his imagination.

The Thanksgiving recess was to last only from Wednesday afternoon till the following Monday morning. Friday and Saturday would be taken up with rehearsals—mostly because of the atrociously bad acting of some of the girls.

The holiday itself, however, was free. Dinner was to be a joyous affair at the old Corner House. There were but two guests expected: Mr. Howbridge and Neale. Mr. Howbridge, their uncle's executor, and the Kenway sisters' guardian, was a bachelor, and he felt a deep interest in the Corner House girls. Of course, Agnes begged to have Neale come.

In the Stower tenements in Meadow Street there was great rejoicing, too. Mr. Howbridge's own automobile had taken around the Thanksgiving baskets and the lawyer's clerk delivered them and made a brief speech at each presentation. The Corner House girls could not attend, for they were too busy in school and (at least, three of them) with their parts in the play. But Sadie Goronofsky reported the affair to Tess in these expressive words:

201 "Say! you'd oughter seen my papa's wife and the kids. You'd think they'd never seen anything to eat before—an' we always has a goose Passover week. My! it was fierce! But there was so much in that basket that it made 'em all fair nutty. You'd oughter seen 'em!"

Mrs. Kranz, the "delicatessen lady," as Dot called her, and Joe Maroni, helped fill the baskets. They were the two "rich tenants" on the Stower estate, and the example of the Corner House girls in generosity had its good effect upon the lonely German woman and the voluble Italian fruiterer.

There were other needy people whom the Corner House girls remembered at this season with substantial gifts. Petunia Blossom, and her shiftless husband and growing family, looked to "gran'pap's missus" for their Thanksgiving fowl. And this year Seneca Sprague came in for a share of the Corner House bounty.

Since the fatal day when Billy Bumps had secured a share of the prophet's generous thatch, Ruth had felt she owed Seneca something. The boys plagued him as he walked the streets in his flapping linen duster and broken straw hat; and older people were unkind enough to make fun of him.

Seneca followed the scriptural command to the Jews regarding swine—and more, for he ate no meat of any kind. But the plump and luscious pig was indeed an abomination to Seneca.

202 One day when Ruth went to market she saw a crowd of the market loiterers teasing Seneca Sprague, the man having ventured among them to peddle his tracts.

The girl saw a smeary-aproned young butcher slip up behind the old man and drop a pig's tail into one of the pockets of his flapping duster.

To the bystanders it was a harmless joke; to Seneca, Ruth knew, it would mean infamy and contamination. He would be months purging his conscience of the stain of "touching the unclean thing," as he expressed it.

The girl went up to Seneca and spoke to him. She had a heavy basket of provisions and she asked the prophet to carry it home for her, which he did with good grace.

When they arrived at the old Corner House Ruth told him if he would remove the linen coat she would sew up a tear in the back for him; and in this way she smuggled the "porker's appendage," as Neale O'Neil called it, out of the prophet's pocket.

"And you ought to see the inside of that shack of his down on Bimberg's wharf," Neale O'Neil said. "I got a peep at it one day. You know it's an old office Bimberg used to use before he moved up town, and it's attached to his store-shed, and at the far end.

"Seneca's got a little stove, and a cupboard, a cot to sleep on, a chair to sit in, and the walls are lined with bookshelves filled with old musty books."

203 "Books!" exclaimed Agnes. "Does he read?"

"Why, in his way, he's quite erudite," declared Neale, smiling. "He reads Josephus and the Apocrypha, and believes them quite as much inspired as the rabbinical books of the Old Testament, I believe. Most of his other books relate to the prophetic writings of the old patriarchs.

"He believes that the Pilgrims were descended from the lost tribes of Israel and that God allowed them to people this country and raise up a nation which should be a refuge and example to all the peoples of the earth."

"Why! I think that is really a wonderful thought," Ruth said.

"He's strong on patriotism; and his belief in regard to the divine direction of George Washington does nobody any harm. If everybody believed as Seneca does, we would all have a greater love of country, that's sure."

Ruth sent down to the little hut on the river dock a basket of such good things as she knew Seneca Sprague would appreciate.

"I'd love to send him warm underwear," she sighed.

"And a cap and mittens," Agnes put in. "He gives me the shivers when I see him pass along this cold weather, with his duster flapping."

"Thank goodness he has put on socks and wears carpet slippers," said Ruth. "He believes it is unhealthy to wear many clothes. And he is healthy enough—goodness knows!"

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"But clothes are *awfully* comfortable," said the luxury-loving Dot.

"Right you are, Dottums," agreed Agnes. "And I'd rather be comfortable than so terribly healthy."

The weather had become intensely cold during the past fortnight. Steady frost had chained the river and ponds. There had been no snow, but there was fine skating by Thanksgiving.

On the morning of the holiday the two older Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil set off to meet a party of their school friends for a skating frolic on the canal and river. They met at the Park Lock, and skated down the solidly frozen canal to where it debouched into the river.

Milton young folks were out in full force on this Thanksgiving morning, despite the keen wind blowing from the northwest. Jack Frost nipped fingers and toes; but there were huge bonfires burning here and there along the bank, and at these the skaters could go ashore to warm themselves when they felt too cold.

River traffic, of course, was over for the season. The docks were for the most part deserted. Some reckless small boys built a fire of shavings and old barrels right on Bimberg's dock.

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When the first tar-barrel began to crackle, the sparks flew. Older skaters saw the danger; but when they rushed to put the fire out, it was beyond control. The Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil were among the first to see the danger. Seneca Sprague's shack was then afire.

"Never mind. The old man's up town," cried one boy. "If it burns up it won't be much loss."

"And it *will* burn before the fire department gets here," said one of the girls.

"Poor Seneca! I expect his poor possessions are treasures to him," said Ruth.

"Cracky!" ejaculated Neale, suddenly, as the flames mounted higher. "What about the poor old duffer's books?"

"Oh, Neale!" gasped Ruth. "And they mean so much to him."

"Pshaw!" observed one of the other boys. "They're not really worth anything, are they?"

"Whether they are or not, they are valuable to Seneca," Ruth repeated.

"Well, goodness!" was the ejaculation of a third boy. "I wouldn't risk going into that shack if they were worth a million. See! the whole end of it is ablaze!"

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CHAPTER XX

NEALE'S ENDLESS CHAIN

SKATERS from both up and down the river augmented the crowd of spectators gathered along the shore to watch the fire. The fire-bells were clanging uptown, but as yet the first machine had not appeared. The firemen would have to attack the blaze from the street end of the dock, anyway.

"Father's got goods stored in the shed," said Clarence Bimberg, "and they'll try to save them. I guess Seneca's old shack will have to go."

"And all those books you told us about, Neale," Agnes cried.

"Wish I could get 'em out for him!" declared the generous boy.

"Pshaw! I can tell you how to do it. But you wouldn't dare," chuckled Clarence.

"How?" demanded Neale.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Well—mebbe not. But tell me anyhow."

"There's an old trap-door in the dock under that office-shack."

"You don't mean it, Clarry?"

"Yes, there is. I know it's there. But it mightn't be open now—I mean maybe it's nailed down. I don't believe Seneca knows it's there. The boards just match."

"Let's try it!" exclaimed Neale.

"Oh, Neale, you wouldn't!" gasped Agnes, who had heard the conversation.

"Of course he wouldn't," scoffed Clarence. "He's only bluffing. Father used to let us play around the old shack before Seneca got it to live in. And I found the trap. But I never said anything about it."

Neale looked serious, but he said: "Just show me how to reach it, Clarry."

"Why," said Clarence, "the ice is solid underneath the wharf. You can see it is. Skate right under, if you want," and he laughed again, believing Neale in fun.

"Show me," said the white-haired boy.

"Not much I won't! Why, the wharf boards are afire already, and the sparks will soon be raining down there."

"Show me," demanded Neale. "If there *is* a trap there——"

"Oh, Neale!" Agnes cried again. "Don't!"

"Don't you be a little goose, Aggie," said the earnest boy. "Come on, Clarry."

"Oh, I don't want to," said the other boy, seeing that Neale was in earnest now. "We'll get burned."

Neale grabbed his hand and whirled him around, and they shot in toward the burning wharf, whether Clarence would or no!

"Hey, boys, keep away from there!" shouted a man from the next dock. "You'll get burned."

"Oh, Neale, come back!" wailed Agnes.

"You hear, Neale O'Neil?" gasped Clarence, struggling in the bigger boy's grasp. "*I don't want to go!*"

"Show me where the trap is," said the boy who had been brought up in a circus. "Then you can run if you like. I'm not afraid."

"I am!" squealed Clarence Bimberg.

But he was forced by the stronger Neale to skate under the burning wharf. They bumped about for half a minute among the piles and the broken ice. They could hear the flames crackling overhead, and the smoke puffed in between the planks. The black ice was solid and there was light enough to see fairly well.

"There! There!" shrieked the frightened Clarence. "You can see it now, Neale! Let me go!"

It did not look like a trap-door to Neale. Yet some short, rotting steps led up out of the frozen water to the flooring of the old wharf. The moment he essayed to climb these steps on his skates, Clarence broke away and shot out from under the burning dock.

Neale was too determined to reach the interior of Seneca Sprague's shack to save the old prophet's books, to bother about the defection of his schoolmate. If Joe Eldred had only been at hand, *he* would have stood by!

"Oh, Neale! can you open it?" quavered a voice behind and below him.

Neale almost tumbled backward from the steps, he was so amazed. He looked down to see Agnes' rosy, troubled face turned up to his gaze.

"For pity's sake! get out of here, Aggie," he begged.

"I won't!" she returned, tartly.

"You'll get burned."

"So will you."

"But aren't you afraid?" the boy demanded, in growing wonder.

"Of course I am!" she gasped. "But I can stand it if *you* can."

"Oh, *me!*"

"Hurry up!" cried Agnes. "I can help carry out some of the books."

Meanwhile Neale had been pounding on the boards overhead. Suddenly two of them lifted a little.

"I've got it!" yelled Neale, in delight, and above the crackling of the flames and the confusion of other sounds without.

He burst up the rickety, old trap with his shoulders, and was met immediately by a stifling cloud of smoke. The interior of Seneca Sprague's shack was filled with the pungent vapor, although the flames were still on the outside.

"Don't get burned, Neale!" cried Agnes, coughing below from a rift of smoke, as the boy climbed into the little room.

"You better go away," returned Neale, in a muffled voice.

"I'll take an armful of books when I do go—if you'll hand 'em down to me," cried his girl chum.

"Oh, Aggie! if you get hurt Ruth will never forgive me," cried Neale, really troubled about the Corner House girl's presence in this place of danger.

"I tell you to give me some of those books, Neale O'Neil!" cried Agnes. "If you don't I'll come up in there and get them."

"Oh, don't be in such a hurry!" returned Neale.

He came to the smoky opening with his arms full and began to descend the steps, which creaked under his weight. He slipped on the skates which he had had no time to remove, and came down with a crash, sitting upon the lowest step. But he did not loose his hold on the books.

"Oh, Neale! are you hurt?" Agnes demanded.

"Only in my dignity," growled the boy, grimly.

Agnes began to giggle at that; but she grabbed the books from him. "Go back and get some more—that's a good boy!" she cried, and, whirling about, shot out from under the wharf.

The worried Ruth, who had not seen the first of this adventure, was standing near. Agnes deposited the volumes at her sister's feet.

"Look out for them, Ruthie!" Agnes cried. "Neale's going to get them all."

With this reckless promise she sped back under the burning wharf. Water was pouring upon the goods' shed now, freezing almost as fast as it left the hose-pipes, but the firemen had not reached the little shack.

Joe Eldred and some of the other boys reached the scene of Ruth's trouble and quickly understood the situation. If Neale O'Neil wanted to save Seneca Sprague's books, of course they would help him—not, as Joe said, that they "gave a picayune for the crazy old duffer."

"Form a chain, boys! form a chain!" commanded Neale's muffled voice from inside the burning shack, when he learned who was below. And this the crowd did, passing the armfuls of books back and out from under the wharf as fast as Neale could gather them and hand them down.

Agnes found herself put aside when Joe and his comrades got to work. But they praised her pluck, nevertheless.

"Those Corner House girls are all right!" was the general comment.

Poor Seneca came running to the end of a neighboring dock and took a flying leap—linen duster, carpet slippers, and all—down upon the ice. He was determined at first to get to his shack on the wharf, for he did not see what the boys were doing for him.

Men in the crowd ran to hold the poor old prophet back from what would likely have been his doom. He screamed anathemas upon them until they led him to where Ruth stood and showed him the great heap of books. Then almost immediately he became calm.

THE CORNER HOUSE THANKSGIVING

It was truly a Thanksgiving feast at the old Corner House that day, and it was enjoyed to the full by all. Nor was there a table in all Milton around which sat a more apparently incongruous company.

At first glance one might have thought that the Corner House girls had put forth a special effort to gather together a really fantastical company to celebrate the holiday. Uncle Rufus, at least, had never served quite so odd an assortment of guests during all the years he had been in Mr. Peter Stower's employ.

At one end of the table the old Scotch housekeeper presided, in a fresh cap and apron. Her hard, rosy face looked as though it had received an extra polishing with the huck towel on the kitchen roller.

At the far end of the long board, covered with the best old damask the house afforded, and laid with the heavy, sterling plate that Unc' Rufus tended so lovingly, and the cut glass of old-fashioned pattern, was silver-haired Mr. Howbridge. He was a man very precise in his dress, given to the niceties of the toilet in every particular. He wore rimless glasses perched on his aristocratic beak of a nose, a well cared-for mustache much darker than his hair, and had very piercing eyes.

On his right was prim Aunt Sarah—Aunt Sarah, who never seemed to belong to the family, who lived so self-centered an existence, but who was sure to have her meddling finger in everything that went on in the old Corner House, especially if it was desired that she should not.

Aunt Sarah glared across the table at a tall, lean, ascetic-looking man in a rusty, old-fashioned, black, tail coat that was a world too wide for him across the shoulders, and with his sleek, long hair parted very carefully in the middle, and falling below the high collar of the coat.

Those who had never seen Seneca Sprague save in his flapping duster and straw hat, would scarcely have recognized him now.

Ruth, after the fire, when the prophet had been made to understand that all his possessions for which he really cared were saved, had induced him to come home with them to eat the Thanksgiving feast.

"It is fitting that we should give thanks—yea, verily," agreed Seneca, his mind rather more muddled than usual by the excitement of the fire. "I saw the armies of Armageddon advancing with flame-tipped spears and flights of flashing arrows. They were all—all—aimed to overwhelm me. But their hands were stayed—they could not prevail against me. Thank you, young man," he added, briskly, to Neale O'Neil. "You have a pretty wit, and by it you have saved my library—my books that could not be duplicated. I have the only Apocrypha extant with notes by the great Swedenborg. Do you know the life of George Washington, young man?"

"Pretty well, sir, thank you," said Neale, gravely.

"It is well. Study it. That great being who sired our glorious country, is yet to come again. And he will purge the nation with fire and cleanse it with hyssop. Verily, it shall come to pass in that day——"

"But we mustn't keep Mrs. MacCall waiting for us, Mr. Sprague," Ruth had interrupted him by saying. "You can tell us all about it later."

They had bundled him into a carriage near the burned dock, to hide his torn duster and wild appearance, and had brought him to the old Corner House—Ruth and Agnes and Neale. There he was soon quieted. Neale helped him remove the traces of the struggle he had had with those who kept him from going into the fire, and likewise helped him dress for dinner.

Uncle Peter Stower's ancient wardrobe furnished the most of Seneca's holiday garb. "Mr. Stower was a meaty man," the prophet said, in some scorn. "His girth should have been upon his conscience, for verily he lived for the greater part of his life on the fat of the land. His latter days were lean ones, it is true; but they could not absolve him from his youthful gastronomic sins."

Ruth had some fear that the odd, old fellow might make trouble at the table; but Seneca Sprague had not always lived the untamed life he now did. He had been well brought up, and had associated with the best families of Milton and the county in his younger days.

Mr. Howbridge was surprised to find Seneca Sprague sitting in the ancient parlor of the old Corner House when he arrived—an unfriendly room which was seldom opened by the girls. But the lawyer shook hands with Seneca and told him how glad he was to hear that his library had been saved from the fire.

"One may say by a miracle," the prophet declared solemnly. "As Elijah was fed by the raven in the wilderness, so was my treasure cared for in time of stress."

He talked after that quite reasonably, and when the girls in their pretty dresses fluttered to their seats about the table, and with Neale O'Neil filled them all, the company being complete, Ruth, looked to Seneca to ask a blessing.

His reverent grace, spoken humbly, was most fitting. Linda opened the door. A great breath of

warm, food-laden air rushed in. Uncle Rufus appeared, proudly bearing the great turkey, browned beautifully and fairly bursting with tenderness and—dressing!

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"Oh-ee!" whispered ecstatically, the smallest Corner House girl. "He looks so *noble*! Do—do you s'pose, Tess, that it will *hurt* him when Uncle Rufus carves?"

"My goodness!" exclaimed Neale, "it will hurt us if he doesn't carve the turk. I couldn't imagine any greater punishment than to sit here and taste the other good things and renege on that handsome bird."

But Seneca Sprague did not hear this comment. He ate heartily of the plentiful supply of vegetables; but he would not taste the turkey or the suet pudding.

It was a merry feast. They sat long over it. Uncle Rufus set the great candelabra on the table and by the wax-light they cracked nuts and drank sweet cider, and the younger ones listened to the stories of their elders.

Even Aunt Sarah livened up. "My soul and body!" she croaked, with rather a sour smile, it must be confessed, "I wonder what Peter Stower would say to see me sitting here. Humph! He couldn't keep me out of my home forever, could he?"

But nobody made any reply to that statement.

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CHAPTER XXII

CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE

THE day following Thanksgiving that year would ever be known as "Black Friday" in the annals of Milton school history. And it came about like this.

Professor Ware had given notice the Saturday previous that there would be two rehearsals on that day of *The Carnation Countess*. The morning rehearsal was for the choruses, the dance numbers and tableaux, and especially for those halting Thespians whom the professor called "lame ducks"—those who had such difficulty in learning their parts.

The afternoon rehearsal was the first full rehearsal—every actor, both amateur and professional, must be present, and the play was to be run through from the first note of the overture to the final curtain. For the first time the scholars would hear the orchestral arrangement of the music score.

And right at the start—at the beginning of the morning rehearsal—the musical director was balked. Innocent Delight was not present.

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"What's the matter with that girl?" demanded the irate professor of everybody in general and nobody in particular. "Was Thanksgiving too much for her? I expected some of you boys would perform gastronomic feats to make the angels tremble. But girls!"

"The Severns went down to Pleasant Cove over Thanksgiving. They haven't got home yet," announced a neighbor of the missing Trix.

"What? Gone out of town? And after all I said about the importance of to-day's rehearsals!" exclaimed the director. "This is no time for a part as important as that of Innocent Delight to be read."

But they had to go on with the play in that halting manner. Trix Severn's lines were read; but her absence spoiled the action of each scene in which she should have appeared.

"But goodness knows!" snapped Eva Larry, who, with the rest of the "penitent sisterhood," as Neale called them, watched the rehearsal, "Trix will spoil the play anyway. But won't she get it when she comes this afternoon?"

The play halted on to the bitter end. The amateur performers grew tired; the director grew fussy. His sarcastic comments toward the end did not seem to inspire the young folk to a spirited performance of their parts. They were discouraged.

"We should announce this on the bills as a burlesque of *The Carnation Countess*," declared Professor Ware, "and as nothing else. Milton people will laugh us out of town."

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The girls and teachers in the audience realized even better than the performers just how bad it was. The little folk were excused, for they had all done well, while the director tried his best to whip the others into some sort of shape for the afternoon session.

"I know very well that Madam Shaw will refuse to sing her part with a background of such blunderers!" exclaimed Professor Ware, bitterly, at the last. "Nor will the other professionals be

willing to risk their reputations, and the play itself, in such a performance. Our time has gone for nothing. And if Innocent Delight does not appear for the afternoon performance——"

His futile threats made little impression upon the girls and boys. They were—for the time—exhausted. Ruth went home in tears—although she had not drawn one word or look of critical comment from the sharp-spoken director. Tess was very solemn, and continued to repeat her part of Swiftwing over and over to herself—although she knew it perfectly.

Dot danced along, saying: "Well! I don't care! *I buzzed* all right—I know I did! Buzz! buzz! buzz-z-z-z!"

"Goodness gracious!" ejaculated the nervous Agnes, who felt for them all, though not having a thing to do with the play—— "Goodness gracious! you were wishing for a 'buzzer,' Dot Kenway. I don't think you need one. Nature must have made a mistake and meant you for a bee, anyway. I don't see how you ever came to be born into the Kenway family, instead of a bee-hive!"

Dot pouted at that, but quickly changed her expression when she saw Sammy Pinkney careering along the street like a young whirlwind. Sammy, for his sins, had been forbidden to participate in *The Carnation Countess*—not that it seemed to trouble him a bit! Anything that occurred in the schoolhouse was trial and tribulation to Master Pinkney. They could not fool him into believing differently, just by calling it a "play!"

"Oh, bully! bully! bully!" he sang, coming along the street in a "hop, skip and a jump pace," the better to show his joy. "Oh, Dot! oh, Tess! you never can guess what's happened."

"Something *awful*, I just know," said Tess, "or you wouldn't be so glad."

"Huh!" grunted Sammy, stopping in the middle of his fantastic dance, and glaring at the next to the youngest Corner House girl, "You wait, Tess Kenway! You're 'teacher's pet'; but nobody else likes old Pepperpot. I guess it will be in the paper to-night, and everybody will be glad of it."

"What has happened to Miss Pepperill?" demanded Ruth, seeing into the mystery of the boy's speech—at least, for a little way.

"Then you *ain't* heard?" crowed Sammy.

"And we're not likely to, if you don't hurry up and say something," snapped Agnes.

"Well!" growled Sammy. "She's hurt-ed. She was run down by an automobile on High Street. They wanted to take her to the hospital—the one for girls and babies, you know——"

"Oh! Mrs. Eland's hospital!" gasped Tess.

"Yep. But she wouldn't go there. They say she made 'em take her to her boarding house. And she's hurt bad. And, oh, goody! there won't be any school Monday!" cried the young savage, beginning to dance again.

"Don't you fool yourself!" exclaimed Agnes, for Tess was crying frankly, and Dot had a finger in her mouth. "Don't you fool yourself, Sammy Pinkney! They'll have plenty of time to find a substitute teacher before school opens on Monday."

"Oh, they *won't!*" wailed the boy.

"Yes they will. And I hope it will be somebody a good deal worse than Miss Pepperill. So there!"

"Oh, but there *ain't* nobody worse," said Sammy, with conviction, while Tess looked at her older sister with tearful surprise.

"Why, Aggie!" she said sorrowfully. "I hope you don't mean that. 'Cause I've got to go to school Monday as well as Sammy."

Tess was really much disturbed over the news of Miss Pepperill's injury. She would not wait for luncheon but went straight over to the house where her teacher boarded, and inquired for her.

The red-haired, sharp-tongued lady was really quite badly hurt. There was a compound fracture of the leg, and Dr. Forsyth feared some injury to the brain, for Miss Pepperill's head was seriously cut. Tess learned that they had been obliged to shave off all the teacher's red, red hair!

"And that's awful!" she told Dot, on her return. "For goodness only knows what color it will be when it grows out again. Miss Lippit (she's the landlady where Miss Pepperill boards) showed it to me. And it's beautiful, long, long hair."

"Mebbe it will come out like Mrs. MacCall's—pepper-and-salt color," said Dot, reflectively. "We haven't got a pepper-and-salt teacher in school, have we?"

Such light reflections as this did not please Tess. She really forgot to repeat the part of Swiftwing, the hummingbird, in her anxiety about the injured Miss Pepperill.

At two o'clock the big rehearsal was called.

"I don't believe I will go back with you," Agnes said, to Ruth. "I can't sit there and hear Trix murder that part. Oh, dear!"

"I bet you won't ever eat any more strawberries," chuckled Neale, who had come over the back

fence of the Corner House premises, that being his nearest way to school.

"Don't speak to me of them!" cried Agnes. "A piece of Mrs. MacCall's strawberry shortcake would give me the colic, I know—*just to look at it!*"

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"Oh, you'll get all over that before the strawberry season comes around again," her older sister said placidly. "You'd better come, Aggie."

"No."

"Oh, yes, Aggie, do come!" urged Neale. "Be a sport. Come and see and hear us slaughter *The Carnation Countess*. It'll be more fun than moping here alone."

"Well, I'll just cover my eyes and ears when Innocent Delight comes on," Agnes declared.

But Trix was not at the rehearsal. Information from the Severn house revealed the fact that the family was still at Pleasant Cove. It was evident that Trix's interest in *The Carnation Countess* had flagged.

Professor Ware gathered the principal professionals around him. His speech was serious. They had given the performance in several cities and large towns, and had whipped into shape some very unpromising material; but the director admitted that he was discouraged with the outlook here.

"I am inclined to say right here and now: Give it up. Not that the children as a whole do not average as high in quality as those of other schools; but the talent is lacking to take the amateur parts which have always been assigned to the girls and boys. The girls' parts are especially weak.

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"One or two bad parts might be ignored—overlooked by a friendly audience. But here is this Innocent Delight girl, not here at all at the most important rehearsal we have had. And she is *awful* in her part, anyway; I admit it.

"I was misinformed regarding her. I received a note before the parts were given out, stating that she had had much experience in amateur theatricals. I do not believe that she ever even acted in parlor charades," added the professor, in disgust. "She must have a friendly letter-writer who is a professional booster.

"Well, it is too late to change such a part, I am afraid. But to read her lines this afternoon, all through the play, will cripple us terribly. Even if she is a stick, she can look the part, and walk through it."

Somebody tugged at the professor's sleeve. When he looked around he saw a flaxen-haired boy with a very eager face.

"I say, Professor! there's a girl here that knows Trix Severn's part better than she does herself."

"What's this? Another booster?" demanded the director, sorrowfully.

"Just try her! She knows it all by heart. And she's a blonde."

"Why haven't I seen her before, if she's so good? Is she in the chorus?" demanded the doubtful professor.

"She hasn't had any part in the play at all—yet," declared Neale O'Neil, banking all upon this chance for Agnes. "But you just try her out!"

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"She knows the lines?"

"Perfectly," declared the boy, earnestly.

He dared say no more, but he watched the professor's face sharply.

"I don't suppose she can do any more harm than the other," muttered the desperate director. "Send her up here, boy. Odd I should not have known there was an understudy for Innocent Delight."

Neale went down to the row of seats in which Agnes and a few of the "penitent sisterhood" sat. "Say!" he said, grinning at Agnes and whispering into her pretty ear, "Now's your chance to show us what you can do."

"What do you mean, Neale O'Neil?" she gasped.

"The professor is looking for somebody to walk through Trix's part—just for this rehearsal, of course."

"Oh, Neale!" exclaimed the Corner House girl, clasping her hands. "They'd never let me do it."

"I don't believe you can," laughed Neale. "But you can try if you want to. He told me to send you up to him. There he stands on the stage now."

Agnes rose up giddily. At first she felt that she could not stand. Everything seemed whirling about her. Neale, with his past experience of the circus in his mind, had an uncanny appreciation of her feelings.

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"Buck up!" he whispered. "Don't have stage-fright. You don't have to say half the words if you

don't want to."

She flashed him a wonderful look. Her vision cleared and she smiled. Right there and then Agnes, by some subtle power that had been given her when she was born into this world, became changed into the character of Innocent Delight—the part which she had already learned so well.

She had sat here throughout each rehearsal and listened to Professor Ware's comments and the stage manager's instructions. She knew the cues perfectly. There was not an inflection or pose in the part that she had not perfected her voice and body in. The other girls watched her move toward the stage curiously—Neale with a feeling that he had never really known his little friend before.

"Hello, who's this?" asked one of the male professionals when Agnes came to the group upon the stage.

"The very type!" breathed Madam Shaw, who had just come upon the platform in her street costume. "Professor! why did you not get *this* girl for Innocent Delight?"

"I have," returned the director, drily. "You are the one who has studied the part?" he asked Agnes.

"Yes, sir," she said, and all her bashfulness left her.

"Open your first scene," commanded the professor, bruskiy.

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The command might have confused a professional—especially when the player had had no opportunity of rehearsing save in secret. But Agnes had forgotten everything but the character she was to play. She opened her lips and began with a vivacity and dash that made the professionals smile and applaud when she was through.

"Wait!" commanded the professor, immediately. "If you can do that as well in the play——"

"Oh! but, sir," said Agnes, suddenly coming to herself, and feeling her heart and courage sink. "I can't act in the play—not really."

"Why not?" he snapped.

"I am forbidden."

"By whom, I'd like to know?"

"Mr. Marks. We girls of the basket ball team cannot act. It is a punishment."

"Indeed?" said the director, grimly. "And are all the girls Mr. Marks sees fit to punish at this special time, as able as you are to take part?"

"Ye-yes, sir," quavered Agnes.

"Well!" It was a most expressive observation. But the director said nothing further about Mr. Marks and his discipline. He merely turned and cried:

"Ready for the first act! Clear the stage."

To Madam Shaw he whispered: "Of course, one swallow doesn't make a summer."

"But one good, smart girl like this one may come near to saving the day for you, Professor."

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CHAPTER XXIII

SWIFTWING, THE HUMMINGBIRD

THE orchestra burst into a low hum of sweet sounds. Agnes had heard them tuning up under the stage for some time; but back in the little hall where the amateur performers were gathered in readiness for their cues, she had not realized that the orchestra members had taken their places.

Having watched the rehearsals so closely since they began, she could now imagine the tall director with his baton, beating time for the opening bars.

The overture swelled into the grand march, and then went on, giving a taste of the marches, dances, and singing numbers, finally with a crash of sound, announcing the moment when the curtain, at the real performance, would go up.

"Now!" hissed the stage manager, beckoning on the first chorus.

Innocent Delight was in it. Innocent Delight went up the steps and into the wings with the others, as in a dream. As she had not rehearsed with the chorus before, she made a little mistake

in her position in the line; and she failed to keep quite good time in the dancing step.

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"Oh, dear me!" gasped Carrie Poole. "Now you're going to spoil it all, Aggie Kenway! You'll be worse than Trix, I suppose!"

Agnes merely smiled at her. Nothing could disturb her poise just then. *She was going to act!*

They saw the boys across the stage, ready, too, to enter—some of them grinning and foolish looking; others very serious. Neale smiled at Agnes and waved his hand encouragingly. Her confident pose delighted him.

Now they were on! It was easy, after all, to keep step with the music. She knew the words of the opening song perfectly. Agnes had a clear, if light contralto voice; the alto part was easy for her to sing.

With a vim that seemed not to have been in the chorus before, the number came to a finish. The girls and boys fell back. Innocent Delight was in the centre of the stage, ready to welcome the Carnation Countess.

Agnes was slow in speaking; her words seemed to drag a bit. Madam Shaw was waiting impatiently to come on. But the stage manager whispered shrilly:

"Quite right, my dear! quite right! The Countess is supposed to come on in a sedan chair, and you must give her time."

The professionals noted the girl's familiarity with the stage instructions; always, wherever the manager had explained in the earlier rehearsals the reason for some stage change, Innocent Delight had the matter pat. The action of the play was not retarded in any particular for the new girl. And her ability in handling the character of the blithe, joyous, light-hearted girl was most natural.

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Somehow, this chief amateur part going so well, pulled the others up to the mark. But there was still much to be wished for in the case of Cheerful Grigg, the twins, Sunbeam and Moonbeam, and Lily White.

"I'd like to get hold of some of those other girls that Mr. Marks considers it his duty to punish," growled the professor. "What's all this foolishness about, anyway? Doesn't he want the play to be a success?"

He said this to Miss Lederer, the principal's assistant. She shook her head, sadly.

"I am sorry that you can't have them, Professor," she said. "But of course, this is only temporary for Agnes."

"What's that?" he demanded angrily.

"Why, she cannot play Innocent Delight for you," the teacher said firmly. "I am not sure that Mr. Marks will like it as it is."

"He's *got* to like it!" interrupted the professor. "I've just got to have the girl—there are no two ways about it. I tell you, without her the schools might as well give up trying to put on the play. That other girl, who was wished on me, is not fitted for the part at all."

"But you have given it to her."

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"And I can take it away; you watch me!" snapped the director. "And I am going to have this Agnes, as you call her, Marks or no Marks!"

"Is that a pun?" the teacher asked archly. "For that is why Agnes Kenway cannot act in the play. Bad marks."

"What's her heinous crime?" demanded the professor.

"Stealing," said the assistant principal, with twinkling eyes.

"Stealing! What did she steal?"

"Strawberries."

"My goodness! I'll pay for them," rejoined the director, quickly.

"I am afraid that will not satisfy Mr. Marks."

"What will satisfy him, then?" demanded the professor. "For I am determined to have that girl play Innocent Delight for me, or else I will not put on the play. I would rather shoulder the expense thus far incurred—all of it—than to go on with a lot of numskulls such as seem to have been selected for many of these important rôles. For pity's sake let me have at least one girl who shows talent."

Meanwhile Madam Shaw, the prima donna, came to Agnes after it was all over and put her arms tight around the young girl's shoulders.

"Who are you, my dear?" she asked, looking kindly down upon Agnes' blushing face.

"Agnes Kenway, ma'am."

"Oh! one of the Corner House girls!" cried the lady. "I have heard of you sisters. Three of you were in the play from the first. And why not you, before?"

"Oh!" fluttered Agnes, now waking up from the beautiful dream in which she had lived from two o'clock till five. "I am not in it—really. I cannot play the part in the opera house."

"Why not, pray?" demanded Madam Shaw in some surprise.

"Because I have broken some rules and am being punished," admitted Agnes.

Madam Shaw hid a smile quickly. "Punished at home?" she asked gravely.

"Oh, no! There is nobody to punish us at home."

"No?"

"No. We have no mother or father. There is only Ruth, and we none of us want to displease Ruth. It wouldn't be fair."

"Who is Ruth?"

"The oldest," said Agnes. "She is in the play. But she hasn't a very important part. I think she might have been given a better one!"

"But *you*? Who is punishing you? Your teacher?"

"Mr. Marks."

"No? Not really?"

"Yes. The basket ball team and some other girls can only look on—we can't act. He said so. And—and we deserve it," stammered Agnes.

"Oh, indeed! But does the poor Carnation Countess deserve it?" demanded Madam Shaw, with asperity. "I wonder what Mr. Marks can be thinking of?"

However, everybody seemed to feel happier and less discouraged about the play when this rehearsal was over; and Agnes went home in a seventh heaven of delight.

"I don't care so much now if I never have a chance again," she said, over and over again. "I've *shown* them that I can act."

But Ruth began to be anxious. She said to Mrs. MacCall that evening: "Suppose, when Agnes gets older, she should determine to be a player? Wouldn't it be *awful*?"

The old Scotch woman bit off her thread reflectively. "Tut, tut!" she said, at last. "That's borrowing trouble, my dear. And you're a bit old-fashioned, Ruthie Kenway. Perhaps being an actress isn't so awful a thing as we used to think. 'Tis at least a way of earning one's living; and it seems now that all girls must work."

"Didn't they work in your day, Mrs. MacCall?" asked Ruth, slyly.

"Not to be called so," was the prompt reply. "Those that had to go into mills and factories were looked down upon a wee bit, I am afraid. Others of us only learned to scrub and cook and sew and stand a man's tantrums for our living. It was considered more respectable to marry a bad man than to work for an honest wage."

Saturday Agnes was not called upon at all. She heard that Trix was at home again; but there were no rehearsals of the speaking parts of *The Carnation Countess*. Only the dances and ensembles of the choruses were tried out in the afternoon.

The girls heard nothing further regarding the re-distribution of the parts—if there were to be such changes made. They only understood that the play would be given, in spite of the director's recent despairing words.

And it was known, too, that the following rehearsals would be given on the stage of the opera house itself. The scenery was ready, and on Saturday morning of the next week the first costume rehearsal would be undertaken.

Dot and her little friends were quite over-wrought about their bee dresses. They had learned to dance and "drone" in unison; now they were all to be turned into fat brown bees, with yellow heads and stripes on their papier-maché bodies, and transparent wings.

Tess, as Swiftwing, the chief hummingbird, was a brilliant sight indeed. Only one thing marred Tess Kenway's complete happiness. It was Miss Pepperill's illness.

For the unfortunate teacher was very ill at her boarding house. Her head had been hurt when the automobile knocked her down. And while her broken bones might mend well, Dr. Forsyth was much troubled regarding the patient.

The Corner House girls heard that Miss Pepperill was quite out of her head. She babbled about things that she never would have spoken of in her right mind. And while she had so vigorously refused to be taken to the Women's and Children's Hospital when she was hurt, she talked about Mrs. Eland, the matron, a good deal of the time.

"I'm going to see my Mrs. Eland and tell her that Miss Pepperill asks for her and if she has found her sister," Tess announced, after a long conference with the teacher's landlady, who was a kindly, if not very wise maiden lady.

"I see no harm in your telling Mrs. Eland," Ruth agreed. "Perhaps Mrs. Eland would go to see her, if it would do the poor thing any good."

"Why do you say 'poor thing' about Miss Pepperill, Ruthie?" demanded Dot, the inquisitive. "Has she lost all her money?"

"Goodness me! no, child," replied the oldest Corner House girl; nor did she explain why she had said "poor thing" in referring to the sick teacher. But everybody was saying the same; they did not expect her to live.

The substitute teacher who took Miss Pepperill's place in school had possibly been warned against Sammy Pinkney; for that embryo pirate found, at the end of the first day of such substitution, that he was no better off than he had been under Miss Pepperill's régime.

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Tess was very serious these days. She was troubled about the teacher who was ill (for it was the child's nature to love whether she was loved in return or no), her lessons had to be kept up to the mark, and, in addition, there was her part as Swiftwing.

She knew her steps and her songs and her speeches, perfectly. But upon the Saturday morning when the dances were rehearsed, Tess found that there was more to the part than she had at first supposed.

There was to be a tableau in which—at the back of the stage—Swiftwing in glistening raiment, was the central figure. A light scaffolding was built behind a gaudy lace "drop" and to the steps of this scaffolding, from the wings on either side of the stage, the birds and butterflies flew in their brilliant costumes to group themselves back of the gauze of the painted drop.

Tess was a bit terrified when she was first taken into the flies, for Swiftwing first of all was to come floating down from above to hover over and finally to rest upon a great carnation.

Of course, Tess saw that she was to stand quite securely upon the very top step of the scaffolding. A strong wire was attached to her belt at the back so that she could not possibly fall.

Below, and on either side of Tess, was a smaller girl, each costumed as a butterfly. These were tossed up to their stations by the strong arms of stage-hands. They could not be held by wires as Tess was, for their wings were made to vibrate slowly all through the scene.

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On lower steps others of the brilliantly dressed children—all butterflies and winged insects—were grouped. From the front the picture thus formed was a very beautiful one indeed; but the children had to go over and over the scene to learn to do their part skillfully and to secure the right effect from the front.

"Aren't you scared up there, little girl?" one of the women playing in the piece asked Tess.

"No-o," said the Corner House girl, slowly. "I'm not scared. But I shall be glad each time when the tableau is over. You see, these other little girls have no belt and wire to hold them, as I have."

"But you are so much higher than the others!"

"No, ma'am. It only looks so. It's what the stage man said was an optical delusion," Tess replied, meaning "illusion." "I can touch those other girls on either side of me—yes, ma'am."

And she did touch them. Each time that she went through the scene, and the butterflies' wings vibrated as they bent forward, Tess' hands, which were out of sight of the audience, clutched at the other girls' sashes.

Tess was a sturdy girl for her age. Her hands at the waists of the two butterflies steadied them as they posed on this day for the final rehearsal of the difficult tableau.

"That's it!" called out the manager. "Now! Hold it! Lights!"

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The glare of the spotlight shot down upon the grouped children from above the proscenium arch.

"Steady!" shouted the stage manager again, for the whole group behind the gauze drop seemed to be wavering.

"Hold that pose!" repeated the man, commandingly.

But it was not the children who moved. There was the creaking sound of parting timbers. Somebody from the back shouted a warning—but too late.

"Down! All of you down to the stage!"

Those on the lower steps of the scaffolding jumped. The stage hands ran in to catch the others; but the higher little girls could not leap without risking both life and limb!

A pandemonium of warning cries and shrieks of alarm followed. The scaffolding pulled apart slowly, falling forward through the drop which retarded it at first, but finally tearing the drop from its fastenings in the flies.

Swiftwing, the hummingbird, did not add her little voice to the general uproar. She was safely held by the wire cable hooked to her belt at the back.

But the butterflies were helpless. The men who tried to seize them from the rear could not do so at first because the scaffolding structure fell out upon the stage.

The Corner House girl, frightened as she was, miraculously preserved her presence of mind. As she had already done before during the rehearsals, she seized the sashes of her two smaller schoolmates at the first alarm. Their feet slipped from the foothold, but Tess held them.



The scaffolding pulled apart slowly, falling forward through the drop. [Page 238](#)

Neale had taught Tess, and even Dot, how to use their strength to better advantage than most little girls. Tess was sure of her own safety in this emergency, and she allowed her body to bend forward almost double, as the two frightened little butterflies slipped from the falling scaffolding.

For a dreadful moment or two, their entire weight hung from Tess Kenway's clutching hands. Her shoulders felt as though they were being dislocated; but she gritted her teeth and held on.

And then two of the men caught the little, fluttering butterflies by their ankles.

"Let 'em come!" yelled one of the men.

Tess loosed her grasp as the scaffolding crashed to the stage. The last to be lowered, Swiftwing came down, so frightened she could not think for a moment where she was.

"Oh, Tess, darling!" gasped Agnes.

"Sister's brave little girl!" murmured Ruth.

"I—I didn't spoil the tableau, did I?" Tess asked.

"Spoil it? My goodness, Tess Kenway," shouted Neale O'Neil, who, likewise, had run to her, "you made the biggest hit of the whole show! If you could do that at every performance *The Carnation Countess* would certain sure be a big success!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FINAL REHEARSAL

BEFORE the tableau in which Tess Kenway had so covered herself with glory was again rehearsed, the scaffolding was rebuilt as a series of broad steps and made much lower.

Tess was not to be frightened out of playing her part as Swiftwing, the hummingbird.

"No. I was not in danger," she reported to Mrs. Eland, when she and Dot went to see the gray lady as usual the next Monday afternoon. "The wire held me up so that I could not possibly fall. It was only the other two girls who might have fallen. But they hurt my arms."

"If you had been a *real* hummingbird," put in the practical Dot, "you could have caught one of them with your beak and the other in your claws. Butterflies aren't very heavy."

"Those butterflies were heavy enough," sighed her sister.

"It was splendid of you, Tess!" cried Mrs. Eland. "I am proud of you."

"So are we," announced Dot. "But Aunt Sarah says we ought not to praise her too much or maybe she'll get biggity. *What's* 'biggity'?"

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"Something I'm sure Tess will never be," said the matron, hugging Tess again. "Why so sober, dear? You ought to be glad you helped save those two little girls from a serious fall."

"I am," Tess replied.

"Then, what is the matter?"

"It's Miss Pepperill."

"Oh, dear me!" murmured Dot. "She fusses over that old Miss Pepperpot as though she were one of the family."

"Is she really worse, dear?" asked Mrs. Eland, softly, of Tess.

"They think she is. And—and, Mrs. Eland! She does call for you so pitifully! Miss Lippit told me so."

"Calls for *me*?" gasped the matron, paling.

"Yes, ma'am. Miss Lippit says she doesn't know why. Miss Pepperill never knew you very well before she was hurt. But I told Miss Lippit that I could understand it well enough," went on Tess, eagerly. "You'd be just the person I'd want to nurse me if I were sick."

"Thank you, my dear," smiled Mrs. Eland, beginning to breathe freely once more.

"You see, Miss Lippit knows Miss Pepperill pretty well. She knew her out West."

"Out West?" repeated Mrs. Eland.

"Yes, ma'am. Miss Lippit says that isn't her real name. She was a 'dopted child."

"Who was?" demanded the matron, all in a flutter again.

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"Miss Pepperill. She was brought up by a family named Pepperill. Seems funny," said Tess, gravely. "*She* lost her mother and father in a fire."

"I guess that's why her hair is red," said Dot, not believing her own reasoning, but desiring to be in the conversation.

Mrs. Eland was silent for some minutes. "She isn't mad, is she?" whispered Dot to Tess.

But the latter respected her friend's silence. Finally the matron said pleasantly enough: "I am going out when you children go home. You must show me where this school teacher of yours lives. If I can be of any service——"

She put on her bonnet and the long gray cloak in a few minutes, and the three set forth from the hospital. Dot clung to one hand and Tess to the other of the little gray woman, as they went to Miss Lippit's boarding house.

"This is Mrs. Eland," Tess said to the spinster, who was both landlady and friend of the injured school teacher. "She is my friend and the matron of the hospital where Miss Pepperill went with us one day."

"When she carried *my* flowers and gave some to the children," muttered Dot, who had never gotten over that.

"I'm glad to see you, Mrs. Eland," said Miss Lippit. "I do not know why Miss Pepperill calls for you so much. She is a singularly friendless woman."

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"I thought she had always lived in Milton?" said the matron, in an inquiring way.

"Oh, no, ma'am. She lived in the town I came from. We children always thought she was Mr. and Mrs. Pepperill's granddaughter; but it seemed not. She was picked up by them wandering about in Liston after the big fire."

Mrs. Eland repeated the name of the Western city, holding hard to a chairback the while, and watching Miss Lippit hungrily.

"Yes, ma'am," said the landlady. "We learned all about it. Miss Pepperill was so small she didn't know her own name—only 'Teeny.'"

"'Teeny!'" repeated Mrs. Eland, pale to her lips.

"She had a sister. She remembered her quite plainly. Marion. When Miss Pepperill was younger she was always expecting to meet that sister somewhere. But I haven't heard her say anything about it of late years."

"Show—show me where the poor thing lies," murmured Mrs. Eland.

They went into the bedroom. Miss Pepperill, her head looking very strange indeed with nothing but bandages upon it, sat up suddenly in bed.

"Mrs. Eland! isn't it?" she said weakly. "Pleased to meet you. You are little Tess Kenway's friend. Tell me!" she cried, clasping her hands, "did you find your sister, Mrs. Eland?"

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The matron ran with streaming eyes to the bed and folded the poor, pain-racked body in her arms. "Yes, yes!" she sobbed. "I've found her! I've found her!"

The two smallest Corner House girls did not see this meeting; but they brought home the report from Miss Lippit that Mrs. Eland was going to make arrangements to stay all night with Miss Pepperill, and perhaps longer. Her work at the hospital would have to be neglected for a time.

These busy days, however, the young folk were neglecting nothing which was connected with the forthcoming benefit for the Women's and Children's Hospital. *The Carnation Countess* was *not* to be a failure.

The changes made in the assignment of the speaking parts caused some little heartburnings; but the director was determined in the matter. First of all he brought Mr. Marks to his way of thinking.

"I won't give the play if I can't have my own *Innocent Delight*, *Cheerful Grigg*, and some of the others," said the director, firmly.

There was good reason for taking the rôle away from Trix Severn—she had neglected rehearsals. Nevertheless, she was very much excited when she learned that the part had been given to Agnes Kenway, who was making such a success of it.

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Miss Severn, in tears, went to the principal of the Milton High School and laid her trouble before him. Mr. Marks listened grimly and then showed her the letter purporting to come from the proprietor of Strawberry Farm, in which the girls who had raided the farmer's patch were named—excluding herself.

Beside this letter he put a specimen of Trix's own handwriting. It chanced to be the note which had suggested Trix for the part of *Innocent Delight* in the play.

"It strikes me, Miss Severn," said the principal, sourly, "that you are getting to be a ready letter writer. Don't deny the authorship of these scripts. Your teachers are all agreed that you wrote them both.

"This one to the professor is reprehensible enough. I am sorry that a girl of the Milton High School should write such a note. But this other," and his voice grew very stern, "is criminal—yes, criminal!

"I have learned from Mr. Buckham personally, that your father's automobile was stalled one day in front of his house and that you went in and met his wife, who is an invalid.

"You must have had it in your mind then to make trouble for your schoolmates, and learning that Mr. Buckham did not write himself, you stole a sheet of his letter paper, and wrote this contemptible screed.

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"I shall tell your parents of your action. I do not feel that it is within my province to punish you for such a contemptible thing. However, knowing that you have been a traitor to your mates, I withdraw my order for their punishment on the spot. I never have, and never will, accept the evidence of a traitor in a matter of this character.

"As Mr. Buckham himself holds no hard feelings about the foolish prank of last May, I shall say no more about it. But the contempt in which your schoolmates must hold you, if they learn that you wrote this letter, should be its own punishment."

Agnes and the others, however, paid little attention to Trix Severn. Agnes knew, and the others suspected, that Trix was the one who had told; but the Corner House girl felt that she had deserved the punishment she received, and was deeply grateful to Mr. Marks for withdrawing the order against her playing in *The Carnation Countess*.

Eva got the part of Cheerful Grigg; some of the other members of the basket ball team obtained good parts, too. They studied hard and were able to act creditably at the final and dress rehearsal.

The play was to be given on three nights and one afternoon of Christmas week. School was closed for the holidays, and little was talked of or thought about among the Corner House girls and their mates, but the play.

"I hope I won't spoil the play," said Tess, with a worried air. "And I hope we will make—oh! lots and lots of money for the hospital, so that Mrs. Eland can stay there. For now, you know, with her sister sick, she'll need her salary more than ever."

CHAPTER XXV

A GREAT SUCCESS

MISS PEPPERILL WAS not going to die. Dr. Forsyth made that good prophecy soon after Mrs. Eland had taken on herself the nursing of her strangely met sister.

The school teacher—so grim and secretive by nature—had been in a fever of worry and uncertainty long before the accident that had stretched her on this bed of illness. The relief her mind secured when her sister, Marion, and she were reunited did much to aid her recovery.

Nobody would have suspected that the calm, demure, little gray woman and the assertive, sharp-tongued school teacher were sisters; but the evidence of their own childish remembrances was conclusive. And that little Mrs. Eland should be the older of the two was likewise astounding.

There was still a sad secret on Mrs. Eland's heart. Mr. and Mrs. Buckham knew it. The smallest Corner House girl had prodded the doubt of her father's honesty to the surface of the hospital matron's mind.

"There ain't no fool like an old fool, it's my bounden duty to say," Mr. Bob Buckham remarked on the Monday of Christmas week, as he warmed his hands before the open fire on the hearth of the old Corner House sitting room.

He had come to town ostensibly to bring the Corner House girls' Christmas goose—a noble bird which Ruth had picked out of his flock herself on a recent visit to Strawberry Farm. But he confessed to another errand in Milton.

"I'd no business to talk out like I done about Abe and Lem Aden that first day you children was at our house. But I've allus hugged that injury to my breast. Marm says I ain't no business to, and I know she's right. But it hurt me dreadfully when I was a boy to lose my marm.

"The rascality lay between old Lem and Abe. Course we couldn't never prove anything on Lem, and he never had a good word himself for his brother. I read his letters to Abe—Mrs. Eland, she showed 'em to me—and there wasn't a word in 'em about my father's five hundred."

"Oh, dear me!" Ruth replied, "I wish it could be cleared up for the sake of Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill. You don't care about the money now, Mr. Buckham."

"No. Thank the good Lord, I don't. And as I say, I blame myself for ever mentioning it before you gals."

"Little pitchers have big ears," quoted Agnes.

At that Dot flared up. "I'm not a little pitcher! And I haven't got big ears!" The smallest Corner House girl knew now that her ill-timed remarks during her first call with Tess on Mrs. Eland had, somehow, made trouble. "How'd I know that Lem—Lemon Aden's brother was Mrs. Eland's father? He might have been her uncle."

They had to laugh at Dot's vehement defense; but Mr. Bob Buckham went on: "My fault, I tell ye—my fault. But I believe it's going to be all cleared up."

"How?" asked Agnes, quickly.

"And will my Mrs. Eland feel better in her mind?" Tess asked gravely.

"That's what she will," declared the farmer, vigorously. "She told me about the old papers and the book left by her Uncle Lemuel over there to the Quoharis poorfarm where he died. I got a letter from her to the townfarm keeper, and I drove over and got 'em the other day.

"Like ter not got 'em at all—old Lem being dead nigh fifteen years now. Wal! Marm and me's been looking over that little book. Lem mebbe was a leetle crazy—'specially 'bout money matters, and toward the end of his life. You'd think, to read what he'd writ down, that he died possessed of

a lot of property instead of being town's poor. That was his foolishness.

"But 'way back, when he was a much younger man, and his brother Abe got scart over a trick he'd played about a horse trade and went West (the man who was tricked threatened to do him bodily harm), what old Lem wrote in that old diary was easy enough understood.

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"There's some letters from Abe, too. Put two and two together," concluded Mr. Buckham, "and it's easy to see where my pap's five hundred dollars went to. It was left by Abe all right in Lem's hands; but it stuck to them hands!"

"Oh!" cried Agnes, "what a wicked man that Lemuel Aden must have been."

"Nateral born miser. Hated ter give up a penny he didn't hafter give up. But them two women—wonderful how they come together after all these years—them two women needn't worry their souls no longer about that five hundred dollars. I never heard as folks could be held accountable for their uncle's sins."

That was the way the old farmer made Mrs. Eland see it, too. After all, she could only be grateful to the two smallest Corner House girls for bringing her and her sister together.

"If I had not taught Tess the old rhyme:

"First William, the Norman,
Then William, the son,"

the matron of the Women's and Children's Hospital declared, "and Tess had not recited it in school, Teeny, you would never have remembered it and felt the strange drawing toward me that you did feel."

"And if you hadn't met that child, I have an idea that you'd have lost your position at this hospital—and then where'd we be?" said the convalescent Miss Pepperill, sitting propped up in her chair in the matron's room at the institution in question. "That child, Tess, certainly started all the interest now being shown in this hospital."

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That Monday night was the first public presentation of the play for the benefit of the hospital. Few were more anxious or more excited before the curtain went up, for the success of *The Carnation Countess*, than the Corner House girls and Neale O'Neil; but there was in store for them in the immediate future much more excitement than this of performing in the play, all of which will be narrated in the next volume of the series, to be entitled, "The Corner House Girls' Odd Find: Where They Made It; and What the Strange Discovery Led To."

Ruth Kenway felt a share of responsibility for the success of the play, as she naturally would for any matter in which she had even the smallest part. It was Ruth's way to be "cumbered by many cares." Mr. Howbridge sometimes jokingly called her "Martha."

Dot was only desirous of singing her "bee" song with the other children, and then hurrying home where she might continue her work on a wonderful Christmas outfit for her Alice-doll. Alice was to have a "coming out party" during the holiday week, and positively *had* to have some new clothes. Besides, *The Carnation Countess* had become rather a stale affair for the smallest Corner House girl by this time.

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Tess seriously hoped she would do nothing in her part of Swiftwing, the hummingbird, to detract from the performance. Tess did not take herself at all seriously as an actor; she only desired—as she always did—to do what she had to do, right.

As for Agnes, she was truly filled with delight. The fly-away's very heart and soul was in the character she played. She lived the part of Innocent Delight.

She truly did well in this first performance. No stage fright did she experience. From her first word spoken in the centre of the stage while Madam Shaw was being borne in by the Sedan men, till the last word she spoke in the final act of the play, Agnes Kenway acted her part with credit.

In truth, as a whole, the Milton school pupils did well in the play. The professor's fears were not fulfilled. Milton people did not by any means, laugh the actors out of town.

Instead, the packed house of the first night was repeated on the second evening. The matinée on the third day, which was given at popular prices, was overcrowded—they had to stop selling admission tickets. While the third and last evening saw a repetition of the crowds at the other performances.

The local papers gave much space each day to the benefit, and their criticisms of the amateur players made the hearts of boys and girls alike, glad.

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The reports from the ticket office were, after all, the main thing. It was soon seen that a goodly sum would be made for the Women's and Children's Hospital. In the end it amounted to more than three thousand dollars.

"Why, *that* will give the hospital a new lease of life! Dr. Forsyth said so," Agnes declared at the dinner table the day after the last performance.

"It will pay Mrs. Eland's salary for a long time," Tess remarked, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"I don't know but that sounds rather selfish, after all, dear," Ruth said, smiling at sober little Tess.

"What does, Sister?"

"It seems that all *you* care about the hospital is that Mrs. Eland shall get her wages."

"Yes. I s'pose that's my special interest in it," admitted Tess, slowly. "But then, if my Mrs. Eland is there as matron, the hospital is bound to do a great deal of good."

"Oh! wisdom of the ancients!" laughed Agnes.

"Quite true, my dear," commented Mrs. MacCall. "Your Mrs. Eland is a fine woman. I've always said that."

"Everybody doesn't agree with you," said Ruth, smiling.

"Who doesn't like Mrs. Eland?" demanded Tess, quite excited.

"Our neighbor, Sammy Pinkney," Ruth replied, laughing again. "I heard him talking about her this very morning, and what he said was not complimentary."

Tess was quite flushed. "Sammy gave us Billy Bumps," she said sternly, "and Billy is a very good goat."

"Except when he eats up poor Seneca Sprague's hair," chuckled Agnes.

"He is a *very* good goat," repeated Tess. "But if Sammy says my Mrs. Eland isn't the very nicest lady there is—well—he can take his old goat back—so now!"

"What did he say, Ruthie?" asked Agnes.

"I heard him say that if Mrs. Eland nursed Miss Pepperill so well that she could come back to teach school, when he got to be a pirate he would sail 'way off with Mrs. Eland somewhere and make her walk the plank!"

"If he does such a thing," cried Dot, excitedly, "he *can* take back his old goat! You know, I don't believe Mrs. Eland could walk a plank, anyway. She isn't an acrobat, like Neale."

"If Sammy Pinkney tries to be a pirate, and carries my Mrs. Eland off in any such horrid way," declared Tess with much energy for her, "I hope his mother spansks him good!"

And with the hilarious laughter that welcomed this speech from Swiftwing, the hummingbird, let us bid farewell to our four Corner House girls.

THE END

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Transcriber's Note:

Page 10 Hyphen removed from [bespectacled](#)

Page 40 Bump's changed to [Bumps'](#)

Page 44 Eve changed to [Eva](#)

Page 116 Closing double quotation mark removed from ['tater!'](#)

Page 129 Retained the spelling of [barries](#)

Page 148 The word "in" removed from between [Also the](#)

Page 193 Changed bady to [badly](#)

Page 236 Changed strongs to [strong](#)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY ***

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