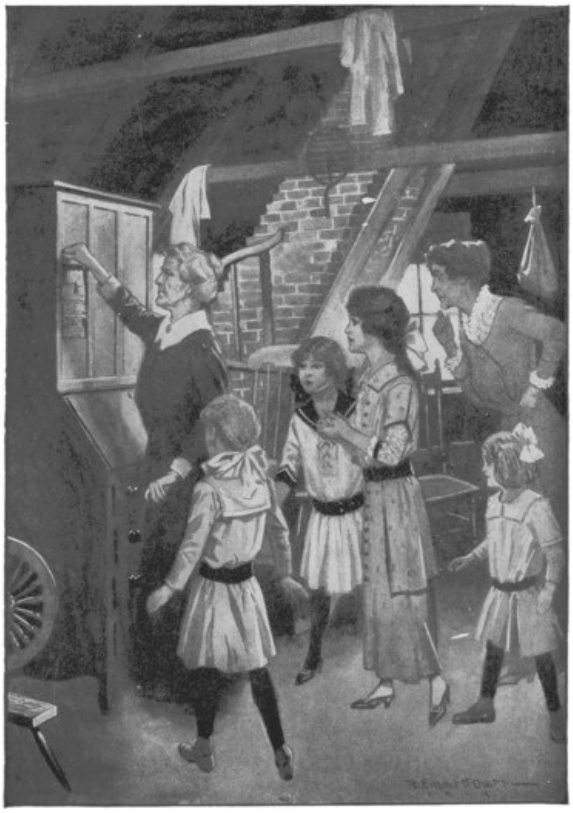
Title: The Corner House Girls

Author: Grace Brooks Hill
Illustrator: Robert Emmett Owen

Release date: February 1, 2012 [EBook #38743]
Most recently updated: January 8, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Roger Frank and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at https://www.pgdp.net



Finding the will. In a moment the panel dropped down, leaving in view a very narrow depository for papers. *Frontispiece.*

THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS

HOW THEY MOVED TO MILTON
WHAT THEY FOUND
AND WHAT THEY DID

BY
GRACE BROOKS HILL

Author of "The Corner House Girls at School," "The Corner House Girls Under Canvas," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

R. EMMETT OWEN

BARSE & HOPKINS
PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK, N. Y.—NEWARK, N. J.

BOOKS FOR GIRLS

The Corner House Girls Series
By Grace Brooks Hill
Illustrated.

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*)

BARSE & HOPKINS
PUBLISHERS—NEW YORK

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS

CHAPTER I—“LEFT HIGH AND DRY”

“Look out, Dot! You’ll fall off that chair as sure as you live, child!”

Tess was bustling and important. It was baking day in the Kenway household. She had the raisins to stone, and the smallest Kenway was climbing up to put the package of raisins back upon the cupboard shelf.

There was going to be a cake for the morrow. Ruth was a-flour to her elbows, and Aggie was stirring the eggs till the beater was just “a-whiz.”

Crash! Bang! Over went the chair; down came Dot; and the raisins scattered far and wide over the freshly scrubbed linoleum.

Fortunately the little busy-body was not hurt. “What did I tell you?” demanded the raisin-seeder, after Ruth had made sure there were no broken bones, and only a “skinned” place on Dot’s wrist. “What did I tell you? You are such a careless child!”

Dot’s face began to “cloud up,” but it did not rain, for Aggie said kindly:

“Don’t mind what she says, Dot. Leave those raisins to me. You run get your hat on. Tess has finished seeding that cupful. Now it’s time you two young ones went on that errand. Isn’t that so, Ruth?”

The elder sister agreed as she busily mixed the butter and flour. Butter was high. She put in what she thought they could afford, and then she shut her eyes tight, and popped in another lump!

On a bright and sunny day, like this one, the tiny flat at the top of the Essex Street tenement was a cheerful place. Ruth was a very capable housekeeper. She had been such for two years previous to their mother’s death, for Mrs. Kenway had been obliged to go out to work.

Now, at sixteen, Ruth felt herself to be very much grown up. It is often responsibility and not years that ages one.

If Ruth had “an old head on green shoulders,” there was reason for it. For almost all the income the Kenways had was their father’s pension.

The tide of misfortune which had threatened the family when the father was killed in the Philippines, had risen to its flood at Mrs. Kenway’s death two years before this day, and had now left the Kenway girls high and dry upon the strand of an ugly tenement, in an ugly street, of the very ugliest district of Bloomingsburg.

The girls were four—and there was Aunt Sarah Stower. There were no boys; there never had been any boys in the Kenway family. Ruth said she was glad; Aggie said *she* was sorry; and as usual Tess sided with the elder sister, while Dot agreed with the twelve-year-old Aggie that a boy to do the chores would be “sort of nice.”

“S’pose he was like that bad Tommy Rooney, who jumps out of the dark corners on the stairs to scare you, Dot Kenway?” demanded the ten-year-old Tess, seriously.

“Why, he couldn’t be like Tommy—not if he was *our* brother,” said the smallest girl, with conviction.

“Well, he might,” urged Tess, who professed a degree of experience and knowledge of the world far beyond that of her eight-year-old sister. “You see, you can’t always sometimes tell about *boys*.”

Tess possessed a strong sense of duty, too. She would not allow Dot, on this occasion, to leave the raisins scattered over the floor. Down the two smaller girls got upon their hands and knees and picked up the very last of the dried fruit before they went for their hats.

“Whistle, Dot—you must whistle,” commanded Tess. “You know, that’s the only way not to yield to temptation, when you’re picking up raisins.”

“I—I can’t whistle, Tess,” claimed Dot.

“Well! pucker up, anyway,” said Tess. “You can’t do *that* with raisins in your mouth,” and she proceeded to falteringly whistle several bars of “Yankee Doodle” herself, to prove to the older girls that the scattered raisins *she* found were going into their proper receptacle.

The Kenway girls had to follow many economies, and had learned early to be self-denying. Ruth was so busy and so anxious, she declared herself, she did not have time to be pretty like other girls of her age. She had stringy black hair that never would look soft and wavy, as its owner so much desired.

She possessed big, brown eyes—really wonderful eyes, if she had only known it. People sometimes said she was intellectual looking; that was because of her high, broad brow.

She owned little color, and she had contracted a nervous habit of pressing her lips tight together when she was thinking. But she possessed a laugh that fairly jumped out at you from her eyes and mouth, it was so unexpected.

Ruth Kenway might not attract much attention at first glance, but if you looked at her a second time, you were bound to see something in her countenance that held you, and interested you.

“Do smile oftener, Ruth,” begged jolly, roly-poly Agnes. “You always look just as though you were figuring how many pounds of round steak go into a dollar.”

“I guess I *am* thinking of that most of the time,” sighed the oldest Kenway girl.

Agnes was as plump as a partridge. When she tried to keep her face straight, the dimples just *would* peep out. She laughed easily, and cried stormily.

She said herself that she had “bushels of molasses colored hair,” and her blue eyes could stare a rude boy out of countenance—only she had to spoil the effect the next moment by giggling. Another thing, Agnes usually averaged two “soul chums” among her girl friends at school, per week!

Tess (nobody ever remembered she had been christened Theresa) had some of Ruth’s dignity and some of Aggie’s good looks. She was the quick girl at her books; she always got along nicely with grown-ups; they said she had “tact”; and she had the kindest heart of any girl in the world.

Dot, or Dorothy, was the baby, and was a miniature of Ruth, as far as seriousness of demeanor, and hair and eyes went. She was a little brunette fairy, with the most delicately molded limbs, a faint blush in her dark cheeks, and her steady gravity delighted older people. They said she was “such an old-fashioned little thing.”

It was Saturday. From the street below shrill voices rose in a nightmare of sound that broke in a nerve-racking wave upon the ears. Numerous wild Red Indians could make no more savage sounds, if they were burning a captive at the stake.

It was the children on the block, who had no other playground. Dot shuddered to venture forth into the turmoil of the street, and Tess had to acknowledge a faster beating of her own heart.

Dot had her “Alice-doll”—her choicest possession. They were going to the green grocer’s, at the corner, and to the drug store.

At the green grocer’s they were to purchase a cabbage, two quarts of potatoes, and two pennies’ worth of soup greens. At the drug store they would buy the usual nickel’s worth of peppermint drops for Aunt Sarah.

Every Saturday since Dot could remember—and since Tess could remember—and since Agnes could remember—even every Saturday since Ruth could remember, there had been five cents’ worth of peppermint drops bought for Aunt Sarah.

The larder might be very nearly bare; shoes might be out at toe and stockings out at heel; there might be a dearth of food on the table; but Aunt Sarah must not be disappointed in her weekly treat.

“It is the only pleasure the poor creature has,” their mother was wont to say. “Why deprive her of it? There is not much that seems to please Aunt Sarah, and this is a small thing, children.”

Even Dot was old enough to remember the dear little mother saying this. It was truly a sort of sacred bequest, although their mother had not made it a mandatory charge upon the girls.

“But mother never forgot the peppermints herself. Why should we forget them?” Ruth asked.

Aunt Sarah Stower was a care, too, left to the Kenway girls’ charge. Aunt Sarah was an oddity.

She seldom spoke, although her powers of speech were not in the least impaired. Moreover, she seldom moved from her chair during the day, where she sewed, or crocheted; yet she had the active use of her limbs.

Housework Aunt Sarah abhorred. She had never been obliged to do it as a girl and young woman; so she had never lifted her hand to aid in domestic tasks since coming to live with the Kenways—and Ruth could barely remember her coming.

Aunt Sarah was only “Aunt” to the Kenway girls by usage. She was merely their mother’s uncle’s half-sister! “And *that’s* a relationship,” as Aggie said, “that would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to figure out.”

As Tess and Dot came down the littered stoop of the tall brick house they lived in, a rosy, red-haired boy, with a snub nose and twinkling blue eyes, suddenly popped up before them. He was dressed in fringed leggings and jacket, and wore a band of feathers about his cap.

“Ugh! Me heap big Injun,” he exclaimed, brandishing a wooden tomahawk before the faces of the startled girls. “Scalp white squaw! Kill papoose!” and he clutched at the Alice-doll.

Dot screamed—as well she might. The thought of seeing her most beloved child in the hands of this horrid apparition ——

“Now, you just stop bothering us, Tommy Rooney!” commanded Tess, standing quickly in front of her sister. “You go away, or I’ll tell your mother.”

“Aw—‘Tell-tale tit! Your tongue shall be split!’” scoffed the dancing Indian. “Give me the papoose. Make heap big Injun of it.”

Dot was actually crying. Tess raised her hand threateningly.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Tommy Rooney,” she said, decisively, “but I shall slap you, if you don’t let us alone.”

“Aw—would you? would you? Got to catch first,” shouted Tommy, making dreadful grimaces. His cheeks were painted in black and red stripes, and these decorations added to Dot’s fright. “You can’t scare me!” he boasted.

But he kept his distance and Tess hurried Dot along the street. There were some girls they knew, for they went to the public school with them, but Tess and Dot merely spoke to them and passed right on.

“We’ll go to the drug store first,” said the older girl. “Then we won’t be bothered with the vegetable bags while we’re getting Aunt Sarah’s peppermints.”

“Say, Tess!” said Dot, gulping down a dry sob.

“Yes?”

“Don’t you wish we could get something ’sides those old peppermint drops?”

“But Ruthie hasn’t any pennies to spare this week. She told us so.”

“Never *does* have pennies to spare,” declared Dot, with finality. “But I mean I wish Aunt Sarah wanted some other kind of candy besides peppermints.”

“Why, Dot Kenway! she always has peppermints. She always takes some in her pocket to church on Sunday, and eats them while the minister preaches. You know she does.”

“Yes, I know it,” admitted Dot. “And I know she always gives us each one before we go to Sunday School. That’s why I wish we could buy her some other kind of candy. I’m tired of pep’mints. I think they are a most unsat—sat’s*fac*tory candy, Tess.”

“Well! I am amazed at you, Dot Kenway,” declared Tess, with her most grown-up air. “You know we couldn’t any more change, and buy wintergreen, or clove, or lemon-drops, than we could *fly*. Aunt Sarah’s got to have just what she wants.”

“Has she?” queried the smaller girl, doubtfully. “I wonder why?”

“Because she *has*,” retorted Tess, with unshaken belief.

The drops were purchased; the vegetables were purchased; the sisters were homeward bound. Walking toward their tenement, they overtook and passed a tall, gray haired gentleman in a drab morning coat and hat. He was not a doctor, and he was not dressed like a minister; therefore he was a curious-looking figure in this part of Bloomingsburg, especially at this hour.

Tess looked up slyly at him as she and Dot passed. He was a cleanly shaven man with thin, tightly shut lips, and many fine lines about the corners of his mouth and about his eyes. He had a high, hooked nose, too—so high, and such a barrier to the rest of his face, that his sharp gray eyes seemed to be looking at the world in general over a high board fence.

Dot was carrying the peppermint drops—and carrying them carefully, while Tess’ hands were occupied with the other purchases. So Master Tommy Rooney thought he saw his chance.

“Candy! candy!” he yelled, darting out at them from an areaway. “Heap big Injun want candy, or take white squaw’s papoose! Ugh!”

Dot screamed. Tess tried to defend her and the white bag of peppermints. But she was handicapped with her own bundles. Tommy was as quick—and as slippery—as an eel.

Suddenly the gentleman in the silk hat strode forward, thrust his gold-headed walking stick between Tommy’s lively legs, and tripped that master of mischief into the gutter.

Tommy scrambled up, gave one glance at the tall gentleman and fled, affrighted. The gentleman looked down at Tess and Dot.

“Oh, thank you, sir!” said the bigger girl. “We’re much obliged!”

“Yes! A knight to the rescue, eh? Do you live on this block, little lady?” he asked, and when he smiled his face was a whole lot pleasanter than it was in repose.

“Yes, sir. Right there at Number 80.”

“Number 80?” repeated the gentleman, with some interest. “Is there a family in your house named Kenway?”

“Oh, yes, sir! *We’re* the Kenways—two of them,” declared Tess, while Dot was a little inclined to put her finger in her mouth and watch him shyly.

“Ha!” exclaimed the stranger. “Two of Leonard Kenway’s daughters? Is your mother at home?”

“We—we haven’t any mother—not now, sir,” said Tess, more faintly.

“Not living? I had not heard. Then, who is the head of the household?”

“Oh, you want to see Ruth,” cried Tess. “She’s the biggest. It must be Ruth you want to see.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said the gentleman, eyeing the girls curiously. “If she is the chief of the clan, it is she I must see. I have come to inform her of her Uncle Peter Stower’s death.”

CHAPTER II—UNCLE PETER’S WILL

Tess and Dot were greatly excited. As they climbed up the long and semi-dark flights to the little flat at the top of the house, they clung tightly to each other’s hands and stared, round-eyed, at each other on the landings.

Behind them labored the tall, gray gentleman. They could hear him puffing heavily on the last flight.

Dot had breath left to burst open the kitchen door and run to tell Ruth of the visitor.

“Oh! oh! Ruthie!” gasped the little girl. “There’s a man dead out here and Uncle Peter’s come to tell you all about it!”

“Why, Dot Kenway!” cried Tess, as the elder sister turned in amazement at the first wild announcement of the visitor’s coming. “Can’t you get anything straight? It isn’t Uncle Peter who wants to see you, Ruth. Uncle Peter is dead.”

“Uncle Peter Stower!” exclaimed Aggie, in awe.

He was the Kenway girls’ single wealthy relative. He was considered eccentric. He was—or had been—a bachelor and lived in Milton, an upstate town some distance from Bloomingsburg, and had occupied, almost alone, the old Stower homestead on the corner of Main and Willow Streets—locally known as “the Old Corner House.”

“Do take the gentleman to the parlor door,” said Ruth, hastily, hearing the footstep of the visitor at the top of the stairs. “Dot, go unlock that door, dear.”

“Aunt Sarah’s sitting in there, Ruth,” whispered Aggie, hastily.

“Well, but Aunt Sarah won’t bite him,” said Ruth, hurriedly removing her apron and smoothing her hair.

“Just think of Uncle Peter being dead,” repeated Aggie, in a daze.

“And he was Aunt Sarah’s half brother, you know. Of course, neither her father nor mother was Uncle Peter’s father or mother—their parents were all married twice. And——”

“Oh, don’t!” gasped the plump sister. “We never *can* figure out the relationship—you know we can’t, Ruth. Really, Aunt Sarah isn’t blood-kin to us at all.”

“Uncle Peter never would admit it,” said Ruth, slowly. “He was old enough to object, mother said, when our grandfather married a second time.”

“Of course. I know,” acknowledged Aggie. “Aunt Sarah isn’t really a Stower at all!”

“But Aunt Sarah’s always said the property ought to come to her, when Uncle Peter died.”

“I hope he *has* left her something—I do hope so. It would help out a lot,” said Aggie, serious for the moment.

“Why—yes. It would be easier for us to get along, if she had her own support,” admitted Ruth.

“And we’d save five cents a week for peppermints!” giggled Aggie suddenly, seeing the little white bag of candy on the table.

“How you do talk, Ag,” said Ruth, admonishingly, and considering herself presentable, she went through the bedroom into the front room, or “parlor,” of the flat. Aggie had to stay to watch the cake, which was now turning a lovely golden brown in the oven.

The tall, gray gentleman with the sharp eyes and beak-like nose, had been ushered in by the two little girls and had thankfully taken a seat. He was wiping his perspiring forehead with a checked silk handkerchief, and had set the high hat down by his chair.

Those quick, gray eyes of his had taken in all the neat poverty of the room. A careful and tasteful young housekeeper was Ruth Kenway. Everything was in its place; the pictures on the wall were hung straight; there was no dust.

In one of the two rockers sat Aunt Sarah. It was the most comfortable rocker, and it was drawn to the window where the sun came in. Aunt Sarah had barely looked up when the visitor entered, and of course she had not spoken. Her knitting needles continued to flash in the sunlight.

She was a withered wisp of a woman, with bright brown eyes under rather heavy brows. There were three deep wrinkles between those eyes. Otherwise, Aunt Sarah did not show in her countenance many of the ravages of time.

Her hair was but slightly grayed; she wore it “crimped” on the sides, doing it up carefully in cunning little “pigtails” every night before she retired. She was scrupulous in the care of her hands; her plain gingham dress was neat in every particular.

Indeed, she was as prim and “old-maidish” as any spinster lady possibly could be. Nothing ever seemed to ruffle Aunt Sarah. She lived sort of a detached life in the Kenway family. Nothing went on that she was not aware of, and often—as even Ruth admitted—she “had a finger in the pie” which was not exactly needed!

“I am Mr. Howbridge,” said the visitor, rising and putting out his hand to the oldest Kenway girl, and taking in her bright appearance in a single shrewd glance.

On her part, Aunt Sarah nodded, and pressed her lips together firmly, flashing him another birdlike look, as one who would say: “That is what I expected. You could not hide your identity from me.”

“I am—or was,” said the gentleman, clearing his throat and sitting down again, but still addressing himself directly to Ruth, “Mr. Peter Stower’s attorney and confidant in business—if he could be said to be confidential with anybody. Mr. Stower was a very secretive man, young lady.”

Aunt Sarah pursed her lips and tossed her head, as though mentally saying: “You can’t tell me anything about *that*.”

Ruth said: “I have heard he was peculiar, sir. But I do not remember of ever seeing him.”

“You did see him, however,” said Mr. Howbridge. “That was when you were a very little girl. If I am not mistaken, it was when this lady,” and he bowed to the silent, knitting figure in the rocking-chair, “who is known as your Aunt Sarah, came to live with your mother and father.”

“Possibly,” said Ruth, hastily. “I do not know.”

“It was one of few events of his life, connected in any way with his relatives, of which Mr. Stower spoke to me,” Mr. Howbridge said. “This lady expressed a wish to live with your mother, and your Uncle Peter brought her. I believe he never contributed to her support?” he added, slowly.

Aunt Sarah might have been a graven image, as far as expressing herself upon *this* point went. Her needles merely flashed in the sunlight. Ruth felt troubled and somewhat diffident in speaking of the matter.

“I do not think either father or mother ever minded *that*,” she said.

“Ah?” returned Mr. Howbridge. “And your mother has been dead how long, my dear?” Ruth told him, and he nodded. “Your income was not increased by her death? There was no insurance?”

“Oh, no, sir.”

He looked at her for a moment with some embarrassment, and cleared his throat again before asking his next question.

“Do you realize, my dear, that you and your sisters are the only living, and direct, relatives of Mr. Peter Stower?”

Ruth stared at him. She felt that her throat was dry, and she could not bring her tongue into play. She merely shook her head slowly.

“Through your mother, my dear, you and your sisters will inherit your Great Uncle Peter’s property. It is considerable. With the old Corner House and the tenement property in Milton, bonds and cash in bank, it amounts to—approximately—a hundred thousand dollars.”

“But—but——Aunt Sarah!” gasped Ruth, in surprise.

“Ahem! your Aunt Sarah was really no relative of the deceased.”

Here Aunt Sarah spoke up for the first time, her knitting needles clicking. “I thank goodness I was not,” she said. “My father was a Maltby, but Mr. Stower, Peter’s father, always wished me to be called by his name. He always told my mother he should provide for me. I have, therefore, looked to the Stower family for my support. It was and is my right.”

She tossed her head and pursed her lips again.

“Yes,” said Mr. Howbridge. “I understand that the elder Mr. Stower died intestate—without making a will, my dear,” he added, speaking again to Ruth. “If he ever expressed his intention of remembering your Aunt Sarah with a legacy, Mr. Peter Stower did not consider it mandatory upon him.”

“But of course Uncle Peter has remembered Aunt Sarah in *his* will?” questioned the dazed Ruth.

“He most certainly did,” said Mr. Howbridge, more briskly. “His will was fully and completely drawn. I drew it myself, and I still have the notes in the old man’s handwriting, relating to the bequests. Unfortunately,” added the lawyer, with a return to a grave manner, “the actual will of Mr. Peter Stower cannot be found.”

Aunt Sarah’s needles clicked sharply, but she did not look up. Ruth stared, wide-eyed, at Mr. Howbridge.

“As was his custom with important papers, Mr. Stower would not trust even a safety deposit box with the custody of his will. He was secretive, as I have said,” began the lawyer again.

Then Aunt Sarah interrupted: “Just like a magpie,” she snapped. “I know ’em—the Stowers. Peter was always doing it when he was a young man—hidin’ things away—’fraid a body would see something, or know something. That’s why he wanted to get *me* out of the house. Oh, I knew his doin’s and his goin’s-on!”

“Miss Maltby has stated the case,” said Mr. Howbridge, bowing politely. “Somewhere in the old house, of course, Mr.

Stower hid the will—and probably other papers of value. They will be found in time, we hope. Meanwhile——”

“Yes, sir?” queried Ruth, breathlessly, as the lawyer stopped.

“Mr. Stower has been dead a fortnight,” explained the lawyer, quietly. “Nobody knew as much about his affairs as myself. I have presented the notes of his last will and testament—made quite a year ago—to the Probate Court, and although they have no legal significance, the Court agrees with me that the natural heirs of the deceased should enter upon possession of the property and hold it until the complications arising from the circumstances can be made straight.”

“Oh, Aunt Sarah! I am so glad for you!” cried Ruth, clasping her hands and smiling one of her wonderful smiles at the little old lady.

Aunt Sarah tossed her head and pursed her lips, just as though she said, “I have always told you so.”

Mr. Howbridge cleared his throat again and spoke hastily: “You do not understand, Miss Kenway. You and your sisters are the heirs at law. At the best, Miss Maltby would receive only a small legacy under Mr. Stower’s will. The residue of the estate reverts to you through your mother, and I am nominally your guardian and the executor.”

Ruth stared at him, open mouthed. The two little girls had listened without clearly understanding all the particulars. Aggie had crept to the doorway (the cake now being on the table and off her mind), and she was the only one who uttered a sound. She said “Oh!”

“You children—you four girls—are the heirs in question. I want you to get ready to go to Milton as soon as possible. You will live in the old Corner House and I shall see, with the Probate Court, that all your rights are guarded,” Mr. Howbridge said.

It was Dorothy, the youngest, who seemed first to appreciate the significance of this great piece of news. She said, quite composedly:

“Then we *can* buy some candy ’sides those pep’mint drops for Aunt Sarah, on Saturdays.”

CHAPTER III—THE OLD CORNER HOUSE

“Now,” said Tess, with her most serious air, “shall we take everything in our playhouse, Dot, or shall we take only the best things?”

“Oh-oo-ee!” sighed Dot. “It’s so hard to ’cide, Tess, just what *is* the best. ’Course, I’m going to take my Alice-doll and all her things.”

Tess pursed her lips. “That old cradle she used to sleep in when she was little, is dreadfully shabby. And one of the rockers is loose.”

“Oh, but Tess!” cried the younger girl. “It was *hers*. You know, when she gets really growed up, she’ll maybe want it for a keepsake. Maybe she’ll want dollies of her own to rock in it.”

Dot did not lack imagination. The Alice-doll was a very real personality to the smallest Kenway girl.

Dot lived in two worlds—the regular, work-a-day world in which she went to school and did her small tasks about the flat; and a much larger, more beautiful world, in which the Alice-doll and kindred toys had an actual existence.

“And all the clothes she’s outgrown—and shoes—and everything?” demanded Tess. Then, with a sigh: “Well, it will be an awful litter, and Ruth says the trunks are just squeezed full right now!”

The Kenways were packing up for removal to Milton. Mr. Howbridge had arranged everything with Ruth, as soon as he had explained the change of fortune that had come to the four sisters.

None of them really understood what the change meant—not even Ruth. They had always been used—ever since they could remember—to what Aggie called “tight squeezing.” Mr. Howbridge had placed fifty dollars in Ruth’s hand before he went away, and had taken a receipt for it. None of the Kenways had ever before even *seen* so much money at one time.

They were to abandon most of their poor possessions right here in the flat, for their great uncle’s old house was crowded with furniture which, although not modern, was much better than any of theirs. Aunt Sarah was going to take her special rocker. She insisted upon that.

“I won’t be beholden to Peter for even a chair to sit in!” she had said, grimly, and that was all the further comment she made upon the astounding statement of the lawyer, that the eccentric old bachelor had not seen fit to will all his property to her!

There was a bit of uncertainty and mystery about the will of Uncle Peter, and about their right to take over his possessions. Mr. Howbridge had explained that fully to Ruth.

There was no doubt in his mind but that the will he had drawn for Uncle Peter was still in existence, and that the old gentleman had made no subsequent disposal of his property to contradict the terms of the will the lawyer remembered.

There were no other known heirs but the four Kenway sisters. Therefore the Probate Court had agreed that the lawyer

should enter into possession of the property on behalf of Ruth and her sisters.

As long as the will was not found, and admitted to probate, and its terms clearly established in law, there was doubt and uncertainty connected with the girls' wonderful fortune. Some unexpected claimant might appear to demand a share of the property. It was, in fact, now allowed by the Court, that Mr. Howbridge and the heirs-at-law should occupy the deceased's home and administer the estate, being answerable to the probate judge for all that was done.

To the minds of Tess and Dot, all this meant little. Indeed, even the two older girls did not much understand the complications. What Aunt Sarah understood she managed, as usual, to successfully hide within herself.

There was to be a wonderful change in their affairs—that was the main thing that impressed the minds of the four sisters. Dot had been the first to express it concretely, when she suggested they might treat themselves on Saturdays to something beside the usual five cents' worth of peppermint drops.

"I expect," said Tess, "that we won't really know how to live, Dot, in so big a house. Just think! there's three stories and an attic!"

"Just as if we were living in this very tenement all, all alone!" breathed Dot, with awe.

"Only much better—and bigger—and nicer," said Tess, eagerly. "Ruth remembers going there once with mother. Uncle Peter was sick. She didn't go up stairs, but stayed down with a big colored man—Uncle Rufus. She 'members all about it. The room she stayed in was as big as all these in our flat, put together."

This was too wonderful for Dot to really understand. But if Ruth said it, it must be so. She finally sighed again, and said:

"I—I guess I'll be 'fraid in such rooms. And we'll get lost in the house, if it's so big."

"No. Of course, we won't live all over the house. Maybe we'll live days on the first floor, and sleep in bedrooms on the second floor, and never go up stairs on the other floors at all."

"Oh, well!" said Dot, gaining sudden courage—and curiosity. "I guess I'd want to see what's on them, just the same."

There were people in the big tenement house quite as poor as the Kenways themselves. Among these poor families Ruth distributed the girls' possessions that they did not wish to take to Milton. Tommy Rooney's mother was thankful for a bed and some dishes, and the kitchen table. She gave Tommy a decisive thrashing, when she caught him jumping out of the dark at Dot on the very last day but one, before the Kenways left Essex Street for their new home.

Master Tommy was sore in spirit and in body when he met Tess and Dot on the sidewalk, later. There were tear-smears on his cheeks, but his eyes began to snap as usual, when he saw the girls.

"I don't care," he said. "I'm goin' to run away from here, anyway, before long. Just as soon as I get enough food saved up, and can swap my alleys and chaneys with Billy Drake for his air-rifle."

"Why, Tommy Rooney!" exclaimed Tess. "Where are you going to run to?"

"I—I——Well, that don't matter! I'll find some place. What sort of a place is this you girls are going to? Is it 'way out west? If it is, and there's plenty of Injuns to fight with, and scalp, mebbe I'll come there with you."

Tess was against this instantly. "I don't know about the Indians," she said; "but I thought you wanted to be an Indian yourself? You have an Indian suit."

"Aw, I know," said Master Tommy. "That's Mom's fault. I told her I wanted to be a cowboy, but she saw them Injun outfits at a bargain and she got one instead. I never did want to be an Injun, for when you play with the other fellers, the cowboys always have to win the battles. Best we Injuns can do is to burn a cowboy at the stake, once in a while—like they do in the movin' pitchers."

"Well, I'm sure there are not any Indians at Milton," said Tess. "You can't come there, Tommy. And, anyway, your mother would only bring you back and whip you again."

"She'd have to catch me first!" crowed the imp of mischief, who forgot very quickly the smarts of punishment. "Once I get armed and provisioned (I got more'n a loaf of bread and a whole tin of sardines hid away in a place I won't tell you where!), I'll start off and Mom won't never find me—no, sir-ree, sir!"

"You see what a bad, bad boy he is, Dot," sighed Tess. "I'm so glad we haven't any brother."

"Oh, but if we did have," said Dot, with assurance, "he'd be a cowboy and not an Indian, from the very start!"

This answer was too much for Tess! She decided to say no more about boys, for it seemed as impossible to convince Dot on the subject as it was Aggie.

Aggie, meanwhile, was the busiest of the four sisters. There were so many girls she had to say good-by to, and weep with, and promise undying affection for, and agree to write letters to—at least three a week!—and invite to come to Milton to visit them at the old Corner House, when they once got settled there.

"If all these girls come at once, Aggie," said Ruth, mildly admonitory, "I am afraid even Uncle Peter's big house won't hold them."

"Then we'll have an overflow meeting on the lawn," retorted Aggie, grinning. Then she clouded up the very next minute and the tears flowed: "Oh, dear! I know I'll never see any of them again, we're going away so far."

“Well! I wouldn’t boo-hoo over it,” Ruth said. “There will be girls in Milton, too. And by next September when you go to school again, you will have dozens of spoons.”

“But not girls like these,” said Aggie, sorrowfully. And, actually, she believed it!

This is not much yet about the old Corner House that had stood since the earliest remembrance of the oldest inhabitant of Milton, on the corner of Main and Willow Streets.

Milton was a county seat. Across the great, shaded parade ground from the Stower mansion, was the red brick courthouse itself. On this side of the parade there were nothing but residences, and none of them had been so big and fine in their prime as the Corner House.

In the first place there were three-quarters’ of an acre of ground about the big, colonial mansion. It fronted Main Street, but set so far back from that thoroughfare, that it seemed very retired. There was a large, shady lawn in front, and old-fashioned flower beds, and flowering shrubs. For some time past, the grounds had been neglected and some of the flowers just grew wild.

The house stood close to the side street, and its upper windows were very blank looking. Mr. Peter Stower had lived on the two lower floors only. “And that is all you will probably care to take charge of, Miss Kenway,” said Mr. Howbridge, with a smile, when he first introduced Ruth to the Corner House.

Ruth had only a dim memory of the place from that one visit to it when Uncle Peter chanced to be sick. She knew that he had lived here with his single negro servant, and that the place had—even to her infantile mind—seemed bare and lonely.

Now, however, Ruth knew that she and her sisters would soon liven the old house up. It was a delightful change from the city tenement. She could not imagine anybody being lonely, or homesick, in the big old house.

Six great pillars supported the porch roof, which jutted out above the second story windows. The big oak door, studded with strange little carvings, was as heavy as that of a jail, or fortress!

Some of the windows had wide sills, and others came right down to the floor and opened onto the porch like two-leaved doors.

There was a great main hall in the middle of the house. Out of this a wide stairway led upward, branching at the first landing, one flight going to the east and the other to the west chambers. There was a gallery all around this hall on the second floor.

The back of the Corner House was much less important in appearance than the main building. Two wings had been built on, and the floors were not on a level with the floors in the front of the house, so that one had to go up and down funny, little brief flights of stairs to get to the sleeping chambers. There were unexpected windows, with deep seats under them, in dark corners, and important looking doors which merely opened into narrow linen closets, while smaller doors gave entrance upon long and heavily furnished rooms, which one would not have really believed were in the house, to look at them from the outside.

“Oh-oo-ee!” cried Dot, when she first entered the big front door of the Corner House, clutching Tess tightly by the hand. “We *could* get lost in this house.”

Mr. Howbridge laughed. “If you stick close to this wise, big sister of yours, little one,” said the lawyer, looking at Ruth, “you will not get lost. And I guarantee no other harm will come to you.”

The lawyer had learned to have great respect for the youthful head of the Kenway household. Ruth was as excited as she could be about the old house, and their new fortune, and all. She had a little color in her cheeks, and her beautiful great brown eyes shone, and her lips were parted. She was actually pretty!

“What a great, great fortune it is for us,” she said. “I—I hope we’ll all know how to enjoy it to the best advantage. I hope no harm will come of it. I hope Aunt Sarah won’t be really offended, because Uncle Peter did not leave it to her.”

Aunt Sarah stalked up the main stairway without a word. She knew her way about the Corner House.

She took possession of one of the biggest and finest rooms in the front part, on the second floor. When she had lived here as a young woman, she had been obliged to sleep in one of the rear rooms which was really meant for the occupancy of servants.

Now she established herself in the room of her choice, had the expressman bring her rocking-chair up to it, and settled with her crocheting in the pleasantest window overlooking Main Street. There might be, as Aggie said rather tartly, “bushels of work” to do to straighten out the old house and make it homey; Aunt Sarah did not propose to lift her hand to such domestic tasks.

Occasionally she was in the habit of interfering in the very things the girls did not need, or desire, help in, but in no other way did Aunt Sarah show her interest in the family life of the Kenways.

“And we’re all going to have our hands full, Ruth,” said Aggie, in some disturbance of mind, “to keep this big place in trim. It isn’t like a flat.”

“I know,” admitted Ruth. “There’s a lot to do.”

Even the older sister did not realize as yet what their change of fortune meant to them. It seemed to them as though the fifty dollars Mr. Howbridge had advanced should be made to last for a long, long time.

A hundred thousand dollars' worth of property was only a series of figures as yet in the understanding of Ruth, and Agnes, and Tess, and Dot. Besides, there was the uncertainty about Uncle Peter's will.

The fortune, after all, might disappear from their grasp as suddenly as it had been thrust into it.

CHAPTER IV—GETTING SETTLED

It was the time of the June fruit fall when the Kenway girls came to the Old Corner House in Milton. A roistering wind shook the peach trees in the side yard and at the back that first night, and at once the trees pelted the grass and the flowers beneath their overladen branches with the little, hard green pellets that would never now be luscious fruit.

"Don't you s'pose they're sorry as we are, because they won't ever be good for nothing?" queried Dot, standing on the back porch to view the scattered measure of green fruit upon the ground.

"Don't worry about it, Dot. Those that are left on the trees will be all the bigger and sweeter, Ruth says," advised Tess. "You see, those little green things would only have been in the way of the fruit up above, growing. The trees had too many children to take care of, anyway, and had to shake some off. Like the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe."

"But I never *did* feel that she was a real mother," said Dot, not altogether satisfied. "And it seems too bad that all those pretty, little, velvety things couldn't turn into peaches."

"Well, for my part," said Tess, more briskly, "I don't see how so many of them managed to cling on, that old wind blew so! Didn't you hear it tearing at the shutters and squealing because it couldn't get in, and hooting down the chimney?"

"I didn't want to hear it," confessed Dot. "It—it sounded worse than Tommy Rooney hollering at you on the dark stairs."

The girls had slept very contentedly in the two great rooms which Ruth chose at the back of the house for their bedrooms, and which opened into each other and into one of the bathrooms. Aunt Sarah did not mind being alone at the front.

"I always intended havin' this room when I got back into this house," she said, in one of her infrequent confidences to Ruth. "I wanted it when I was a gal. It was a guest room. Peter said I shouldn't have it. But I'm back in it now, in spite of him—ain't I?"

Following Uncle Peter's death, Mr. Howbridge had hired a woman to clean and fix up the rooms in the Corner House, which had been occupied in the old man's lifetime. But there was plenty for Ruth and Agnes to do during the first few days.

Although they had no intention of using the parlors, there was quite enough for the Kenway girls to do in caring for the big kitchen (in which they ate, too), the dining-room, which they used as a general sitting-room, the halls and stairs, and the three bedrooms.

The doors of the other rooms on the two floors (and they seemed innumerable) Ruth kept closed with the blinds at the windows drawn.

"I don't like so many shut doors," Dot confided to Tess, as they were dusting the carved balustrade in the big hall, and the big, hair-cloth covered pieces of furniture which were set about the lower floor of it. "You don't know what is behind them—ready to pop out!"

"Isn't anything behind them," said the practical Tess. "Don't you be a little ''fraid-cat,' Dot."

Then a door rattled, and a latch clicked, and both girls drew suddenly together, while their hearts throbbed tumultuously.

"Of course, that was only the old wind," whispered Tess, at last.

"Ye-es. But the wind wasn't ever like that at home in Bloomingsburg," stammered Dot. "I—I don't believe I am going to like this big house, Tess. I—I wish we were home in Essex Street."

She actually burst out crying and ran to Ruth, who chanced to open the dining-room door. Agnes was with her, and the twelve year old demanded of Tess:

"What's the matter with that child? What have you been doing to her?"

"Why, Aggie! You know I wouldn't do anything to her," declared Tess, a little hurt by the implied accusation.

"Of course you haven't, dear," said Ruth, soothing the sobbing Dot. "Tell us about it."

"Dot's afraid—the house is so big—and the doors rattle," said Tess.

"Ugh! it *is* kind of spooky," muttered Aggie.

"O-o-o!" gasped Tess.

“Hush!” commanded Ruth, quickly.

“What’s ‘spooky’?” demanded Dot, hearing a new word, and feeling that its significance was important.

“Never you mind, Baby,” said Aggie, kissing her. “It isn’t anything that’s going to bite *you*.”

“I tell you,” said Ruth, with decision, “you take her out into the yard to play, Tess. Aggie and I will finish here. We mustn’t let her get a dislike for this lovely old house. We’re the Corner House girls, you know, and we mustn’t be afraid of our own home,” and she kissed Dot again.

“I—I guess I’ll like it by and by,” sobbed Dot, trying hard to recover her composure. “But—but it’s so b-b-big and scary.”

“Nothing at all to scare you here, dear,” said Ruth, briskly. “Now, run along.”

When the smaller girls had gone for their hats, Ruth said to Aggie: “You know, mother always said Dot had too much imagination. She just pictures things as so much worse, or so much better, than they really are. Now, if she should really ever be frightened here, maybe she’d never like the old house to live in at all.”

“Oh, my!” said Aggie. “I hope that won’t happen. For I think this is just the very finest house I ever saw. There is none as big in sight on this side of the parade ground. We must be awfully rich, Ruth.”

“Why—why I never thought of that,” said the elder sister, slowly. “I don’t know whether we are actually rich, or not. Mr. Howbridge said something about there being a lot of tenements and money, but, you see, as long as Uncle Peter’s will can’t be found, maybe we can’t use much of the money.”

“We’ll have to work hard to keep this place clean,” sighed Aggie.

“We haven’t anything else to do this summer, anyway,” said Ruth, quickly. “And maybe things will be different by fall.”

“Maybe we can find the will!” exclaimed Aggie, voicing a sudden thought.

“Oh!”

“Wouldn’t that be great?”

“I’ll ask Mr. Howbridge if we may look. I expect *he* has looked in all the likely places,” Ruth said, after a moment’s reflection.

“Then we’ll look in the unlikely ones,” chuckled Aggie. “You know, you read in story books about girls finding money in old stockings, and in cracked teapots, and behind pictures in the parlor, and inside the stuffing of old chairs, and——”

“Goodness me!” exclaimed Ruth. “You are as imaginative as Dot herself.”

Meanwhile Tess and Dot had run out into the yard. They had already made a tour of discovery about the neglected garden and the front lawn, where the grass was crying-out for the mower.

Ruth said she was going to have some late vegetables, and there was a pretty good chicken house and wired run. If they could get a few hens, the eggs would help out on the meat-bill. *That* was the way Ruth Kenway still looked at things!

The picket fence about the front of the old Corner House property was higher than the heads of the two younger girls. As they went slowly along by the front fence, looking out upon Main Street, they saw many people look curiously in at them. It doubtless seemed strange in the eyes of Milton people to see children running about the yard of the old Corner House, which for a generation had been practically shut up.

There were other children, too, who looked in between the pickets, too shy to speak, but likewise curious. One boy, rather bigger than Tess, stuck a long pole between two of the pickets, and when Dot was not looking, he turned the pole suddenly and confined her between it and the fence.

Dot squealed—although it did not hurt much, only startled her. Tess flew to the rescue.

“Don’t you do that!” she cried. “She’s my sister! I’ll just give it to you——”

But there came a much more vigorous rescuer from outside the fence. A long legged, hatless colored girl, maybe a year or two older than Tess, darted across Main Street from the other side.

“Let go o’ dat! Let go o’ dat, you Sam Pinkney! You’s jes’ de baddes’ boy in Milton! I done tell your mudder so on’y dis berry mawnin’——Yes-sah!”

She fell upon the mischievous Sam and boxed both of his ears soundly, dragging the pole out from between the pickets as well, all in a flash. She was as quick as could be.

“Don’ you be ’fraid, you lil’ w’ite gals!” said this champion, putting her brown, grinning face to an aperture between the pickets, her white teeth and the whites of her eyes shining.

“Dat no-’count Sam Pinkney is sho’ a nuisance in dis town—ya-as’m! My mudder say so. ’F I see him a-tantalizin’ you-uns again, he’n’ me’ll have de gre’tes’ bustification we ever *did* hab—now, I tell yo’, honeys.”

She then burst into a wide-mouthed laugh that made Tess and Dot smile, too. The brown girl added:

“You-uns gwine to lib in dat ol’ Co’ner House?”

“Yes,” said Tess. “Our Uncle Peter lived here.”

“Sho’! I know erbout him. My gran’pappy lived yere, too,” said the colored girl. “Ma name’s Alfredia Blossom. Ma mammy’s Petunia Blossom, an’ she done washin’ for de w’ite folks yere abouts.”

“We’re much obliged to you for chasing that bad boy away,” said Tess, politely. “Won’t you come in?”

“I gotter run back home, or mammy’ll wax me good,” grinned Alfredia. “But I’s jes’ as much obleeged to yo’. On’y I wouldn’t go inter dat old Co’ner House for no money—no, *Ma’am*!”

“Why not?” asked Tess, as the colored girl prepared to depart.

“It’s spooky—dat’s what,” declared Alfredia, and the next moment she ran around the corner and disappeared up Willow Street toward one of the poorer quarters of the town.

“There!” gasped Dot, grabbing Tess by the hand. “What does *that* mean? She says this old Corner House is ‘spooky,’ too. What does ‘spooky’ mean, Tess?”

CHAPTER V—GETTING ACQUAINTED

By the third day after their arrival in Milton, the Kenway sisters were quite used to their new home; but not to their new condition.

“It’s just delightful,” announced Agnes. “I’m going to love this old house, Ruth. And to run right out of doors when one wants to—with an apron on and without ‘fixing up’—nobody to see one——”

The rear premises of the old Corner House were surrounded by a tight fence and a high, straggling hedge. The garden and backyard made a playground which delighted Tess and Dot. The latter seemed to have gotten over her first awe of the big house and had forgotten to ask further questions about the meaning of the mysterious word, “spooky.”

Tess and Dot established their dolls and their belongings in a little summer-house in the weed-grown garden, and played there contentedly for hours. Ruth and Aggie were working very hard. It was as much as Aunt Sarah would do if she made her own bed and brushed up her room.

“When I lived at home before,” she said, grimly, “there were plenty of servants in the house. That is, until Father Stower died and Peter became the master.”

Mr. Howbridge came on this day and brought a visitor which surprised Ruth.

“This is Mrs. McCall, Miss Kenway,” said the lawyer, who insisted upon treating Ruth as quite a grown-up young lady. “Mrs. McCall is a widowed lady for whom I have a great deal of respect,” continued the gentleman, smiling. “And I believe you girls will get along nicely with her.”

“I—I am glad to meet Mrs. McCall,” said Ruth, giving the widow one of her friendly smiles. Yet she was more than a little puzzled.

“Mrs. McCall,” said Mr. Howbridge, “will take many household cares off your shoulders, Miss Kenway. She is a perfectly good housekeeper, as I know,” and he laughed, “for she has kept house for me. If you girls undertook to take care of even a part of this huge house, you would have no time for anything else.”

“But——” began Ruth, in amazement, not to say panic.

“You will find Mrs. McCall just the person whom you need here,” said Mr. Howbridge, firmly.

She was a strong looking, brisk woman, with a pleasant face, and Ruth *did* like her at once. But she was troubled.

“I don’t see, Mr. Howbridge, how we can *afford* anybody to help us—just now,” Ruth said. “You see, we have so very little money. And we already have borrowed from you, sir, more than we can easily repay.”

“Ha! you do not understand,” said the lawyer, quickly. “I see. You think that the money I advanced before you left Bloomingsburg was a loan?”

“Oh, sir!” gasped Ruth. “We could not accept it as a gift. It would not be right——”

“I certainly do admire your independence, Ruth Kenway,” said the gentleman, smiling. “But do not fear. I am not lending you money without expecting to get full returns. It is an advance against your uncle’s personal estate.”

“But suppose his will is never found, sir?” cried Ruth.

“I know of no other heirs of the late Mr. Stower. The court recognizes you girls as the legatees in possession. There is not likely to be any question of your rights at all. But we hope the will may be found and thus a suit in Chancery be avoided.”

“But—but is it *right* for us to accept all this—and spend money, and all that—when there is still this uncertainty about the will?” demanded Ruth, desperately.

“I certainly would not advise you to do anything that was wrong either legally or morally,” said Mr. Howbridge, gravely. “Don’t you worry. I shall pay the bills. You can draw on me for cash within reason.”

“Oh, sir!”

“You all probably need new clothing, and some little luxuries to which you have not been always accustomed. I think I must arrange for each of you girls to have a small monthly allowance. It is good for young people to learn how to use money for themselves.”

“Oh, sir!” gasped Ruth, again.

“The possibility of some other person, or persons, putting in a claim to Mr. Peter Stower’s estate, must be put out of your mind, Miss Kenway,” pursued the kindly lawyer. “You have borne enough responsibility for a young girl, already. Forget it, as the boys say.

“Remember, you girls are very well off. You will be protected in your rights by the court. Let Mrs. McCall take hold and do the work, with such assistance as you girls may wish to give her.”

It was amazing, but very delightful. “Why, Ruth-*ie*!” cried Agnes, when they were alone, fairly dancing around her sister. “Do you suppose we are really going to be *rich*?”

To Ruth’s mind a very little more than enough for actual necessities was wealth for the Kenways! She felt as though it were too good to be true. To lay down the burden of responsibilities which she had carried for two years——well! it was a heavenly thought!

Milton was a beautiful old town, with well shaded streets, and green lawns. People seemed to have plenty of leisure to chat and be sociable; they did not rush by you without a look, or a word, as they had in Bloomingsburg.

“So, you’re the Corner House girls, are you? Do tell!” said one old lady on Willow Street, who stopped the Kenway sisters the first time they all trooped to Sunday School.

“Let’s see; *you* favor your father’s folks,” she added, pinching Agnes’ plump cheek. “I remember Leonard Kenway very well indeed. He broke a window for me once—years ago, when he was a boy.

“I didn’t know who did it. But Lenny Kenway never could keep anything to himself, and he came to me and owned up. Paid for it, too, by helping saw my winter’s wood,” and the old lady laughed gently.

“I’m Mrs. Adams. Come and see me, Corner House girls,” she concluded, looking after them rather wistfully. “It’s been many a day since I had young folks in my house.”

Already Agnes had become acquainted with a few of the storekeepers, for she had done the errands since their arrival in Milton. Now they were welcomed by the friendly Sabbath School teachers and soon felt at home. Agnes quickly fell in love with a bronze haired girl with brown eyes, who sat next to her in class. This was Eva Larry, and Aggie confided to Ruth that she was “just lovely.”

They all, even the little girls, strolled about the paths of the parade ground before returning home. This seemed to be the usual Sunday afternoon promenade of Milton folk. Several people stopped the Corner House girls (as they were already known) and spoke kindly to them.

Although Leonard Kenway and Julia Stower had moved away from Milton immediately upon their marriage, and that had been eighteen years before, many of the residents of Milton remembered the sisters’ parents, and the Corner House girls were welcomed for those parents’ sake.

“We certainly shall come and call on you,” said the minister’s wife, who was a lovely lady, Ruth thought. “It is a blessing to have young folk about that gloomy old house.”

“Oh! we don’t think it gloomy at all,” laughed Ruth.

When the lady had gone on, the Larry girl said to Agnes: “I think you’re awfully brave. *I* wouldn’t live in the Old Corner House for worlds.”

“Why not?” asked Agnes, puzzled. “I guess you don’t know how nice it is inside.”

“I wouldn’t care if it was carpeted with velvet and you ate off of solid gold dishes!” exclaimed Eva Larry, with emphasis.

“Oh, Eva! you won’t even come to see us?”

“Of course I shall. I like you. And I think you are awfully plucky to live there——”

“What for? What’s the matter with the house?” demanded Agnes, in wonder.

“Why, they say such things about it. You’ve heard them, of course?”

“Surely you’re not afraid of it because old Uncle Peter died there?”

“Oh, no! It began long before your Uncle Peter died,” said Eva, lowering her voice. “Do you mean to say that Mr. Howbridge—nor *anybody*—has not told you about it?”

“Goodness me! No!” cried Agnes. “You give me the shivers.”

“I should think you would shiver, you poor dear,” said Eva, clutching at Aggie’s arm. “You oughtn’t to be allowed to go there to live. My mother says so herself. She said she thought Mr. Howbridge ought to be ashamed of himself——”

“But what *for*?” cried the startled Agnes. “What’s the matter with the house?”

“Why, it’s haunted!” declared Eva, solemnly. “Didn’t you ever hear about the Corner House Ghost?”

“Oh, Eva!” murmured Agnes. “You are fooling me.”

“No, Ma’am! I’m not.”

“A—a ghost?”

“Yes. Everybody knows about it. It’s been there for years.”

“But—but we haven’t seen it.”

“You wouldn’t likely see it—yet. Unless it was the other night when the wind blew so hard. It comes only in a storm.”

“What! the ghost?”

“Yes. In a big storm it is always seen looking out of the windows.”

“Goodness!” whispered Agnes. “What windows?”

“In the garret. I believe that’s where it is always seen. And, of course, it is seen from outside. When there is a big wind blowing, people coming across the parade here, or walking on this side of Willow Street, have looked up there and seen the ghost fluttering and beckoning at the windows——”

“How horrid!” gasped Agnes. “Oh, Eva! are you *sure*?”

“I never saw it,” confessed the other. “But I know all about it. So does my mother. She says it’s true.”

“Mercy! And in the daytime?”

“Sometimes at night. Of course, I suppose it can be seen at night because it is phosphorescent. All ghosts are, aren’t they?”

“I—I never saw one,” quavered Agnes. “And I don’t want to.”

“Well, that’s all about it,” said Eva, with confidence. “And I wouldn’t live in the house with a ghost for anything!”

“But we’ve *got* to,” wailed Agnes. “We haven’t any other place to live.”

“It’s dreadful,” sympathized the other girl. “I’ll ask my mother. If you are dreadfully frightened about it, I’ll see if you can’t come and stay with us.”

This was very kind of Eva, Agnes thought. The story of the Corner House Ghost troubled the twelve-year-old very much. She dared not say anything before Tess and Dot about it, but she told the whole story to Ruth that night, after they were in bed and supposed the little girls to be asleep.

“Why, Aggie,” said Ruth, calmly, “I don’t think there *are* any ghosts. It’s just foolish talk of foolish people.”

“Eva says her mother *knows* it’s true. People have seen it.”

“Up in our garret?”

“Ugh! In the garret of this old house—yes,” groaned Agnes. “Don’t call it *our* house. I guess I don’t like it much, after all.”

“Why, Aggie! How ungrateful.”

“I don’t care. For all of me, Uncle Peter could have kept his old house, if he was going to leave a ghost in the garret.”

“Hush! the children will hear you,” whispered Ruth.

CHAPTER VI—UNCLE RUFUS

That whispered conversation between Ruth and Agnes after they were abed that first Sunday night of the Kenways’ occupancy of the Old Corner House, bore unexpected fruit. Dot’s ears were sharp, and she had not been asleep.

From the room she and Tess occupied, opening out of the chamber in which the bigger girls slept, Dot heard enough of the whispered talk to get a fixed idea in her head. And when Dot *did* get an idea, it was hard to “shake it loose,” as Agnes declared.

Mrs. McCall kept one eye on Tess and Dot as they played about the overgrown garden, for she could see this easily from the kitchen windows. Mrs. McCall had already made herself indispensable to the family; even Aunt Sarah recognized her worth.

Ruth and Agnes were dusting and making the beds on this Monday morning, while Tess and Dot were setting their playhouse to rights.

“I just heard her say so, so now, Tessie Kenway,” Dot was saying. “And I know if it’s up there, it’s never had a thing to eat since we came here to live.”

“I don’t see how that could be,” said Tess, wonderingly.

“It’s just *so*,” repeated the positive Dot.

“But why doesn’t it make a noise?”

“We-ell,” said the smaller girl, puzzled, too, “maybe we don’t hear it ’cause it’s too far up—there at the top of the house.”

“I know,” said Tess, thoughtfully. “They eat tin cans, and rubber boots, and any old thing. But I always thought that was because they couldn’t find any other food. Like those castaway sailors Ruth read to us about, who chewed their sealskin boots. Maybe such things stop the gnawing feeling you have in your stomach when you’re hungry.”

“I am going to pull some grass and take it up there,” announced the stubborn Dot. “I am sure it would be glad of some grass.”

“Maybe Ruth wouldn’t like us to,” objected Tess.

“But it isn’t Ruthie’s!” cried Dot. “It must have belonged to Uncle Peter.”

“Why! that’s so,” agreed Tess.

For once she was over-urged by Dot. Both girls pulled great sheafs of grass. They held it before them in the skirts of their pinafores, and started up the back stairs.

Mrs. McCall chanced to be in the pantry and did not see them. They would have reached the garret without Ruth or Agnes being the wiser had not Dot, laboring upward, dropped a wisp of grass in the second hall.

“What’s all this?” demanded Agnes, coming upon the scattered grass.

“What’s what?” asked Ruth, behind her.

“And on the stairs!” exclaimed Agnes again. “Why, it’s grass, Ruth.”

“Grass growing on the stairs?” demanded her older sister, wonderingly, and running to see.

“Of course not *growing*,” declared Agnes. “But who dropped it? Somebody has gone up——”

She started up the second flight, and Ruth after her. The trespassers were already on the garret flight. There was a tight door at the top of those stairs so no view could be obtained of the garret.

“Well, I declare!” exclaimed Agnes. “What are you doing up here?”

“And with grass,” said Ruth. “We’re all going to explore up there together some day soon. But you needn’t make your beds up there,” and she laughed.

“Not going to make beds,” announced Tess, rather grumpily.

“For pity’s sake, what *are* you going to do?” asked Agnes.

“We’re going to feed the goat,” said Dot, gravely.

“Going to feed *what*?” shrieked Agnes.

“The goat,” repeated Dot.

“She says there’s one up here,” Tess exclaimed, sullenly.

“A goat in the garret!” gasped Ruth. “How ridiculous. What put such an idea into your heads?”

“Aggie said so herself,” said Dot, her lip quivering. “I heard her tell you so last night after we were all abed.”

“A—goat—in—the—gar—ret!” murmured Agnes, in wonder.

Ruth saw the meaning of it instantly. She pulled Aggie by the sleeve.

“Be still,” she commanded, in a whisper. “I told you little pitchers had big ears. She heard all that foolishness that Larry girl told you.” Then to the younger girls she said:

“We’ll go right up and see if we can find any goat there. But I am sure Uncle Peter would not have kept a goat in his garret.”

“But you and Aggie *said* so,” declared Dot, much put out.

“You misunderstood what we said. And you shouldn’t listen to hear what other people say—that’s eavesdropping, and is not nice at all. Come.”

Ruth mounted the stairs ahead and threw open the garret door. A great, dimly lit, unfinished room was revealed, the entire size of the main part of the mansion. Forests of clothing hung from the rafters. There were huge trunks and chests, and all manner of odd pieces of furniture.

The small windows were curtained with spider’s lacework of the very finest pattern. Dust lay thick upon everything. Agnes sneezed.

“Goodness! what a place!” she said.

“I don’t believe there is a goat here, Dot,” said Tess, becoming her usual practical self. “He’d—he’d cough himself to death!”

“You can take that grass down stairs,” said Ruth, smiling. But she remained behind to whisper to Agnes:

“You’ll have to have a care what you say before that young one, Ag. It was ‘the *ghost* in the garret’ she heard you speak about.”

“Well,” admitted the plump sister, “I could see the whole of that dusty old place. It doesn’t seem to me as though *any* ghost would care to live there. I guess that Eva Larry didn’t know what she was talking about after all.”

It was not, however, altogether funny. Ruth realized that, if Agnes did not.

“I really wish that girl had not told you that silly story,” said the elder sister.

“Well, if there should be a ghost——”

“Oh, be still!” exclaimed Ruth. “You know there’s no such thing, Aggie.”

“I don’t care,” concluded Aggie. “The old house *is* dreadfully spooky. And that garret——”

“Is a very dusty place,” finished Ruth, briskly, all her housewifely instincts aroused. “Some day soon we’ll go up there and have a thorough house-cleaning.”

“Oh!”

“We’ll drive out both the ghost and the goat,” laughed Ruth. “Why, that will be a lovely place to play in on rainy days.”

“Boo! it’s spooky,” repeated her sister.

“It won’t be, after we clean it up.”

“And Eva says that’s when the haunt appears—on stormy days.”

“I declare! you’re a most exasperating child,” said Ruth, and that shut Agnes’ lips pretty tight for the time being. She did not like to be called a child.

It was a day or two later that Mrs. McCall sent for Ruth to come to the back door to see an old colored man who stood there, turning his battered hat around and around in his hands, the sun shining on his bald, brown skull.

“Good mawnin’, Missie,” said he, humbly. “Is yo’ one o’ dese yere relatifs of Mars’ Peter, what done come to lib yere in de ol’ Co’ner House?”

“Yes,” said Ruth, smiling. “I am Ruth Kenway.”

“Well, Missie, I’s Unc’ Rufus,” said the old man, simply.

“Uncle Rufus?”

“Yes, Missie.”

“Why! you used to work for our Uncle Peter?”

“Endurin’ twenty-four years, Missie,” said the old man.

“Come in, Uncle Rufus,” said Ruth, kindly. “I am glad to see you, I am sure. It is nice of you to call.”

“Yes, Missie; I ’lowed you’d be glad tuh see me. Das what I tol’ my darter, Pechunia——”

“Petunia?”

“Ya-as. Pechunia Blossom. Das her name, Missie. I been stayin’ wid her ever since dey turn me out o’ yere.”

“Oh! I suppose you mean since Uncle Peter died?”

“Ya-as, Missie,” said the old man, following her into the sitting room, and staring around with rolling eyes. Then he chuckled, and said: “Disher does seem lak’ home tuh me, Missie.”

“I should think so, Uncle Rufus,” said Ruth.

“I done stay here till das lawyer man done tol’ me I wouldn’t be wanted no mo’,” said the colored man. “But I sho’ does feel dat de ol’ Co’ner House cyan’t git erlong widout me no mo’ dan I kin git erlong widout *it*. I feels los’, Missie, down dere to Pechunia Blossom’s.”

“Aren’t you happy with your daughter, Uncle Rufus?” asked Ruth, sympathetically.

“Sho’ now! how you t’ink Unc’ Rufus gwine tuh be happy wid nottin’ to do, an’ sech a raft o’ pickaninnies erbout? Glo-ree! I sho’ feels like I was livin’ in a sawmill, wid er boiler fact’ry on one side an’ one o’ dese yere stone-crushers on de oder.”

“Why, that’s too bad, Uncle Rufus.”

“Yo’ see, Missie,” pursued the old black man, sitting gingerly on the edge of the chair Ruth had pointed out to him, “I done wo’k for Mars’ Peter so long. I done ev’ryt’ing fo’ him. I done de sweepin’, an’ mak’ he’s bed, an’ cook fo’ him, an’ wait on him han’ an’ foot—ya-as’m!

“Ain’t nobody suit Mars’ Peter like ol’ Unc’ Rufus. He got so he wouldn’t have no wimmen-folkses erbout. I ta’ de wash to Pechunia, an’ bring hit back; an’ I markets fo’ him, an’ all dat. Oh, I’s spry fo’ an ol’ feller, Missie. I kin wait on table quite propah—though ’twas a long time since Mars’ Peter done have any comp’ny an’ dis dinin’ room was fixed up for ’em.

“I tak’ care ob de silvah, Missie, an’ de linen, an’ all. Right smart of silvah Mars’ Peter hab, Missie. Yo’ sho’ needs Uncle Rufus yere, Missie. I don’t see how yo’ git erlong widout him so long.”

“Mercy me!” gasped Ruth, suddenly awakening to what the old man was getting at. “You mean to say you want to come back here to *work*?”

“Sho’ly! sho’ly!” agreed Uncle Rufus, nodding his head a great many times, and with a wistful smile on his wrinkled old face that went straight to Ruth’s heart.

“But, Uncle Rufus! we don’t *need* you, I’m afraid. We have Mrs. McCall—and there are only four of us girls and Aunt Sarah.”

“I ’member Mis’ Sarah very well, Missie,” said Uncle Rufus, nodding. “She’ll sho’ly speak a good word fo’ Uncle Rufus, Missie. Yo’ ax her.”

“But—Mr. Howbridge——”

“Das lawyer man,” said Uncle Rufus, “he neber jes’ understood how it was,” proposed the old colored man, gently. “He didn’t jes’ see dat dis ol’ Co’ner House was my home so long, dat no oder place seems jes’ *right* tuh me.”

“I understand,” said Ruth, softly, but much worried.

“Disher w’ite lady yo’ got tuh he’p, *she’ll* fin’ me mighty handy—ya-as’m. I kin bring in de wood fo’ her, an’ git up de coal f’om de cellar. I kin mak’ de paf’s neat. I kin mak’ yo’ a leetle bit gyarden, Missie—’taint too late fo’ some vegertables. Yo’d oughter have de lawn-grass cut.”

The old man’s catalog of activities suggested the need of a much younger worker, yet Ruth felt so sorry for him! She was timid about taking such a responsibility upon herself. What would Mr. Howbridge say?

Meanwhile the old man was fumbling in an inner pocket. He brought forth a battered wallet and from it drew a soiled, crumpled strip of paper.

“Mars’ Peter didn’t never intend to fo’get me—I know he didn’t,” said Uncle Rufus, earnestly. “Disher paper he gib me, Missie, jes’ de day befo’ he pass ter Glory. He was a kin’ marster, an’ he lean on Unc’ Rufus a powerful lot. Jes’ yo’ read dis.”

Ruth took the paper. Upon it, in a feeble scrawl, was written one line, and that unsigned:

“Take care of Uncle Rufus.”

“Who—whom did he tell you to give this to, Uncle Rufus?” asked the troubled girl, at last.

“He didn’t say, Missie. He warn’t speakin’ none by den,” said the old man. “But I done kep’ it, sho’ly, ’tendin’ tuh sho’ it to his relatifs what come yere to lib.”

“And you did right, Uncle Rufus, to bring it to us,” said Ruth, coming to a sudden decision. “I’ll see what can be done.”

CHAPTER VII—THEIR CIRCLE OF INTEREST WIDENS

Uncle Rufus was a tall, thin, brown negro, with a gently deprecating air and a smile that suddenly changed his naturally sad features into a most humorous cast without an instant’s notice.

Ruth left him still sitting gingerly on the edge of the chair in the dining-room, while she slowly went upstairs to Aunt

Sarah. It was seldom that the oldest Kenway girl confided in, or advised with, Aunt Sarah, for the latter was mainly a most unsatisfactory confidante. Sometimes you could talk to Aunt Sarah for an hour and she would not say a word in return, or appear even to hear you!

Ruth felt deeply about the old colored man. The twist of soiled paper in her hand looked to Ruth like a direct command from the dead uncle who had bequeathed her and her sisters this house and all that went with it.

Since her last interview with Mr. Howbridge, the fact that they were so much better off than ever before, had become more real to Ruth. They could not only live rather sumptuously, but they could do some good to other people by the proper use of Uncle Peter's money!

Here was a case in point. Ruth did not know but what the old negro would be more than a little useless about the Corner House; but it would not cost much to keep him, and let him think he was of some value to them.

So she opened her heart to Aunt Sarah. And Aunt Sarah listened. Indeed, there never was such a good audience as Aunt Sarah in this world before!

"Now, what do you think?" asked Ruth, breathlessly, when she had told the story and shown the paper. "Is this Uncle Peter's handwriting?"

Aunt Sarah peered at the scrawl. "Looks like it," she admitted. "Pretty trembly. I wouldn't doubt, on'y it seems too kind a thought for Peter to have. He warn't given to thinking of that old negro."

"I suppose Mr. Howbridge would know?"

"That lawyer? Huh!" sniffed Aunt Sarah. "He might. But that wouldn't bring you anything. If he put the old man out once, he would again. No heart nor soul in a lawyer. I always *did* hate the whole tribe!"

Aunt Sarah had taken a great dislike to Mr. Howbridge, because the legal gentleman had brought the news of the girls' legacy, instead of telling her *she* was the heir of Uncle Peter. On the days when there chanced to be an east wind and Aunt Sarah felt a twinge of rheumatism, she was inclined to rail against Fate for making her a dependent upon the "gals' charity," as she called it. But she firmly clung to what she called "her rights." If Uncle Peter had not left his property to her, he *should* have done so—that is the way she looked at it.

Such comment as Ruth could wring from Aunt Sarah seemed to bolster up her own resolve to try Uncle Rufus as a retainer, and tell Mr. Howbridge about it afterward.

"We'll skimp a little in some way, to make his wages," thought Ruth, her mind naturally dropping into the old groove of economizing. "I don't think Mr. Howbridge would be *very* angry. And then—here is the paper," and she put the crumpled scrap that the old colored man had given her, safely away.

"Take care of Uncle Rufus."

She found Agnes and explained the situation to her. Aunt Sarah had admitted Uncle Rufus was a "handy negro," and Agnes at once became enthusiastic over the possibility of having such a serving man.

"Just think of him in a black tail-coat and white vest and spats, waiting on table!" cried the twelve year old, whose mind was full of romantic notions gathered from her miscellaneous reading. "This old house just *needs* a liveried negro servant shuffling about it—you *know* it does, Ruth!"

"That's what Uncle Rufus thinks, too," said Ruth, smiling. What had appealed to the older girl was Uncle Rufus' wistful and pleading smile as he stated his desire. She went back to the dining-room and said to the old man:

"I am afraid we cannot pay you much, Uncle Rufus, for I really do not know just how much money Mr. Howbridge will allow us to spend on living expenses. But if you wish to come——"

"Glo-ree!" exclaimed the old man, rolling his eyes devoutedly. "Das sho' de good news for disher collud pusson. Nebber min' payin' me wages, Missie. I jes' wanter lib an' die in de Ol' Co'ner House, w'ich same has been my home endurin' twenty-four years—ya-as'm!"

Mrs. McCall approved of his coming, when Ruth told her. As Uncle Rufus said, he was "spry an' pert," and there were many little chores that he could attend to which relieved both the housekeeper and the Kenway girls themselves.

That very afternoon Uncle Rufus reappeared, and in his wake two of Petunia Blossom's pickaninnies, tugging between them a bulging bag which contained all the old man's worldly possessions.

One of these youngsters was the widely smiling Alfredia Blossom, and Tess and Dot were glad to see her again, while little Jackson Montgomery Simms Blossom wriggled, and grinned, and chuckled in a way that assured the Corner House girls of his perfect friendliness.

"Stan' up—you!" commanded the important Alfredia, eyeing her younger brother with scorn. "What you got eatin' on you, Jackson Montgom'ry? De *wiggles*? What yo' s'pose mammy gwine ter say ter yo' w'en she years you ain't got yo' comp'ny manners on, w'en you go ter w'ite folkses' houses? Stan' up—straight!"

Jackson was bashful and was evidently a trial to his sister, when she took him into "w'ite folks' comp'ny." Tess, however, rejoiced his heart with a big piece of Mrs. McCall's ginger-cake, and the little girls left him munching, while they took Alfredia away to the summer house in the garden to show her their dolls and playthings.

Alfredia's eyes grew big with wonder, for she had few toys of her own, and confessed to the possession of "jes' a ol' rag tar-baby wot mammy done mak' out o' a stockin'-heel."

Tess and Dot looked at each other dubiously when they heard this. Their collection of babies suddenly looked to be fairly wicked! Here was a girl who had not even a single "boughten" dollie.

Dot gasped and seized the Alice-doll, hugging it close against her breast; her action was involuntary, but it did not signal the smallest Kenway girl's selfishness. No, indeed! Of course, she could not have given away *that* possession, but there were others.

She looked down the row of her china playmates—some small, some big, some with pretty, fresh faces, and some rather battered and with the color in their face "smootchy."

"Which could we give her, Dot?" whispered Tess, doubtfully. "There's my Mary-Jane——"

The older sister proposed to give up one of her very best dolls; but Mary-Jane was not pink and pretty. Dot stepped up sturdily and plucked the very pinkest cheeked, and fluffiest haired doll out of her own row.

"Why, Dot! that's Ethelinda!" cried Tess. Ethelinda had been found in Dot's stocking only the previous Christmas, and its purchase had cost a deal of scrimping and planning on Ruth's part. Dot did not know that; she had a firm and unshakable belief in Santa Claus.

"I think she'll just *love* Alf'edia," declared Dot, boldly. "I'm sure she will," and she thrust the doll suddenly into the colored girl's open arms. "You'll just take good care of her—won't you, Alf'edia?"

"My goodness!" ejaculated Alfredia. "You w'ite gals don' mean me ter *keep* this be-you-ti-ful doll-baby? You don't mean *that*?"

"Of course we do," said Tess, briskly, taking pattern after Dot. "And here's a spangled cloak that belonged to one of my dolls, but she hasn't worn it much—and a hat. See! they both fit Ethelinda splendidly."

Alfredia was speechless for the moment. She hugged her new possessions to her heart, and her eyes winked *hard*. Then she grinned. Nobody or nothing could quench Alfredia's grin.

"I gotter git home—I gotter git home ter mammy," she chattered, at last. "I cyan't nebber t'ank you w'ite chillen enough. Mammy, she done gotter thank yo' for me."

Uncle Rufus came out and stopped his grandchild, ere she could escape. "Whar you done got dat w'ite doll-baby, Alfredia Blossom?" he asked, threateningly.

Dot and Tess were right there to explain. Uncle Rufus, however, would not let his grandchild go until "Missie Ruth," as he called the eldest Kenway girl, had come to pronounce judgment.

"Why, Dot!" she said, kissing her little sister, "I think it is very nice of you to give Alfredia the doll—and Tess, too. Of course, Uncle Rufus, she can take the doll home. It is hers to keep."

Alfredia, and "Jackson And-so-forth," as Agnes nicknamed the colored boy, ran off, delighted. The old man said to Ruth:

"Lor' bless you, Missie! I done *know* you is Mars' Peter's relatifs; but sho' it don't seem like you was re'l blood kin to de Stowers. Dey ain't nebber give nawthin' erway—no Ma'am!"

The Kenway girls had heard something about Uncle Peter's closeness before; he had been counted a miser by the neighbors. His peculiar way of living alone, and seldom appearing outside of the door during the last few years of his life, had encouraged such gossip regarding him.

On Main Street, adjoining the premises of the Corner House, was a pretty cottage in which there lived a family of children, too. These neighbors did not attend the same church which the Kenways had gone to on Sunday; therefore no opportunity had yet occurred for Tess and Dot to become acquainted with the Creamer girls. There were three of them of about the same ages as Agnes, Tess and Dot.

"They're such nice looking little girls," confessed Tess. "I hope we get to know them soon. We could have lots of fun playing house with them, Dot, and going visiting, and all."

"Yes," agreed Dot. "That one they call Mabel is so pretty! She's got hair like our Agnes—only it's curly."

So, with the best intentions in the world, Tess and Dot were inclined to gravitate toward the picket fence dividing the two yards, whenever they saw the smaller Creamer girls out playing.

Once Tess and Dot stood on their side of the fence, hand in hand, watching the three sisters on the other side playing with their dolls near the dividing line. The one with the curls looked up and saw them. It quite shocked Dot when she saw this pretty little creature twist her face into an ugly grimace.

"I hope you see us!" she said, tartly, to Tess and Dot. "What you staring at?"

The Kenways were amazed—and silent. The other two Creamer children laughed shrilly, and so encouraged the one who had spoken so rudely.

"You can just go away from there and stare at somebody else!" said the offended small person, tossing her head. "We don't want you bothering us."

“O-o-o!” gasped Dot.

“We—we didn’t mean to stare,” stammered Tess. “We—we don’t know any little girls in Milton yet. Don’t you want to come over and play with us?”

“No, we don’t!” declared the curly head. “We got chased out of that old place enough, when we first came to live here, by that old crazy man.”

“She means Uncle Peter,” said Tess to Dot.

“Was he crazy?” asked the wondering Dot.

“Of course he wasn’t,” said Tess, sturdily.

“Yes he was, too!” snapped the Creamer girl. “Everybody says so. You can ask them. I expect you folks are all crazy. Anyway, we don’t want to play with you, and you needn’t stand there and stare at us!”

The smaller Kenway sisters went meekly away. Of course, if Agnes had overheard the conversation, she would have given them as good as they sent. But Tess and Dot were hurt to the quick.

Dot said to Ruth, at supper: “Was our Uncle Peter crazy, Ruthie?”

“Of course not,” said the bigger girl, wonderingly. “What put such a silly idea into your little head?”

The tale came out, then. Agnes bristled up, of course.

“Let me catch them talking to you that way!” she cried. “*I’ll* tell them something!”

“Oh, don’t let us quarrel with them,” urged Ruth, gently. “But you and Tess, Dot, had better not put yourselves in their way again.”

“Dey’s berry bad chillen—dem Creamers,” put in Uncle Rufus, who was shuffling about the dining-room, serving. Although he was faultless in his service, with the privilege of an old retainer when the family was alone, he *would* assist in the general conversation.

In Agnes’ eyes, Uncle Rufus made a perfect picture. Out of his bulging traveling bag had appeared just the sort of a costume that she imagined he should wear—even to the gray spats!

“It makes me feel just *rich*!” the twelve year old said to Ruth, with a contented sigh. “And real silver he got out of the old chest, and polished it up—and the cut glass!”

They began to use the dining-room for meals after Uncle Rufus came. The old man gently insisted upon it.

“Sho’ly, Missie, you wants ter lib up ter de customs ob de ol’ Co’ner House. Mars’ Peter drapped ’em all off latterly; but de time was w’en dis was de center ob sassiety in Milton—ya-as’m!”

“But goodness!” ejaculated Ruth, in some timidity, “we do not expect to be in society *now*. We don’t know many people yet. And not a soul has been inside the door to call upon us since we arrived.”

However, their circle of acquaintance was steadily widening.

CHAPTER VIII—THE CAT THAT WENT BACK

Agnes put her hand upon it in the pantry and dropped a glass dish ker-smash! She screamed so, that Ruth came running, opened the door, and, as it scurried to escape into the dining-room, the oldest Kenway girl dodged and struck her head with almost stunning force against the doorframe. She “saw stars” for a few moments.

“Oh! oh!” screamed Agnes.

“Ow! ow!” cried Ruth.

“Whatever is the matter with you girls?” demanded Mrs. McCall, hurrying in from the front hall.

She suddenly saw it, following the baseboard around the room in a panic of fear, and Mrs. McCall gathered her skirts close about her ankles and called Uncle Rufus.

“He, he!” chuckled the black man, making one swoop for Mrs. Mouse and catching her in a towel. “All disher combobberation over a leetle, teeny, gray mouse. Glo-ree! s’pose hit had been a rat?”

“The house is just over-run with mice,” complained Mrs. McCall. “And traps seem to do no good. I always *would* jump, if I saw a mouse. I can’t help it.”

“Me, too,” cried Agnes. “There’s something so sort of *creepy* about mice. Worse than spiders.”

“Oh, dear!” moaned Ruth, holding the side of her head. “I wish you’d find some way of getting rid of them, Uncle Rufus. I’m afraid of them, too.”

“Lor’ bress yo’ heart an’ soul, Missie! I done cotched this one fo’ you-uns, an’ I wisht I could ketch ’em all. But Unc’ Rufus ain’t much of a mouser—naw suh! What you-alls wants is a cat.”

“We ought to have a good cat—that’s a fact,” admitted Mrs. McCall.

“I like cats,” said Dot, who had come in to see what the excitement was all about. “There’s one runs along our back fence. Do you ’spect we could coax her to come in here and hunt mouses? Let’s show her this one Uncle Rufus caught, and maybe she’ll follow us in,” added the hopeful little girl.

Although this plan for securing a cat did not meet with the family’s approval, Agnes was reminded of the cat problem that very afternoon, when she had occasion to go to Mr. Stetson’s grocery store, where the family traded.

She liked Myra Stetson, the groceryman’s daughter, almost as well as she did Eva Larry. And Myra had nothing to say about the “haunt” which was supposed to pester the old Corner House.

Myra helped about the store, after school hours and on Saturdays. When Agnes entered this day, Mr. Stetson was scolding.

“I declare for’t!” he grumbled. “There’s no room to step around this store for the cats. Myra! I can’t stand so many cats—they’re under foot all the time. You’ll have to get rid of some of your pets. It’s making me poor to feed them all, in the first place!”

“Oh, father!” cried Myra. “They keep away the mice, you know.”

“Yes! Sure! They keep away the mice, because there’s so many cats and kittens here, the mice couldn’t crowd in. I tell you I can’t stand it—and there’s that old Sandy-face with four kittens in the basket behind the flour barrels in the back room. Those kittens have got their eyes open. Soon you can’t catch them at all. I tell you, Myra, you’ve got to get rid of them.”

“Sandy-face and all?” wailed Myra, aghast.

“Yes,” declared her father. “That’ll be five of ’em gone in a bunch. Then maybe we can at least *count* those that are left.”

“Oh, Myra!” cried Agnes. “Give them to us.”

“What?” asked the store-keeper’s girl. “Not the whole five?”

“Yes,” agreed Agnes, recklessly. “Mrs. McCall says we are over-run with mice, and I expect we could feed more than five cats for a long time on the mouse supply of the old Corner House.”

“Goodness! Old Sandy-face is a real nice mother cat——”

“Let’s see her,” proposed Agnes, and followed Myra out into the store-room of the grocery.

In a broken hand-basket in which some old clothes had been dropped, Sandy-face had made her children’s cradle. They looked like four spotted, black balls. The old cat herself was with them, and she stretched and yawned, and looked up at the two girls with perfect trust in her speckled countenance.

Her face looked as though salt and pepper, or sand, had been sprinkled upon it. Her body was marked with faint stripes of black and gray, which proved her part “tiger” origin. She was “double-toed” on her front feet, and her paws were big, soft cushions that could unsheath dangerous claws in an instant.

“She ought to be a good mouser,” said Agnes, reflectively. It *did* look like a big contract to cart five cats home at once!

“But I wouldn’t feel right to separate the family—especially when the kittens are so young,” Myra said. “If your folks will let you take them—well! it would be nice,” she added, for she was a born lover of cats and could not think, without positive pain, of having any of the cunning kittens cut short in their feline careers.

“Oh, Ruth will be glad,” said Agnes, with assurance. “So will Mrs. McCall. We need cats—we just actually *need* them, Myra.”

“But how will you get them home?” asked the other girl, more practical than the impulsive Agnes.

“Goodness! I hadn’t thought of that,” confessed Agnes.

“You see, cats are funny creatures,” Myra declared. “Sometimes they find their way home again, even if they are carried miles and miles away.”

“But if I take the kittens, too—wouldn’t she stay with her own kittens?”

“Well—p’r’aps. But the thing *is*, how are you going to carry them all?”

“Say! they’re all in this old basket,” said Agnes. “Can’t I carry them just as they are?”

She picked the basket up. Old Sandy-face just “mewed” a little, but did not offer to jump out.

“Oh!” gasped Agnes. “They’re heavy.”

“You couldn’t carry them all that way. And if Sandy saw a dog——”

“Maybe I’ll have to blindfold her?” suggested Agnes.

“Put her in a bag!” cried Myra.

“But that seems so cruel!”

“I know. She might smother,” admitted Myra.

“Goodness me!” said Agnes, briskly, “if we’re going to have a cat, I don’t want one that will always be afraid of me because I popped her into a bag. Besides, a cat is a dignified creature, and doing a thing like that would hurt her feelings. Don’t you think so?”

“I guess Sandy-face wouldn’t like it,” agreed Myra, laughing at Agnes’ serious speech and manner.

“I tell you what,” the second-oldest Kenway girl said. “I’ll run home with the groceries your father has put up for me, and get the kids to come and help. They can certainly carry the kittens, while I take Sandy.”

“Of course,” agreed the relieved Myra. She saw a chance of disposing of the entire family without hurting her own, or the cats’ feelings, and she was much pleased.

As for the impulsive Agnes, when she made up her mind to do a thing, she never thought of asking advice. She reached home with the groceries and put them into the hands of Uncle Rufus at the back door. Then she called Tess and Dot from their play in the garden.

“Are your frocks clean, girls?” she asked them, hurriedly. “I want you to go to Mr. Stetson’s store with me.”

“What for, Aggie?” asked Dot, but quite ready to go. By Agnes’ appearance it was easy to guess that there was something exciting afoot.

“Shall I run ask Ruth?” Tess inquired, more thoughtfully.

Uncle Rufus was watching them from the porch. Agnes waved her hand to the black man, as she ushered the two smaller girls out of the yard onto Willow Street.

“No,” she said to Tess. “Uncle Rufus sees us, and he’ll explain to Ruth.” At the moment, she did not remember that Uncle Rufus knew no more about their destination than Ruth herself.

The smaller girls were eager to learn the particulars of the affair as Agnes hurried them along. But the bigger girl refused to explain, until they were in the grocer’s store-room.

“Now! what do you think of them?” she demanded.

Tess and Dot were delighted with the kittens and Sandy-face. When they learned that all four kittens and the mother cat were to be their very own for the taking away, they could scarcely keep from dancing up and down.

Oh, yes! Tess and Dot were sure they could carry the basket of kittens. “But won’t that big cat scratch you, when you undertake to carry her, Aggie?” asked Tess.

“I won’t let her!” declared Agnes. “Now you take the basket right up when I lift out Sandy.”

“I—I’m afraid she’ll hurt you,” said Dot.

“She’s real kind!” Agnes lifted out the mother-cat. Sandy made no complaint, but kept her eyes fixed upon the kittens. She was used to being handled by Myra. So she quickly snuggled down into Agnes’ arms, purring contentedly. The two smaller girls lifted the basket of kittens between them.

“Oh, this is nice,” said Tess, delightedly. “We can carry them just as easy! Can’t we, Dot?”

“Then go right along. We’ll go out of that side door there, so as not to take them through the store,” instructed Agnes.

Sandy made no trouble at all. Agnes was careful to walk so that the big cat could look right down into the basket where her four kittens squirmed and occasionally squealed their objections to this sort of a “moving day.”

The sun was warm and the little things could not be cold, but they missed the warmth of their mother’s body, and her fur coat to snuggle up against! When they squealed, Sandy-face evinced some disturbance of mind, but Agnes managed to quiet her, until they reached Mrs. Adams’ front gate.

Mrs. Adams was the old lady who had told the Kenways about their father breaking one of her windows when he was a boy. She had shown much interest in the Corner House girls. Now she was out on her front porch and saw them coming along Willow Street.

“Whatever have you girls been up to?” she demanded, pleasantly enough, but evincing much curiosity.

“Why, Mrs. Adams,” said Agnes, eagerly. “Don’t you see? We’ve adopted a family.”

“Humph! A family? Not those young’uns of Petunia Blossom? I see Uncle Rufus back at the old Corner House, and I expect the whole family will be there next.”

“Why,” said Agnes, somewhat surprised by this speech, “these are only cats.”

“Cats?”

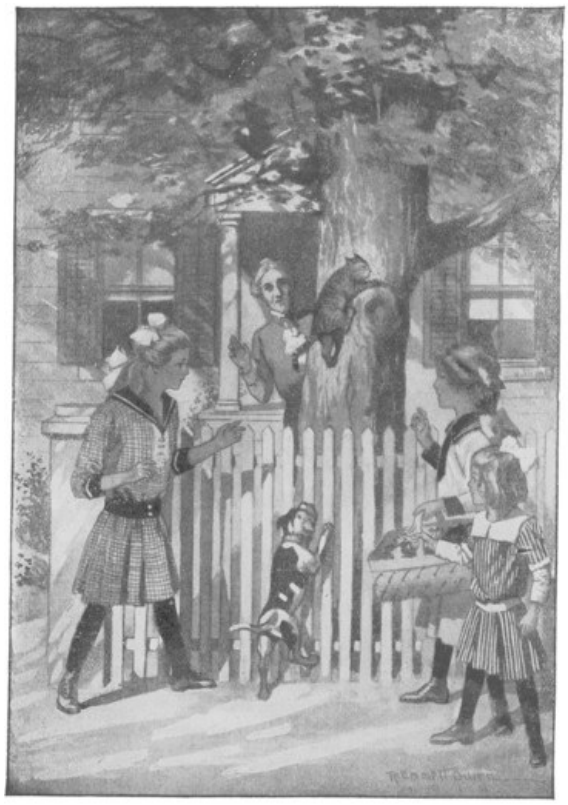
“Yes’m. Cats. That is, *a* cat and four kittens.”

Mrs. Adams started down the path to see. The girls stopped before her gate. At that moment there was a whoop, a scrambling in the road, and a boy and a bulldog appeared from around the nearest corner.

With unerring instinct the bulldog, true to his nature, came charging for the cat he saw in Agnes’ arms.

Poor old Sandy-face came to life in a hurry. From a condition of calm repose, she leaped in a second of time to wild and vociferous activity. Matters were on a war basis instantly.

She uttered a single “Yow!” and leaped straight out of Agnes’ arms to the bole of a maple tree standing just inside Mrs. Adams’ fence. She forgot her kittens and everything else, and scrambled up the tree for dear life, while the bulldog, tongue hanging out, and his little red eyes all alight with excitement, leaped against the fence as though he, too, would scramble over it and up the tree.



She forgot her kittens and everything else, and scrambled up the tree for dear life.

“Oh! that horrid dog! Take him away, you Sammy Pinkney!” cried Mrs. Adams. “Come into the yard, girls!”

The gate was open, and the little girls ran in with the basket of kittens. Each kitten, in spite of its youth, was standing stiff-legged in the basket, its tiny back arched, its fur on end, and was “spitting” with all its might.

The mother cat had forgotten her children in this moment of panic. The dancing bulldog outside the fence quite crazed her. She ran out on the first limb of the tree, and leaped from it into the next tree. There was a long row of maples here and the frightened Sandy-face went from one to the other like a squirrel.

“She’s running away! she’s running away!” cried Agnes.

“Where did you get that cat and those kittens, child?” demanded Mrs. Adams.

“At Mr. Stetson’s store,” said Agnes, sadly, as the old cat disappeared.

“She’s going back,” said the lady firmly. “That’s where she is going. A scared cat always will make for home, if she can. And now! what under the canopy are you going to do with that mess of kittens—without a cat to mother them?”

Agnes was stricken dumb for the moment. Tess and Dot were all but in tears. The situation was very complicated indeed, even if the boy had urged his dog away from the gate.

The four little kittens presented a problem to the Corner House girls that was too much for even the ready Agnes to solve. Here were the kittens. The cat had gone back. Agnes had a long scratch on her arm—and it smarted. Tess and Dot were on the verge of tears, while the kittens began to mew and refused to be pacified.

CHAPTER IX—THE VANISHING KITTENS

“What you’ll do with those little tykes, I don’t see,” said Mrs. Adams, who was not much of a comforter, although kind-hearted. “You’d better take them back to Mr. Stetson, Aggie.”

“No-o. I don’t think he’d like that,” said Agnes. “He told Myra to get rid of them and I promised to take them away and keep them.”

“But that old cat’s gone back,” decided the lady.

“I s’pect you’ll have to go after her again, Aggie,” said Tess.

“But I won’t carry her—loose—in my arms,” declared the bigger girl, with emphasis. “See what she did to me,” and she displayed the long, inflamed scratch again.

“Put her in a bag, child,” advised Mrs. Adams. “You little ones come around here to the back stoop and we’ll try to make the kittens drink warm milk. They’re kind of small, but maybe they’re hungry enough to put their tongues into the dish.”

She bustled away with Tess and Dot and the basket of kittens, while Agnes started back along the street toward the grocery store. She had rather lost interest in Sandy-face and her family.

At once Tess and Dot were strongly taken with the possibility of teaching the kittens to drink. Mrs. Adams warmed the milk, poured it into a saucer, and set it down on the top step. Each girl grabbed a kitten and the good lady took the other two.

They thrust the noses of the kittens toward the milk, and immediately the little things backed away, and made great objections to their introduction to this new method of feeding.

The little black one, with the white nose and the spot of white over one eye, got some milk on its whiskers, and immediately sneezed.

“My goodness me!” exclaimed Dot, worriedly, “I believe this kitten’s catching cold. Suppose it has a real *hard* cold before its mother comes back? What shall we do about it?”

This set Mrs. Adams to laughing so hard that she could scarcely hold her kittens. But she dipped their noses right into the milk, and after they had coughed and sputtered a little, they began to lick their chops and found the warm milk much to their taste.

Only, they did not seem to know how to get at it. They nosed around the edge of the saucer in the most ridiculous way, getting just a wee mite. They found it very good, no doubt, but were unable to discover just where the milk was.

“Did you ever see such particular things?” asked the impatient Mrs. Adams. She suddenly pushed the black and white kitten (the girls had already called it “Spotty”) right up against the dish. Now, no cat—not even a very tiny cat like this one—cares to be pushed, and to save itself from such indignity, Spotty put out one paw and—splash!—it went right into the dish.

Oh! how he shook the wet paw and backed away. Cats do not like to get their feet wet. Spotty began licking the wet paw to dry it and right then and there he discovered something!

The milk on it tasted very good. He sat up in the funniest way and licked it all off, and Dot danced around, delighted to see him.

A little of the milk had been spilled on the step, and one of the speckled kittens found this, and began to lap it up with a tiny pink tongue. With a little urging the other two kittens managed to get some milk, too, but Spotty was the brightest—at least, the girls thought so.

After he had licked his paw dry, he ventured over to the saucer again, smelled around the edge, and then deliberately dipped in his paw and proceeded to lap it dry once more.

“Isn’t he the cunningest little thing that ever was?” demanded Tess, clapping her hands. Dot was so greatly moved that she had to sit down and just watch the black and white kitten. She could not speak for happiness, at first, but when she *did* speak, she said:

“Isn’t it nice that there’s such things as kittens in the world? I don’t s’pose they are useful at all till they’re *cats*, but they are awfully pretty!”

“Isn’t she the little, old-fashioned thing?” murmured Mrs. Adams.

Tess and Dot were very much at home and the kittens were curled up in the basket again in apparent contentment, when Agnes returned.

She had Sandy-face in a sack, and it was just about all Agnes could do to carry the cat without getting scratched again. For Sandy’s claws came through the flimsy bag, and she knew not friend from foe in her present predicament.

“I declare! I had no idea cats had so little sense,” Agnes sighed, sitting down, quite heated. “Wouldn’t you think she’d be *glad* to be taken to a good home—and with her kittens, too?”

“Maybe *we* wouldn’t have any more sense if we were being carried in a sack,” said Tess, thoughtfully.

“Well!” exclaimed Aggie. “She knew enough to go back to Mr. Stetson’s store, that’s sure. He had to catch her for me, for Myra was out. He says we’ll have to watch her for a few days, but I don’t believe she’d have left her kittens if that bad Sam Pinkney hadn’t come along with his dog—do you, Mrs. Adams?”

“No, deary. I think she’ll stay with the kittens all right,” said the old lady, comfortingly.

“Well, let’s go on home, girls,” said Agnes, rising from the step. “We’ve bothered Mrs. Adams long enough.”

“We’ve had an awfully nice time here,” said Tess, smiling at the old lady, and not forgetful of her manners.

“I’m glad you came, dearies. Come again. I’m going to have a little party here for you Corner House girls, some day, if you’ll come to it.”

“Oh, I just *love* parties,” declared Dot, her eyes shining. “If Ruth will let us we’ll come—won’t we, Tess?”

“Certainly,” agreed Tess.

“Of course we’ll come, Mrs. Adams,” cried Agnes, as she led the way with the me-owing cat in the sack, while the two smaller girls carried the sleeping kittens with care.

They reached home without any further adventure. Ruth came running from Aunt Sarah’s room to see the kittens. When they let Sandy-face out of the bag in the dining-room, she scurried under the sofa and refused to be coaxed forth.

The children insisted upon taking the kittens up to show Aunt Sarah, and it was determined to keep the old cat in the dining-room till evening, at any rate; so the basket was set down by the sofa. Each girl finally bore a kitten up to Aunt Sarah’s room.

Agnes had chosen Spotty for her very own—and the others said she ought to have her choice, seeing that she had been through so much trouble to get the old mother cat and her family—and received a scratch on her arm, too!

They remained long enough in Auntie’s room to choose names for all the other three kittens. Ruth’s was named Popocatepetl—of course, “Petl,” for short (pronounced like “petal”) is pretty for a kitten—“reminds one of a flower, I guess,” said Tess.

Tess herself chose for her particular pet the good old fashioned name of “Almira.” “You see,” she said, “it’s sort of in memory of Miss Almira Briggs who was my teacher back in Bloomingsburg, and Myra Stetson, who gave us the cats.”

Dot wavered a long time between “Fairy” and “Elf” as a name for the fourth kitten, and finally she decided on “Bungle”! That was because the little, staggery thing, when put down on the floor, tried to chase Aunt Sarah’s ball of yarn and bungled the matter in a most ridiculous fashion.

So, Spotty, Petl, Almira and Bungle, the kittens became. Aunt Sarah had a soft spot in her heart for cats—what maiden lady has not? She approved of them, and the children told her their whole adventure with Sandy-face and her family.

“Butter her feet,” was the old lady’s single audible comment upon their story, but the girls did not know what for, nor just what Aunt Sarah meant. They seldom ventured to ask her to explain her cryptic sayings, so they carried the kittens downstairs with puzzled minds.

“What do you s’pose she meant, Ruth?” demanded Agnes. “‘Butter her feet,’ indeed. Why, the old cat would get grease all over everything.”

So they merely put the kittens back into the basket, and left the dining-room to Sandy-face and her family, until it was time for Uncle Rufus to set the table for evening dinner.

“Das old cat sho’ done feel ter home now,” said the black man, chuckling. “She done got inter dat basket wid dem kittens an’ dey is havin’ a reg’lar love feast wid each odder, dey is so glad ter be united once mo’. Mebbe dat ol’ speckled cat kin clean out de mice.”

Of course, Uncle Rufus was not really a “black” man, save that he was of pure African blood. He was a brown man—a rich, chocolate color. But his daughter, Petunia Blossom, when she came to get the wash-clothes, certainly proved to be as black—and almost as shiny—as the kitchen range!

“How come she is so dreful *brack*, I sho’ dunno,” groaned Uncle Rufus. “Her mudder was a well-favored brown lady—not a mite darker dan me—an’ as I ’member my pappy an’ mammy, ’way back dere befo’ de wah, wasn’t none o’ dese common *brack* negras—no, Ma’am!

“But Pechunia, she done harked back to some ol’ antsister” (he meant “ancestor”) “wot must ha’ been marked mighty permiscuous wid de tarbrush. Does jes’ look lak’ yo’ could rub de soot off Pechunia wid yo’ finger!”

Petunia was enormously fat, too, but she was a pretty colored woman, without Uncle Rufus’ broad, flat features. And she had a great number of bright and cunning pickaninnies.

“How many I got in to-tal, Missie?” she repeated Ruth’s question. “Lor’ bress yo’! Sometimes I scurce remember dem all. Dere’s two merried an’ moved out o’ town. Den dere’s two mo’ wokin’; das four, ain’t it? Den de good Lor’ sen’ me twins twicet—das mak’ eight, ef my ’rithmetickle am cor-rect. An’ dere’s Alfredia, an’ Jackson, and Burne-Jones Whis’ler Blossom (he done been named by Mis’ Holcomb, de artis’ lady, wot I wok fo’) an’ de baby, an’ Louisa Annette, an’ an’—— Bress de Lor’, Missie, I ’spect das ’bout all.”

Ruth had lost count and could only laugh over the names foistered upon the helpless brown babies. Uncle Rufus "snorted" over the catalog of his daughter's progeny.

"Huh! dem names don't mean nuthin', an' so I tell her," he grunted. "But yo' cyan't put sense in de head ob a flighty negra-woman—no, Ma'am! She called dem by sech *circusy* names 'cause dey *sounds* pretty. Sound an' no sense! Huh!"

Just now, however, the Corner House girls were more deeply interested in the names of the four kittens, and in keeping them straight (for three were marked almost exactly alike), than they were in the names which had been forced upon the helpless family of Petunia Blossom.

Having already had one lesson in lapping milk from a saucer, the kittens were made to go through the training again after dinner, under the ministrations of Tess and Dot.

Sandy-face, who seemed to have become fairly contented by this time, sat by and watched her offspring coughing and sputtering over the warm milk and finally, deciding that they had had enough, came and drank it all up herself.

Dot was rather inclined to think that this was "piggish" on Sandy's part.

"I don't think you're a bit polite, Sandy," she said, gravely, to the mother cat while the latter calmly washed her face. "You had your dinner, you know, before Mrs. McCall brought in the milk."

They all trooped out to see Uncle Rufus establish Sandy and her family for the night in the woodshed. The cat seemed to fancy the nest in the old basket, so they did not change it, and when they left the family, shutting the woodshed door tightly, they supposed Sandy and her children would be safe for the night.

In the morning, however, a surprise awaited Tess and Dot, when they ran out to the shed to see how the kittens were. Sandy-face was sleeping soundly in the basket and Spotty and Petl were crawling all over her. Almira and Bungle had disappeared!

The two smallest girls searched all about the shed, and then a wail arose from Dot, when she was assured that her own, and Tess' kitten, were really not to be found. Dot's voice brought the whole family, including Uncle Rufus, to the shed door.

"Al-mi-ra and Bungle's lost-ed!" sobbed Dot. "Somebody came and took them, while poor Sandy was asleep. See!"

It was true. Not a trace of the missing kittens could be found. The shed door had not been opened by any of the family before Tess and Dot arrived. There was only a small window, high up in the end wall of the shed, open a very little way for ventilation.

How could the kittens have gotten away without human help? It did look as though Almira and Bungle had been stolen. At least, they had vanished, and even Dot did not believe that there were kitten fairies who could bewitch Sandy's children and spirit them away!

Sandy-face herself seemed the least disturbed of anybody over the lost kittens. Uncle Rufus declared that "das cat sho' nuff cyan't count. She done t'ink she's sho' got all de kittens she ever had."

"I do believe it was that Sam Pinkney boy," whispered Tess, to Agnes. "He's just as bad as Tommy Rooney was—every bit!"

"But how would he know where we had housed the kittens for the night?" demanded Agnes. "I don't see why anybody should want to take two little, teeny kittens from their mother."

Tess and Dot watched closely the remainder of Sandy's family. They believed that the mother cat *did* discover at last that she was "short" two kittens, for she did not seem satisfied with her home in the woodshed. Twice they caught her with a kitten in her mouth, outside the woodshed door, which had been left open.

"Now, Sandy," said Dot, seriously, "you mustn't try to move Spotty and Petl. First thing you know you'll lose them *all*; then you won't have any kittens. And I don't believe they like being carried by the backs of their necks—I don't. For they just *squall*!"

Sandy seemed offended by the girls' interference, and she went off by herself and remained out of sight for half a day. Tess and Dot began to be worried about the mother cat before Sandy turned up again and snuggled the two remaining kittens in the basket, once more.

That second evening they shut the cat and her two kittens into the shed just as carefully as before. In the morning only Spotty was left! The speckled little Popocatepetl had vanished, too!

CHAPTER X—RUTH SEES SOMETHING

The mystery of the vanishing kittens cast a cloud of gloom over the minds of the younger Corner House girls. Besides, it had rained in the night and was still raining after breakfast. It was a dull, gloomy day.

"Just a nice day for us to start cleaning the garret," Ruth said, trying to put cheer into the hearts of her sisters. "Only Mr. Howbridge, who has been away, has written me to come to his office this forenoon. He wants to arrange about several matters, he says. I'll have to go and we'll postpone the garret rummage till I get back."

"Poor Sandy's all wet and muddy," said Dot, who could not get her troubled mind off the cat family. "Just as though

she'd been out in the rain. But I don't see how that could be. She's washing up now by the kitchen stove."

They had brought the mother cat and Spotty into the kitchen for safety. Uncle Rufus shook his head over the mysterious disappearance of Petl, Almira and Bungle, too; whispering to Mrs. McCall:

"Do look for sho' as though rats had got dem kittins. Dunno what else."

"For goodness sake, don't tell me there are rats here, Uncle Rufus!" exclaimed the widow, anxiously. "I couldn't sleep in my bed nights."

"Dunno whar you'd sleep safer, Mis' McCall, ter git away from 'em," chuckled the old colored man. "But I exemplifies de fac' dat I ain't seed none ob dere tracks."

Occasionally Uncle Rufus "threw in a word" in conversation which sounded euphonious in his own ears, but had little to do with the real meaning of his speech.

Nobody whispered "rats" to the little girls; and Tess and Dot scarcely let Sandy and the remaining kitten out of their sight. It was a windy, storm-stricken day, and they took the mother cat and Spotty up to Aunt Sarah's room to play.

Ruth put on her rain-coat, seized an umbrella, and ventured forth. She knew she could find her way to Mr. Howbridge's office, down town, although she had never visited it before.

The lawyer was very glad to see the oldest Corner House girl, and told her so. "I am hearing some good reports of you, Miss Kenway," he said, smiling at her in his odd way, and with his keen eyes looking sharply over the high bridge of his nose, as though he were gazing deep into Ruth's mind.

"Some of these Milton people think that you girls need closer watching than you are getting. So they say. What do you think? Do you feel the need of a sterner guardian?"

"I think you are a very nice guardian," admitted Ruth, shyly. "And we are having awfully nice times up there at the old Corner House, Mr. Howbridge. I hope we are not spending too much money?"

He put on his eyeglasses again and scanned the totals of the store bills and other memoranda she had brought him. He shook his head and smiled again:

"I believe you are a born housekeeper. Of course, I knew that Mrs. McCall wouldn't let you go far wrong. But I see no evidence of a lack of economy on your part. And now, we must see about your spending some more money, Miss Kenway."

"Oh! it seems like a lot to me," said Ruth, faintly. "And—and I must tell you something perhaps you won't like. We—we have an addition to the family."

"How's that?" he asked, in surprise.

"We—we have Uncle Rufus," explained Ruth.

"What! has that old darkey come bothering you?"

"Oh! he isn't a bother. Not at all. I thought he was too old to do much, but he is *so* handy—and he finds so many little things to do. And then——Why, Mr. Howbridge! it's just like home to him."

"Ha! Undoubtedly. And so he told you? Worked on your feelings? You are going to have the whole family on you, next. You will have more wages to pay out than the estate will stand."

"Dear me, sir!" cried Ruth. "Don't say that. I am not paying Uncle Rufus a penny. I told him I couldn't—until I had seen you about it, at least. And he is willing to stay anyhow—so he says."

"I don't know about that old darkey," said Mr. Howbridge, slowly. "I believe he knew more about Mr. Peter Stower's private affairs than he seemed willing to tell the time I talked to him after your Uncle Peter's death. I don't know about your keeping him there."

"Do you think he may know where Uncle Peter hid his private papers, sir?" asked Ruth, eagerly.

"Yes, I do. He's an ignorant old negro. He might get the papers into his hands, and the will might be lost forever."

"Oh, sir!" cried Ruth, earnestly, "I don't think Uncle Rufus is at all dishonest. I asked him about Uncle Peter's hiding away things. He knows what folks say about uncle's being a miser."

"Well?" said Mr. Howbridge, questioningly.

"Uncle Rufus says he knows his old master was that way. Aunt Sarah says Uncle Peter was just like a magpie—that he hid away things without any real reason for it."

"Ha! Miss Maltby was not fond of Mr. Peter Stower. They did not get along well together."

"No, sir. I fancy not. And of course, Aunt Sarah doesn't say much, anyway. She is real hurt to think that he did not leave her the house and money instead of leaving it to us," and Ruth sighed.

"Oh, he left her enough in his will to keep her in comfort for the remainder of her life. She need not be envious," said

the lawyer, carelessly.

“Well,” sighed Ruth, “that isn’t what Aunt Sarah wanted. She feels she ought to own the house. But we can’t help that, can we!”

“No. Do not worry about your Aunt Sarah’s fidgets,” said the lawyer, smiling once more. “But about Uncle Rufus?”

Ruth had opened her bag, and now drew forth the scrap of paper Uncle Rufus had given her. “Who do you think wrote that, sir?” she asked Mr. Howbridge, simply.

The moment the lawyer saw it he scowled. Staring at the paper fixedly for some moments in silence, he finally asked:

“When did the old darkey say he was given this?”

“The day before Uncle Peter died. He said the poor old gentleman couldn’t talk, then, but he managed to write that line. *Is* it Uncle Peter’s handwriting?”

“It certainly is. Shaky, but plainly Mr. Stower’s own hand.”

“Oh, sir! let us keep Uncle Rufus, then,” begged Ruth, quickly.

“But you understand, Miss Kenway, that this request, unsigned as it is, hasn’t an iota of legal weight?”

“I don’t care!” said Ruth.

“Why didn’t the old man show it to me?”

“He was keeping it to show to the relatives of Uncle Peter who, he expected, would have the old Corner House.”

“Ha! and he was afraid of the lawyer, I suppose?”

“You—you were not very sympathetic, were you?” said Ruth, slowly.

“Right! I wasn’t. I could not be. I did not see my way clear to making any provision for Uncle Rufus, for I knew very well that Mr. Stower had not mentioned the old serving man in his will.”

“Well—you’ll let us keep him?”

“If you like. I’ll see that he has a little money every month, too. And now I must not give you much more time to-day, my dear. But I wish to put this envelope into your hand. In it you will find the amount of money which I consider wise for each of you girls to spend monthly—your allowance, I mean.

“Such dresses as you need, will be paid for separately. You will find that a charge account has been opened for you at this store,” and he passed the surprised Ruth the business card of the largest department store in town. “But buy wisely. If you spend too much, be sure you will hear from me. The monthly allowance is pin-money. Squander it as you please without accounting to me—only to your own consciences,” and he laughed and rose to show her out of his private office.

Ruth thanked him and slipped the bulky envelope into her bag. She could not open it there, or on the street, and she hurried homeward, eager to see just what Mr. Howbridge considered a proper allowance for the Corner House Girls to “squander.”

The east wind was tearing across the parade ground and the trees overhead, as Ruth started over the big common, writhed in the clutch of it. The rain came in fitful dashes. The girl sheltered herself as best she could with the umbrella.

Such gusts are hard to judge, however. Although she clung to the umbrella with both hands, one savage squall swept down upon Ruth Kenway and fairly snatched the umbrella from her grasp. It whirled away over the wet lawn, and turned inside out!

“No use chasing *that* thing,” said Ruth, in disgust. “It’s past repairing. I’ll just have to face it.”

She hurried on, her head bowed before the slanting rain. She came to the Willow Street crossing and glanced up at the old Corner House. Not only could she see the great, frowning front of the mansion, with its four huge pillars, but she could view, too, the side next to Willow Street.

Nobody was looking out of the windows on the watch for her, that she could see. The parlors were on this side of the main building, and the girls did not use them. Above, on the second floor, were the sleeping room and library in which Uncle Peter had spent the last years of his life.

Above those blind windows was another row of windows on the third floor, with the shades pulled down tightly. And then, above those, in the peak of the roof, were several small garret windows.

“That’s where that girl said the ghost came and looked out,” Ruth said aloud, stopping suddenly.

And just at that identical moment the ghost *did* look out!

Ruth saw it. Only for a moment, but just as plain as plain could be! A white, fluttering figure—a sort of faceless figure with what seemed to be long garments fluttering about it.

Nobody ever has to see a ghost to know just what one looks like. People who see ghosts recognize their appearance by intuition. This was the garret ghost of the old Corner House, and Ruth was the first of the Kenway girls to see it.

She had made fun of Agnes' belief in things supernatural, but she could not control the shaking of her own limbs now. It was visible up there at the garret window for only half a minute; yet Ruth knew it was no hallucination.

It disappeared with a jump. She did not wait to see if it came back again, but scurried across the street and in at the side gate, and so to the back porch, with scarcely a breath left in her body.

Ruth was just as scared as she could be.

CHAPTER XI—IN THE GARRET

It would never do to burst into the house and scare the younger girls. This thought halted Ruth Kenway, with her hand upon the knob of the outer door.

She waited, getting her breath back slowly, and recovering from the shock that had set every nerve in her body trembling. Of course she did not believe in ghosts! Then, why should she have been so frightened by the fluttering figure seen—for only half a minute, or so—in the garret window of the old Corner House?

Like the old lady in the fable, she did not believe in ghosts, but she was very much afraid of them!

"It's quite ridiculous, I know," Ruth told herself, "for a great big thing like me to shake and shiver over what I positively *know* is merely imagination. That was an old skirt—or a bag—or a cloak—or *something*, waving there at that window.

"Er—er, that's just it!" breathed Ruth. "It was *something*. And until I find out just what it is, I shall not be satisfied. Now, I'm going to be brave, and walk in there to the girls and Mrs. McCall, and say nothing. But we'll start cleaning that garret this very afternoon," she concluded, nodding a determined head.

So she ran into the house to find her three sisters in the dining-room, with such a peculiar air upon them that Ruth could not fail to be shocked. "What under the canopy, as Mrs. McCall says, is the matter with you all!" she demanded.

"Well! I am glad you have come home, Ruth," Agnes began, impulsively. "The most mysterious things happen around this house——"

"Hush!" commanded Ruth. "What is it now? You come up stairs to our room and tell me while I change my clothes. You little ones stay down here till sister comes back."

Agnes had stopped at her warning, and meekly followed Ruth up stairs. In their room the older girl turned on her and demanded:

"What did you see, Aggie?"

"I didn't—it was Tess saw him," replied Agnes, quickly.

"*Him?*" gasped Ruth.

"Yes. Of course, it's foolish. But so many strange things happen in this old house. First, you know, what Eva Larry told me about the ghost——"

"Sh! you haven't seen it?"

"The ghost!" squealed Agnes. "I should hope not. If I had——"

She signified by her look and manner that such an apparition would have quite overcome her.

"It was Tess," she said.

"She hasn't been to the garret?"

"Of course not! You believe in that old ghost, after all, Ruth."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, if it wasn't a ghost Tess saw, it was something like it. The child is convinced. And coming on top of those vanishing kittens——"

"For mercy's sake, Aggie Kenway!" screamed Ruth, grabbing her by the shoulders and giving Agnes a little shake. "*Do* be more lucid."

"Why—ee! I guess I haven't told you much," laughed Agnes. "It was Tess who looked out of the kitchen window a little while ago and saw Tommy Rooney going by the house—on Willow Street."

"Tommy Rooney?"

"Yes. Tess declares it was. And she's not imaginative like Dot, you know."

"Not Tommy Rooney, from Bloomingsburg?"

“There isn’t any other Tommy Rooney that we know,” said Agnes, quite calm now. “And if *that* doesn’t make a string of uncanny happenings, I don’t know what *would*. First the ghost in the garret——”

“But—but you haven’t seen that?” interrupted Ruth, faintly.

“No, thank goodness! But it’s *there*. And then the vanishing kittens——”

“Has Spotty gone?”

“No. But Sandy-face has, and has been gone ever since you went out, Ruth. I don’t think much of that mother cat. She doesn’t stay at home with her family hardly at all.

“Then this boy who looks like Tommy Rooney,” concluded Agnes. “For of course it can’t really *be* Tommy any more than it can be his spirit.”

“I’m glad to see you have some sense, Ag,” said Ruth, with a sigh. “Now let’s go down to the other girls, or they will think we’re hiding something from them.”

Ruth carried down stairs in her hand the envelope Mr. Howbridge had given to her. The sisters gathered in the dining-room, and Agnes picked up Spotty to comfort him while his mother was absent. “Poor ’ittle s’ing!” she cooed over the funny little kitten. “He don’t know wedder him’s got any mudder, or not.”

“It seems to me,” said Dot, gravely, “that Sandy-face must be hunting for her lost children. She wouldn’t really neglect this poor little Spotty for any other reason—would she?”

“Of course not,” Ruth said, briskly. “Now, girls, look here. Mr. Howbridge says we may keep Uncle Rufus, and he will pay him.”

“Oh, goody!” cried Agnes, clapping her hands.

At once Spotty tumbled off her lap and scurried under the sofa. He was not used to such actions.

“Now you’ve scared Spotty, I’m afraid,” said Tess.

“He can get over his scare. What’s that in your hand, Ruth?” demanded Agnes.

“This is some money Mr. Howbridge gave me for us to spend. He calls it our monthly allowance. He says we are to use it just as we please—each of us.”

“Is some of it mine?” asked Dot.

“Yes, dearie. We’ll see how much he gives you to spend for your very owniest own, first of all.”

Ruth tore open the big envelope and shook out four sealed envelopes of smaller size. She sorted them and found the one addressed in Mr. Howbridge’s clerkly hand to “Miss Dorothy Kenway.”

“Now open it, Dot,” urged Tess.

The little girl did so, with sparkling eyes and the color flushing into her cheeks. From the envelope, when it was opened, she drew a crisp, folded dollar bill.

“My!” she murmured. “A whole—new—dollar bill! My! And can I spend it all, Ruthie?”

“Surely,” said the elder sister, smiling.

“Then I know just what I’m going to do,” said Dot, nodding her head.

“What’s that?” asked Agnes.

“I’m going to buy some candy on Saturday that’s not pep’mints. I just *am*. I’m tired of Aunt Sarah’s old pep’mint drops.”

The other girls laughed loudly at this decision of Dot’s. “You funny little thing!” said Ruth. “Of course you shall buy candy—if you want to. But I wouldn’t spend the whole dollar for it. Remember, you’ll get no more spending money until this time next month.”

“I should hope she’d have sense enough to kind of spread it out through the month,” said Agnes. “Hurry up, Ruth. Let’s see what he’s given the rest of us.”

Tess opened her envelope and found a dollar and a half. “Oh, I’m *rich*!” she declared. “I’m awfully obliged to Mr. Howbridge. I’ll tell him so when he comes again.” Then she turned swiftly to Dot and hugged her. “You don’t mind if I have half a dollar more than *you* do, Dot?” she asked. “I’ll divide it with you.”

That was Tess’ way. She could not bear to think that anybody’s feelings were hurt because of her. Ruth intervened:

“Dot knows you are two whole years older than she, Tess. Both of you have more money to spend than you ever had before, and I am sure neither will be selfish with it.”

Agnes grabbed her envelope. “I’m just as anxious to see as I can be,” she confessed.

When she ripped open the envelope she drew forth two crisp dollar bills. But in Ruth's there were five dollars.

"My! it's a lot of money," Agnes said. "And I guess you *ought* to have more than us—a great deal more, Ruthie. I'm glad of my two dollars. I can treat Eva Larry and Myra Stetson. And I'll get some new ribbons, and a book I saw in a window that I want to read. Then, there's the prettiest pair of buckles for fifty cents in the shoeshop window right down Main Street. Did you see them, Ruth? I want them for my best slippers. They'll look scrumptious! And I'd *love* to have one of those embroidered handkerchiefs that they sell at the Lady's Shop. Besides, it's nice to have a little change to rattle in one's purse——"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Ruth. "You've spent your allowance twice over, already. And you still hope to rattle it in your purse! You want to have your cake, and eat it, too—which is something that nobody ever managed to accomplish yet, my dear."

It was really wonderful for them all to have money of their own that need not be accounted for. They came to the luncheon table with very bright faces, despite the stormy day. They did not say anything, before Aunt Sarah, about the allowance Mr. Howbridge had given them. Ruth was afraid that Aunt Sarah might feel hurt about it.

"She *is* so touchy," she said to the others, "about Uncle Peter's money. And she ought to know that she is just as welcome to her share as she can be!"

"I expect," the thoughtful Tess said, "that Aunt Sarah would have enjoyed giving to us just as much as we enjoy giving to her. Maybe *that's* what's the matter with her."

Perhaps that was partly Aunt Sarah's trouble. However, there were other topics of conversation to keep their tongues busy, if the money was tabooed. Tess could not keep from talking about Tommy Rooney.

"I *know* it was Tommy I saw," she declared.

"But how could Tommy get here, clear from Bloomingsburg?" Ruth said. "You know how long it took us to get here by train."

"I know, Sister," Tess said. "But it *was* Tommy. And he must have had an awfully hard time."

"Do—do you s'pose he is looking for us?" queried Dot.

"Don't you fret, Dot," assured Agnes. "He sha'n't jump out and say 'Boo!' at you any more."

"It isn't that. I guess the dark scared me more than Tommy did," confessed Dot. "But say, Tess! Did he have his Indian suit on when he went by in the rain?"

"No. Just rags," declared Tess.

After luncheon Ruth rummaged for brooms, brushes and dustcloths. Mrs. McCall asked:

"What under the canopy are you girls going to do now?"

"Garret. Going to clean it," said Agnes.

"You're never going up in that garret in a storm?" demanded the widow, with a strange look on her face.

"Why not?" asked Agnes, eagerly.

"What do you want to bother with it for?" the good lady asked Ruth without making Agnes any reply.

"So we can play there on just such days as this," said Ruth, firmly. "It will make a splendid playroom."

"Well! I wouldn't do it for a farm," declared Mrs. McCall, and at once went out of the room, so that the girls could not ask further questions. Agnes whispered to Ruth:

"She knows about the ghost, all right!"

"Don't be so silly," the older girl said. But her own heart throbbed tumultuously as she led the procession up the garret stairs a little later. They could hear the wind whistling around the house up here. A shutter rattled, and then the wind gurgled deep in the throat of one of the unused chimneys.

"Goodness!" gasped Tess. "How many strange voices the storm has, hasn't it? Say, Dot! do you s'pose we'll find that goat of yours up here now?"

"I don't care," said the littler girl. "Aggie and Ruth were talking about something that sounded like 'goat' that night in bed. And they won't tell now what it was."

"You must never play eavesdropper," said Ruth, seriously. "It is very unlady-like."

"Then folks shouldn't whisper," declared Dot, quickly. "Nobody would ever *try* to listen, if folks spoke right out loud. You say, yourself, Ruth, that it's not polite to whisper."

They opened the garret door and peered in. Although it was so dull a day outside, there was plenty of light up here. The rain beat against some of the windows and the wind shook and rattled the sashes.

Ruth's gaze turned instantly upon the window at which she believed she had seen the moving figure from across Willow

Street. There was nothing hanging near that window that could possibly have shown from without.

She forced herself to go directly to the place. It was at the right of one of the huge chimneys and she could make no mistake, she thought, for it was at the window to the right of this chimney that she had seen the specter appear not two hours before!

A large space about this window was cleared. There was nothing near enough the window that could have represented the garret ghost. But this cleared space before the window seemed to have been made especially for the ghostly capers of the “haunt.”

Agnes came gingerly over to where Ruth stood. She whispered in the older girl’s ear:

“S’pose that old ghost should appear, Ruth? What would you do? You know, Eva said it was seen only on stormy days.”

“Don’t be silly, child,” said Ruth, quite angrily. She was angry as much at herself for “feeling so shaky inside,” as she was at Agnes.

She bustled about then, and hurried her sisters, too. They made a good beginning within the next two hours. Of course, it was *only* a beginning. Dust and cobwebs lay thick over all. They could brush up only the worst of the litter.

“Next clear day,” Ruth declared, “we’ll take all these old clothes down and hang what we want to keep on the lines in the yard. Uncle Rufus can have the rest. Why do you suppose Uncle Peter kept this old stuff?”

“They say he got so he wouldn’t give away a pin, at the last,” said Agnes. “And some of these old things must have belonged to people dead and gone when Uncle Peter himself was a boy.”

“I expect so,” agreed Ruth.

“What do you suppose is in all these chests and trunks, Ruthie?” asked Tess.

“Don’t know, honey. But we’ll find out some day.”

Just then Uncle Rufus’ tones reached them from the stairway. He called, in his quavering old voice:

“Missie! An’ you oder chillen. I done got somet’ing ter tell yo’.”

“What is it?” cried Agnes, running to open the door at the top of the stairs.

“I done foun’ out what happen ter dem kittens, Missie,” said Uncle Rufus. “You-all come ri’ down an’ I’ll show yo’.”

CHAPTER XII—MRS. KRANZ COMES TO CALL

The girls came down from the garret in a hurry, when they heard this news. Uncle Rufus hobbled on before to the kitchen. There was Sandy-face and Spotty in front of the range. They were both very wet and the old cat was licking the kitten dry.

“Where—where’s the others?” cried Tess. “Did you find Almira?”

“I want my Bungle,” declared Dot. “Didn’t you find my Bungle kitten, Uncle Rufus?”

“Sho, chile! I didn’t say I foun’ dem kittens. I on’y say I knowed where dey went.”

“Where?” was the chorused demand.

Uncle Rufus rolled his eyes and chuckled deeply. “Das ol’ cat play a joke on we-uns,” he declared. “She t’ink she an’ de kittens on’y come yere for a visit. And so she lug ’em all back to Mars’ Stetson’s store—ya-as’m!”

“Carried them back to the store?” cried Ruth. “Oh! she couldn’t.”

“Ya-as’m. One at a time. In her teef,” said Uncle Rufus, nodding confidently. “I jes’ kotch her out on the sidewalk wid dis leetle brack kitten, marchin’ straight fo’ de store. Dat how she come go ’way an’ stay so long. Nex’ time you go to Mars’ Stetson’s, you find dem dere—sho’.”

“But she couldn’t have taken them out of the woodshed,” cried Agnes.

“Ya-as’m, she did. She git out de winder. A cat kin squeeze through a moughty small space—so she kin.”

“Why, you foolish Sandy-face!” exclaimed Dot. “And we tried to make you feel at home—didn’t we, Ruthie?”

“Butter her feet,” said Aunt Sarah, who chanced to be in the kitchen at the moment. “I told you that before,” and she walked out.

“Goodness! we’ll butter all their feet,” cried Agnes, “if that will keep them here. Just as soon as it holds up a little, I’ll run over to Mr. Stetson’s and see if it is so. The poor old thing! to carry those kittens so far. But, me-oh-my! cats haven’t much sense, after all, have they?”

Uncle Rufus was proved right—and that before supper time. The rain held up, and Agnes scurried over to the store, bringing back, huddled in a small covered basket, Popocatepetl, Almira, and Bungle, who all seemed very glad to rejoin

Spotty. Sandy-face looked absurdly pleased to see them—just as though she had not carried them back, one by one, to a hiding place behind the flour barrels in Mr. Stetson's store-room!

Agnes insisted upon buttering the mother-cat's paws. And to make sure of it, she buttered the paws of the four kittens as well.

"There," she said, "when Sandy gets through lapping all that butter up, she ought to be *proud* to stay here, for butter's forty cents a pound right now!"

"You extravagant thing," sighed Ruth, shaking her head.

"Yes!" cried Agnes. "And it's so nice to be extravagant. I declare, Ruth, I feel that I was just born to be a rich girl. It *tickles* me to be extravagant."

Since returning from Mr. Howbridge's office, Ruth had evolved a question that she wished to put to Uncle Rufus. The mystery of the lost will was ever present in the mind of the oldest of the Corner House girls, and this query had to do with that mystery.

"Uncle Rufus," she asked the old man, after dinner that evening when he was carefully putting away the silver and they were alone together in the dining-room, "Uncle Rufus, do you know where Uncle Peter used to keep his private papers?"

"Sho', Missie, he kept dem in de safe in his study—ya-as'm. Yo' know dat safe; don't yo'?"

"But Mr. Howbridge has the key to that safe, and to the desk, and all. And there are some things—quite important things—that he can't find. Didn't Uncle Peter have some other hiding place?"

"Glo-ree, Missie! I 'spect he did," said Uncle Rufus, rolling his eyes. "But I nebber knowed whar dat is."

"And you lived right here with him all those years?"

"Why, Missie, I tell yo' how it was," said Uncle Rufus, dropping his voice. "Yo' see, latterly, Mars' Peter got pecool'ar—ya-as'm. Yo' might call it pecool'ar. I knowed he was superstitious of folks—ya-as'm. He used ter send me out on errands—plumb foolish errands, Missie; den I reckon he hid t'ings away. But I don' know whar."

"You haven't the least suspicion?" asked Ruth, anxiously.

"Well now!" said Uncle Rufus, rubbing the bald spot on his head as though to stir his wits into action. "Dar was dat time he got mad at me."

"What about?"

"I warn't gone so long on an errand, lak' he 'spected me ter be, I reckon. An' w'en I come back he warn't in his room, an' dere he was a-comin' down from de garret with a lighted candle."

"From the garret?"

"Yes, Missie. An' he sho' was mad with ol' Unc' Rufus."

"Perhaps he hid papers, then, in one of those chests, or bureaus up there?"

"Cyan't say, Missie. Mebbe. But yo' don' ketch Unc' Rufus goin' up dem garret stairs much—no'm!"

"Why not, Uncle Rufus?" asked Ruth, quickly. "Are you afraid of the garret ghost?"

"Glo-ree! who done tell yo' erbout *dat*?" demanded the colored man, rolling his eyes again. "Don' talk erbout ghos'es; it's sho' baid luck."

That was all Ruth could get out of the old negro. He had all the fear of his race for supernatural things.

It was the next day that Mrs. Kranz came to call. The Corner House girls had never seen Mrs. Kranz before, but they never could forget her after their first view of her!

She was a huge lady, in a purple dress, and with a sweeping gray plume on her big hat, and lavender gloves. She had the misfortune to possess a hair-mole on one of her cheeks, and Dot could not keep her eyes off of that blemish, although she knew it was impolite to stare.

Mrs. Kranz came to the front door of the old Corner House and gave a resounding summons on the big, brass knocker that decorated the middle panel. Nobody had ventured to approach that door, save Mr. Howbridge, since the Corner House girls had come to Milton.

"Goodness! who can that be?" demanded Agnes, when the reverberations of the knocker echoed through the big hall.

"Company! I know it's company!" cried Tess, running to peer out of the dining-room window.

Ruth gave a glance about the big room, which they still made their sitting room in general, and approached the hall. Dot whispered:

"Oh-ee! I hope there are some little girls coming to call."

There was nobody but this huge lady, though half a dozen little girls might have hidden behind her voluminous skirts. Ruth smiled upon the giantess and said, quickly, “Good-morning!”

“Vell!” was the deep-throated reply—almost a grunt. “Vell! iss de family home?”

“Certainly,” said Ruth, in her politest way. “Do come in. We are all at home,” and she ushered the visitor into the dining-room.

The lady stared hard at all the girls, and then around at the old-fashioned furniture; at the plate rail of Delft china which Ruth had taken out of a cupboard, where it had been hidden away for years; at the ancient cellarette; and at the few pieces of heavy plate with which the highboy and the lowboy were both decorated.

“Vell!” exclaimed the visitor, in that exceedingly heavy voice of hers, and for the third time. “I hear dere iss only madchens—girls—in dis house. Iss dot so—heh?”

“We are the four Kenway girls,” said Ruth, pleasantly. “We have no mother or father. But Aunt Sarah——”

“But you own dis house undt all de odder houses vot belonged to dot cr-r-ra-zy old mans—heh?”

Ruth flushed a little. She had begun to feel that such references to Uncle Peter were both unkind and insulting. “Uncle Peter left his property by will to us,” she said.

“Vell, I am Mrs. Kranz,” said the large lady, her little eyes sparkling in rather a strange way, Ruth thought.

“We are very glad to meet you—to have you call, Mrs. Kranz,” Ruth said. “Not many of our neighbors have been in to see us as yet.”

“I aind’t von of de neighbors, Miss Kenway,” said the visitor. “I am choose Mrs. Kranz. I keeps de grocery store on Meadow Street yet.”

“We are just as glad to see you, Mrs. Kranz,” returned Ruth, still smiling, “although you do not live very near us,” for she knew that Meadow Street was at the other side of the town.

“Vell! maype nodt,” said Mrs. Kranz. “Maype you iss nodt so glad to see me yet. I gome to tell you dot I vill nodt stand for dot Joe Maroni no longer. He has got to get dot cellar oudt. His r-r-rotten vegetables smells in mine nostrils. His young vuns iss in my vay—undt dey steal. An’ dey are all very, very dirty.

“I keep a nice shop—eferbody vill tell you so, Miss Kenway. Idt iss a clean shop, and them *Eye*-talians dey iss like pigs yet—de vay dey lif!” cried Mrs. Kranz, excitedly. “I pay mine rent, undt I haf mine rights. I gome to tell you—so-o!”

“Oh, dear me!” breathed Ruth, in surprise. “I—I don’t know what you are talking about, Mrs. Kranz. Have—have *we* got anything to do with your trouble?”

“Vell!” exclaimed the large lady. “Hafn’t you say you own de house?”

“So Mr. Howbridge says. We own this house——”

“Undt *mine* house,” declared Mrs. Kranz. “Undt more houses. Your uncle, Herr Stower, own idt. I pay mine rent to him for ten year yet.”

Ruth began to see—and so did Agnes. Of course, the little girls only stared and wondered at the woman’s coarse voice and strange appearance.

“You were one of uncle’s tenants?” said Ruth, quickly.

“For ten year,” repeated Mrs. Kranz.

“And you are having trouble with another tenant?”

“Mit dot Joe Maroni. He has kinder like steps—von, two, tri, fo’, five, six—like *dot*,” and the woman indicated by gestures the height of the children in rotation. “Dey swarm all ofer de blace. I cannot stand dem—undt de dirt—Ach! idt iss terrible.”

“I am sorry, Mrs. Kranz,” Ruth said, quietly. “I understand that this Italian family are likewise tenants of the house?”

“They lif de cellar in—undt sell vegetables, undt coal, undt wood, undt ice—undt dirt! heafens, vot dirt!” and the plume on Mrs. Kranz’s hat trembled throughout its length, while her red face grew redder, and her eyes more sparkling.

“But perhaps, Mrs. Kranz, the poor things know no better,” Ruth suggested. “It must be dreadful to have to live in a cellar. They have nobody to teach them. Don’t the children go to school—when there is school, I mean?”

“Undt I—am *I* no example to dem yet?” demanded the lady. “Ach! dese foreigners! I nefer could get along yet mit foreigners.”

This tickled Agnes so that she laughed, and then coughed to hide it. Mrs. Kranz was attracted to the twelve year old.

“Dot iss a pretty madchen,” she said, smiling broadly upon Agnes. “She iss your sister, too? Undt de kinder?” her sharp eyes sighting Tess and Dot.

“This is Agnes,” Ruth said, gladly changing the subject for a moment. “And this is Tess, and *this*, Dot—Dorothy, you know. We have had no mother for more than two years.”

“Ach!” said Mrs. Kranz, in a tone denoting sympathy, and she made a funny clucking noise in her throat. “De poor kinder! Undt *you* haf de hausmutter been—no?”

“Yes,” replied Ruth. “I have *loved* to take care of the little ones. Agnes is a great help. And now, since we have come here to the old Corner House, we have Mrs. McCall and Uncle Rufus. Besides, there has always been Aunt Sarah.”

Mrs. Kranz’s big face looked rather blank, but in a moment her thought returned to the subject of her visit.

“Vell!” she said. “Undt vot about dot Joe Maroni?”

“Dear Mrs. Kranz,” Ruth said, “I do not know anything about the property Uncle Peter left, as yet. I shall speak to Mr. Howbridge about it. He is our guardian, you understand, and a lawyer. I am sure we can find some way of relieving you.”

Mrs. Kranz grunted: “Vell!”

“I shall come to see you,” promised Ruth. “And I shall see these Italians and try to get them to clean up their cellar. I am sorry you should be so troubled by them.”

Meanwhile she had whispered to Tess and sent her running to Mrs. McCall. Mrs. Kranz gradually lost her offended look. She even took Dot upon her broad lap—though that was a precarious position and Dot was in danger of sliding off all the time.

“Mine oldt man undt I nefer have no kinder,” said Mrs. Kranz, sighing windily. “Ve both vor-r-k—Oh! so hard!—ven young we are. Ven we marry we are alretty oldt yet. Undt now mine oldt man iss dead for sefen year, undt I am all alone.”

Tears came to the good lady’s eyes. Ruth, seeing a propitious moment, said a word for Joe Maroni’s children.

“I should think you would like those Italian children, Mrs. Kranz. Aren’t they pretty? ’Most always I think they are.”

Mrs. Kranz raised her two hands in a helpless gesture. “Ach! heafens! if dey vos clean yet I could lofe dem!” she declared.

Just then Uncle Rufus, in his official coat and spats and white vest, arrived with the tray. It was evident that Mrs. Kranz was immensely impressed by the presence of the old serving man. She accepted a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, and nibbled the one and sipped the other amidst a running fire of comment upon the late Mr. Stower, and his death, and the affairs of the tenements and stores Uncle Peter had owned in her neighborhood.

Ruth learned much about this property that she had never heard before. Uncle Peter had once collected his own rents—indeed, it was during only the last few years of his life that a clerk from Mr. Howbridge’s office had done the collecting.

Uncle Peter had been in touch with his tenants. He had been a hard man to get repairs out of, so Mrs. Kranz said, but he had always treated the good tenants justly. With a record of ten years of steady rent paying behind her, Mrs. Kranz considered that she should be recognized and her complaint attended to. As she could get no satisfaction from the lawyer’s clerk (for Joe Maroni was a prompt paying tenant, too), she had determined to see the owners.

These were the facts leading to the good lady’s visit. Before she went away again Mrs. Kranz was much pacified, and openly an admirer of the Corner House girls.

“Ach! if I had madchens like you of my own yet!” she said, as she descended the porch steps, on her departure.

Agnes gazed after her more seriously than was her wont. She did not even laugh at Mrs. Kranz, as Ruth expected.

“And I believe she’s an old dear at that,” Ruth said, reflectively. “Maybe we can get her to help those little Italian children—if we can once get their parents to clean them up.”

“Well!” breathed Agnes, finally. “I wasn’t thinking particularly about her—or of the Joe Maroni kids. I was just thinking that perhaps it is not always so nice to be rich, after all. Now! we didn’t have to worry about tenement house property, and the quarrels of the tenants, when we lived on Essex Street in Bloomingsburg.”

CHAPTER XIII—THE MARONIS

It was on this day, too, that Agnes received a letter from Bloomingsburg. Kitty Robelle wrote a long and “newsy” letter, for Kitty had been one of Agnes’ most cherished friends.

Kitty lived right next door to the house in which the Kenways had lived so long, so she had all the news to impart of the old neighborhood. One item interested the four Corner House girls immensely.

“Little Tommy Rooney has run away and his mother can’t find out what’s become of him. He swapped his Indian suit with Patsy Link for a cowboy suit, and has been gone a week. The police, even, can’t find him.”

“There now!” cried Tess. “What did I tell you? I *knew* I saw him go past here in the rain.”

“Oh, but, Tess,” said Ruth, “you can’t be sure. And how could he ever have gotten to Milton?”

“I don’t know,” said the confident Tess. “But he’s here.”

Dot agreed with her. “You know,” the latter said, gravely, “he said he was coming to Milton to shoot Indians.”

“The foolish boy!” exclaimed Ruth. “Indians, indeed!”

“Did he expect to eat them after he shot them?” demanded Agnes. “How would he live?”

“Perhaps he’s hungry, poor boy,” said Ruth. “I wish you girls had run after him that day—if it was Tommy.”

“He looked awfully ragged,” said Tess, with pity. “Boys must be a *naw*ful burden. Isn’t it lucky we haven’t any brothers to look after, Ruth?”

“Very fortunate, I think,” agreed the oldest Kenway.

“Well,” sighed Dot, “Tommy was a real bad boy, but Mrs. Rooney thinks just as much of him, I s’pose, as though he was a girl.”

“Not a doubt of it,” chuckled Agnes. “And if we find Tommy, we’ll send him home to her.”

Having made a promise to Mrs. Kranz, Ruth was not the girl to neglect its fulfillment. She was doubtful, however, whether or no she should first see Mr. Howbridge.

The lawyer was a busy man; perhaps he would not thank her for bringing such complaints as this of the grocery store-keeper to his attention. Agnes said:

“He’s got troubles of his own, you may be sure, Ruth. And, honest—I don’t see as Mrs. Kranz has any business to bring her complaints to us.”

“But I said I’d see what I could do.”

“Of course. And I’ll go with you. I’m awfully eager to see this Joe Maroni and his family—especially the ‘kinder like steps,’ as Mrs. Kranz says.”

Ruth agreed to let only Aggie go with her after the younger girl had given her word not to laugh. “It is nice to have a sense of humor, I guess, Ag,” said the older girl, “but you want to have tact with it. Don’t hurt people’s feelings by laughing at them.”

“I know,” sighed Agnes. “But Mrs. Kranz was so funny! To hear her say she did not like foreigners, when she can scarcely speak English herself.”

“You might be a foreigner yourself, Ag, as far as speaking correctly goes,” laughed Ruth. “You’re awfully slangy. And Mrs. Kranz has lived in this country for many, many years. She happens to be one of those unfortunate Germans who can never master English. But I know she has a kind heart.“

“She’s dead sore on Joe Maroni and his tribe, just the same,” declared Agnes, proving the truth of her sister’s accusation as to her slanginess.

The two older Kenways walked the next afternoon across town to Meadow Street. It was in the poorer section of Milton, near the silk mills. Although the houses were not so tall, and were mostly frame buildings, the street reminded Ruth and Agnes of Essex Street, in Bloomingsburg, where they had resided before coming to the old Corner House.

Mrs. Kranz had given them her number; and it was not hard to find the three-story, brick-front building in which she kept store. Mrs. Kranz hired the entire street floor, living in rooms at the back. There were tenements above, with a narrow hall and stairway leading to them at one side. The cellar was divided, half being used by Mrs. Kranz for a store-room.

The other half was the dwelling and store of the Italian, Joe Maroni, whose name was painted crookedly on a small sign, and under it his goods were enumerated as

ISE COLE WOOD VGERTABLS

Joe himself was in evidence as the girls came to the place. He was a little, active, curly haired man, in velveteen clothing and cap, gold rings in his ears, and a fierce mustache.

“A regular brigand,” whispered Agnes, rather shrinking from his vicinity and clinging to Ruth’s hand.

“I’m sure he’s a reformed brigand,” Ruth laughed.

The girls’ own nostrils informed them that part of Mrs. Kranz’s complaint must be true, for there was a tall basket beside the vegetable and fruit stand into which Joe had thrown decayed vegetable leaves and fruit. It was a very warm day and the odor certainly was offensive.

Joe came forward smiling, as the girls stopped at the stand. “Want-a da orange—da pear—da banan’?” he asked, in a most agreeable way. Agnes immediately reversed her opinion and declared he was actually *handsome*.

“Nice-a vegetables,” said Joe, eager to display his wares. “All fre-esh.”

Ruth took her courage in both hands and smiled at him in return. “We haven’t come to buy anything this afternoon, Mr. Maroni,” she said. “You see, our Uncle Peter gave us this house when he died. Our name is Kenway. We have come to see you——”

“Si! Si!” cried the Italian, understanding them at once. “You da litla Padrona wot own all dese,” with a wave of his hand that was both graceful and explanatory. “Me, Joe, me hear-a ’bout de litla Padrona. Grazias!” and he bowed and lifted his cap.

The children had appeared from the cool depths of the cellar as if by magic. They *were* like a flight of steps in height, and the oldest was a very pretty girl, possibly as old as Agnes, but much smaller. Joe turned swiftly to this one and said something in his own tongue, nothing of which did the visitors understand save the child’s name, “Maria.”

Maria darted down the steps again, and immediately Joe fished out a basket from under the stand and proceeded to fill it with his very choicest fruit.

“For you, Padrona,” he explained, bowing to Ruth again. “You mak-a me ver’ hap’ to come see me. Grazias!”

“Oh, but Mr. Maroni!” cried Ruth, rather nervously. “You must not give us all that nice fruit. And we did not come just to call. Some—some of the other tenants have complained about you.”

The man looked puzzled, and then troubled. “What is that ‘complain’?” he asked. “They no lik-a me? They no lik-a my wife? They no lik-a my chil’ren?”

“Oh, no! nothing like that,” Ruth said, sympathetically. “They only say you do not keep the stand clean. See! that basket of rotting vegetables and fruit. You should get rid of it at once. Don’t the collectors come through this part of the town for garbage?”

“Si! Si!” cried Joe, shrugging his shoulders. “But sometimes come first my poor compatriots—si? They find da orange with da speck; dey fin’ potato part good-a—see?” All the time he was showing them the specked vegetables and fruit in the basket. Although his hands were grimed, Ruth noticed that he was otherwise clean. The children, though dirty and ragged, were really beautiful.

“W’en da poor peep’ go, then I put out-a da basket for da cart,” pursued Joe, still smiling and still gesturing.

Up the steps at that moment came a smiling, broad Italian woman, with a gay clean bandanna over her glossy black hair. She was a pretty woman, too, with the same features as little Maria.

“Good-a day! good-a day!” she said, bobbing and courtesying. Then she added something in Italian which was a friendly greeting.

Joe smiled on her dazzlingly. She wore heavier earrings than Joe and a great gilt brooch to hold the neck of her gown together.

“She no spe’k da English mooch,” explained the man. “But da keeds——Oh! dey learn to spe’k fine in da school. We been in dis country six year—no? We come here fi’ year ago. We doin’ fine!” explained Joe, with enthusiasm.

Agnes was already hugging one of the toddlers, and trying to find a clean spot on his pretty face that she could kiss. “Aren’t they little darlings?” she said to Ruth.

The older girl agreed with her, but she was having difficulty herself in forming the request she wished to make to the Italian. Finally she said:

“Joe, you must let the city men take away your spoiled fruit every morning. You can pick it over yourself and save what you think your poor friends would like. Although, it is very bad to eat decayed fruit and vegetables. Bad for the health, you know.”

“Si! Si!” exclaimed Joe, smiling right along. “I understand. It shall be as da litla Padrona command. Eh?”

“And let me go down into the cellar, Joe. For your own sake—for your children’s health, you know—you must keep everything clean.”

The woman spoke quickly and with energy. Joe nodded a great deal. “Si! Si!” he said. “So the good-a doctor say wot come to see da bébé.”

“Oh! have you a baby?” cried Agnes, clasping her hands.

The woman smiled at the eager girl and offered her hand to lead Agnes down the broken steps. Ruth followed them. The cellar was damp because of the ice blocks covered with a horseblanket at one side. Beyond the first partition, in a darker room, there was an old bedstead with ugly looking comforters and pillows without cases. Right down in one corner was an old wooden cradle with the prettiest little black haired baby in the world sleeping in it! At least, so Agnes declared.

Mrs. Maroni was delighted with the girls’ evident admiration for the baby. She could tell them by signs and broken words, too, that the baby was now better and the doctor had told her to take it out into the air and sunshine all day. She could trust some of the older children with it; Maria was big enough to help at the stand. *She* had the housework to do.

The Italian woman led the way to her other apartment—if such it could be called. The rear cellar had two little, high windows looking into a dim little yard. They had no right to the yard. That belonged to the tenants above, and Ruth

could see very well that the yard would be the better for a thorough cleaning-up.

“Perhaps Mr. Howbridge will say we have no right to interfere,” thought the oldest of the Corner House girls. “But I’m just going to tell him what I think of this place.”

The cellar was not so dirty, only it was *messy*. The Italians’ possessions were of the cheapest quality, and they had scarcely a decent chair to sit on. Whether it was poverty or a lack of knowledge of better things, Ruth could not decide.

The little Maria came close to her side and smiled at her. “You speak English all right, don’t you?” asked Ruth.

“Oh, yes, Ma’am. I go to school,” said Maria.

“Do you know the lady who has the store up stairs?”

The little girl’s face clouded. “Yes, Ma’am. I guess she’s a nice German lady, but she is *so* cross.”

“I do not think she’d be cross with you if she saw you in a clean dress and with your face and hands washed,” said Ruth, with a sudden idea. “If you will make yourself tidy, I will take you up stairs with me, and we can call on Mrs. Kranz.”

The child’s face brightened in a flash. She said something to her mother, who replied in kind. Maria ran behind a curtain that hung in one corner, and just then Joe came down.

“You want-a me to feex up, Padrona?” he asked. “I no ask nottin’ since w’en I come here. De walls much dirt’—eh?”

“If they were whitewashed I think it would be ever so nice and clean,” declared Ruth. “I shall speak to Mr. Howbridge and see if I can get him to supply the whitewash. Will you put it on?”

“But surely—si! si!” exclaimed the man. “I lik-a have nice place. I keep good-a fruit—good-a vegetable. Da wife, she clean an’ scr-r-rub—oh, yes! But poor man live in da cellar not lik-a da reech dat live in da fine house.”

Ruth sighed. With such little experience as she had had, she knew the man’s words to be true. The Kenways had lived among poor people themselves and knew how hard it was to keep an old tumble-down tenement in nice order.

Maria came dancing out in what was evidently her gala frock. It was pretty and neatly made, too. She ran to the sink and washed her face and hands. Then she came to Ruth for her approval.

“You’re a pretty girl,” said Ruth, kissing her. “You can help a lot, too, by keeping your brothers and sisters clean.”

“Oh, yes, Ma’am! I make them wash up every day before they go to school. But there is no school now,” said Maria.

The visitors went out of the cellar with Maria. The other children eyed them curiously, but smilingly. Poverty set well upon these Italians, for they smiled at it!

“Now we shall go in and see Mrs. Kranz,” said Ruth to Agnes. “Goodness only knows what she will say to us. Come, Maria,” and she took the little girl’s hand.

CHAPTER XIV—FIVE CENTS’ WORTH OF PEPPERMINTS

“Vell! vell!” was the German lady’s greeting when the girls entered the shop. “You gome quick back to see me already, eh? I am glad.”

She came forward and kissed Agnes and then Ruth. But she halted as she was about to stoop to Maria.

“Ach! this is nefer von of de kinder I saw yesterday?” she cried.

“Don’t you know this little girl, Mrs. Kranz?” asked Ruth, smiling. “This is Maria Maroni.”

“Ach! I nefer did!” exclaimed Mrs. Kranz, using an expression that she must have picked up from her American neighbors. “Vell! I lofe *clean* kinder,” and she delivered a resounding kiss upon Maria’s darkly flushed cheek. “Undt how pretty she iss.”

“I am sure she is quite as good as she is pretty,” said Ruth, smiling. “You ought to have just such a little girl as Maria to help you, Mrs. Kranz.”

“Ach! I would lofe to have such a girl,” declared the good lady. “Come you all right back to mine poller. Iky! ’tend to the store yet,” she shouted to a lanky youth lounging on the sidewalk.

“He vill eat up all mine dried apples, yet, undt trink soda-pop, if I don’t vatch him. Some day dot Iky iss goin’ to svell right up undt bust! But he lifs up stairs undt his mutter iss a hard vorkin’ vidow.”

“As though *that* excused Iky for stuffing himself with dried apples,” whispered Agnes to Ruth. Ruth looked at her admonishingly and Agnes subsided.

Mrs. Kranz bustled about to put coffee-cake and other toothsome dainties, beside bottles of lemon-soda, before the three visitors. She treated Maria just as nicely as she did Ruth and Agnes. Ruth had not been mistaken in her judgment of Mrs. Kranz. She *had* to own such a big body to hold her heart!

Ruth told her how they had talked with Maroni and how he had agreed to clean up the cellar, and get rid of the decayed

vegetables daily. But it was, without doubt, Maria's improved appearance, more than anything else, that thawed the good lady.

"Ach! it iss de way de vorld iss made," sighed Mrs. Kranz. "That Joe Maroni, he hass six kinder; I haf none. This mädchen, she shall help me in de house, undt in de store. I buy her plenty clean dresses. I'll talk to that Joe. Ven I am madt mit him I can't talk, for he smile, an' smile——Ach! how can I fight mit a man dot smiles all de time?"

The two older Kenway girls started home feeling that they had accomplished something worth while at the Meadow Street tenement house. "Only," said Ruth, "if we really had the right to do so, I can see that there are a lot of repairs that would make the house more comfortable for the tenants."

"And I suppose if Uncle Peter had thought of the comfort of the tenants, he would never have made so much money out of the houses," observed Agnes, with more thought than she usually displayed.

Just then Joe and Maria came hurrying down the block after them. "No, Padrona!" cried the man. "You would not r-r-refuse Joe's poor litla present? Maria shall carry eet for you—si! si! She is a smart girl—no? She fin' her way all over town."

They thanked Maroni for the basket of fruit, and allowed Maria to carry it to the Corner House, for that gave her pleasure, too, Ruth could see.

It gave them an opportunity of introducing Maria Maroni to Tess and Dot. The younger Kenways were very glad to see her, and Maria was made acquainted with the garden playhouse and with the rows of dolls.

"I don't care so much because the Creamer girls won't play with us," said Tess, happily, after Maria had run home. "Alfredia and Maria are both very nice little girls."

"Yes, indeed," said Dot, quickly. But she added, after a moment: "And they can't either of them help being so awful dark complected!"

It had begun to bother Ruth, however, if it did none of the other three, that so few people called on them. Of course, the Kenways had not been in Milton but four weeks. The people they met at church, however, and the girls they had become acquainted with at Sunday School, had not called upon them.

Eva Larry was delighted to see Agnes on the street, and had taken her home one day with her. Myra Stetson was always jolly and pleasant, but no urging by Agnes could get either of these nice girls to visit the old Corner House.

"Do you suppose it is the ghost of the garret that keeps them away?" demanded Agnes, of Ruth.

"We wouldn't entertain them in the garret," responded Ruth, laughing. Only she did not feel like laughing. "If that is the trouble, however, we'll soon finish up cleaning out the garret. And we'll sweep out the ghost and all his tribe, too."

A Saturday intervened before this could be accomplished, however. It was the first Saturday after Mr. Howbridge had bestowed upon the Corner House girls their monthly allowance.

After the house was spick and span, and the children's playthings put away for over Sunday, and the garden (which was now a trim and promising plot) made particularly neat, the four girls dressed in their very best and sallied forth. It was after mid-afternoon and the shoppers along Main Street were plentiful.

Aunt Sarah never went out except to church on Sunday. Now that the weather was so warm, the big front door stood open a part of the time, and the girls sat with their sewing and books upon the wide porch. Mrs. McCall joined them there; but Aunt Sarah, never.

Because she did not go out, anything Aunt Sarah needed was purchased by one of the girls. Particularly, Ruth never forgot the peppermints which were bought as regularly now that they lived in the Corner House as they were bought in the old days, back in Bloomingsburg.

Sometimes Ruth delegated one of the other girls to buy the peppermints, but on this particular occasion she chanced to find herself near the candy counter, when she was separated from Agnes in Blachstein & Mapes. So she purchased the usual five cents' worth of Aunt Sarah's favorite Sunday "comfort."

"No matter how dry the sermon is, or how long-winded the preacher, I can stand it, if I've got a pep'mint to chew on," the strange old lady once said. That was almost as long a sentence as the girls had ever heard her speak!

With the peppermints safe in her bag, Ruth hunted again for Agnes. But the latter had those shoe-buckles on her mind and, forgetting Ruth, she left the big store and made for the shoeshop.

On the way Agnes passed the Lady's Shop with its tempting display in the show-window, and she ventured in. There were those lovely handkerchiefs! Agnes feasted her eyes but she could not gain the courage to break one of her dollar bills for the trifle.

So she wandered out and went toward the glittering buckles in the shoeshop window. And there she hesitated again. Fifty cents! A quarter of her entire monthly allowance. She wanted to find Eva Larry, who would be down town, too, and treat her to a sundae. Besides, she must buy Myra Stetson some little remembrance.

"I know what I'll do!" thought Agnes finally, her eye suddenly lighting upon a candy store across Main Street. "I can break one of these bills by getting Aunt Sarah's peppermints. Then it won't seem so hard to spend the change."

Agnes tripped over the crosswalk and purchased the little bag of peppermints. These she popped into her own handbag, and a little later came across Eva. They went into the drug store on the corner and had a sundae apiece. Agnes bought some hairpins (which she certainly could not use) and a comb, and some lovely ribbon, and a cunning little red strawberry emery-bag for her sewing-box, and several other trifles. She found all her change gone and nothing but the dollar bill left in her purse. That scared Agnes, and she ran home, refusing to break the remaining bill, and much troubled that she should have been so reckless in her expenditures the very first time she was out.

Tess and Dot had gone together. There was no reason why two girls, of eight and ten respectively, should not shop on Milton's Main Street. The younger Kenway girls had often shopped for Ruth, while they lived in Bloomingsburg.

The Five and Ten Cent Store attracted them. There was a toy department, and all kinds of cheap fancy goods, and little things for presents. Tess roamed among these, using her eyes to good advantage, save that she forgot to look for Dot, after a time.

There was a very cute little spool holder for ten cents, and Tess bought that for Mrs. McCall. Uncle Rufus she remembered in the purchase of a red and black tie for "state and date" occasions. She bought a pretty ruching for Ruth's collar, and a new thimble for Agnes, because Agnes was always losing her silver one.

For Dot, Tess bought a tiny doll's tea-set, and forgetting herself entirely, Tess wandered out of the store with her bundles, looking for her sister. She did not at once see Dot, but a boy was selling cheap candies from a basket, and Tess was smitten with the thought that she had forgotten Aunt Sarah!

She bought a bag of white peppermint drops in a hurry. That took all of Tess' half dollar, and she did not want to break into the bill; so she went home without satisfying any of her own personal longings.

Dot had found the candy counter in the big store the first thing. There were heaps, and heaps of goodies. Dot possessed a sweet tooth, and she had never really had enough candy at one time in her life—not even at Christmas.

Some of this candy was ten cents a pound, and some ten cents a quarter of a pound. Dot knew that if she bought the more expensive kind, her dollar bill would not go far. And she really did not want to spend all her month's money just for candy. Ruth would think her extravagant and Agnes would laugh at her.

The little girl moved along in front of the counter, feasting her eyes upon the variegated sweets. There were chocolates, and bonbons, and nut candies, and "kisses," and many candies of which Dot did not know even the names. Finally she came to the end, where the cheaper kinds were displayed.

Dot's eyes grew round and she uttered a half-stifled "Oh!" There was a great heap of luscious looking, fat peppermint drops. They looked to be so creamy and soft, that Dot was *sure* they were far superior to any drops that Aunt Sarah had ever had in the past.

"Here, little girl," said the lady behind the counter, seeing Dot feasting her eyes upon the heap of peppermints. "Here's a broken one," and she reached over the screen and passed Dot the crumbly bit of candy.

Dot thanked her nicely and popped the broken peppermint drop into her mouth. It was every bit as nice as it looked. It was crumbly, and creamy, and sweet, with just the right amount of peppermint essence in it.

"I'll buy Aunt Sarah's peppermints my own self," decided Dot. Then she hesitated, being an honest little thing. She knew that she could not resist the temptation of those luscious drops, once they were in her hands.

"I'll take *two* quarter pounds, if you please, Ma'am," she said to the saleslady. "In two bags. One's for my Aunt Sarah and the other's for Tess and me."

Having broken her dollar bill for these two bags of sweets, Dot felt rather frightened, and she, too, hurried out of the store.

The four Corner House girls arrived home at about the same time—and not long before the usual dinner hour. Dot and Tess had tasted out of the special bag of peppermint drops that Dot had bought, in the yard. Tess had so many other things to show her smaller sister that neither suspected the other's possession of Aunt Sarah's peppermints.

Dot ran up to Aunt Sarah's room as soon as she got inside the door. "I got your pep'mint drops, Auntie!" she cried, plumping the bag into the old lady's lap.

"Humph! Good child," declared Aunt Sarah, and opened the bag invitingly. "Have one?"

"No-o, Ma'am," said Dot, backing away. "I've been eating some out of *my* bag," and she showed Aunt Sarah her other purchase. "Ruth says it spoils your appetite to eat too much candy before dinner."

"Humph!" remarked Aunt Sarah.

As Dot went down the stairway, Tess came dancing along from the bathroom, with a fresh ribbon in her hair and her face and hands still damp. "Oh, Aunt Sarah!" she cried, "here is your bag of peppermints for to-morrow," and she held up her own purchase. "Shall I put them in your room on the bureau?"

"Humph!" exclaimed the old lady, stopping and eyeing Tess curiously. "So *you've* got them?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Tess, and hopped down stairs by the old lady's side very happily.

There was a neat little box resting on the table beside Aunt Sarah's plate. Agnes said: "There's your Sunday

peppermints, Aunt Sarah. I got them at the Unique candy store, and I guess they're nice ones."

Aunt Sarah merely glared at her, and remained speechless. That was nothing strange; the old lady sometimes acted as though she did not hear you speak to her at all.

Mrs. McCall came in from the kitchen and Ruth appeared from up stairs. Uncle Rufus arrived with the steaming soup tureen. As Ruth sat down, she said to Aunt Sarah:

"You'll find your peppermints on the hall stand, Aunt Sarah. I forgot to bring them up to your room."

That was too much. The old lady blazed up like a freshly kindled fire.

"For the good Land o' Goshen! I got peppermints enough now to last me four meetings. I believe getting your Uncle Peter's money the way you have, has made all you gals silly!"

She refused to say another word to any of them that evening.

CHAPTER XV—"A DISH OF GOSSIP"

The seamstress came on Monday to the old Corner House. Mrs. McCall had recommended her, and in Milton Miss Ann Titus was a person of considerable importance.

She was a maiden lady well past middle age, but, as she expressed it herself, "more than middling spry." She was, as well, a traveling free information bureau.

"Two things I am fond of, gals," she said to Ruth and Agnes, the first day. "A cup of tea, and a dish of gossip."

She was frank about the last named article of mental diet. She knew that most of the people she worked for enjoyed her gossip as much as they desired her needle-work.

Ruth had opened and aired a room for her at the back of the house, and there she was established with her cutting table and sewing machine. She would not hear of remaining at night with them.

"I got an old Tom-cat at home that would yowl his head off, if I didn't give him his supper, and his breakfast in the morning. He can forage for himself at noon."

She lived in a tiny cottage not far from the old Corner House—the girls had seen it. She had lived there most of her life, and she had a tidy little sum in the savings-bank. Miss Ann Titus might have lived without working at her trade.

"But I sartain-sure should die of lonesomeness," she declared. "A cat's well enough as far as he goes; but you can't call him right inspiritin' company."

Ruth went to the big store where Mr. Howbridge had opened a charge account for her and bought such goods as Miss Titus wanted. Then the capable woman went to work to make up several summer and fall dresses for the four girls.

These were busy times at the old Corner House. The sewing room was a scene of bustle and hurrying from morning to night. One or the other of the girls seemed to be "trying-on" all the time. Ruth and Agnes, to say nothing of Mrs. McCall, spent all their spare minutes helping the dressmaker.

"You young-uns have sartain-sure got pluck to come to this old place to live," Miss Titus declared on the second day. The wind was rising, the shutters shook, and loose casements rattled.

"It's a very nice house, we think," said Ruth.

The smaller girls were not present, but Miss Titus lowered her voice: "Ain't you none afraid of what they say's in the garret?"

"What is in the garret?" asked Ruth, calmly. "We have cleaned it all up, and have found nothing more dangerous than old clothes and spiders. We play up there on rainy days."

"I wouldn't do it for a farm!" gasped Miss Titus.

"So you believe in that ghost story?"

"Yes, I do. They say some man, 'way back before Peter Stower's father lived, hung himself up there."

"Oh!" cried Ruth. "How wicked it is to repeat such stories."

"I dunno. I can find you half a dozen good, honest folks, that have seen the ghost at the garret window."

Ruth could not help shivering. She had begun to refuse to acknowledge the evidence of her own eyes, and *that* had helped. But Miss Titus seemed so positive.

"Is—is it because they are afraid of ghosts, that so few people have come to call on us, do you suppose?" Ruth asked.

The seamstress glanced at her through her spectacles. She had very sharp eyes and she snipped off threads with a bite of her sharp teeth, and stuck a sharp needle into her work in a very sharp manner. Altogether, Miss Ann Titus was a very sharp person.

“I shouldn’t wonder if there was another reason,” she said. “Ain’t the minister’s wife been?”

“Oh, yes. And we think she is lovely. But not many of the girls we meet at church have called. I thought maybe they were afraid. The house has had a bad name, because it was practically shut up so long.”

“Yes,” agreed Miss Titus. “And Peter Stower acted funny, too. They say *his* ghost haunts it.”

“How foolish!” said Ruth, flushing. “If people don’t want to come because of *that*——”

“Maybe there *is* another reason,” said the gossip.

“I’d like to know what it is!” demanded Ruth, determined to learn the worst. And Miss Titus *did* look so knowing and mysterious.

“Well, now,” said Miss Titus, biting off another thread. “Speakin’ for myself, I think you gals are just about right, and Mr. Howbridge did the right thing to put you into Peter’s house. But there’s them that thinks different.”

“What *do* you mean?” begged the puzzled Ruth.

“There’s been a deal of talk. Mr. Howbridge is blamed. They say he did it just to keep the property in his own hands. He must make a good speck out of it.”

“But you are puzzling me, more and more,” cried Ruth. “I suppose Mr. Howbridge does not handle Uncle Peter’s estate for nothing. How could he?”

“Trust Howbridge for feathering his nest all right,” said the seamstress, bitingly. “But that ain’t it. You see, there’s them that believes other folks than you Kenway gals should have the old Corner House and all that goes with it!”

“Oh!” gasped Ruth. “You do not mean Aunt Sarah?”

“Sally Maltby?” snapped Miss Titus. “Well, I should say *not*. She ain’t got no rights here at all. Never did have. Never would have, if Peter had had his way.”

“I am sure *that* is not so,” began Ruth. Then she stopped. She realized that Miss Titus would carry everything she said to her next customer. She did not know that either Mr. Howbridge, or Aunt Sarah, would care to have the news bandied about that Uncle Peter had left Aunt Sarah a legacy.

“Well, you’re welcome to your own belief, Ruthie,” said Miss Titus, curiously eyeing her. “But it ain’t Sally Maltby that folks are talking about.”

“Who can possibly have any right here?” queried Ruth. “Mr. Howbridge declares there are no other heirs.”

“He ain’t heard of ’em—or else he don’t want to acknowledge ’em,” declared Miss Titus. “But these folks live at a distance. They’re another branch of the Stower family, I reckon, and ’tis said that they’ve got a better right than you gals.”

“Oh!” gasped Ruth again.

“That’s why folks don’t come to congratulate you, I reckon. They ain’t sure that you’ll stay here long. Maybe them other relatives will come on, or begin suit in the courts, or something. And the neighbors don’t like to mix in, or take sides, until the matter’s straightened out.”

“Oh, dear, me!” sighed Ruth. “We love staying here at the old Corner House, but we never wished to take anybody’s rights away from them. Mr. Howbridge assured us that we were the only heirs, and that the estate would in time be settled upon us. It makes me feel very badly—this news you tell me, Miss Titus.”

“Well! let sleepin’ dogs lie, is *my* motter,” declared the seamstress. “You might as well enjoy what you got, while you got it.”

If Ruth had been troubled before by the circumstances that had brought her and her sisters to the old Corner House, she was much more troubled now. Uncle Peter had made a will, she had been assured by Mr. Howbridge, which left the bulk of the old man’s estate to the Kenway girls; but that will was lost. If other claimants came forward, how should Ruth and her sisters act toward them?

That was Ruth’s secret trouble. Without the will to make their own claim good, did not these other relatives Miss Titus had spoken of have as good a right to shelter in the old Corner House, and a share of the money left by Uncle Peter, as they had?

Ruth could not talk about it with her sisters—not even with Agnes. The latter would only be troubled, while Tess and Dot would not understand the situation very well. And Aunt Sarah was no person in whom to confide!

Mr. Howbridge had gone away on business again. She had written him a note to his office about Joe Maroni and Mrs. Kranz, and Mr. Howbridge had sent back word—just before his departure on the sudden trip—that she should use her own judgment about pacifying the tenants in the Meadow Street houses.

“You know that every dollar you spend on those old shacks reduces the revenue from the property. You girls are the ones interested. Now, let us test your judgment,” Mr. Howbridge had written.

It put a great responsibility upon Ruth’s shoulders; but the girl of sixteen had been bearing responsibilities for some

years, and she was not averse to accepting the lawyer's test.

"We want to help those Maronis," she said to Agnes. "And we want Mrs. Kranz to help them, too. We'll just clean up that old house, and that will help all the families in it."

She ordered the whitewashing materials, and Joe promised to whiten his cellar. She hired the boy, Iky, and another, to clean the yard, too, and paid them out of her own pocket. Mrs. Kranz smiled broadly, while the Maronis considered "the litla Padrona" almost worthy to be their patron saint!

Ruth had begged Miss Titus to say nothing before Agnes or the little girls regarding those possible claimants to Uncle Peter's property. She was very sorry Mr. Howbridge had gone away before she could see him in reference to this gossip the seamstress had brought to the house.

It seemed that a certain Mrs. Bean, a friend of Miss Ann Titus, who did not attend the First Church, but another, knew all about the people who claimed relationship with Uncle Peter Stower. Ruth was sorely tempted to call on Mrs. Bean, but then, she feared she had no business to do so, until she had talked with the lawyer.

Mr. Howbridge had given her a free hand in many things, but this matter was too important, it seemed to Ruth, for her to touch without his permission. With the expectation of other claimants to the property looming before her, Ruth was doubtful if she ought to go ahead with the frocks for her sisters and herself, or to increase their bills at the stores.

However, their guardian had already approved of these expenditures, and Ruth tried to satisfy her conscience by curtailing the number of her own frocks and changing the engagement of Miss Titus from three weeks to a fortnight only.

"I must confer with Mr. Howbridge first, before we go any farther," the girl thought. "Mercy! the bills for our living expenses here at the old Corner House are mounting up enormously."

Agnes was so delighted over the frocks that were being made for her, that she thought of little else, waking, and probably dreamed of them in sleep, as well! She did not notice Ruth's gravity and additional thoughtfulness.

As for Tess and Dot, they had their small heads quite full of their own affairs. They were having a better time this summer than ever they had dreamed of having in all their young lives.

Tess and Dot were not without friends of their own age to play with, in spite of the fact that the Creamer girls next door had proved so unpleasant. There were two girls next door to Mrs. Adams who were nice, and as Mrs. Adams promised, she arranged a little tea party for Tess and Dot, and these other girls, one afternoon. The new friends were Margaret and Holly Pease.

Mrs. Adams had the tea on her back lawn in the shade of a big tulip tree. She had just the sort of cakes girls like best, and strawberries and cream, and the "cambric tea," as Mrs. Adams called it, was rich with cream and sugar. Mrs. Adams herself took a cup of tea that had brewed much longer; she said she wanted it "strong enough to bite," or it did not give her a mite of comfort.

From where the pleasant little party sat, they could look over the fence into the big yard belonging to the Pease place. "Your folks," said Mrs. Adams to her next door neighbors, "are going to have a right smart lot of cherries. That tree's hanging full."

The tree in question was already aflame with the ripening fruit. Margaret said:

"Mother says we'll have plenty of cherries to do up for once—if the birds and the boys don't do too much damage. There are two nests of robins right in that one tree, and they think they own all the fruit. And the boys!"

"I expect that Sammy Pinkney has been around," said Mrs. Adams.

"There's worse than him," said Holly Pease, shaking her flaxen head. "This morning papa chased an awfully ragged boy out of that tree. The sun was scarcely up, and if it hadn't been for the robins scolding so, papa wouldn't have known the boy was there."

"A robber boy!" cried Mrs. Adams. "I wager that's who got my milk. I set a two quart can out in the shed last night, because it was cool there. And this morning more than half of the milk was gone. The little rascal had used the can cover to drink out of."

"Oh!" said Tess, pityingly, "the poor boy must have been hungry."

"He's probably something else by now," said Mrs. Adams, grimly. "Half ripe cherries and milk! My soul and body! Enough to snarl anybody's stomach up into a knot, but a boy's. I guess boys can eat anything—and recover."

Holly said, quietly: "There was a boy worked for Mrs. Hovey yesterday. He was awfully hungry and ragged. I saw him carrying in wood from her woodpile. And he just staggered, he was so small and weak. And his hair looked so funny ——"

"What was the matter with his hair?" asked her sister.

"It was red. Brick red. I never saw such red hair before."

"Oh!" cried Tess. "Did he have sure enough *red* hair?" Then she turned to Dot. "Do you s'pose it could be Tommy Rooney, Dot?"

“Who’s Tommy Rooney?” asked Mrs. Adams.

The Corner House girls told them all about Tommy, and how he had run away from home, and why they half believed he had come here to Milton.

“To shoot Indians!” exclaimed Mrs. Adams. “Whoever heard of such a crazy notion? Mercy! boys get worse and worse, every day.”

Perhaps it was because of this conversation that Tess and Dot at once thought of Tommy on the way home that evening after the party, when they saw a man and a dog chasing a small boy across Willow Street near the old Corner House.

“That’s Sammy Pinkney’s bulldog,” declared Tess, in fright. “And it’s Sammy’s father, too.”

The boy crawled over the high fence at the back of their garden and got through the hedge. When the girls caught up with the man, Tess asked:

“Oh, sir! what is the matter?”

“That young rascal has been in my strawberry patch again,” declared Mr. Pinkney, wrathfully. He seemed to forget that he had a boy of his own who was always up to mischief. “I’d like to wallop him.”

“But the dog might have bit him,” said Dot, trembling, and drawing away from the ugly looking animal.

“Oh, no, little girl,” said Mr. Pinkney, more pleasantly. “Jock wouldn’t bite anybody. He only scared him.”

“Well, he *looks* like he’d bite,” said Tess, doubtfully. “And he scared our cat, Sandy-face, almost to death.”

“Well, bulldogs always seem to think that cats are their enemies. I am sorry he scared your cat, girls.”

Tess and Dot hurried on to their gate. They looked for the boy in the garden, but he was nowhere to be found. When they entered the house, the back door was open and everybody seemed to be at the front.

The two girls went immediately up the back stairs to the bathroom to wash and make themselves tidy for dinner.

“Where do you s’pose he went, Tess?” asked Dot, referring to the strange boy.

“I don’t know,” said Tess. Then she stopped to listen in the hall outside the bathroom door.

“What’s the matter, Tess?” demanded Dot, quickly. “Did you hear something? Up the garret stairs?”

“It sounded like the latch of the garret door,” said Tess. “But I guess it was just the wind. Or maybe,” she added, laughing, “it was your goat, Dot!”

“Humph!” said the smaller girl, in disgust. “I know there isn’t any old goat living up in that garret. That’s silly.”

The girls thought no more about the odd noise at that time, but hurried to join the rest of the family down stairs.

CHAPTER XVI—MORE MYSTERIES

Some of Miss Ann Titus’ gossip was not unkindly, and some of it amused Ruth and Agnes very much.

Miss Titus had known Aunt Sarah when they were both young girls and what she told the Corner House girls about Miss Maltby, who had taken the name of “Stower” of her own accord, satisfied much of the curiosity the older Kenway girls felt regarding Aunt Sarah and her affairs.

“I remember when old Mr. Stower married Mrs. Maltby,” said the busy Miss Titus, nodding vigorously as she snipped and talked at the same time. “The goodness knows, Sally Maltby an’ her mother was as poor as Job’s turkey—an’ they say *he* was sartain-sure a lean fowl. It was as great a change in their sarcumstances when they came to the ol’ Corner House to live, as though they’d been translated straight to the pearly gates—meanin’ no irreverence.

“They was sartain-sure dirt poor. I dunno how Mis’ Maltby had the heart to stand up an’ face the minister long enough for him to say the words over ’em, her black bombazeen was that shabby! They had me here with Ma Britton (I was ’prenticed to Ma Britton in them days) for three solid months, a-makin’ both Mrs. Maltby-that-was, an’ Sally, fit to be seen.

“An’ how Sally *did* turn her nose up, to be sure—to-be-sure! I reckon she must ha’ soon got a crick in her neck, holdin’ it so stiff. An’ to see her an’ hear her, you’d ha’ thought she owned the ol’ Corner House.

“They had sarvints here in them days, an’ ol’ Mr. Stower—he was still in practice at the law—had lashin’s of company. I won’t say but that Mrs. Maltby-that-was, made him a good wife, and sat at the foot of his table, and poured tea out o’ that big solid silver urn like she’d been to the manner born. But Sally was as sassy and perky as a nuthatch in flytime.

“We other gals couldn’t git along with her no-how. Me bein’ here so much right at the first of it,” pursued Miss Titus, “sort o’ made me an’ Sally intimate, as ye might say, whether we’d ever been so before, or not. After Ma Britton got through her big job here Sally would sometimes have to come around to our house—Ma Britton left me that little cottage I live in—I ain’t ashamed to tell it—I hadn’t any folks, an’ never had, I reckon. Like *Topsy*, I ‘jes’ growed.’ Well! Sally would come around to see me, and she’d invite me to the old Corner House here.

“She never invited me here when there was any doin’s—no, Ma’am!” exclaimed Miss Titus. “I wonder if she remembers them times now? She sits so grim an’ lets me run on ha’f a day at a time, till I fairly foam at the mouth ’ith talkin’ so much, an’ then mebbe all she’ll say is: ‘Want your tea now, Ann?’ ’Nuff ter give one the fibbertygibbets!

“In them days I speak of, she could talk a blue streak—sartain-sure! And she’d tell me how many folks ‘we had to dinner’ last night; or how ‘Judge Perriton and Judge Mercer was both in for whist with us last evening.’ Well! she strutted, and tossed her head, an’ bridled, till one time there was an awful quarrel ’twixt her an’ Peter Stower.

“I was here. I heard part of it. Peter Stower was a good bit older than Sally Maltby as you gals may have heard. He objected to his father’s marriage—not because Mrs. Maltby was who she was, but he objected to anybody’s coming into the family. Peter was a born miser—yes he was. He didn’t want to divide his father’s property after the old man’s death, with anybody.

“I will say for Peter,” added Miss Titus, “going off on a tangent” as she would have said herself, had she been critically listening to any other narrator. “I will say for Peter, that after your mother was born, gals, he really seemed to warm up. I have seen him carrying your mother, when she was a little tot, all about these big halls and hummin’ to her like a bumblebee.

“But even at that, he influenced his father so that only a small legacy came to your mother when the old man died. Peter got most of the property into his hands before *that* happened, anyway. And quite right, too, I s’pose, for by that time he had increased the estate a whole lot by his own industry and foresight.

“Well, now! I have got to runnin’ away with my story, ain’t I? It was about Sally and that day she and Peter had their big quarrel. Whenever Peter heard, or saw Sally giving herself airs, he’d put in an oar and take her down a peg, now I tell you!” said Miss Titus, mixing her metaphors most woefully.

“I’d been to Sally’s room—it was a small one tucked away back here in this ell, and *that* hurt her like pizen! We was goin’ down stairs to the front hall. Sally stops on the landing and points to the ceiling overhead, what used to be painted all over with flowers and fat cupids, and sech—done by a famous artist they used to say when the house was built years before, but gettin’ faded and chipped then.

“So Sally points to the ceilin’ an’ says she:

“‘I hope some day,’ says she, ‘that we will have that painting restored. *I* mean to, I am sure, when I am in a better position to have my views carried out here.’

“Of course, she didn’t mean nothin’—just showin’ off in front of me,” said Miss Titus, shaking her head and biting at a thread in her queer fashion. “But right behind us on the stairs was Peter. We didn’t know he was there.

“‘Wal,’ says he, drawlin’ in that nasty, sarcastic way he had, ‘if you wait till your views air carried out in *this* house, Sal Maltby, it’ll be never—you hear me! I guarantee,’ sez Peter, ‘that they’ll carry *you* out, feet fust, before they carry out your idees.’

“My! she turns on him like a tiger-cat. Yes, Ma’am! Sartain-sure I thought she was going to fly at him, tooth an’ toe-nail! But Peter had a temper like ice-water, an’ ice-water—nuff of it, anyway—will put out fire ev’ry time.

“He just listened to her rave, he standin’ there so cold an’ sarcastic. She told him how she was going to live longer than he did, anyway, and that in the end she’d have her way in the old Corner House in spite of him!

“When she had sort of run-down like, Peter says to her: ‘Brag’s a good dog, but Holdfast’s a better,’ sez he. ‘It ain’t people that talks gits what they want in this world. If I was you, Sal Maltby, I’d learn to hold my teeth on my tongue. It’ll git you farther.’

“And I b’lieve,” concluded Miss Titus, “that just then was the time when Sally Maltby begun to get tongue-tied. For you might’s well call her that. I know I never heard her ‘blow,’ myself, after that quarrel; and gradually she got to be just the funny, silent, grim sort o’ person she is. Fact is—an’ I admit it—Sally gives *me* the shivers oncet in a while.”

Tess and Dorothy did not always play in the garden, not even when the weather was fair. There must be variety to make even play appealing, although the dolls were all “at home” in the out-of-door playhouse. Dot and Tess must go visiting with their children once in a while.

They had a big room for their sleeping chamber and sometimes they came, with a selection of the dolls, and “visited” in the house. Being allowed to play in the bedroom, as long as they “tidied up” after the play was over, Tess and Dot did so.

Ruth had strictly forbidden them going to the garret to play, unless she went along. The excuse Ruth gave for this order was, that in the garret the smaller girls were too far away from the rest of the family.

Tess and Dot, the morning after Mrs. Adams had made them the tea party, had a party for their dolls in the big bedroom. Tess set her folding table with the best of the dolls’ china. There were peanut butter sandwiches, and a sliced pickle, and a few creamed walnuts that Ruth had bought at the Unique Candy Store and divided between the younger girls.

They sat the dolls about the table and went down to the kitchen for milk and hot water for the “cambric tea,” as Mrs. Adams called the beverage. When they came back Tess, who entered first, almost dropped the pitcher of hot water.

“My goodness me!” she ejaculated.

“What’s the matter, Tessie?” asked Dot, toiling on behind with milk and sugar.

“Some—somebody’s taken our dolls’ luncheon. Oh, dear me!”

“It can’t be!” cried Dot, springing forward and spilling the milk. “Why! those walnut-creams! Oh, dear!”

“They haven’t left a crumb,” wailed Tess. “Isn’t that just mean?”

“Who’d ever do such a thing to us?” said Dot, her lip trembling. “It *is* mean.”

“Why! it must be somebody in the house,” declared Tess, her wits beginning to work.

“Of course it wasn’t Mrs. McCall. She’s in the kitchen,” Dot declared.

“Or Uncle Rufus. He’s in the garden.”

“And Ruth wouldn’t do such a thing,” added Dot.

“It couldn’t be Aunt Sarah,” said Tess, eliminating another of the family group.

“And I don’t think Miss Titus would do such a thing,” hesitated Dot.

“Well!” said Tess.

“Well!” echoed Dot.

Both had come to the same and inevitable conclusion. There was but one person left in the house to accuse.

“Aggie’s been playing a joke on us,” both girls stated, with conviction.

But Agnes had played no joke. She had been out to the store for Mrs. McCall at the time the children were in the kitchen. Besides, Agnes “would not fib about it,” as Tess declared.

The disappearance of the dolls’ feast joined hands, it seemed to Dot, with that mysterious *something* that she knew she had heard Ruth and Agnes talking about at night, and which the younger girl had thought referred to a goat in the garret.

“It’s just the mysteriousest thing,” she began, speaking to Tess, when the latter suddenly exclaimed:

“Sandy-face!”

The mother cat was just coming out of the bigger girls’ bedroom. She sat down at the head of the main flight of stairs and calmly washed her face. Sandy-face had the run of the house and her presence was driving out the mice, who had previously gnawed at their pleasure behind the wainscoting.

“You—you don’t suppose Sandy-face did that?” gasped Dot.

“Who else?” asked Tess.

“All of those walnuts?” said Dot, in horror. “And those sandwiches? And not leave a crumb on the plates?”

“She looks just as though she had,” determined Tess.

“You—you are an awful bad cat, Sandy-face,” said Dot, almost in tears. “And I just hope those walnuts will disagree with your stomach—-so now!”

Tess was quite angry with the cat herself. She stamped her foot and cried “Shoo!” Sandy-face leaped away, surprised by such attentions, and scrambled up stairs in a hurry. Almost at once the two girls heard her utter a surprised yowl, and down she came from the garret, her tail as large as three tails, her eyes like saucers, and every indication of panic in her movements.

She shot away for the back stairs, and so down to the hall and out of doors.

“I don’t care,” exclaimed Dot. “I know those walnuts are disagreeing with her right now, and I’m glad. My! but she was punished soon for her greediness, wasn’t she, Tess?”

There was something going on at the Creamer cottage, next door to the old Corner House. Tess and Dot became aware of this fact at about this time, so did not bother their heads much about Sandy’s supposed gluttony. Some of the windows on the second floor of the cottage were darkened, and every morning a closed carriage stopped before the house and a man went in with a black bag in his hand.

Tess and Dot were soon wondering what could be happening to the little Creamer girls. The only one they saw was the curly haired one, who had spoken so unpleasantly to them on a particular occasion. They saw her wandering about the yard, and knew that she did not play, and was often crying by herself behind the clumps of bushes.

So Tess, whose heart was opened immediately to any suffering thing, ventured near the picket fence again, and at last spoke to the Creamer girl.

“What’s the matter, please?” Tess asked. “Did you lose anything? Can we help you find it?”

The curly headed girl looked at her in surprise. Her pretty face was all streaked with tears.

“You—you want to keep away from me!” she blurted out.

“Oh, dear, me!” said Tess, clinging to Dot’s hand. “I didn’t mean to offend you again.”

“Well, you’ll catch it, maybe,” sniffled the Creamer girl, whose name was Mabel.

“Catch what?” asked Tess.

“Something dreadful. All my sisters have it.”

“Goodness!” breathed Dot.

“What is it?” asked Tess, bravely standing her ground.

“It’s *quarantine*,” declared Mabel Creamer, solemnly. “And I have to sleep in the library, and I can’t go up stairs. Neither does pop. And mamma never comes down stairs at all. And I have to play alone here in the yard,” sighed Mabel. “It’s just awful!”

“I should think it was,” gasped Tess. “Then, that must be a doctor that comes to your house every day?”

“Yes. And he is real mean. He won’t let me see mamma—only she comes to the top of the stairs and I have to stay at the bottom. Quarantine’s a *nawful* thing to have in the house.

“So you’d better stand farther off from that fence. I was real mean to you girls once, and I’m sorry enough now. But I hadn’t ought to play with you, for maybe *I’ll* have the quarantine, too, and I’ll give it to you if you come too close.”

“But we can play games together without coming too near,” said Tess, her kind heart desiring to help their neighbor. “We’ll play keep house—and there’ll be a river between us—and we can talk over a telephone—and all that.” And soon the three little girls were playing a satisfying game together and Mabel’s tears were dried and her heart comforted for the time being.

That night at dinner, however, Dot waxed curious. “Is quarantine a very bad disease? Do folks die of it?” she asked.

So the story came out, and the older girls laughed at the young one’s mistake. It was learned that all the Creamer children save Mabel had the measles.

Ruth, however, was more puzzled about the novelty of a cat eating peanut butter and walnut creams than Dot had been about that wonderful disease, “quarantine.”

CHAPTER XVII—“MRS. TROUBLE”

“You girls go through this pantry,” complained Mrs. McCall, “like the plague of locusts. There isn’t a doughnut left. Nor a sugar cookie. I managed to save some of the seed-cakes for tea, if you should have company, by hiding them away.

“I honestly thought I made four apple pies on Monday; I can’t account but for three of them. A hearty appetite is a good gift; but I should suggest more bread and butter between meals, and less sweets.”

Ruth took the matter up with the Corner House girls in convention assembled:

“Here it is only Thursday, and practically all the week’s baking is gone. We must restrain ourselves, children. Remember how it used to be a real event, when we could bake a raisin cake on Saturday? We have no right to indulge our tastes for sweets, as Mrs. McCall says. Who knows? We may have to go back to the hard fare of Bloomingsburg again, sometime.”

“Oh, never!” cried Agnes, in alarm.

“You don’t mean that, sister?” asked Tess, worried.

“Then we’d better eat all the good things we can, now,” Dot, the modern philosopher, declared.

“You don’t mean that, Ruth,” said Agnes, repeating Tess’ words. “There is no doubt but that Uncle Peter meant us to have this house and all his money, and we’ll have it for good.”

“Not for bad, I hope, at any rate,” sighed Ruth. “But we must mind what Mrs. McCall says about putting our hands in the cookie jars.”

“But, if we get hungry?” Agnes declared.

“Then bread and butter will taste good to us,” finished Ruth.

“I am sure I haven’t been at the cookie jar any more than usual this week,” the twelve-year-old said.

“Nor me,” Tess added.

“Maybe Sandy did it,” suggested Dot. “She ate up all the dolls’ dinner—greedy thing!”

Agnes was puzzled. She said to the oldest Corner House girl when the little ones were out of earshot:

“I wonder if it *was* that cat that ate the dolls’ feast yesterday?”

“How else could it have disappeared?” demanded Ruth.

“But a cat eating cream walnuts!”

“I don’t know,” said Ruth. “But of course, it wasn’t Sandy-face that has been dipping into the cookie jars. We must be good, Agnes. I tell you that we may be down to short commons again, as we used to be in Bloomingsburg. We must be careful.”

Just why Ruth seemed to wish to economize, Agnes could not understand. Her older sister puzzled Agnes. Instead of taking the good things that had come into their lives here at the old Corner House with joy, Ruth seemed to be more than ever worried. At least, Agnes was sure that Ruth smiled even less frequently than had been her wont.

When Ruth chanced to be alone with Miss Titus, instead of her mind being fixed upon dressmaking details, she was striving to gather from the seamstress more particulars of those strange claimants to Uncle Peter’s estate.

Not that Miss Titus had much to tell. She had only surmises to offer. Mrs. Bean, though claiming to know the people very well, had told the spinster lady very little about them.

“Their names is Treble, I understand,” said Miss Titus. “I never heard of no family of Trebles living in Milton here—no, Ma’am! But you can’t tell. Folks claiming relationship always turn up awful unexpected where there’s money to be divided.”

“Mother was only half sister to Uncle Peter,” said Ruth, reflectively. “But Uncle Peter was never married.”

“Not as anybody in Milton ever heard on,” admitted Miss Titus.

“Do you suppose Aunt Sarah would know who these people are?” queried Ruth.

“You can just take it from me,” said Miss Titus, briskly, “that Sally Maltby never knew much about Peter’s private affairs. Never half as much as she claimed to know, and not a quarter of what she’d *liked* to have known!

“That’s why she had to get out of the old Corner House——”

“Did she *have* to?” interrupted Ruth, quickly.

“Yes, she did,” said the seamstress, nodding confidently. “Although old Mr. Stower promised her mother she should have shelter here as long as Sally lived, he died without making a will. Mrs. Maltby-that-was, died first. So there wasn’t any legal claim Sally Maltby could make. She stayed here only by Peter’s sufferance, and she couldn’t be content.

“Sally learned only one lesson—that of keeping her tongue between her teeth,” pursued Miss Titus. “Peter declared she was always snooping around, and watching and listening. Sally always was a stubborn thing, and she had got it into her head that she had rights here—which of course, she never had.

“So finally Peter forbade her coming into the front part of the house at all; then she went to live with your folks, and Peter washed his hands of her. I expect, like all misers, Peter wanted to hide things about the old house and didn’t want to be watched. Do you know if Howbridge found much of the old man’s hidings?”

“I do not know about that,” said Ruth, smiling. “But Uncle Rufus thinks Uncle Peter used to hide things away in the garret.”

“In the garret?” cried Miss Titus, shrilly. “Well, then! they’d stay there for all of me. I wouldn’t hunt up there for a pot of gold!”

Nor would Ruth—for she did not expect any such hoard as that had been hidden away in the garret by Uncle Peter. She often looked curiously at Aunt Sarah, however, when she sat with the old lady, tempted to ask her point-blank what she knew about Uncle Peter’s secrets.

When a person is as silent as Aunt Sarah habitually was, it is only natural to surmise that the silent one may have much to tell. Ruth had not the courage, however, to advance the subject. She, like her younger sisters, stood in no little awe of grim Aunt Sarah.

Mr. Howbridge remained away and Miss Titus completed such work as Ruth dared have done, and removed her machine and cutting table from the old Corner House. The days passed for the Kenway girls in cheerful occupations and such simple pleasures as they had been used to all their lives.

Agnes would, as she frankly said, have been glad to “make a splurge.” She begged to give a party to the few girls they had met but Ruth would not listen to any such thing.

“I think it’s mean!” Aggie complained. “We want to get folks to coming here. If they think the old house is haunted, we want to prove to them that it is haunted only by the Spirit of Hospitality.”

“Very fine! very fine!” laughed Ruth. “But we shall have to wait for that, until we are more secure in our footing here.”

“‘More secure!’” repeated Agnes. “When will that ever be? I don’t believe Mr. Howbridge will ever find Uncle Peter’s will. I’d like to hunt myself for it.”

“And perhaps *that* might not be a bad idea,” sighed Ruth, to herself. “Perhaps we ought to search the old house from cellar to garret for Uncle Peter’s hidden papers.”

Something happened, however, before she could carry out this half-formed intention. Tess and Dot had gone down Main Street on an errand for Ruth. Coming back toward the old Corner House, they saw before them a tall, dark lady, dressed in a long summer mantle, a lace bonnet, and other bits of finery that marked her as different from the ordinary Milton matron doing her morning’s marketing. She had a little girl with her.

“I never saw those folks before,” said Dot to Tess.

“No. They must be strangers. That little girl is wearing a pretty dress, isn’t she?”

Tess and Dot came abreast of the two. The little girl *was* very showily dressed. Her pink and white face was very angelic in its expression—while in repose. But she chanced to look around and see the Kenway girls looking at her, and instantly she stuck out her tongue and made a face.

“Oh, dear! She’s worse than that Mabel Creamer,” said Tess, and she took Dot’s hand and would have hurried by, had the lady not stopped them.

“Little girls! little girls!” she said, commandingly. “Tell me where the house is, in which Mr. Peter Stower lived. It is up this way somewhere they told me at the station.”

“Oh, yes, Ma’am,” said Tess, politely. “It is the old Corner House—*our* house.”

“*Your* house?” said the tall lady, sharply. “What do you mean by that?”

“We live there,” said Tess, bravely. “We are two of the Kenway girls. Then there are Ruth and Agnes. And Aunt Sarah. We all live there.”

“You reside in Mr. Peter Stower’s house?” said the lady, with emphasis, and looking not at all pleasant, Tess thought. “How long have you resided there?”

“Ever since we came to Milton. We were Uncle Peter’s only relations, so Mr. Howbridge came for us and put us in the house,” explained Tess, gravely.

“Mr. Stower’s only relatives?” repeated the lady, haughtily. “We will see about *that*. You may lead on to the house. At least, I am sure we have as much right there as a parcel of girls.”

Tess and Dot were troubled, but they led the way. Agnes and Ruth were on the big front porch sewing and they saw the procession enter the gate.

“Goodness me! who’s this coming?” asked Agnes, eyeing the dark lady with startled curiosity. “Looks as though she owned the place.”

“Oh, Agnes!” gasped Ruth, and sprang to her feet. She met the lady at the steps.

“Who are you?” asked the stranger, sourly.

“I am Ruth Kenway. Did you—you wish to see me, Ma’am?”

“I don’t care whom I see,” the lady answered decisively, marching right up the steps and leading the angel-faced little girl by the hand. “I want you to know that I am Mrs. Treble. Mrs. John Augustus Treble. My daughter Lillie (stand straight, child!) and I, have been living in Michigan. John Augustus has been dead five years. He was blown up in a powder-mill explosion, so I can prove his death very easily. So, when I heard that my husband’s uncle, Mr. Peter Stower, was dead here in Milton, I decided to come on and get Lillie’s share of the property.”

“Oh!” murmured Ruth and Agnes, in chorus.

“I am not sure that, as John Augustus Treble’s widow, my claims to the estate do not come clearly ahead of *yours*. I understand that you Kenway girls are merely here on sufferance, and that the ties of relationship between you and Mr. Peter Stower are very scant indeed. Of course, I suppose the courts will have to decide the matter, but meanwhile you may show me to my room. I don’t care to pay a hotel bill, and it looks to me as though there were plenty of rooms, and to spare, in this ugly old house.”

Ruth was left breathless. But Agnes was able to whisper in her sister’s ear:

“‘Mrs. Treble’ indeed! She looks to me, Ruth, a whole lot like ‘Mrs. Trouble.’ What *shall* we do?”

CHAPTER XVIII—RUTH DOES WHAT SHE THINKS IS RIGHT

Mrs. Treble, as the tall, dark lady called herself, had such an air of assurance and command, that Ruth was at a loss what course to take with her. Finally the oldest Kenway girl found voice to say:

“Won’t you take one of these comfortable rockers, Mrs. Treble? Perhaps we had better first talk the matter over a little.”

“Well, I’m glad to sit down,” admitted Mrs. Treble. “Don’t muss your dress, Lillie. We’ve been traveling some ways, as I

tell you. Clean from Ypsilanti. We came on from Cleveland Junction this morning, and it's a hot day. *Don't* rub your shoes together, Lillie."

"It *is* very warm," said Ruth, handing their visitor a fan and sending Agnes for a glass of cold water from the icebox.

"Then we've been to that lawyer's office," pursued Mrs. Treble. "What do you call him—Howbridge? Don't rub your hands on your skirt, Lillie."

"Yes; Mr. Howbridge," replied Ruth.

"*Don't* take off that hat, Lillie. So we've been walking in the sun some. That's nice, cool water. Have some, Lillie? Don't drip it on your dress."

"Wouldn't your little girl like to go with Tess and Dot to the playhouse in the garden?" Ruth suggested. "Then we can talk."

"Why—yes," said Mrs. Treble. "Go with the little girls, Lillie. Don't you get a speck of dirt on you, Lillie."

Ruth did not see the awful face the much admonished Lillie made, as she left her mother's side. It amazed Tess and Dot so that they could not speak. Her tongue went into her cheek, and she drew down the corners of her mouth and rolled her eyes, leering so terribly, that for an instant she looked like nothing human. Then she resumed the placidity of her angelic expression, and minced along after the younger Kenway girls, and out of sight around a corner of the house.

Meanwhile, Agnes had drawn Ruth aside, and whispered: "What are you going to do? She's raving crazy, isn't she? Had I better run for a doctor—or the police?"

"Sh!" admonished Ruth. "She is by no means crazy. I don't know *what* to do!"

"But she says she has a right to live here, too," gasped Agnes.

"Perhaps she has."

"Mr. Howbridge said we were Uncle Peter's only heirs," said Agnes, doggedly.

"May—maybe he didn't know about this John Augustus Treble. We must find out about it," said Ruth, much worried. "Of course, we wouldn't want to keep anybody out of the property, if they had a better right to it."

"*What?*" shrilled Agnes. "Give it up? Not—on—your—life!"

In the meantime, Tess and Dot scarcely knew how to talk to Lillie Treble. She was such a strange girl! They had never seen anybody at all like her before.

Lillie walked around the house, out of her mother's sight, just as mincingly as a peacock struts. Her look of angelic sweetness would have misled anybody. She just looked as though she had never done a single wrong thing in all her sweet young life!

But Tess and Dot quickly found that Lillie Treble was not at all the perfect creature she appeared to the casual observer. Her angelic sweetness was all a sham. Away from her mother's sharp eye, Lillie displayed very quickly her true colors.

"Those all your dolls?" she demanded, when she was shown the collection of Tess and Dot in the garden house.

"Yes," said Tess.

"Well, my mother says we're going to stay here, and if you want me to play with you," said this infantile socialist, "we might as well divide them up right now."

"Oh!" gasped Tess.

"I'll take a third of them. They can be easily divided. I choose *this* one to begin with," said Lillie, diving for the Alice-doll.

With a shriek of alarm, Dot rescued this—her choicest possession—and stood on the defensive, the Alice-doll clasped close to her breast.

"No! you can't have that," said Tess, decidedly.

"Why not?" demanded Lillie.

"Why—it's the doll Dot loves the best."

"Well," said Lillie, calmly, "I suppose if I chose one of *yours*, you'd holler, too. I never did see such selfish girls. Huh! if I can't have the dolls I want, I won't choose any. I don't want to play with the old things, anyway!" and she made a most dreadful face at the Kenway sisters.

"Oh-oh!" whispered Dot. "I don't like her at all."

"Well, I suppose we must amuse her," said Tess, strong for duty.

“But she says she is going to stay here all the time,” pursued the troubled Dot, as Lillie wandered off toward the foot of the garden.

“I don’t believe that can be so,” said Tess, faintly. “But it’s our duty to entertain her, while she *is* here.”

“I don’t see why we should. She’s not a nice girl at all,” Dot objected.

“Dot! you know very well Ruth wants us to look out for her,” Tess said, with emphasis. “We can’t get out of it.”

So the younger girl, over-ruled by Tess, followed on. At the foot of the garden, Lillie caught sight of Ruth’s flock of hens. Uncle Rufus had repaired the henhouse and run, and Ruth had bought in the market a dozen hens and a rooster of the white Plymouth Rock breed. Mr. Rooster strutted around the enclosure very proudly with his family. They were all very tame, for the children made pets of them.

“Don’t you ever let them out?” asked Lillie, peering through the wire-screen.

“No. Not now, Ruth says. They would get into the garden,” Tess replied.

“Huh! you could shoo them out again. I had a pet hen at Ypsilanti. I’d rather have hens than dolls, anyway. The hens are alive,” and she tried the gate entering upon the hen-run.

“Oh!” exclaimed Tess. “You mustn’t let them out.”

“Who’s letting them out?” demanded Lillie.

“Well, then, you mustn’t go into the yard.”

“Why not?” repeated the visitor.

“Ruth won’t like it.”

“Well, I guess my mother’s got more to say about this place than your sister has. She says she’s going to show a parcel of girls how to run this house, and run it right. That’s what she told Aunt Adeline and Uncle Noah, when we went to live with them in Ypsilanti.”

Thus speaking, Lillie opened the gate and walked into the poultry yard. At once there was great excitement in the flock. Lillie plunged at the nearest hen and missed her. The rooster uttered a startled and admonitory “Cut! cut! ca-dar-cut!” and led the procession of frightened hens about the yard.

“Aren’t hens foolish?” demanded Lillie, calmly. “I am not going to hurt her.”

She made another dive for the hen. The rooster uttered another shriek of warning and went through the watering-pan, flapping his wings like mad. The water was spilled, and the next attempt Lillie made to seize a hen, she was precipitated into the puddle!

Both hands, one knee, and the front of her frock were immediately streaked with mud. Lillie shrieked her anger, and plunged after the frightened hens again. She was a determined girl. Tess and Dot added their screams to the general hullabaloo.

Round and round went the hens, led by the gallant rooster. Finally the inevitable happened. Lillie got both hands upon one of the white hens.

“Now I got you—silly!” shrieked Lillie.

But she spoke too quickly and too confidently. It was only the tail-feathers Lillie grabbed. With a wild squawk, the hen flew straight away, leaving the bulk of her plumage in the naughty girl’s hands!

The girls outside the fence continued to scream, and so did the flock of hens. The rooster, who was a heavy bird, came around the yard again, on another lap, and wildly leaped upon Lillie’s back.

He scrambled over her, his great spurs and claws tearing her frock, and his wings beating her breathlessly to the ground. Just then Uncle Rufus came hobbling along.

“Glo-ree! who dat chile in dat hen-cage?” he demanded. “Dat ol’ rooster’ll put her eyes out for her—dat he will!”

He opened the gate, went in, and grabbed up Lillie Treble from the ground. When he set her on her feet outside the fence, she was a sight to behold!

“Glo-ree!” gasped Uncle Rufus. “What you doin’ in dar, chile?”

“Mind your own business!” exclaimed Lillie. “You’re only a black man. I don’t have to mind *you*, I hope.”

She was covered with mud and dust, and her frock was in great disarray, but she was self-contained—and as saucy as ever. Tess and Dot were horrified by her language.

“I dunno who yo’ is, gal!” exclaimed Uncle Rufus. “But yo’ let Missie Ruth’s chickens erlone, or I’ll see ter yuh, lak’ yer was one o’ my own gran’chillen.”

Lillie was sullen—and just a little frightened of Uncle Rufus. The disaster made but slight impression upon her mind.

“What—what will your mother say?” gasped Tess, when the three girls were alone again.

“She won’t say anything—till she sees me,” sniffed Lillie. And to put that evil hour off, she began to inquire as to further possibilities for action about the old Corner House.

“What do you girls do?” she asked.

“Why,” said Tess, “we play house; and play go visiting; and—and roll hoop; and sometimes skip rope——”

“Huh! that’s dreadful tame. Don’t you ever *do* anything——Oh! there’s my mother!” A window had opened in one of the wings of the big house, on the second floor. It was a window of a room that the Kenway family had not before used. Tess and Dot saw Ruth as well as Mrs. Treble at the window.

Ruth was doing what she thought was right. Mrs. Treble had confessed to the oldest of the Corner House girls that she had arrived at Milton with scarcely any money. She could not pay her board even at the very cheapest hotel. Mr. Howbridge was away, Ruth knew, and nothing could be done to straighten out this tangle in affairs until the lawyer came back.

So she had offered Mrs. Treble shelter for the present. Moreover, the lady, with a confidence equaled only by Aunt Sarah’s, demanded in quite a high and mighty way to be housed and fed. Yet she had calmed down, and actually thanked Ruth for her hospitality, when she found that the girl was not to be intimidated, but was acting the part of a Good Samaritan from a sense of duty.

Agnes was too angry for words. She could not understand why Ruth should cater to this “Mrs. Trouble,” as she insisted, in secret, upon calling the woman from Ypsilanti.

Ruth was showing the visitor a nice room on the same floor with those chambers occupied by the girls themselves, and Mrs. Treble was approving, when she chanced to look out of the window and behold her angelic Lillie in the condition related above.

CHAPTER XIX—“DOUBLE TROUBLE”

“What is the meaning of that horrid condition of your clothing, Lillie?” demanded Mrs. Treble from the open window.

“I fell in the mud, Mamma,” said the unabashed Lillie, and glanced aside at Tess and Dot with a sweetly troubled look, as though she feared they were at fault for her disarray, but did not quite like to say so!

“Come up here at once!” commanded her mother, who turned to Ruth to add: “I am afraid your sisters are very rough and rude in their play. Lillie has not been used to such playmates. Of course, left without a mother as they were, nothing better can be expected of them.”

Meanwhile, Lillie had turned one of her frightful grimaces upon Tess and Dot before starting for the house, and the smaller Kenway girls were left frozen in their tracks by the ferocity of this parting glare.

Lillie appeared at luncheon dressed in some of Tess’ garments and some of Dot’s—none of them fitting her very well. She had a sweetly forgiving air, which bolstered up her mother’s opinion that Tess and Dot were guilty of leading her angelic child astray.

Mrs. Treble had two trunks at the railway station and Uncle Rufus was sent to get an expressman to bring them up to the Corner House. Ruth paid the expressman.

“Talk about the *Old Man of the Sea* that *Sinbad* had to carry on his shoulders!” scoffed Agnes, in private, to Ruth. “This Mrs. Trouble is going to be a bigger burden for us than he was. And I believe that girl is going to be ‘Double Trouble.’ She looks like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. Uncle Rufus says she got in that messy condition before lunch, chasing the hens out of their seven senses.”

“There are only five senses, Aggie,” said Ruth, patiently.

“Humph! that’s all right for folks, but hens have two more, I reckon,” chuckled the younger girl.

“Well,” said Ruth, “we must treat Mrs. Treble politely.”

“You act as though you really thought they had some right to come here and live on us,” cried Agnes.

“Perhaps they have a right to some of Uncle Peter’s property. We don’t know.”

“I don’t believe it! She’s the sort of a person—that Mrs. Trouble—who assumes rights wherever she goes.”

Ruth had to confess that Mrs. Treble *was* trying. She criticised Mrs. McCall’s cooking and the quantity of food on the table at luncheon. Lillie did not like dried apple pies, and said so bluntly, with a hostile glare at the dessert in question.

“Well, little girl,” said Mrs. McCall, “you’ll have to learn to like them. I’ve just bought quite a lot of dried apples and they’ve got to be eaten up.”

Lillie made another awful face—but her mother did not see it. Dot was so awe-stricken by these facial gymnastics of the strange girl that she could scarcely eat, and watched Lillie continually.

“That child ought to be cured of staring so,” remarked Mrs. Treble, frowning at Dot. “Or is her eyesight bad?”

Mrs. Treble was busy, after her trunks came, in unpacking them and arranging her room to suit herself—as though she expected to make a long visit. She had suggested appropriating Uncle Peter’s old bedroom in the front of the house, but that suite of rooms was locked, and Ruth refrained from telling her that *she* had the keys.

Meantime the bigger Corner House girls tried to help the smaller ones entertain Lillie. Lillie was not like any normal girl whom they had ever known. She wanted to do only things in which she could lead, and if she was denied her way in any particular, she “wouldn’t play” and threatened to go up stairs and tell her mother.

“Why,” said Agnes, first to become exasperated. “You want to be the whole show—including the drum-major at the head of the procession, and the little boys following the clown’s donkey-cart at the end!”

Lillie made a face.

“I think,” said Ruth, quietly, “that if I were you, Lillie, and went to visit, I’d try to make my new friends like me.”

“Huh!” said Lillie. “I’m not visiting—don’t you fool yourselves. My mother and I have come here to stay. We’re not going to be put out like we were at Aunt Adeline’s and Uncle Noah’s. Mother says we’ve got more right to this old house than you Kenways have, and she’s going to get her rights.”

That made Dot cry, and Tess looked dreadfully serious. Agnes was too angry to play with the girl any more, and Ruth, even, gave her up as impossible. Lillie wandered off by herself, for her mother would not be bothered with her just then.

When Mrs. McCall went out into the kitchen that afternoon to start dinner, she missed the bag of dried apples that had been left on the table. There had been nearly four pounds of them.

“What under the canopy’s become of that bag?” demanded the good lady. “This is getting too much, I declare. I *know* I missed the end of the corned beef yesterday, and half a loaf of bread. I couldn’t be sure about the cookies and doughnuts, and the pie.

“But there that bag of dried apples stood, and there it *isn’t* now! What do you know about such crazy actions?” she demanded of Ruth, who had come at her call.

“Why! it’s a mystery,” gasped the eldest of the Corner House girls. “I can’t understand it, dear Mrs. McCall. Of course none of us girls have taken the dried apples. And if you have missed other things from your pantry of late, I am just as sure we are not at fault. I have warned the girls about raiding the cookie jars between meals.”

“Well,” said Mrs. McCall, with awe, “what can have taken them? And a bag of dried apples! Goodness! It’s enough to give one the shivers and shakes.”

Ruth was deeply mystified, too. She knew very well that Sandy-face, the cat, could not be accused with justice of this loss. Cats certainly do not eat dried apples—and such a quantity!

It began to rain before evening, and Tess and Dot rushed out to rescue their dolls and other playthings, for there was wind with the rain and they were afraid it would blow in upon their treasures.

Here poor Dot received an awful shock. The Alice-doll was gone!

Dot went in crying to Ruth and would not be comforted. She loved the missing doll as though it was a real, live baby—there could be no doubt of that. And why should a thief take that lovely doll only, and leave all the others?

Mysteries were piling upon mysteries! It was a gloomy night out of doors and a gloomy night inside the old Corner House as well. Mrs. Treble’s air and conversation were sufficient alone to make the Kenway girls down-hearted. Dot cried herself to sleep that night, and not even Agnes could comfort her.

The wind howled around the house, and tried every latch and shutter fastening. Ruth lay abed and wondered if the thing she had seen at the window in the garret on that other windy day was now appearing and vanishing in its spectral way?

And what should she do about Mrs. Treble and her little girl? What would Mr. Howbridge say when he came home again?

Had she any right to spend more of the estate’s money in caring for these two strangers who were (according to the lady herself) without any means at all? Ruth Kenway put in two very bad hours that night, before she finally fell asleep.

The sun shone brightly in the morning, however. How much better the world and all that is in it seems on a clean, sunshiny morning! Even Dot was able to control her tears, as she went out upon the back porch with Tess, before breakfast.

The rain had saturated everything. The brown dirt path had been scoured and then gullied by the hard downpour. Right at the corner of the woodshed, where the water ran off in a cataract, when it *did* rain, was a funny looking mound.

“Why—why! what’s that?” gasped Dot.

“It looks just as though a poor little baby had been buried there,” whispered Tess. “But of course, it isn’t! Maybe there’s some animal trying to crawl out of the ground.”

“O-o-o!” squealed Dot. “*What* animal?”

“I don’t know. Not a mole. Moles don’t make such a big hump in the ground.”

As the girls wondered, Uncle Rufus came up from the henhouse. He saw the strange looking mound, too.

“Glo-ree!” he gasped. “How come dat?”

“We don’t know, Uncle Rufus,” said Tess eagerly. “We just found it.”

“Somebody been buryin’ a dawg in we-uns back yard? My soul!”

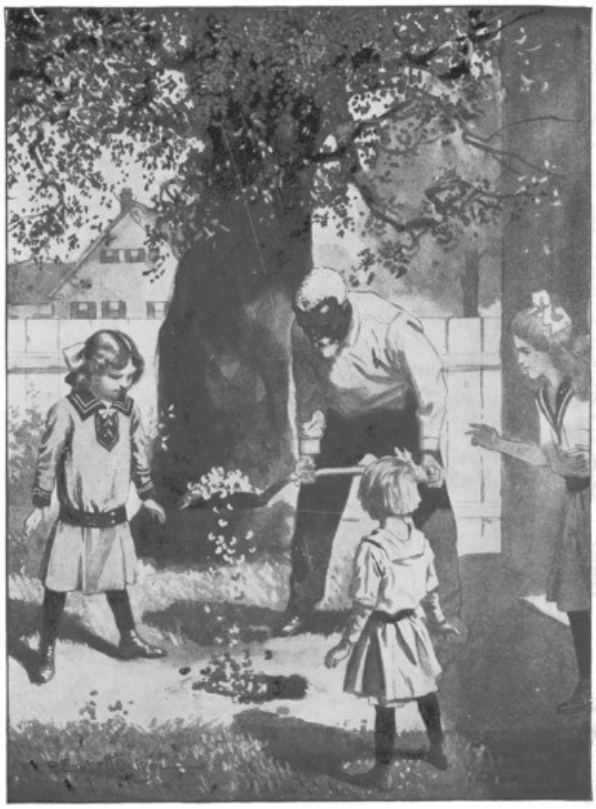
“Oh, it can’t be!” cried Tess.

“And it isn’t Sandy-face,” Dot declared. “For she’s in the kitchen with all her children.”

“Wait er bit—wait er bit,” said the old man, solemnly. “Unc’ Rufus gwine ter look inter dis yere matter. It sho’ is a misery”—meaning “mystery.”

He brought a shovel and dug down beside the mound. Lifting out a huge shovelful of dirt, there were scattered all about the path a great number of swollen and messy brown things that, for a moment, the girls did not identify. Then Uncle Rufus lifted up his voice in a roar:

“Looker yere! Looker yere! Missie Ruth! see wot you-all mak’ out o’ disher monkey-shines. Here’s dem dried apples, buried in de groun’ and swelled fit ter bust demselves.”



“Looker yere! Looker yere! Missie Ruth! There dem dried apples,
buried in de groun’”

Mrs. McCall as well as the other girls came running to see. It was Agnes that saw something else under the mound. She darted down the steps, put her hand into the hole and drew out the Alice-doll!

The poor thing’s dress was ruined. Its hair was a mass of plastered apple, and its face as well. Such a disreputable looking thing!

While the others cried out in wonder and disclaimed all knowledge of how the marvel could have happened, Agnes spoke two accusing words.

“Double Trouble!” she cried, pointing her finger at Lillie Treble, who had just appeared, angelic face and all, at the back door.

“Did that young’un do that?” demanded Mrs. McCall, vigorously.

“She most certainly did,” declared Agnes. “She tried to get rid of the dried apples, and the doll Dot wouldn’t let her play with, at one and the same time. Isn’t she the mean thing?”

Instantly Lillie’s face was convulsed into a mask of rage and dislike. “I hate all you girls!” she snarled. “I’ll do worse than that to you!”

Mrs. McCall seized her like an eagle pouncing upon a rabbit. Mrs. McCall was very vigorous. She carried Lillie into the

kitchen with one hand, and laid her abruptly, face down, over her knee.

What happened during the next few moments was evidently the surprise of Lillie Treble's young life. Her mother had never corrected her in that good, old-fashioned way.

CHAPTER XX—MR. HOWBRIDGE IS PERPLEXED

Tess and Dot went out that morning, when the sun had dried the grass, to play with the lonely little Creamer girl, and they did not invite Lillie Treble to go with them.

Nobody could blame them for that breach of politeness. Dot could not overlook the dreadful thing Lillie had done to the Alice-doll. Fortunately, the doll was not wholly ruined—but "no thanks to Lillie," as Agnes said.

She never *would* look like the same doll again. "She is so pale now," said Dot, hugging the doll tightly; "she looks as though she had been through a dreadful illness. Doesn't she, Tess?"

"And her beautiful dress and cap all ruined," groaned Tess. "It was awfully mean of Lillie."

"I don't care so much about the dress," murmured Dot. "But the color ran so in her cheeks, and one of her eyes is ever so much lighter blue than the other."

"We'll play she *has* been sick," said Tess. "She's had the measles, like Mabel's sisters."

"Oh, no!" cried Dot, who believed in the verities of play-life. "Oh, no! it would not be nice to have all the other dolls quarantined, like Mabel is."

Mabel was not very happy on this morning, it proved. Her face was flushed when she came to the fence, and she spoke to the Kenway girls hoarsely, as though she suffered from a cold.

"Come on over here and play. I'm tired of playing so at arm's length like we've been doing."

"Oh, we couldn't," said Tess, shaking her head vigorously.

"Why not? *You* haven't quarantine at your house," said Mabel, pouting.

"Mrs. McCall says we mustn't—nor you mustn't come over here."

"I don't care," began Mabel, but Tess broke in cheerfully, with:

"Oh, let's keep on using the make-believe telephone. And let's make believe the river's in a flood between us, and the bridges are all carried away, and——"

"No! I won't play that way," cried Mabel, passionately, and with a stamp of her foot. "I want you to come over here."

"We can't," said Tess, quite as firmly.

"You're mean things—there now! I never did like you, anyway. I want you to play in my yard——"

"*I'll* come over and play with you," interposed a cool, sweet voice, and there was Lillie Treble, looking just as angelic as she could look.

"Oh, Lillie!" gasped Tess. But Mabel broke in with:

"Come on. There's a loose picket yonder. You can push it aside. Come on over here, little girl, and we'll have a good time. I never did like those stuck-up Kenway girls, anyway."

Lillie turned once to give Tess and Dot the full benefit of one of the worst grimaces she could possibly make. Then she joined the Creamer girl in the other yard. She remained over there all the morning, and for some reason Mabel and Lillie got along very nicely together. Lillie could be real nice, if she wanted to be.

That afternoon Mabel did not appear in her yard and Lillie wandered about alone, having sworn eternal enmity against Tess and Dot. The next morning Mrs. Creamer put her head out of an upstairs window of the cottage and told Mrs. McCall, who chanced to be near the line-fence between the two places, that Mabel had "come down" with the measles, after all the precautions they had taken with her.

"It's lucky those two little girls over there didn't come into our yard to play with her," said Mrs. Creamer. "The other young ones are just beginning to get around, and now Mabel will have to have a spell. She always was an obstinate child; she couldn't even have measles at a proper and convenient time."

Mrs. Treble, meantime, was feeling herself more and more at home in the old Corner House. She did not offer to help in the general housework in the least, and did nothing but "rid up" her own room. There could be nothing done, or nothing talked of in the family, that Mrs. Treble was not right there to interfere, or advise, or change, or in some way "put her oar in," as Agnes disrespectfully said, to the complete vexation of the person most concerned.

In addition, morning, noon and night she was forever dinning the fact into the ears of the girls, or Mrs. McCall, or Aunt Sarah, or Uncle Rufus, that her husband's mother was Uncle Peter Stower's own sister. "John Augustus Treble talked a lot about Uncle Peter—always," she said. "I had a little property, when I married John Augustus. It was cash money left

from my father's life insurance.

"He wasn't a very good business man, John Augustus. But he meant well," she continued. "He took my money and started a little store with it. He took a lease of the store for three years. There was a shoe factory right across the street, and a box shop on one hand and a knitting mill on the other. Looked like a variety store ought to pay in such a neighborhood.

"But what happened?" demanded Mrs. Treble, in her most complaining tone. "Why, the shoe factory moved to Chicago. The box shop burned down. The knitting mill was closed up by the sheriff. Then the landlord took all John Augustus' stock for payment of the rent.

"So he had to go to work in the powder mill, and that finally blew him up. But he always said to me: 'Now, don't you fuss, Emily, don't you fuss. When Uncle Peter Stower dies, there'll be plenty coming to us, and you'll live like a lady the rest of *your* life.' Poor fellow! If I hadn't seen him go to work that morning, I'd never have believed it was the same man they put into his coffin."

When she told this version of the tale to Aunt Sarah, and many more details, Aunt Sarah never said a word, or even looked as though she heard Mrs. Treble. The old lady's silence and grimness finally riled Mrs. Treble's temper.

"Say!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you say something? John Augustus' mother came from Milton when she was a girl. You must have known her. Why don't you say something?"

At last Aunt Sarah opened her lips. It was the second time in their lives that the Kenway girls had ever heard the old lady say more than two sentences consecutively.

"You want me to say something? Then I will!" declared Aunt Sarah, grimly, and her eyes flashing. "You say your husband's mother was Peter Stower's sister, do ye? Well! old Mr. Stower never had but one child by his first wife, before he married my mother, and that child was Peter. Peter didn't have any sister but these gals' mother, and myself. You ain't got no more right in this house than you would have in the palace of the King of England—and if Ruth Kenway wasn't foolish, she'd put you out."

Agnes was delighted at this outbreak. It seemed that Aunt Sarah must speak with authority. Ruth was doubtful; she did not know which lady to believe. Mrs. Treble merely tossed her head, and said it was no more than she had expected. Of course, Aunt Sarah would back up these Kenway girls in their ridiculous claim to the estate.

"Oh, dear me! I do wish Mr. Howbridge would return home," groaned Ruth.

"I'd put them both out," declared Agnes, who could scarcely control her dislike for the lady from Ypsilanti and her bothersome little girl.

The neighbors and those acquaintances whom the girls had made before began to take sides in the matter. Of course, Miss Titus had spread the tidings of the coming of Mrs. Treble, and what she had come for. The lady herself was not at all backward in putting her story before any person who might chance to call upon the Corner House girls.

Some of these people evidently thought Mrs. Treble had the better right to Uncle Peter's property. It was well known by now, that no will had been offered for probate. Others were sure, like Aunt Sarah, that Uncle Peter had had no sister save the girls' mother.

The minister's wife came to call—heard both sides of the argument—and told Ruth she was doing just right. "It was a kindly thing to do, Ruth," she said, kissing the girl, warmly. "I do not believe she has any claim upon the estate. There is a mistake somewhere. But you are a good girl, and Mr. Howbridge will straighten the matter out, when he comes—never fear."

But before the lawyer came, something occurred which seemed to make it quite impossible for Ruth to ask Mrs. Treble to go, even had she so desired. Lillie came down with the measles!

She had caught the disease that morning she had played with Mabel Creamer, and to Dot's horror, "quarantine" came into the old Corner House. Ruth was dreadfully afraid that Dot and Tess might catch the disease, too, for neither of them had had it. Although the doctor said that Lillie had the disease in a light form, Ruth kept the younger girls as far away from the Trebles' apartment as she could, and even insisted upon Mrs. Treble taking her meals up stairs.

Mr. Howbridge came home at last. Ruth had left a note at his office explaining her trouble, and the lawyer came over to the old Corner House the day following his return.

He listened to Ruth's story without comment. Then he went up stairs and talked with Mrs. Treble. From the sound of Mrs. Treble's high-pitched voice, that must have been rather a stormy interview. Mr. Howbridge was quite calm when he came down to the girls again.

"Oh, sir!" Agnes cried, unable to restrain herself any longer. "You are not going to let her put us out of this dear old house, are you!"

"I wouldn't worry about that, my dear. Not yet, at least," returned Mr. Howbridge, kindly. But to Ruth he said: "It is an utterly unexpected situation. I am not prepared to give an opinion upon the woman's claim.

"However, I think you are a brave girl, Miss Kenway, and I approve of all you have done. You have made a good impression upon the people here in Milton, I am sure. Yes; you did quite right. Don't worry about money matters. All the bills shall be paid.

“But, my dear, I wish more than ever that we could find that will. That would settle affairs immediately, and unless she tried to break the will in the courts, she would have no standing at all. Of course, it is for the little girl she claims a part of Mr. Peter Stower’s property. She, personally, has no rights herself, even if her tale is true.”

Ruth knew that he was perplexed, however, so her own heart was but little relieved by the lawyer’s visit.

CHAPTER XXI—THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS WIN PUBLIC APPROVAL

Was it Mr. Howbridge’s wish, or her own desire, that set Ruth the very next day at the task of searching the garret thoroughly? She allowed only Agnes to go up with her; Tess and Dot were out of the house, Mrs. McCall was busy, and the lady from Ypsilanti was engaged in nursing her little daughter.

These days they were much relieved of Mrs. Treble’s interference in their affairs. Lillie claimed all her mother’s attention, and although the child was not very ill, she managed to take up almost every moment of her mother’s time.

Agnes was frankly scary about the huge lumber-room at the top of the house. Despite Ruth’s declaration that they would use the garret to play in on stormy days, they had not often gone there for that—nor for any other—purpose.

The girls had removed all the ancient garments and aired them. Many were moth-eaten and past redemption; those went to the ragman. Others were given to Petunia Blossom to be fixed over for her growing family. Some of the remainder were hung up again, shrouding one dark corner of the garret in which Ruth knew there was neither box, nor chest, nor trunk.

It was the chests of drawers, and boxes, the two girls gave their attention to on the occasion of this search. Before, Ruth had opened several of the old-fashioned receptacles and rummaged in the contents. Now she and Agnes went at the task methodically.

Everything was taken out of the chests, and boxes, and drawers, and shaken out before being put back again. The girls came upon many unexpected treasures, and Agnes soon forgot her fear of the supposed ghostly occupant of the garret.

Ruth, however, would not allow her to stop and try on wonderful ancient garments, or read yellowed letters, bound with faded tape, or examine the old-fashioned gift-books, between the leaves of which were pressed flowers and herbs, all of which, Agnes was sure, were the souvenirs of sentiment.

Oh, yes! there were papers—reams and reams of them! But they were either letters of no moment to the quest in hand, or ancient documents of no possible use save for their historical value. They came upon some papers belonging to the original Peter Stower—the strong, hard-working man who had built this great house in his old age and had founded the family.

He had been an orphan and had been sheltered in the Milton poorhouse. Here was his “indenture paper,” which bound him to a blacksmith of the town when he was twelve years old. As Ruth and Agnes read the faded lines and old-fashioned printing, they realized that the difference between an apprentice in those days in the north, and a black slave in the south, was all in favor of the last named.

But this “bound boy” had worked, studied nights so as to get some education, had married his master’s daughter, and come in time to be heir to his business. He had taken contracts for furnishing the ironwork for government warships, and so, little by little, had risen to be a prosperous, then a very wealthy man.

The old Corner House was the fruit of his labor and his desire to establish in the town of his miserable beginnings, a monument to his own pluck and endeavor. Where he may have been scorned for the “bound boy” that he was, he took pride in leaving behind him when he died the memory only of a strong, rich, proud man.

The girls found nothing which the last Peter Stower could have considered—whether he were miser, or not—of sufficient value to hide away. Certainly no recently dated papers came to light, and no will at all, or anything that looked like such a document.

They ransacked every drawer, taking them out of the worm-eaten, shaky pieces of furniture, and rummaging behind them for secret panels and the like. Actually, the only thing the girls found that mystified them at all in their search, was half a doughnut lying on a window sill!

“Whoever left that doughnut there?” demanded Agnes. “I don’t believe the girls have been up here alone. Could that Lillie have been here?”

“Perhaps,” sighed Ruth. “She was going everywhere about the house, before she was taken down sick.”

“It’s a blessing she’s sick—that’s what *I* say,” was Agnes’ rather heartless reply. “But—a doughnut! and all hard and dry.”

“Maybe it was Dot’s goat?” chuckled Ruth, nervously.

“Don’t!” gasped Agnes. “My nerves are all on the jump as it is. Is there any single place in this whole garret that we haven’t looked?”

Ruth chanced to be staring at the doughnut on the window sill, and did not at first answer. That was the window at the right of the chimney where she had seen the ghostly apparition fluttering in the storm. The space about the window remained cleared, as it was before.

“Wake up!” commanded Agnes. “Where shall we look now?”

Ruth turned with a sigh and went toward the high and ornate black-walnut “secretary” that stood almost in the middle of the huge room.

“Goodness to gracious!” ejaculated the younger girl. “We’ve tried that old thing again and again. I’ve almost knocked the backboards off, pounding to see if there were secret places in it. It’s as empty as it is ugly.”

“I suppose so,” sighed Ruth. “It’s strange, though, that Uncle Peter did not keep papers in it, for that is what it was intended for. Almost every drawer and cupboard in it locks with a different key.”

She had been given a huge bunch of keys by Mr. Howbridge when they first came to the Corner House; and she had used these keys freely in searching the garret furniture.

As they went hopelessly down to the third floor, at last, Ruth noticed that one of the small chambers on this floor, none of which the family had used since coming to Milton, had been opened. The door now stood ajar.

“I suppose that snoopy Mrs. Treble has been up here,” said Agnes, sharply. “I thought all these doors were locked, Ruth?”

“Not all of them had keys. But they were all shut tightly,” and she went to this particular room and peered in.

The bed was a walnut four-poster—one of the old-fashioned kind that was “roped”—and the feather-bed lay upon it, covered with an old-fashioned quilt.

“Why! it looks just as though somebody had been sleeping here,” gasped Ruth, after a moment.

“What?” cried Agnes. “Impossible!”

“Doesn’t that look like the imprint of a body on the bed? Not a big person. Somebody as big as Tess, perhaps?”

“It wasn’t Tess, I am quite sure,” declared Agnes.

“Could it have been Sandy-face?”

“Of course not! No cat would make such a big hollow, lying down in a bed. I know! it was that Lillie Treble—‘Double Trouble’! Of course,” concluded Agnes, with assurance.

So Ruth came out and closed the door carefully. Had it not been for her sister’s assurance at just this moment, Ruth might have made a surprising discovery, there and then!

She had to report to Mr. Howbridge, by note, that a thorough search of the garret had revealed nothing which Uncle Peter Stower could have hidden away.

While Lillie was under the doctor’s care, Mrs. Treble was out of the way. Affairs at the old Corner House went on in a more tranquil way. The Creamer girls who had first been ill, were allowed out of doors, and became very friendly with Tess and Dot—over the fence. The quarantine bars were not, as yet, altogether down.

Maria Maroni came to see them frequently, and Alfredia Blossom brought her shining black face to the old Corner House regularly, on Mondays and Thursdays. Usually she could not stop to play on Monday, when she and Jackson came for the soiled clothes, but if Petunia got the ironing done early enough on Thursday, Alfredia visited for a while.

“I don’t believe Alfredia could be any nicer, if she was bleached white,” Dot said, seriously, on one occasion. “But I know she’d like to be like us—and other folks, Tess.”

“I expect she would,” agreed Tess. “But we must treat her just as though her skin was like ours. Ruth says she is sure Alfredia’s heart is white.”

“Oh!” gasped Dot. “And they showed us in school before we left Bloomingsburg, pictures of folks’ hearts, and lungs, and livers—don’t you remember? And the heart was painted *red*.”

“I don’t expect they were photographs,” said Tess, decidedly. “And there aren’t any pictures exact but photographs—and movies.”

The Pease girls came frequently to play with Tess and Dot, and the younger Kenways went to *their* house. None of the Corner House girls could go out on the street now without being spoken to by the Milton people. Many of these friendly advances were made by comparative strangers to the four sisters.

The tangle of Uncle Peter Stower’s affairs had gotten even into the local newspapers, and one newspaper reporter came to Ruth for what he called “an interview.” Ruth sent him to Mr. Howbridge and never heard anything more of it.

The friends Agnes had made among the girls of her own, and Ruth’s, age began to come to call more frequently. Eva Larry admitted she felt shivery, whenever she approached the old house, and she could not be hired to come on a stormy day. Just the same, she was so sorry for the girls, and liked Agnes so much, that she just *had* to run in and cheer them up a bit.

Older people came, too. Ruth’s head might have been turned, had she been a less sensible girl. The manner in which she handled the situation which had risen out of Mrs. Treble’s coming east to demand a share of the property left by Peter Stower, seemed to have become public knowledge, and the public of Milton approved.

Nobody called on Mrs. Treble. Perhaps that was because she was quarantined upstairs, with Lillie convalescent from her attack of the measles. However, the Corner House girls, as they were now generally called, seemed to be making friends rapidly.

Public approval had set its seal upon their course.

CHAPTER XXII—CALLERS—AND THE GHOST

“I do wonder!” said Tess, with a sigh.

“What do you wonder?” asked Ruth, mildly.

“Sounds like a game,” Agnes observed, briskly. The Corner House girls were sitting on the porch with their sewing, and it was a very warm August forenoon. “‘Cumjucum—what do you come by? I come by the letter T’—which stands for ‘Tess’ and ‘Trouble,’ which last is the expression on Tess’ face,” concluded Agnes, with a laugh.

Tess’ train of thought was not to be sidetracked so easily. “I wonder whatever became of Tommy Rooney?” she said.

“You don’t really believe that was Tommy you saw the day it rained so hard?” cried Agnes.

“Yes, I do. And we know that Tommy stole cherries from Mr. Pease, and milk from Mrs. Adams. Didn’t he, Dot? And then, we saw Mr. Pinkney and that bulldog chasing him.”

“He ran into our yard to escape the dog,” said Dot, seriously.

“Well,” said Ruth, “if it was Tommy, I wish he had come to the house, so we could have fed him. Mrs. Rooney must be awfully worried about him. It’s been a month since we heard he had run away.”

“And he’d been gone a week, then,” added Agnes.

“Well,” said Tess, “I guess he hasn’t killed any Indians here in Milton, or we would have heard about it.”

“I guess not,” chuckled Agnes.

“I always look for him, when I’m on the street,” said Dot.

“We’ll look for him to-day,” said Tess, “when we go to see Maria.”

Tess and Dot were going over to Meadow Street that afternoon to call on the Maronis and Mrs. Kranz. The condition of the Maronis had greatly improved during these weeks. Not only Joe and Maria, but the whole family had begun to be proud of living “like Americans.”

Mrs. Kranz, out of the kindness of her heart, had helped them a great deal. Maria helped the good German lady each forenoon, and was learning to be a careful little housekeeper.

“She iss a goot mädchen,” declared the large lady. “Aind’t idt vonderful how soon dese foreigners gets to be respectable, ven dey iss learndt yet?”

Tess and Dot went up stairs to make themselves ready for their visit, before luncheon. Upon their departure, Eva Larry and Myra Stetson appeared at the front gate.

“Oh, do come in, girls!” shouted Agnes, dropping her sewing.

“We will, if you’ll tie up your ghost,” said Eva, laughing.

“Hush!” commanded Ruth. “Don’t say such things—not out loud, please.”

“Well,” Eva said, as she and Myra joined them on the porch, “I understand you have ransacked that old garret. Did you chase out Mr. Ghost?”

“What is that?” demanded Mrs. Treble’s shrill voice in the doorway. “What does that girl mean by ‘ghost’?”

“Oh, Mrs. Treble!” cried the teasing Eva. “Haven’t you heard of the famous Garret Ghost of the old Corner House—and you here so long?”

“Oh, don’t!” begged Ruth, sotto voce.

Mrs. Treble was not to be denied. Something evidently had escaped her curiosity, and she felt cheated of a sensation. “Go on and tell me, girl,” she commanded Eva.

Eva, really nothing loath, related the story of the supposed supernatural occupant of the garret. “And it appears on stormy, windy days. At least, that’s when it’s been seen. It comes to the window up there and bows, and flutters its grave clothes—and—and all that.”

“How ridiculous!” murmured Ruth. But her face was troubled and Mrs. Treble studied her accusingly.

“That’s why you forbade my Lillie going up there,” she said. “A ghost, indeed! I guess you have something hidden up there, my girl, that you don’t want other folks to see. You can’t fool me about ghosts. I don’t believe in them,” concluded

the lady from Ypsilanti.

“Now you’ve done it, Eva,” said Agnes, in a low voice, when Mrs. Treble had departed. “There isn’t a place in this house that she hasn’t tried to put her nose in *but* the garret. Now she’ll go up there.”

“Hush,” begged Ruth, again. “Don’t get her angry, Agnes.”

“Oh! here comes Mr. Howbridge!” exclaimed the other Kenway girl, glad to change the subject.

Ruth jumped up to welcome him, and ushered him into the dining-room, while the other girls remained upon the porch. As she closed the door, she did not notice that Mrs. Treble stood in the shadow under the front stairs.

“I have been to see this Mrs. Bean,” said the lawyer, to Ruth, when they were seated. “She is an old lady whose memory of what happened when she was young seems very clear indeed. She does not know this Mrs. Treble and her child personally. Mrs. Treble has not been to see her, since she came to Milton.”

“No. Mrs. Treble has not been out at all,” admitted Ruth.

“Mrs. Bean,” pursued Mr. Howbridge, “declares that she knew Mr. Treble’s mother very well, as a girl. She says that the said mother of John Augustus Treble went west when she was a young woman—before she married. She left behind a brother—Peter Stower. Mrs. Bean has always lived just outside of Milton and has not, I believe, lived a very active life, or been much in touch with the town’s affairs. To her mind, Milton is still a village.

“She claims,” said Mr. Howbridge, “to have heard frequently of this Peter Stower, and when she heard he had died, she wrote to the daughter-in-law of her former friend. That is her entire connection with the matter. She said one very odd thing. That is, she clearly remembers of having hired Peter Stower once to clean up her yard and make her garden. She says he was in the habit of doing such work at one time, and she talked with him about this sister who had gone west.”

“Oh!” gasped Ruth.

“It does not seem reasonable,” said Mr. Howbridge. “There is a mixup of identities somewhere. I am pretty sure that, as much as Mr. Peter Stower loved money, he did not have to earn any of it in such a humble way. It’s a puzzle. But the solving of the problem would be very easy, if we could find that lost will.”

Ruth told him how she and Agnes had thoroughly examined the garret and the contents of the boxes and furniture stowed away there.

“Well,” sighed the lawyer. “We may have to go into chancery to have the matter settled. That would be a costly procedure, and I dislike to take that way.”

Directly after luncheon Tess and Dot started off for Meadow Street with the convalescent Alice-doll pushed before them in Dot’s doll-carriage. Mrs. Treble, who had begun to eat down stairs again, although Lillie was not allowed out of her room as yet, marched straight up stairs, and, after seeing that Lillie was in order, tiptoed along the hall, and proceeded up the other two flights to the garret door.

When she opened this door and peered into the dimly lit garret, she could not repress a shudder.

“It is a spooky place,” she muttered.

But her curiosity had been aroused, and if Mrs. Treble had one phrenological bump well developed, it was that of curiosity! In she stepped, closed the door behind her, and advanced toward the middle of the huge, littered room.

A lost will! Undoubtedly hidden somewhere in these old chests of drawers—or in that tall old desk yonder. Either the Kenway girls have been very stupid, or Ruth has not told that lawyer the truth! These were Mrs. Treble’s unspoken thoughts.

What was that noise? A rat? Mrs. Treble half turned to flee. She was afraid of rats.

There was another scramble. One of the rows of old coats and the like, hanging from nails in the rafters overhead, moved more than a little. A rat could not have done that.

The ghost? Mrs. Treble was not at all afraid of such silly things as ghosts!

“I see you there!” she cried, and strode straight for the corner.

There was another scramble, one of the Revolutionary uniform coats was pulled off the hook on which it had hung, and seemed, of its own volition, to pitch toward her.

Mrs. Treble screamed, but she advanced. The coat seemed to muffle a small figure which tried to dodge her.

“I have you!” cried Mrs. Treble, and clutched at the coat.

She secured the coat itself, but a small, ragged, red haired, and much frightened boy slid out of its smothering folds and plunged toward the door of the garret. In trying to seize this astonishing apparition, Mrs. Treble missed her footing and came down upon her knees.

The boy, with a stifled shout, reached the door. He wrenched it open and dove down the stairway. His bare feet made little sound upon the bare steps, or upon the carpeted halls below. He seemed to know his way about the house very well indeed.

When Mrs. Treble reached the stairs and came down, heavily, shrieking the alarm, nobody in the house saw the mysterious red haired boy. But Uncle Rufus, called from his work in the garden, was amazed to see a small figure squeezing through a cellar window into the side-yard. In a minute the said figure flew across to the street fence, scrambled over it, and disappeared up Willow Street, running almost as fast as a dog.

“Glo-ree!” declared the black man, breathlessly. “If dat boy keeps on runnin’ like he’s done started, he’ll go clean ’round de worl’ an’ be back fo’ supper!”

CHAPTER XXIII—NOT ENTIRELY EXPLAINED

Joe Maroni smiled at Tess and Dot broadly, and the little gold rings in his ears twinkled, when the girls approached his fruit stand.

“De litla ladies mak’ Joe ver’ hap’—come to see-a he’s Maria. Maria, she got da craz’ in da head to wait for to see you.”

“Oh, I hope not, Mr. Maroni,” said Tess, in her most grown-up way. “I guess Maria isn’t crazy, only glad.”

“Glad a—si, si! Here she come.”

Maria, who always was clean and neat of dress now, appeared from the cellar. She was helping her mother draw out the new baby carriage that Joe had bought—a grand piece of furniture, with glistening wheels, varnished body, and a basket top that tipped any way, so as to keep the sun out of the baby’s eyes.

The baby was fat again and very well. He crowed, and put his arms out to Tess and Dot, and the latter was so delighted with him that she almost neglected the Alice-doll in *her* carriage.

The little Maronis thought that big doll and its carriage were, indeed, very wonderful possessions. Two of the smaller Maronis were going walking with the visitors, and Maria and the baby.

Joe filled the front of the baby carriage with fruit, so that the children would not be hungry while away from the house. Off the procession started, for they had agreed to go several blocks to the narrow little park that skirted the canal.

It was a shady park, and the Kenway girls and the clean, pretty Maroni children had a very nice time. Maria was very kind and patient with her sisters and with the baby, and nothing happened to mar the afternoon’s enjoyment until just as the children were about to wheel the baby—and the doll—back to Meadow Street.

What happened was really no fault of any of this little party in whom we are interested. They had set off along the canal path, when there suddenly darted out of some bushes a breathless, hatless boy, whose tangled hair was fiery red!

Tess shrieked aloud. “Why! Tommy Rooney! Whatever are you doing here?”

The boy whirled and stared at Tess and Dot, with frightened countenance. Their appearance in this place evidently amazed him. He stumbled backward, and appeared to intend running away; but his foot tripped and he went down the canal bank head-first!

Splash he went into the murky water, and disappeared. The girls all screamed then; there were no grown folk near—no men at all in sight.

When Tommy Rooney came to the surface he was choking and coughing, and paddled for only a moment, feebly, before going under again. It was plain that he could not swim.

“Oh, oh!” cried Dot. “He’ll be drowned. Tommy Rooney will be drowned! And what will his mother say to *that*?”

Tess wrung her hands and screamed for help. But there *was* no help.

That is, there would have been none for poor Tommy, if it had not been for quick-witted Maria Maroni. Quickly she snatched the baby from the carriage and put him into Tess’ arms. Then she flung out the pillows and wrappings, and ran the carriage to the brow of the canal-bank.

Up came Tommy again, his eyes open, gurgling a cry, and fighting to keep above the surface.

Up came Tommy again, his eyes open, gurgling a cry, and fighting to keep above the surface.

“Look out, boy!” cried Maria, and she ran the baby carriage right down the bank, letting it go free.

The carriage wheeled into the water and floated, as Maria knew it would. It was within the reach of Tommy’s still sturdy hands. He grabbed it, and although it dipped some, it bore up his weight so that he did not sink again.

By that time men had heard their cries, and came running from the lock. They soon fished out Master Tommy and the baby carriage, too.

“You’re a smart little kid,” said one of the men, to Maria, and he gave her a silver dollar. Meanwhile the other man turned Tommy across his knee to empty the water out of his lungs. Tommy thought he was going to get a spanking, and he began to struggle and plead with the man.

“Aw, don’t, Mister! I didn’t mean to fall into your old canal,” he begged, half strangling. “I didn’t hurt the water none.”

The men laughed. “You ought to get it—and get it good,” he said. “But perhaps the dip in the canal was punishment enough for you. I’ll leave it to your mother to finish the job right.”

“Say! does he belong to these little girls?” asked the other man. “He’s no Italian.”

“Well, here’s two girls who are not Italians, either,” said the other rescuer.

“He’ll go home with us,” declared Tess, with confidence. “If he doesn’t, we’ll tell his mother, and she’ll send a policeman after Tommy.”

“Guess the little lady knows what she’s about,” laughed the man. “Come on, Jim. The boy’s so water-soaked that it’s pretty near put his hair out. No danger of much fire there now.”

Maria was afraid of what her father would do and say when he saw the condition of the new baby carriage. She carried the baby home in her arms, while her little sisters carried the pillows and other things. Tess ordered Tommy Rooney to push the carriage.

Tess was very stern with Tommy, and the latter was very meek. Naturally, he was much subdued after his involuntary bath; and he was worried, too.

“You—you going to make me go clear home with you, Tess Kenway?” he finally asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“Well,” said the boy, with a sigh, “they’ll just about kill me there.”

“What for?” demanded Tess and Dot, in chorus.

“Guess you warn’t at home an hour ago?” said Tommy, a faint grin dawning on his face.

“No. We came over here right after lunch,” said Tess.

“Wow! wait till you hear about it,” groaned Tommy. “Just wait!” and he refused to explain further.

At the Meadow Street fruit stand, there was great excitement when the procession appeared. Mrs. Maroni feared that it was the baby who had fallen into the canal and she ran out, screaming.

Such a chattering Tess and Dot had never heard before. Joe and his wife and all the children—including Maria and the baby—screeched at the top of their voices. Somehow an understanding of the facts was gathered by Mr. and Mrs. Maroni, and they began to calm down.

Then Tess put in a good word for Maria, and told Joe that she had saved the life of Tommy, who was a friend of theirs—and a friend of the “litla Padrona,” as Joe insisted upon calling Ruth.

So the excitable Italian was pacified, and without visiting Mrs. Kranz on this occasion, Tess and Dot bade the Maronis good-by, kissed the baby, and with Tommy Rooney started for home.

As they approached the old Corner House, Tommy grew more and more disturbed. He was not likely to get cold, if his garments *were* wet, for the day was very warm. Anyway, he wore so few garments, and they were so ragged, that it did not seem to matter much, whether he removed them in going in swimming, or not!

“You girls better go ahead and tell ’em,” suggested Tommy, at last.

“Tell ’em what?” demanded Tess.

“Tell ’em——Well, tell ’em I’m coming. I wouldn’t want to frighten your sisters—and—and that woman.”

“No, we won’t,” said Tess. “You are fixing to run away again. Don’t you dare even *start*, Tommy Rooney.”

“Well,” grunted Tommy. “There’s something going to happen, when we get there.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. How you talk!”

“Oh, yes there is. I scared that woman pretty near into fits.”

“What woman?” demanded Tess and Dot, together.

Tommy refused to be more explicit. They came in sight of the Corner House. As they entered by the back gate, Ruth and Agnes rushed out upon the rear porch, having caught sight of Tommy’s disreputable figure.

“There he is!” they shrieked.

Mrs. McCall was visible behind them. She said something far more practical. She demanded: “Is that the boy that’s been stealing my pies and doughnuts?”

Tommy shrank back and turned to flee. But Uncle Rufus darted out from behind the woodshed and caught him.

“Glo-ree! is dis de leetle rapscallion I done see squeezin’ out of dat cellar winder? An’ I declar’! I didn’t t’ink nobody more’n a cat could git in an out o’ dat winder.”

A window opened above, and Mrs. Treble put out her head. “Hold him till I come down there,” she ordered. “That little tyke tried to play ghost and scare me. I’ll fix him.”

She banged the window again, and was evidently hastening down stairs. Even Dot turned upon the truant:

“Have you been living in our garret, Tommy Rooney?” she cried.

Tommy nodded, too full for utterance at that moment.

“And we thought it was a goat!” declared Dot.

“And you ate the cookies and doughnuts Mrs. McCall missed,” accused Agnes.

Tommy nodded.

“And the dolls’ dinner out of our room,” cried Dot. “And we thought it was Sandy-face.”

“Ah—well——I was starvin’,” confessed Tommy.

At this point Tess came to the front again. She stood before Tommy, and even put Uncle Rufus firmly, though gently, aside.

“Stop!” she said to the wrathful Mrs. Treble, when that lady appeared. “Tommy is a friend of ours. And he’s been ’most drowned. You wouldn’t want to punish him any more to-day. Dot and I invited him home, and you mustn’t all *pounce* on him this way. You know, his mother’s a long way from here, and he hasn’t seen her lately, and—and he’s sorry anyway. And it must be just *awful* to be so hungry that you have to *steal*.”

At this point gentle Tess’ eyes ran over, and she turned to take the red haired boy’s hand. To her amazement, Tommy’s grimy face was likewise streaked with tears.

CHAPTER XXIV—AUNT SARAH SPEAKS OUT

Tommy Rooney's capture explained some of the mysterious happenings about the old Corner House, but he could not satisfy Ruth regarding the figure she had seen appear at the garret window. For *that* happened before Tommy had ever been in the house.

They were all kind to Tommy, however—all but Mrs. Treble—after Tess had pleaded for him. Mrs. McCall washed his face and hands, and even kissed him—on the sly—and then set him down to a very satisfying meal. For as often as he had raided Mrs. McCall's pantry at night since taking up his abode in the garret of the old Corner House, he had not had a real "*square*" meal for a month.

The house was so big that, by keeping to the two upper floors of the main part during the daytime, and venturing out-of-doors by way of the cellar window only at night, Master Tommy had been able to avoid the family for weeks.

He had entered the house first on that evening when he was chased by Mr. Pinkney and the bulldog. Finding the back door open, he had run up the back stairs, and so climbed higher, and higher, until he reached the garret.

Nobody said anything to Master Tommy about the ghost, although Agnes wanted to. Ruth forbade her to broach the subject to the runaway.

Tommy had made a nest behind the old clothes, but some nights he had slept in a bed on the third floor. The day Ruth and Agnes ransacked the garret for Uncle Peter's will, he had been down in that third floor room. When Ruth discovered the print of his body on the feather-bed, he was on the floor, under that bed, hidden by the comforter which hung down all around it.

He was pretty tired of the life he had been leading. He admitted to the Corner House girls that he had not seen a single Indian in all his wanderings. He was ready to go home—even if his mother thrashed him.

So Ruth telegraphed Mrs. Rooney. She took Tommy to a nearby store and dressed him neatly, if cheaply, and then bought his ticket and put him in the care of the conductor of the Bloomingsburg train. Tommy, much wiser than he had been, and quite contrite, went home.

"I s'pose he's a dreadful bad boy," sighed Dot. "But my! no girl would ever have such things happen to her—would she?"

"Would you want to be chased by bulldogs, and live in garrets, and steal just enough to keep alive—and—and never have on anything clean, Dot Kenway?" demanded Tess, in horror.

"No, I don't s'pose I would," confessed Dot. Then she sighed, and added: "It's *awful* commonplace, just the same, bein' a girl, isn't it?"

"I agree with you, Dot-ums," cried Agnes, who heard her. "Nothing ever happens to us."

Almost on the heels of that statement, however, something happened to them that satisfied even Agnes' longing for romance, for some time thereafter.

It was on Saturday that Tommy Rooney went home to his anxious mother. The weather had been of a threatening character for several days. That night the wind shrieked and moaned again around the old Corner House and the rain beat with impotent hands against the panes.

A rainy Sunday is not often a cheerful day. Ruth Kenway always tried to interest her sisters on such occasions in books and papers; or they had quiet talks about "when mother was with us," or those more ancient times "before father went away."

If they could possibly get to Sabbath School on such stormy days, they did so. This particular mid-August Sunday was no exception.

The rain ceased for a while about noon and the four set forth, under two umbrellas, and reached the church in season. They were glad they had come, so few scholars were there, and they helped swell the attendance.

Coming home, it rained a little, and their umbrellas were welcome. Tess and Dot were under the smaller umbrella and the older girls had the larger one. Coming across the parade ground, the path they followed approached the old Corner House from the side.

"Oh, see there!" cried Tess, suddenly. "Somebody's waving to us from the window."

"What window?" demanded Agnes, with sudden nervousness, trying to tip up the big umbrella, so that she could see, too.

"Why!" cried Tess. "It's in the garret."

"Oh, I see it!" agreed Dot.

"Oh! mercy me!" groaned Agnes.

"Stop that!" gasped Ruth, shaking her by the arm. "You want to scare those children?"

"It's—it's the ghost," whispered Agnes, too afraid to look again.

Tess and Dot were merely curious. Ruth had seen the waving figure. Immediately it seemed to leap upward and disappear.

“Do you suppose it was Lillie?” asked Tess.

“We’ll find out when we go in,” said Ruth, in a shaken voice.

Agnes was almost in tears. She clung to Ruth’s arm and moaned in a faint voice:

“I don’t want to go in! I never want to go into that horrid old house again.”

“What nonsense you do talk, Ag,” said Ruth, as the little girls ran ahead. “We have been all over that garret. We know there is really nothing there——”

“That’s just it,” groaned Agnes. “It *must* be a ghost.”

Ruth, unhappy as she felt, determined to discover the meaning of that spectral figure. “Let’s go right up there and find out about it,” she said.

“Oh, Ruth!”

“I mean it. Come on,” said the older sister, as they entered the big hall.

Tess and Dot heard her, and clamored to go, too, but Ruth sent the smaller girls back. At the head of the front stairs, they met Mrs. Treble.

“Have you, or Lillie, been up in the attic?” asked Ruth, sharply. “There was something at the window up there——”

“What are you trying to do, girl?” demanded the lady from Ypsilanti, scornfully. “Trying to scare me with a ridiculous ghost story?”

“I don’t know what it is,” said Ruth. “I mean to find out. Were you up there?”

“I should have gone to the garret had I wished,” Mrs. Treble said, scornfully. “You must have something hidden away there, that you don’t want me to see. I wonder what it is?”

“Oh, Mrs. Treble!” began Ruth, and just then she saw that Aunt Sarah’s door was open. Aunt Sarah stood at the opening.

“Niece Ruth!” exclaimed the old lady, harshly, “why don’t you send that woman away? She’s got no business here.”

“I’ve more right here than *you* have, I should hope,” cried Mrs. Treble, loudly. “And more right than these girls. You’ll all find out when the courts take the matter up.”

“Oh, Mrs. Treble! We none of us know——”

“Yes we do, too,” declared the lady from Ypsilanti, interrupting Ruth. “My husband’s mother was Peter Stower’s sister. Perhaps my Lillie shall have *all* the property—and this ugly old house, too. I tell you what I’ll do first thing, when it comes into my hands as guardian of my child.”

Ruth and Agnes were speechless. Mrs. Treble was more passionate than she had ever been before.

“I shall tear this ugly old house down—that’s what I’ll do,” Mrs. Treble declared. “I’ll raze it to the ground——”

Aunt Sarah suddenly advanced into the hall. Her black eyes flashed as though there were sparks in them.

“You will do *what*?” she asked, in a low, hoarse voice.

“I’ll tear down the house. It is no good.”

“This beautiful old house!” groaned Agnes, forgetting about the ghost at that moment.

Aunt Sarah’s wrath was rising. It broke the bonds she had put upon her tongue so many years before.

“You will tear this house down?” she repeated. “Niece Ruth! is there any chance of this woman getting control of Peter’s property?”

“We don’t know,” said Ruth desperately. “If we can’t find Uncle Peter’s will that Mr. Howbridge made, and which leaves the estate to you and us girls, Aunt Sarah—”

“There never was such a will,” put in Mrs. Treble.

“Mr. Howbridge says there was. He thinks Mr. Stower must have hidden it away with other papers, somewhere in the house——”

“And I know where,” said Aunt Sarah, speaking out at last. “Peter never thought I knew where he hid things. But I did. You gals come with me.”

She stalked toward the stairs that led upward. Ruth and Agnes, half awed by her manner and speech, followed her. So did Mrs. Treble.

Aunt Sarah went directly to the garret. Agnes forgot to be scared of the ghost they had seen from outside, in her interest in this affair.

Aunt Sarah went to the old secretary, or desk, standing in the middle of the garret floor.

“Oh, we’ve looked all through *that*,” whispered Agnes.

“You did not look in the right place,” said Aunt Sarah.

Quite calmly she tapped with her fingers upon a panel in one end of the old desk. In a moment the panel dropped down, leaving in view a very narrow depository for papers. It was crammed with documents of several different kinds.

Mrs. Treble sprang forward, with a cry. But Aunt Sarah got in front of her. She seized her skirts with both hands and advanced upon the lady from Ypsilanti with belligerence.

“Shoo!” said Aunt Sarah. “Shoo!”

As Mrs. Treble retreated, Aunt Sarah advanced, and, as though she were “shooing” a refractory chicken, she drove the lady from Ypsilanti out of the garret and closed the door firmly in her face.

CHAPTER XXV—LAYING THE GHOST

Mr. Howbridge came by request to the Corner House the next morning. Ruth had slept all night with the papers found in the old secretary under her pillow.

Mr. Howbridge came into the dining-room where the four Corner House girls were assembled, smiling and evidently in right good humor. “I understand you have made a wonderful discovery, Miss Kenway?” he said.

“It was Aunt Sarah,” said Agnes, excitedly. “*She* knew where the papers were.”

“Indeed?” said the lawyer, interested.

“We have found some of Uncle Peter’s papers, that is sure,” said Ruth. “And among them is one that I think must be the will you spoke of.”

“Good! we shall hope it is the paper we have been looking for,” said Mr. Howbridge, accepting the packet Ruth handed him. “And *I* have made a discovery, too.”

“What is that, sir?” asked Ruth, politely.

“It refers to Mrs. Treble’s claim to the estate of Mr. Peter Stower.”

“If little Lillie bears any relationship to Uncle Peter, she must have her just share of the estate. We could agree to nothing else,” Ruth hastened to say.

“Oh, Ruth!” exclaimed Agnes.

Mr. Howbridge adjusted his glasses and looked at Ruth quizzically. “Miss Kenway,” he said, “you are a remarkable girl. Lillie Treble is the daughter of John Augustus Treble, without a doubt. *His* mother went west from Milton, years ago, as is claimed. But she was *not* Peter Stower’s sister.”

“Oh, goody!” ejaculated Agnes, clapping her hands.

“Who was she?” asked Ruth.

Mr. Howbridge laughed softly. “She was the sister of a man named Peter *Stover*. The names are similar, but there is a difference of one letter—and many other differences, it seems. Peter Stover was a poor man all his days. He was an ‘odd job’ man most of his life, working about the farms on the outskirts of Milton, until he grew infirm. He died last winter at the poorfarm.

“Mrs. Bean, even, remembers the name right now. These Trebles evidently heard of the wealth of your Uncle Peter, and thought he was *their* Uncle Peter. The names were so much alike, you see.”

“Then—then Mrs. Treble and Lillie have no claim upon Uncle Peter’s estate at all?” asked Ruth.

“No more than the Man in the Moon,” said Mr. Howbridge, still smiling.

“And you know *he* isn’t any relation,” whispered Tess, to Dot, with great importance.

“The poor things!” Ruth sighed. “Whatever will they do?”

“Why, Ruth Kenway!” exclaimed Agnes, in great excitement. “What are you thinking of? I should think you had done enough for them.”

Ruth only looked at her, and went on talking to the lawyer. “You see, sir,” she said, “they are quite penniless. I know, for Mrs. Treble broke down and cried about it last night, when I read to her the provisions of what I supposed to be Uncle Peter’s will.

“She spent the last money she had in getting here from Ypsilanti. She has thoroughly believed that Lillie was to come into the money. Now, what *can* she do?”

“Go back to Ypsilanti,” put in Agnes, sharply.

“I wonder if her relatives will take her in again if she goes back?” said Ruth slowly.

“Ahem!” said Mr. Howbridge, clearing his throat. “I have been in correspondence with a Mr. Noah Presley, her brother-in-law. He says he was opposed to her coming east without knowing more of the situation here and her own rights. Now he says she and Lillie may come back, if——wait! I will read you exactly what he says,” and Mr. Howbridge drew forth the letter in question. He cleared his throat again and read:

“‘Tell Emily she can come back here if she wants, providing she’ll mind her own business and keep that dratted young one of hers from turning the house upside down. I can’t pay her fare to Ypsilanti, but I won’t refuse her a home.’”

“You can easily see what *he* thinks of them,” declared Agnes, grimly.

“Do hush, dear,” begged Ruth. “Then you will pay their fare back for them, will you not, Mr. Howbridge?” pursued Ruth. “And we shall see that they are comfortably clothed. I do not think they have *many* frocks.”

“You are really a very remarkable girl, Miss Kenway,” said Mr. Howbridge again. That was the settlement of the Trebles’ affairs. Two weeks later the Corner House girls saw the Ypsilanti lady and her troublesome little girl off on the train for the west.

At this particular Monday morning conference, the lawyer made it clear to the Kenway girls that, now the will had been found, the matters of the estate would all be straightened out. Unless they objected, he would be appointed guardian as well as administrator of the estate. There was plenty of cash in the bank, and they were warranted in living upon a somewhat better scale than they had been living since coming to the old Corner House.

Besides, Ruth, as well as the other girls, was to go to school in the autumn, and she looked forward to this change with delight. What she and her sisters did at school, the new friends they made, and how they bound old friends to them with closer ties, will be set forth in another volume, to be called “The Corner House Girls at School.”

A great many things happened to them before schooldays came around. As Tess declared:

“I never did see such a busy time in this family—did you, Dot? Seems to me we don’t have time to turn around, before something new happens!”

“Well, I’m glad things happen,” quoth Dot, gravely. “Suppose nothing ever *did* happen to us? We just might as well be asleep all the time.”

First of all, with the mystery of Uncle Peter’s will cleared away, and the status of Mrs. Treble and Lillie decided, Ruth went at the mystery which had frightened them so in the garret. Even Agnes became brave enough on that particular Monday to go “ghost hunting.”

They clambered to the garret and examined the window at which they thought they had seen the flapping, jumping figure in the storm. There was positively nothing hanging near the window to suggest such a spectral form as the girls had seen from the parade ground.

“And this is the window,” said Ruth, thoughtfully. “To the right of the chimney——Oh! goodness me, what a foolish mistake!”

“What’s the matter now?” asked the nervous Agnes, who did not dare approach very near the window.

“Why, it wasn’t this window at all,” Ruth said. “Don’t you see? It was to the right of the chimney *from the outside*! So it is on the left of the chimney up here. It is the other window.”

She marched around the big bulge of the chimney. Agnes held to her sleeve.

“I don’t care,” she said, faintly. “It was a ghost just the same——”

There was another window just like the one they had formerly looked at. Only, above the window frame was a narrow shelf on which lay a big, torn, home-made kite—the cloth it was covered with yellowed with age, and the string still fastened to it. In cleaning the garret, this kite had been so high up that none of them had lifted it down. Indeed, the string was fastened to a nail driven into a rafter, above.

Even now there was a draught of air sucking in around the loose window frame, and the kite rustled and wabbled on its perch. Ruth ran forward and knocked it off the shelf.

“Oh, oh!” shrieked Agnes.

The kite dangled and jumped right before the window in such a manner that it must have looked positively weird from the outside. It was more than half as tall as a man and its crazy motions might well be taken for a human figure, from a distance.

Suddenly the boisterous wind seized it again and jerked it back to its perch on the shelf. There it lay quivering, until the next gust of wind should make it perform its ghostly dance before the garret casement.

“Oh, isn’t that great!” gasped Agnes. “And it must have been there for years and years—ever since Uncle Peter was a

boy, perhaps. Now! what do you suppose Eva Larry will say?”

“And other people who have been afraid to come to the old Corner House?” laughed Ruth. “Oh, I know! we’ll give a ghost party up here in the garret.”

“Ruth!” screamed Agnes in delight. “That will be just scrumptious!”

“We shall celebrate the laying of the ghost. No! don’t touch it, Agnes. We’ll show the girls when they come just what made all the trouble.”

This the Corner House girls did. They invited every girl they had become acquainted with in Milton—little and big. Even Alfredia Blossom came and helped Uncle Rufus and Petunia Blossom wait upon the table.

For the first time in years, the old Corner House resounded to the laughter and conversation of a great company. There was music, too, and Ruth opened the parlors for the first time. They all danced in those big rooms.

Mr. Howbridge proved to be a very nice guardian indeed. He allowed Ruth to do pretty much everything she wanted. But, then, Ruth Kenway was not a girl to desire anything that was not good and sensible.

“It’s dreadfully nice to feel *settled*,” said Tess to Dot and Maria Maroni, and Margaret and Holly Pease, and the three Creamer girls, as they all crowded into the summer house the afternoon of the ghost laying party.

“Now we *know* we’re going to stay here, so we can make plans for the future,” pursued Tess.

“Yes,” observed Dot. “I’m going right to work to make my Alice-doll a new dress. She hasn’t had anything fit to wear since that awful time she was buried alive.”

“Buried alive!” shrieked Mabel Creamer. “How was *that*?”

“Yes. And they buried her with some dried apples,” sighed Dot. “She’s never been the same since. You see, her eyes are bad. I ought to take her to an eye and ear infernery, I s’pose; but maybe even the doctors there couldn’t help her.”

“I don’t think it’s *infernery*, Dot,” said Tess, slowly. “That doesn’t sound just right. It sounds more like a conservatory than a hospital.”

“Well, *hospital*, then!” exclaimed Dot. “And poor Alice! I don’t suppose she ever *will* get the color back into her cheeks.”

“Shouldn’t think she would, if she’s been buried alive,” said Mabel, blankly.

The two youngest Kenways had been very glad to see Lillie Treble go away, but this was almost the only comment they ever made upon that angel-faced child, before company. Tess and Dot *were* polite!

That was a lovely day, and the Corner House girls all enjoyed the party immensely. Good Mrs. McCall was delighted, too. She had come to love Ruth and Agnes and Tess and Dot, almost as though they were her own. Ruth had already engaged a strong girl to help about the kitchen work, and the widow had a much easier time at the old Corner House than she had at first had.

Aunt Sarah appeared at the party, when the dancing began, in a new cap and with her knitting. She had subsided into her old self again, immediately after her discovery of Uncle Peter’s secret panel in the old secretary in the garret. She talked no more than had been her wont, and her knitting needles clicked quite as sharply. Perhaps, however, she took a more kindly interest in the affairs of the Corner House girls.

She was not alone in that. All the neighbors, and the church people—indeed everybody in Milton who knew Ruth Kenway and her sisters at all—had a deep interest in the fortunes of the Corner House girls.

“They are a town institution,” said Mr. Howbridge. “There is no character sweeter and finer than that of Ruth Kenway. Her sisters, too, in their several ways, are equally charming.

“Ruth—Agnes—Tess—Dot! For an old bachelor like me, who has known no family—to secure the confidence and liking of such a quartette of young folk, is a privilege I fully appreciate. I am proud of them!”

THE END

---

2 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AT SCHOOL.
3 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS UNDER CANVAS.
4 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY.
5 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS' ODD FIND.
6 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A TOUR.
7 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS GROWING UP.
8 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SNOWBOUND.
9 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT.
10 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AMONG THE GYPSIES.
11 CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON PALM ISLAND.
12 THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SOLVE A MYSTERY.

BARSE & HOPKINS

New York, N. Y.—Newark, N. J.

THE POLLY PENDELTON SERIES

By DOROTHY WHITEHILL

Polly Pendleton is a resourceful, wide-awake American girl who goes to a boarding school on the Hudson River some miles above New York. By her pluck and resourcefulness, she soon makes a place for herself and this she holds right through the course. The account of boarding school life is faithful and pleasing and will attract every girl in her teens.

1 POLLY'S FIRST YEAR AT BOARDING SCHOOL
2 POLLY'S SUMMER VACATION
3 POLLY'S SENIOR YEAR AT BOARDING SCHOOL
4 POLLY SEES THE WORLD AT WAR
5 POLLY AND LOIS
6 POLLY AND BOB
7 POLLY'S REUNION

Cloth. Large 12mo. Illustrated.

BARSE & HOPKINS

Publishers

New York, N. Y.—Newark, N. J.

CHICKEN LITTLE JANE SERIES

By LILY MUNSELL RITCHIE

Chicken Little Jane is a Western prairie girl who lives a happy, outdoor life in a country where there is plenty of room to turn around. She is a wide-awake, resourceful girl who will instantly win her way into the hearts of other girls. And what good times she has!—with her pets, her friends, and her many interests. "Chicken Little" is the affectionate nickname given to her when she is very, very good, but when she misbehaves it is "Jane"—just Jane!

Adventures of Chicken Little Jane
Chicken Little Jane on the "Big John"
Chicken Little Jane Comes to Town

With numerous illustrations in pen and ink

By CHARLES D. HUBBARD

BARSE & HOPKINS

New York, N. Y.—Newark, N. J.

THE MARY JANE SERIES

By CLARA INGRAM JUDSON

Cloth, 12mo. Illustrated.

Mary Jane is the typical American little girl who bubbles over with fun and the good things in life. We meet her here on a visit to her grandfather's farm where she becomes acquainted with farm life and farm animals and thoroughly enjoys the experience. We next see her going to kindergarten and then on a visit to Florida, and then—but read the stories for

yourselves.

Exquisitely and charmingly written are these books which every little girl from five to nine years old will want from the first book to the last.

1 MARY JANE—HER BOOK
2 MARY JANE—HER VISIT
3 MARY JANE'S KINDERGARTEN
4 MARY JANE DOWN SOUTH
5 MARY JANE'S CITY HOME
6 MARY JANE IN NEW ENGLAND
7 MARY JANE'S COUNTRY HOME
8 MARY JANE AT SCHOOL
9 MARY JANE IN CANADA

BARSE & HOPKINS

Publishers

New York, N. Y.—Newark, N. J.

DOROTHY WHITEHILL SERIES

For Girls

Here is a sparkling new series of stories for girls—just what they will like, and ask for more of the same kind. It is all about twin sisters, who for the first few years in their lives grow up in ignorance of each other's existence. Then they are at last brought together and things begin to happen. Janet is an independent go-ahead sort of girl; while her sister Phyllis is—but meet the twins for yourself and be entertained.

6 Titles, Cloth, large 12mo.,

Covers in color.

1. JANET, A TWIN
2. PHYLLIS, A TWIN
3. THE TWINS IN THE WEST
4. THE TWINS IN THE SOUTH
5. THE TWINS' SUMMER VACATION
6. THE TWINS AND TOMMY JR.

BARSE & HOPKINS

PUBLISHERS

NEWARK, N. J.—NEW YORK, N. Y.

FAMOUS AMERICANS FOR YOUNG READERS

"Life Stories with the Charm of Fiction"

> "This new series is timely. As an urgent civic need, our schools should be vivified more by the spirit of the founders and builders of the Republic."
>
> WALTER E. RANGER, Commissioner of Education, Rhode Island.

> "I regard the series one of rare usefulness for young readers, and trust it will become a formidable rival for much of the fiction now in circulation among the young."
>
> JOHNSON BRIGHAM, State Librarian, Iowa.

Titles Ready

"GEORGE WASHINGTON" Joseph Walker
"JOHN PAUL JONES" Chelsea C. Fraser
"BENJAMIN FRANKLIN" Clara Tree Major
"DAVID CROCKETT" Jane Corby
"THOMAS JEFFERSON" Gene Stone
"ABRAHAM LINCOLN" J. Walker McSpadden
"ROBERT FULTON" Inez N. McFee
"THOMAS A. EDISON" Inez N. McFee
"HARRIET BEECHER STOWE" Ruth Brown MacArthur
"MARY LYON" H. Oxley Stengel

“THEODORE ROOSEVELT” J. Walker McSpadden

Illustrated. Size 5-1/8 × 7-5/8. Cloth.

OTHER VOLUMES IN PREPARATION

BARSE & HOPKINS

Publishers

New York, N. Y.—Newark, N. J.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ***

License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project

Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation’s EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state’s laws.

The Foundation’s business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation’s website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.