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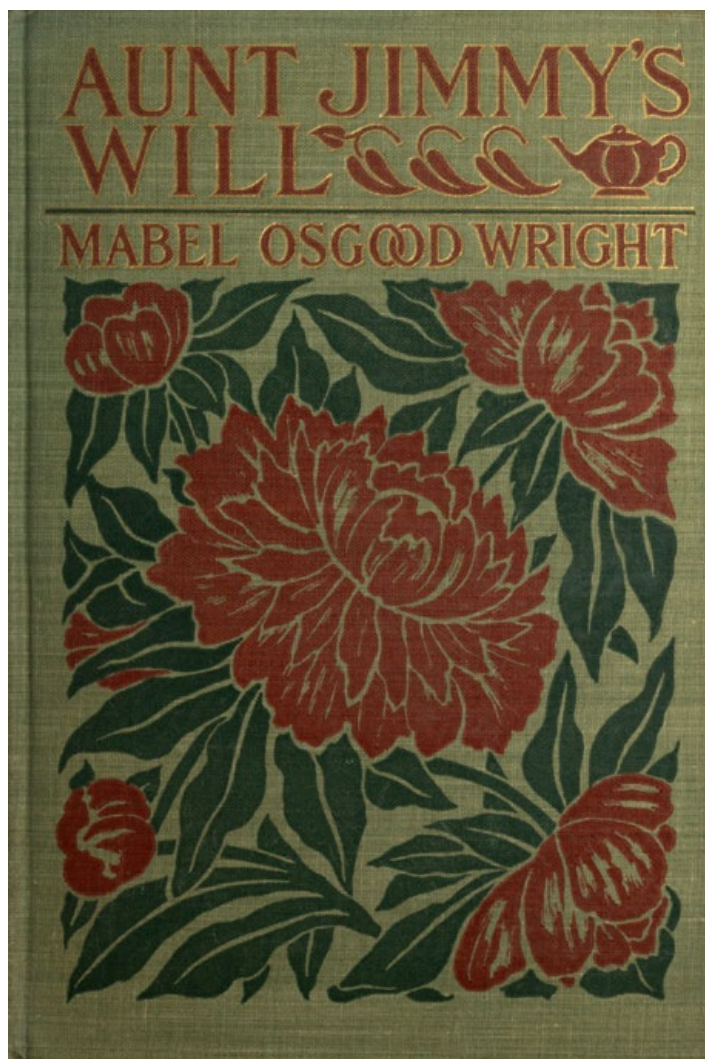
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AUNT JIMMY'S WILL ***



AUNT JIMMY'S WILL



"'Hem!' The lawyer cleared his throat."

(See p. 52.)

AUNT JIMMY'S WILL

BY

MABEL OSGOOD WRIGHT

AUTHOR OF "BIRDCRAFT," "WABENO THE MAGICIAN,"

ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

FLORENCE SCOVELL SHINN

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To my God-child

MARY ELIZABETH MILLER



*“Aim at the highest, and
never mind the money.”*

—L. M. ALCOTT.



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Aunt Jimmy’s Will

I

RED PINEYS

BIRD O’MORE crouched in a little black heap in the corner of the sofa that stood between the closed windows in the farmhouse sitting room. Her eyes, that looked straight before her, yet without seeing anything, were quite dry; but her feverish cheeks, that she pressed against the cool haircloth, and the twisting of her fingers in the folds of her gown, told of grief, as well as her black frock and the closed blinds.

Outside the house, in the road, half a dozen country teams were hitched to the rickety fence, while their owners roamed about the yard, talking in low voices, and occasionally wondering aloud “when the women folks would be ready to go home.”

But the women folks had no idea of going yet, and small wonder, for they had come from a funeral that had made poor Bird an orphan; they had much to discuss, and without them, also, she would be all alone at the farm that lay on a straggling cross-road a mile from neighbours, as if it, like its recent owners, had tried to hide from those who had known it in better days.

The little girl had been christened Bertha, after her grandmother, but as, from the time she could speak a word, she was always singing, her father had called her “Bird.” Yet this day the little bird in her throat was mute and only made a strange fluttering; so that the neighbours, talking in whispers as they drank the tea that a stout, rosy woman, who seemed to be in charge, was serving in the kitchen, said, “Poor child, if she’d only let go and cry it out natural, it would do her good; but that dry sobbing is enough to break a body’s heart.”

Then, as she gradually grew quiet, dulled by fatigue and the heat of the room, her head sliding down on her arm in heavy sleep, they drew sighs of relief and their voices arose in chat about the happenings of the last few days and the natural question as to what was to become of Bird.

“Hasn’t she got any folks either side?” asked a young woman who had but recently moved into Laurelville, and did not yet know the comings and goings and kith and kin of her neighbours.

“Only her father’s half-brother,” spoke up the rosy woman, Mrs. Lane by name, “and he lives way down in New York City. Joshua wrote him ten days back when Mr. More took sick; but he never answered, so two days ago he wrote again. Joshua says he guesses maybe they’ve moved, for folks are awful restless down in York, and shift around as often as every few years—says he reckons you have to if you’re anybody, cause there’s sudden fashions in buildings down there as well as in clothes, and they get made over frequent to keep in style, likewise the streets.

“Yes, I wouldn’t even have known his name if Mis’ More hadn’t told me about him before she died, two years back. You see,” turning to Mrs. Tilby, the newcomer, “she was Sarah Turner, born and raised over at the Milltown, and, being an only child, was give her own head a good deal. I must allow she was pretty, and had those big black eyes that you can’t guess what they’re seeing, same as Bird’s got. Her folks felt dreadful bad when she wouldn’t take up with any of the solid fellers who would have taken pride in the farm and mill business, but married young O’More that nobody knew a speck about, except that he claimed to be an artist, but folks didn’t buy his pictures, and I don’t wonder, for there’s some up attic now, and you have to stand way back to even see a shape to ’em, being not near as clear as those that come extry with the Sunday papers.

“No, Mis’ Slocum, I *don’t* take Sunday papers, on ’count of Joshua’s aunt’s husband being deacon, and not desirin’ to call trouble on the family; but if he wasn’t I would, for besides them pictures an’ readin’ an’ advertisements, that wonderful they’d raise curiosity in froze dough, there’s your money’s worth o’ paper for carpet linin’ or kindlin’ over and above.

“Where was I? Mis’ Slocum, you shouldn’t ‘a’ set me off the track, so’s I’m not giving Mis’ Tilby a clear idee of how it was.

“Ah, yes, I remember,—his wall pictures not sellin’, he got a job to paint posies and neat little views the size of your hand on the inside covers of sewin’-machine boxes and trays and worktables over in Northboro. It paid first-rate, I guess, for a spell, so after the old folks died, they sold out the farm and mill and moved into town.

“When Bird here was five years old or so, O’More had a knock-down, for they got some kind of a machine in the factory that could do pictures quicker than he, and at the same time the folks that had bought the place on a mortgage caved in, and, between havin’ no sense themselves and lawyers, most everything was ate up and mixed so’s Mis’ O’More lost the mill and all, and they

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moved out here.

"Mis' More—folks round here never could swaller the O', it being the sign, as it were, of a furrin race and religion—just drew in like a turtle in a shell, losin' hope altogether, and never went any place. And as for Terence,—that was him, Bird always callin' him 'Terry' like he was her brother,—I suppose he was always what bustlin' folks like us would call slack; but after he came here, he seemed to grow happy in spite of the fact that only one shop, the work-box and the picture-frame one, gave him jobs. He painted out his flowers as careful, no two pictures alike, and when I said, 'Why don't you do one and copy it—it would be less trouble,' he looked up sort of reproachful and said, 'It makes me happy to do good work, Mrs. Lane; a machine can do the other kind.'

"Mis' More fretted herself to death, dumblike, same as snow disappears, and it's two years now that Bird and her father have made out to get along alone. Once in a time old Dinah Lucky would come up and wash or scrub a day, and he and Bird always was together, and he learned her to be what I call a real lady, and never hurt anybody's feelin's, to say poetry and write a fine hand, and draw out flowers so you'd know 'em right off. The s'lectmen went after him onct 'cause he'd never sent the girl to school, but when they found she knew more'n the grammar grade, they kept their hands off from her; and as for speakin',—since she talked plain, she's spoke nicer, and chose her words better'n anybody but story-books and the parson, which come natural, her mother bein' well learned and her father havin' a tone of voice not belonging in these parts. Never a cross word did he speak or a complaint, so I guess it was true he was born a gentleman on one side, as poor Sarah always claimed, and it stuck to him all through, too, for the day he died he worried for troublin' me to draw him a cool drink, saying, 'The well-sweep was out of repair,' which it was, Mis' Slocum, *awful*, 'and too heavy for a woman to handle,' as if I wasn't always stronger than two of him. But then I never was, and never will be, his kind of a lady, for there's folks whose feelin's I'm just achin' to hurt if I knew a sure way. And now to think of it, Bird left at only thirteen with no own folks and little better'n nothing."

"Less than nothin', *I* should say," put in Mrs. Slocum, setting her cup in its saucer with an unnecessary clash, "for what's here won't pay Mr. Slocum his back rent on the place and the fence rails of the south lot that they've seemingly used for firin'. *I* should say that the clothes on the girl's back didn't fairly belong to her, mournin' and all."

"If she is only a little turned thirteen from what you say she has schoolin' enough to pass for fourteen and get work in the factory. I'll keep her if she'll help me evenings and she gets enough to pay full board,—growin' girls eats hearty," and Mrs. Slocum settled back in her chair, folding her arms as if she expected Mrs. Lane to be speechless at her generosity.

Speechless she was for a few moments, but for a different cause—a struggle between prudence and a quick but just temper—then she said very slowly and distinctly: "Mis' Slocum, the back rent is not for me to deny you, but the fence rails is and the few clothes the poor lamb's wearin' also. There hasn't been any fence to that south lot since the summer before my Sammy was born and I was there berryin' and noticed the rails was rotted and fell, and that's fifteen years! As to clothes, they was give her outside of the family, which was me, ma'am, made out of those that belonged to my Janey and for her sake, and besides which a minor child isn't liable for her father's debts, 'it bein' the law,' as Joshua says, and he knows."

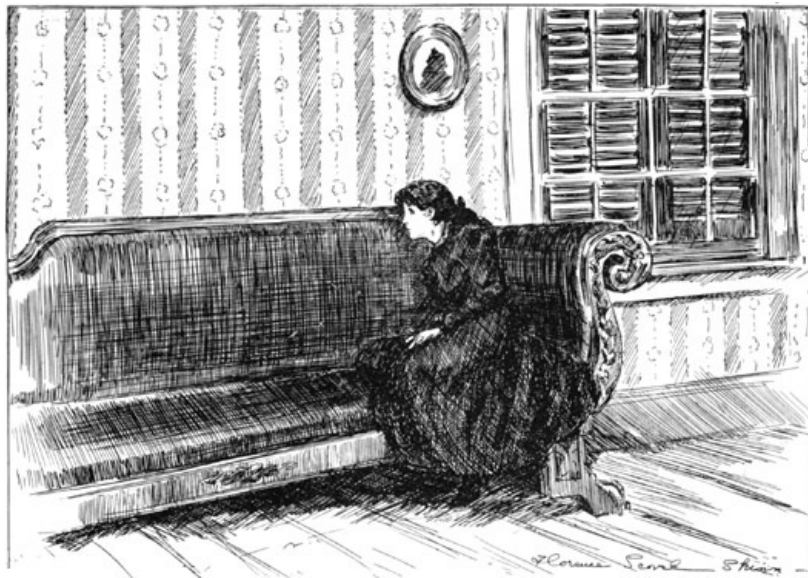
"I wouldn't have mentioned this in public, except some folks needs to have witnesses around before they can take in things, Mis' Jedge o' Probate Ricker bein' here makin' it quite suitable for me to testify."

"As for who'll take her, there's those that'll ask no board, but Joshua says 'no one's got a right until the uncle either turns up or else doesn't,' which I'd much prefer. And there'll be no talk of factory and passin' her for above her age, Mis' Slocum, I bein' the niece-in-law to a deacon, as I've said before, should feel called upon to testify and give the truth a full airing."

Whatever action Mrs. Slocum would have taken, it was sidetracked by the minister's wife, who, with a sharp warning cough and a hurried "s'h'ush, she's awake," turned the attention toward the darkened room again.

Bird rubbed her eyes drowsily, then started up murmuring, "Yes, Terry, I'm coming, I didn't mean to fall asleep," as if she fancied herself called, stumbled toward the door, saw the kitchen full of people, while the bright light and lilac perfume of the May afternoon came through the open door. Then she remembered.

"Here, let me wash your face and freshen you up a bit," said Mrs. Lane, whisking out a clean handkerchief and dipping it in the water bucket, while at the same time she put her arm around Bird to cut off her retreat. "Now, that is better. Just a sip of tea, dearie, and a bite, and then go out and get a mouthful of air, while I open up the windows, for it's sizzling in here if it does lack two days yet of almanac summer."



"Bird crouched in a black heap."

The child did as she was told, gave her friend one grateful look, and slipped out the door without speaking, much to the relief of the others, the minister's wife nodding caution to Mrs. Tilby who said: "Sakes alive! she scart me silly, gropin' in that way. I do wonder how much she heard."

Meanwhile as Bird disappeared around the house a tall boy, carrying a big bunch of red peonies, came up the track in the grass that served as a path. It was Sammy, or Lammy Lane, as he was usually called, clad in his best clothes and red with running, having only come to a full stop as he reached the kitchen door, where he stood looking anxiously in, the flowers clutched nervously in both hands.

"Lammy Lane, where've you bin, to go and miss the funeral and all, when I started you out close after breakfast?" asked his mother, fiercely, yet with an air of relief.

"Catchin' fish in the brook with his eyes, I reckon," said Mrs. Slocum, with a glittering smile, which was very trying to Mrs. Lane, for Lammy, the youngest of her three sons, was not esteemed over clever, in fact a sort of village Johnny-Look-in-the-Air, always going to do something that he never did, and lacking in courage to boot. In fact the twisting of the name of Sammy into Lammy was really a slur upon his lack of sand and the fighting spirit natural to the average boy. [10]

It is perfectly true that Lammy at this time was not a beauty with his tousled reddish hair, freckles, and lean colt's legs, but no one who was a judge of faces could look in his straightforward gray eyes and at the firm line of his chin without feeling that here was the makings of a man, if people did not meddle with the plan God had for his work.

Lammy's eyes roved about, and, not seeing the object he wanted, answered his mother slowly, as if it was hard to remember exactly where he had been.

"I've been at Aunt Jimmy's most all day until now," he answered. "When I took the butter down after breakfast, she wanted me to help her fix up cause she didn't feel smart, 'n' then there was the chickens to feed, and Jake he didn't go yesterday to spread the grass under the strawberries, and she said if it rained, they'd spoil, so I did that; 'n' then I ate dinner, 'n' dressed up again and started. Then I remembered I told Bird I'd cut her some o' Aunt Jimmy's red pineys for her to take along up there," nodding his head backward toward the hillside graveyard. [11]

"Aunt Jimmy's awful particular about those red pineys, and she wouldn't let me cut 'em. She came out in the yard to do it herself, but it took her a long while, and when she'd got them tied up, she said, 'Best go to the house now for they'll be back, and tell your ma to come over to-night, for somehow I feel all strange and worked up as if I was going to have a spell,' and that's why I'm late, and where's Bird?" he ended abruptly.

"Lammy Lane, do you mean that aunt is threatened with a spell, and you've took all this time to tell me?" said Mrs. Lane, hardly believing her ears.

"Neighbours, I'll have to close up here, Joshua bein' in charge, as it were, as Mis' Jedge o' Probate Ricker understands, until a 'ministrator's fixed on, but we can meet to-morrow forenoon to wash up and discuss the situation. Goodness me, I hope Aunt Jimmy's no more'n overtired!"

"'Twouldn't be surprisin' if you was resigned to the worst, seein' your expectations through being the favourite nephew's wife," said Mrs. Slocum, slyly.

"Expectations, fiddlesticks!" snorted Mrs. Lane, "you know perfectly well, Mis' Slocum, that the Lord and I are working together as hard as we can to give Aunt Jimmy every breath of life that's coming to her, and seein' that she enjoys it too, her ownin' the best southslope fruit garden between Milltown and Northboro having nothing to do with it. [12]

"Lammy, do you go round, and I guess you'll find Bird back of the shed, and you can take her a walk to fetch the posies up yonder, and then bring her down to our house for supper; and if I don't get back first, the butt'ry key is in the kitchen clock, and you and pa can set out a full table.

"Young company's best for the young in sorrow," she added to the group as Lammy shot off.

"Yes, Mis' Slocum, those spoons is real silver, but biting 'em 'll injure them new teeth o' yourn, and not profit you anything, for they're *my* spoons I fetched up for the funeral, minding how well the Turners always set out things at such times in the old days."

With this parting shot Mrs. Lane shooed the women out and locked the door, called Joshua from the group of men who were examining a broken-down grindstone for lack of better occupation, climbed into the old buggy, and disappeared in a cloud of dust, the others following until they scattered at the four corners.

* * * * *

As Mrs. Lane had said, Bird was behind the shed. She was sitting on an old log, her face between her hands, as she looked across the fresh green grass to where the ragged spiræas and purple and white lilacs waved against the sky. Leaning against her knees was a queer little rough-haired, brown terrier with unkempt, lopping ears, his keen eyes intent on her face as if he knew that she was in trouble, and only waited for some signal that he might understand to go to her aid, while he vainly licked her hands to attract her attention.

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As Lammy came around the corner suddenly, at first the dog gave a growl, and then bounding toward the boy fairly leaped into his arms in joy, for Twinkle, named for his keen twitching eyes, had once been Lammy's best-beloved pup, that he had given to Bird for a companion.

"Hello, Twinkle, where've you been these days?" said the boy, holding the flowers at arm's-length with one hand, while he tucked the little dog between his shoulder and neck with the other. "Seems to me you've got pretty thin wherever you've tramped to."



Bird, Lammy, and Twinkle.

"He hasn't been away," answered Bird, looking up; "he was hiding all the time in Terry's—I mean father's room, and to-day, after they took *him* away, he knew it wasn't any use waiting any longer, and he came out, and Lammy, you—know—he's—all—I've—got—now," and, burying her face in the terrier's ragged coat, she broke into a perfect storm of crying.

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Lammy felt like crying, too, and in fact a tear rolled so far down on his cheek that he had to struggle hard to lick it up, for Bird was his dear friend, the only girl in the village who had never laughed at him or called him "Nose-in-the-Air," or "Look-up-Lammy," and seemed to understand the way in which he saw things. At first he looked around helplessly, and then remembering that his mother had gone, and that he must get Bird down to his home before supper-time, he blurted out: "Say, don't you reckon Twinkle's pretty hungry by this? I guess we'd better get him some feed down to my house, and you can leave these red pineys over yonder as we go along if you like."

Lammy could not have done better, for Bird sprang up instantly, all the pity aroused for the dog, and, turning toward the house, said: "How selfish of me; we'll go in and get him something right away. Do you think the people have gone yet? 'They mean kindly,' Terry used to say. I must never forget that, but they talked so much I couldn't seem to bear it."

"Yes, they've gone; mother wouldn't leave them behind 'cause of Mis' Slocum," and he began to tell her about his Aunt Jimmy's ill turn and of his delay in getting back with the flowers.

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Bird listened quietly, and as they stood before the door of the silent, empty house, a strange look crossed the girl's face that frightened poor gentle Lammy, as she gazed straight before her and said: "Now I know that I was not asleep this afternoon, only dull and faint, and that what I

thought was a dream was partly true. Terry *did* owe rent to Mrs. Slocum, and that was what he tried to tell me and couldn't when he said there was only a little bit of money in the Centre bank to pay for things, so that I must be sure and keep his paint-box and the pictures in the big portfolio. The Slocums might try to take them. That's why your mother made the people go and locked the door. Oh, Lammy, I haven't any home or anything of my very own but Twinkle, but I could work and learn to paint. Terry said I could and if everything gave out, I can open the keepsake bag. See, I've got it now," and Bird pulled out a small, flat, leather case, strongly sewed together, that hung close around her neck on a thin gold chain.

"Do you know what's in it?" asked Lammy, fingering it curiously.

"No, but I think it's a piece of gold money; for it's round, though one side is thicker than the other. Mother wore it, and then father put it about my neck for me to keep, and he said his mother gave it to him when he came away from home long ago."

As Bird stood looking at the house, the afternoon shadows began to fall and a change came over her. That morning the thought of leaving the place frightened her, but now the thing she most wanted was to get away. "Lammy," she cried presently, "we must get those pictures and the paint-box *now*; to-morrow the people may come back."

"But mother's taken the key."

"That doesn't matter, the cellar-door flap doesn't fasten—it never has since I can remember—we can go in that way," and then Lammy, quaking mightily, though he didn't know why, followed Bird into the house.

Love lights up many a dark, shabby room, and Bird had never been lonely with her father for a companion, and in spite of his own shiftlessness and poverty he had taught her much that she never would forget; but now love had gone, and as she crept down the rickety stairs hugging the box, Lammy stumbling after with the portfolio, her only desire was to go somewhere, anywhere to get away, lingering only a moment in the kitchen to collect some scraps of food for the dog. When they reached the porch, they stopped to fasten the things together with some twine from Lammy's pocket. The portfolio was full of flower pictures and some designs such as wall-papers are made from. Bird turned them over lovingly, explaining as she did so that a man in New York had written to Terry that if he could do these well, he could earn money, and that he was only waiting for spring flowers to begin. The letter was still in the portfolio.

"See," she said, "here is one of red peonies all ready to put the last color in, and father was only waiting for them to bloom, but it is too late now, so we will take them to him," and she took the bouquet from Lammy, gently kissing each of the glowing flowers; and then they went out of the yard in silence, Twinkle first, then Lammy with the bundle, while Bird hesitated a moment; lifting the sagging gate she dragged it to, fastened it to the post with the old barrel hoop that had replaced the latch, and with one parting look shook the tears from her long lashes and walked straight down the road. At the gate of the little graveyard Lammy put down the bundle, and they went in together.

"See, I've made it look nice until dad can turf it over," said Lammy, "and put a little Christmas tree for a head-mark," and sure enough the mound that a few hours before was a heap of rough gravel was green with young bayberry twigs and spruce branches, for on the upper side of the hill had once been a great nursery of evergreens, the seed had scattered, and the fragrant little Christmas trees had run all down the hill and clustered in groups around the fence posts.

Kneeling very carefully, Bird arranged the crimson peonies. The country folk thought only white flowers proper for such a place, but Bird loved colour and Lammy's gift cheered her more than any words.

"Janey's close by here and grandma," said Lammy, presently, "so it won't be a bit lonesome for your father, and I was hoping to-day that he'd remember to tell Janey that you're going to be my sister now and come down and live at our house, for she'll be glad that mother and I won't be so lonesome as we've been at our home since she went to heaven. 'Cause you will stop with us, won't you?" he added earnestly as he saw Bird hesitate. "Mother's going to fix it just as soon as she gets word from your uncle. She didn't want to write, only dad said she'd ought to because of the law or something."

"I'll always love you, Lammy," said Bird, slowly, the tears gathering again, "and I never can like any place so much as this, and I'll never forget to-day and the red peonies and your covering up the ugly stones, but I've got to earn my living and I can't be a drag on anybody. I thought, you know, if there was enough left to get to a city,—New York, perhaps,—I might learn to paint quicker, and perhaps the man that wanted Terry to make pictures for wall-paper might tell me how," and then the poor child, tired and overcome with the long strain and the new loneliness, could keep up no longer, and, throwing her arms about Lammy's neck, sobbed, "Oh, take me somewhere out of sight, for I feel as if I was all falling—way down a—deep—well."

Poor little Bird! All that she knew of the great city was from the pictures in the papers and an occasional magazine, and it seemed to her so big and gay and busy that there must be some place in it for her, and now that night was coming, the country felt so empty and lonely to the little girl, faint from weariness, and with the door of all the home she had known closed upon her. For no one but Lammy had had time to really comfort her, and in her unhappiness God seemed to have taken her parents away and then hidden Himself. If only Aunt Jimmy had not had the spell just then and she could have laid her head on Mrs. Lane's motherly bosom, how different it might all have been. A carriage passed as they turned into the highway, and the clanking of the harness made Bird lift her head from Lammy's shoulder where she had hidden it, and looking up she met the eyes of a young girl who was sitting alone on the back seat of the handsome victoria. She was perhaps sixteen, or a little over,—the braids of pale golden hair were fastened up loosely behind,—and she was beautifully dressed; but it was not the clothes but her sweet face and wistful big gray eyes that made Bird look a second time, and then the carriage had passed by.

"How happy she must be," thought Bird.

"I'd rather walk than ride, and wear stubby shoes, or go barefoot, if I only had a brother so that I need not go alone," was what the other girl thought.

"That's Miss Marion Clarke that lives in the big stone house on the hill before you come to Northboro," quoth Lammy. "There's only one of her, and she can have everything she wants." Then he straightway forgot her. Bird did not, however, for there was something in the gray eyes that would not let themselves be forgotten.

By the time they reached the Lane farmhouse Bird was quiet again, though her eyes drooped with sleep, and Lammy was telling eagerly how next autumn they could perhaps go over to Northboro to school, for drawing was taught there, and, he confided to Bird what had never before taken the form of words, that he too longed to learn to draw, not flowers, but machinery and engines, such as pulled the trains over at the Centre. [21]

As they came in sight of the house Lammy noticed that there was a strange team at the gate, a buggy from the livery-stable at the Centre, for quiet Lammy kept his eyes open, and knew almost every horse in the county. On the stoop a short, thick-set man, with a fat, clean-shaven face, and clad in smart black clothes, stood talking to Lammy's father.

Both men glanced up the road from time to time, and then Lammy noticed that the stranger held his watch in his hand, and he kept fidgeting and looking at it as if in a great hurry.

As the children entered the gate they heard Mr. Lane say, "Here she is now, but you can't catch that evenin' train from the Centre; you'll have to put over here until morning."

Bird gave a gasp and instinctively clutched Lammy's hand. Could this be some one from her uncle? Of course it was not he himself, for her father had been youngish, tall and slight, with fair hair, small feet and hands, while this man was all of fifty, and had a rough and common look in spite of his clothes that did not match his heavy boots and clumsy grimy hands. [22]

For a moment Bird forgot the story of her father's boyhood that he had so often told her, forgot that fifteen years and a different mother separated him from his half-brothers, and when Mr. Lane called her, as she tried to slip in at the side door after Lammy, saying, "Come here, Bird, this is your Uncle John O'More come from New York," she could only keep from falling by an effort, and stood still, nervously twisting her hands in the skirt of her black frock without being able to speak a word, while Twinkle seated himself at her feet looking anxiously, first at the stranger, then at Mr. Lane, with his head cocked on one side.

II

 [23]

HER UNCLE JOHN

"Got a start? Didn't expect to see me here, did you? else maybe you never knew you had an Uncle John," said the stranger, by way of greeting, taking Bird roughly, but not unkindly, by the shoulders and looking her full in the face. Then, noticing how pale she was and that her eyes were red with crying, he let her go with a pat of his heavy hand that shook her through and through, saying, half to her and half to Mr. Lane, "Go along in now and get your supper. You look done up, and I wouldn't object to a bite myself since I've got to hang around over night; been chasing round after you since morning, and those sandwiches I got at that tumble-down ranch at what they call the Centre were made up of last year's mule-heel. They ain't gone further'n here yet," he added, striking his chest that was covered by a showy scarf, emphatically.

Bird began to breathe more freely to know he was going away in the morning. Her father had told her in one of the long sleepless nights of his illness about his two half-brothers, one in Australia, as far as he knew, and the other in New York. Their mother had been a strong, black-eyed, south-country lass, but his mother, the wife of his father's later years, was a gentle, fair-haired, English girl, the governess in the family to which his father was steward. At her death when he was a lad of about fifteen, family differences arose, and he had gone to his mother's people until he finally came to America with this brother John. [24]

John was sturdy and coarse-grained; Terence delicate and sensitive. They soon parted, and in the years between the artist had written occasionally to his brother, but kept him in ignorance of his poverty. Yet, in spite of knowing it all, Bird was bitterly disappointed in her uncle. She built hopes about him, for did he not live in New York, and there were schools where painting was taught in that magical city, also the man lived there who wanted the wall-papers. Ah, if her uncle had only been different, he might have asked her to visit him or perhaps even have known the wall-paper man himself.

But this uncle seemed an impossibility and fairly repelled her, so that to get out of his sight was all she desired. Presently she went into the house, and, after carefully dusting her plain, little, black straw hat and laying it on the sofa in the best room, she covered her new dress with Mrs. Lane's gingham apron that hung on its usual peg and fell to work at helping Lammy with the supper. [25]

Now Bird was a clever little housewife while Lammy was very clumsy at the work, so that in a few minutes they were both absorbed and chatting quite cheerfully, never dreaming of the conversation that was going on in the north porch. Only the white-curtained windows of the best room could hear it, and they were shut tight.

"Now, Mr. Lane, since the youngster's gone in, I guess we might as well get right down to business. I've shown you my papers and proofs, and there's no special use rubbing it into her that her father was a dead failure clear from the start, and that the sticks of furniture he left and the few dollars banked or coming from his work 'll only square up his accounts and leave the kid on the world, so to speak. I own I'm clean flabbergasted myself, for I thought he was a man of some property through his wife, for when he wrote, his letters were chuck full of high ideas for the girl here."

Joshua Lane fidgeted miserably on the edge of his chair, and if ever a man longed for the presence and ready tongue of his wife, it was he.

"I suppose that's one way o' lookin' at it," he assented after a while, "but mebbe in some way he didn't flat out so much as it looks. He never gave an ill word to any one, and Bird here's as smart and talkable and writes a fist as good as the seminary principal over to Northboro, all through his teachin', so no wonder she set a store by him. As to leavin' the child on the world, she'll never feel the hurtin' edge of it while mother and Joshua Lane's got roof and bite. I told O'More so, and I reckon it eased him considerable."

"Smart, is she?" echoed the other; "that's a mercy. Girls have to get a move on them nowadays in the city, and if they can't start in at type-writing or something when they're sixteen or so, they get shoved out of the race as leftovers by a new lot before they've earned their ten a week. I've got a good job now, but I've had to hustle for it and keep a lively step, too. That's why it goes hard to lose two days' time on this business. I was mighty afraid when I saw what a forsaken hole this was that the girl might be green as the grass, and n. g. altogether. No, I didn't mean any offence," he said, as he noticed Joshua's face flush at his reference to the pretty hillside village, "but I've never had a use for the country. Give me streets with a push of people and a lively noise and trolleys going by at night to remind you yer alive, if you don't sleep straight through."

"Of course, knowing nothing of the circumstances before I left, I couldn't quite fix a plan,—might have had to wait around and see to that mill property if it hadn't vamoosed, but as it is, I don't see why Bird shouldn't go right back with me to-morrow morning. I've got three lively boys besides a poor little crippled feller,—them and the city sights 'll cheer her up. It's different from what I thought to find, and I don't owe Terry any favours of purse or tongue, but I've no girls, and blood's thicker 'n water even though the English streak is heatin' to an all-through Irishman,—but let that go. I'll give her some schooling until she's fit age to choose her trade, or if she's tasty looking, get in some good shop, and she can ease her way along meantime in minding little Billy or helping the woman out. For I'd have you know that though I've a good job, and there's always meat in the pot, we're plain people of no pretence. I've money in a land company, though, that'll soon give us our own home and not so far out either but what a gun would shoot into the Bowery."

John O'More's speech poured out so rapidly that it almost stunned Joshua Lane. When he pulled himself together, he gasped: "Did you say that you calkerlate to take Bird away from us and to-morrow at that? I'll have to go down to Aunt Jimmy's, I reckon, and call mother to onct," but as he started from his chair "mother" appeared, coming up the road in the buggy clucking vigorously to the old gray horse, excitement written in every line of her homely, lovable face.

As she pulled up the horse at the gate, an entirely unnecessary labour as for the past ten years he had never willingly gone past it, Joshua, wearing a white, scared look upon his usually placid face, greeted her with: "Sakes alive, Laretta Ann, I'm wonderful put out; it never rains but it pours; an' 's if there wasn't enough trouble for one day, Bird's uncle, John O'More, has turned up. He's a rough, drivin', quick-tongued sort o' chap, like the travellin' man that sold us the horse-rake that had fits of balking and tearin' up the medder, and when I complained, he said, says he, 'Why, certainly, I forgot it had the plough combination,—I had oughter asked you an extry five on it.'"

"Nonsense, Joshua Lane, nobody's going to carry Bird off under our very noses, uncle or no uncle; I'll soon settle that! But talking of pourin' rain,—it's certainly let drive on us this day, for your Aunt Jimmy's had a stroke; and though she can't move she can speak her mind still, and isn't for lettin' folks in or havin' things done for her as she ought. I've left Dinah Lucky with her, and I've stopped at Doctor Jedd's and told him to hurry down, but the time has come when you've just got to assert yourself willy-nilly. It's you, not me, as is her eldest nephew and kin, and while I'm more'n willing to do the work, you've got to show some spunk. Now jist you git into a biled shirt and your good coat and go down and stand off the neighbours that, now she can't stir, 'll all be wrigglin' and slippin' through that door like eels in the mill sluice when the gate's up. I'll soon settle that O'More."

Joshua, much relieved, obediently went into the house, while Mrs. Lane, after looking into the kitchen to be sure that supper was progressing, smoothed her Sunday dress that she had donned that morning for the funeral, opened the windows of the best room to impress her visitor with its green carpet and cabinet organ, and asked John O'More to come in.

"Thanks, Mrs. Lane I take it, but I guess I'll stay out here,—had enough of shut-up places in that train to-day, besides some ladies object to smoke in the house."

Before she could speak a word or even notice the long cigar that was sticking out of his mouth in the direction of his left eye, he had plunged into the subject at the exact point where it had been dropped. "Now as to Bird, Mrs. Lane; your husband and I have tongue-threshed things out, and he can repeat the same to you. I know just how things stand, so nuff said about what's past. I travel in the west and Canada for a steady house, and I'm away a good deal; now Bird can be company for my wife as my kids are all boys. I'll give her schoolin', a trade, and a shove along on the road in a couple of years. I wouldn't do less for any kin of my own, and I kind o' take to her."

"But we don't want you to take her, and I reckon she don't either, for—" put in Mrs. Lane, almost bursting with suppressed speech.

"Excuse me, one moment more, madam," he continued, removing his cigar and speaking rather more slowly, "I judge that you object to her going to-morrow; now I can't stop around here, and it's an expensive trip. Seein' the city 'll be a change, and she'll soon settle down all right."

"But we don't want her to go at all," Mrs. Lane almost shrieked; "we want her to live with us!"

"As what, for instance?" queried O'More, growing more Irish in his speech, "a kind of a charity help, or had you intentions of adopting her by the law? If so, and she wishes, I'll stand in the way of nothing but a change of her name, to which I'd object."

Mrs. Lane was struck dumb. She had no idea of making a servant of Bird, but on the other hand she knew that legal adoption would mean to give Bird a like share with her own boys, and as what little they had, or might expect, came from her husband's people, this she could not promise at once.

"I meant—to treat her just like my little girl that died—but"—poor Mrs. Lane got more and more mixed up—"I haven't asked Joshua about the adoptin' business—it's so lately happened, we'd not got that far, you see."

"Yes, mum, I see," said the fat man, drawing his lips together shrewdly, "yourself has a warm heart, but others, yer own boys likely, may give it a chill some day, and then where's Bird? No, mum, the girl 'll have an easier berth with her own, I fancy, and not have to bend her back drawin' and fetchin' water, either,—we've it set quite handy."

This was said with withering sarcasm for, unfortunately, at that moment, Bird could be seen lugging in a heavy water bucket from the well, something she had been warned not to do, and yet did unthinkingly, for to-day she walked as in a dream.

Mrs. Lane saw that in reality she was helpless, unless she appealed to Bird herself, and to rouse the child's sensitive spirit she knew would be not only foolish but wicked, so for once Lauretta Ann Lane sat silent and with bowed head, only saying with a choking voice, "I will tell her after—supper—and you'll let—us write—to her, I suppose, and have her—back to visit if she gets piney for Lammy,—they've been like twin brother and sister ever since Janey died."

"I will that, ma'am, and I'll say more; if within the year she don't content herself and settle down and grieves for yer, and yer see it clear in that time to adopt her fair and square, and guarantee to do by her as I will,—you'll get the chance."

O'More stretched his legs, stiff with sitting, and jerked his half-burned cigar into the bushes, while at the same moment Oliver and Nellis, Lammy's big brothers who worked in Milltown, rode up on their wheels and the bell rang for supper.

* * * * *

No one but Bird ever knew what Mrs. Lane said to her that night, during the sad hours that she held the child in her arms in the great rocking-chair that had soothed to sleep three generations of Lane babies. Perhaps it soothed poor Bird, too, only she did not know it then; yet she fell asleep, after a storm of crying, with her arms around Twinkle, the terrier, as soon as Mrs. Lane had put her to bed, promising to come back from Aunt Jimmy's early in the morning to awaken her, for her uncle was to take the nine o'clock train from the Centre.

As Mrs. Lane collected, in a valise, the few clothes that made up Bird's wardrobe, she felt broken-hearted indeed, but she could not but realize that if the little girl must go, the quicker the better, and who knew what might turn up, for Mrs. Lane was always hopeful. But Lammy, poor boy, could not see one bright spot in the darkness. It was with difficulty that his father could keep the child, usually so gentle, from flying at O'More; he stormed and begged and finally, completely exhausted, fled to the stuffy attic where he fell asleep, pillowed by some hard ears of seed corn.

Next morning when Bird awoke, she had forgotten and felt much better for her long sleep, but when she sat up and looked at the strange room, it all came back. One thought mingled with the dread of parting,—she was going to New York; there was where the wall-paper man lived and people learned things. Hope was strong in her also, and never did she doubt for a moment but what she could win her way and come back some day to her friends if she could only find the right path.

Downstairs all was confusion. Joshua Lane had come from Aunt Jimmy's to take O'More over to the judge's house to sign some papers. A man had followed him up to say Dr. Jedd felt the old lady was worse. Mrs. Lane was giving Bird a thousand directions and warnings that she couldn't possibly remember, and in the middle of it all Lammy, looking straight before him and dumb as an owl, his eyes nearly closed from last night's crying, drove around in the business wagon to take the travellers to the station, four good miles away.

"Here's my card, so you'll know where I hang out," said John O'More, as he stepped into the wagon, holding out a bit of printed pasteboard to Joshua Lane, "and if you need anything in my line, I'll let you in on the square." On one corner was the picture of a horse's head, on the other a wagon, and the letters read, "John O'More with Brush & Burr, Dealers in Horses, Vehicles of all Kinds, Harness & Stable Fixings." Then they drove away, Bird keeping her eyes fixed on Twinkle who Lammy had settled in the straw at their feet.

"To think she was going and I was so put about I never asked the address," sighed Mrs. Lane, adjusting her glasses and looking at the card. "For goodness sakes, Joshua, *do* you suppose he's a horse-jockey? I sort of hoped he might be in groceries, or coal or lumber,—something solid and respectable. What would poor Terry say?"

"I really don't know, Lauretta Ann," sighed Joshua, whose slow nature was showing the wear, tear, and hurry of the last few days; "but he's Terry's brother, not ourn. It takes all kinds of fellers to make up a world, and I *hev* met honest horse-jockeys, and then again I haven't. I wished I'd thought to ask him the bottom price for a new chaise; ourn is so weak every time you cross the ford I'm afeared you'll spill through the bottom into the water," and Joshua turned on his heel and went in to a belated breakfast, while his wife jerked remarks at the chickens she made haste

to feed, about the heartlessness of all men, which she didn't in the least mean.

* * * * *

They had ten minutes or so to wait for the train when they reached the Centre, and, after taking her valise to be checked and buying the ticket, O'More returned to the wagon for Bird. For the first time she remembered that she had not asked about Twinkle and perhaps he might need a ticket. Making a brave effort to get out the name that choked her, yet too considerate to use the plain Mr., she said: "Uncle John,—you won't mind if I take Twinkle with me, will you? He's very clean and clever; I love him dearly and he was so good to Terry when he was sick."

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O'More was the bustling city man now, and whatever sentiment had swayed him the night before was slept away. He gave a glance at the dog and shook his head in the negative.

"That's a no account little yaller cur. If your aunt will let you keep a pup, there's always a litter around the stable you can pick from, though they're more'n likely to fall off the fire-escape."

The tears came to Bird's eyes, but she blinked them back; but not before Lammy saw them. "I'll keep Twinkle all safe for you—till—you come a-visiting," he said in a shaky voice, reading her wish.

Then the train came around the curve and stopped at the big tank to drink.

"Come along," called O'More.

"Oh, I've forgotten my paint-box and bundle!" said Bird, running back to get the precious portfolio that had been wrapped in the horse blanket.

"Your what?" said O'More, "paint-box! Just you leave that nonsense to your chum along with the dog. You've had enough of paints and painting for your vittles; I'm going to see you stick to bread and meat," and, waving his hand good-by to Lammy, he flung him a silver dollar, that missing the wagon rolled in the dirt.

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For a moment the sickening disappointment tempted Bird to turn and run down the track, anywhere so long as she got away; then her pride came to her aid, and, stretching out her hands to her playmate, she cried, "Keep them safe for me, oh, Lammy, please do!"

"You bet I will, don't you fret!" he called back.

Then she followed her uncle quietly to the cars, and her last glimpse, as the train entered the cut, was of Lammy, seated in the old wagon with Twinkle at his side, the box and the portfolio clasped in his arms, and a brave smile on his face.

III

[38]

AUNT JIMMY

FOR a few minutes Lammy sat looking after the vanishing train. Then he carefully wrapped the paint-box and portfolio in the blanket again, and, patting Twinkle, who was quivering with excitement and looking into his face with a pitiful, pleading glance, he put the dog down in the straw again, saying, "We can't help it, old fellow; we've just got to stand it until we can fix up some way to get her back."

As he turned the wagon about, with much backing and rasping of cramped wheels, the bright silver dollar that was lying in the dirt caught his eye. It seemed like a slap in the face when O'More threw it, though in his rough way he meant well enough, and Lammy's first impulse was to drive home and leave it where it had fallen.

Still, after all, it was money, and to earn money vaguely seemed to him the only way by which he could get Bird back again, for though Lammy had a comfortable home, enough clothing, and plenty to eat, whole dollars were as rare in his pockets as white robins in the orchard.

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So he picked up the shining bit of silver, wiped it carefully on his sleeve, and, wrapping it in a scrap of paper, opened the precious paint-box, and tucked the coin into one of the small compartments. It never occurred to him to spend the money for any of the little things a boy of fourteen always wants, and he quite forgot that his knife had only half of one blade left. The money was for Bird, and from that moment the paint-box, which was to spend some months in his lower bureau drawer in company with his best jacket and two prizes won at school, became a savings bank.

Lammy stopped at the "Centre" druggist's for some medicine for Aunt Jimmy, and while he was waiting for the mixture, he had to undergo a running fire of questions concerning his aunt's "spell" from the people who came in from all sections for their mail, as this store was also the post-office and there was as yet no rural free-delivery system to deprive the community of its daily trade in news.

Now Aunt Jimmy, otherwise Jemima Lane, occupied an unusual position in the neighbourhood and was a personage of more than common importance. In the first place she was a miser, which is always interesting, as a miser is thought to be a sort of magician whose money is supposed to lie hidden in the chimney and yet increase as by double cube root; then she owned ten acres of the best land for small fruits—strawberries, raspberries, currants, and peaches—in the state. The ground was on the southern slope of Laurel Ridge, and though it was shielded in such a way that the March sun did not tempt the peach blossoms out before their time, yet Aunt Jimmy's strawberries were always in the Northboro market a full week ahead of the other native fruit.

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Of course there was nothing particularly strange in this interest, as many people coveted the land. The odd part that concerned the gossips was that Aunt Jimmy had three able-bodied nephews, of which Joshua Lane was eldest, all farmers struggling along on poorish land, while she, though seventy-five years old, insisted upon running her fruit farm and house entirely alone, hiring Poles or Hungarians, who could speak no English, to till and gather the crops, instead of going shares with her own kin. In fact, until a few years back, no one, man, woman, or child, except little Janey Lane, had ever got beyond the kitchen door. Then when she died, Aunt Jimmy had opened her house and heart to Joshua Lane's wife, and ever since, that dear, motherly soul had done all that she could for the queer, lonely old woman, in spite of the fact that the gossips said she did it from selfish motives. [41]

Joshua Lane was very sensitive about this talk and would have held aloof like his two brothers, who lived beyond the Centre, one of whom had a sick wife and was too lazy to more than scratch half rations from his land, while the other had once given the old lady some unwise advice about pruning peach trees, and had been forbidden inside the gate under pain of being cut off with a "china button," Aunt Jimmy's pet simile for nothing.

Mrs. Joshua, however, was gossip proof, and, tossing her head, had publicly declared, "I'm a-going to keep the old lady from freezin', burnin', or starvin' herself to death jest so far 's I'm able, accordin' to scripture and the feelings that's in me, and if that's 'undue influence,' so be it! I shan't discuss the subject with anybody but the Lord," and she never did.

Many a meal of hot cooked food she took to the old woman to replace the crackers and cheese of her own providing. It was not that Aunt Jimmy meant to be mean, but she had lived so long alone that she had gotten out of the habits of human beings. She certainly looked like a lunatic when she went about the place superintending her men, clad in a short skirt, a straw sunbonnet, and rubber boots, merely adding in the winter a man's army overcoat and cape that she had picked up cheap; but the lawyer who had come down from Northboro a year before to make her will said he had never met a clearer mind outside of the profession, for she had Dr. Jedd testify that she was of sound mind, and a second physician from Northboro swear that Dr. Jedd's wits were also in good order. [42]

Shortly after this she had given it out quietly that, though Joshua Lane was the only one of her kin that was worth a box of matches, yet they would share and share alike, as she didn't believe in stirring up strife among brothers by showing favour.

Then everybody expected Mrs. Lane would lessen her attentions, but as often happens everybody was mistaken.

Of course the good woman could not help thinking once in a while what a fine thing it would be if some day her elder boys could work the fruit farm (Lammy she never thought of as working at anything) instead of delving in a shop at Milltown, but she put the idea quickly from her. However, it would keep coming back all that night after Terence O'More's funeral when she watched with the old lady, while poor Bird slept her grief-spent sleep before her journey. [43]

If the fruit farm could ever be hers, she would adopt Bird without hesitation, for the little lady-child had crept into the empty spot that Janey had left in her big mother heart and filled it in a way that greatly astonished her.

* * * * *

Lammy finally secured the medicine and jogged homeward, thinking, all the time thinking about Bird. He knew that people said he was stupid, and yet he also felt that he could learn as well as any one if they would only let him pick his own way a little. His father wanted him to be a carpenter, his mother thought that too rough, and that he was still a baby and some day perhaps he might be a clerk.

But Lammy himself, as he looked into the future, saw only the whirling wheels of the machinery at Milltown, or the wonders of the locomotive works that he had once visited at Northboro. That was why he was always day-dreaming and looking in the air. Of course it was very stupid and dumb of him not to tell his parents, but Bird's was the only ear that had ever heard his thoughts.

All that day he stayed about the place at home, keeping the fire in and doing the chores, for his mother's time was divided between her aunt's and straightening things at Bird's old home, and his father was up in the back lots planting corn. Toward night, as he was sitting on the steps having brought back Twinkle who had run to his old home in search of his little mistress, Mrs. Lane bustled in, mystery and importance written on her face. Spying Lammy, she beckoned him to follow her into the kitchen, then, carefully closing the doors, putting Twinkle in the closet and the cat out of the window, as if they could carry tales, she unfastened her bonnet and collar and settled herself in the rocking-chair. [44]

"Samuel Lane," she began solemnly, shaking her forefinger and making the boy quake at the unused title, while his eyes opened wide in wonder, "No, 'tain't *that*; Aunt Jimmy's *much* more comfortable, and I suspect she's going to pick up again after scaring us well, or I wouldn't be home, but she said private words to me this afternoon that if I do keep quite to myself, I'll burst, I know, and maybe get a headache spell that'll lay me by a day and upset everything. Now, Samuel, I've found as far as givin' messages you're told to carry, you're as good as nobody, so I reckon you'll be tight sealed on something that you're bid to keep close and forget maybe for some years." [45]

"Is it about Bird?" asked Lammy, suddenly jumping up and fixing his big, gray eyes on his mother's face with a gaze that made her nervous, for she well knew that there was something in this pet son of hers that was a little beyond her comprehension.

"No, not about Bird,—that is, not straight, though another way it may have a lot to do with her; it all depends. Listen, Samuel!

"This afternoon Aunt Jimmy waked up, and, seeing me sitting by the window croshtayin',—true I

was making a bungle of the tidy, not feelin' like workin' (but she hates, same 's I do, for watchers to set idle looking ready to jump at a body like a cat does at a mouse hole),—she says, says she, her voice comin' back steady, 'Set nearer, Lauretta Ann Lane, I'm goin' to tell you somethin' no one else need ever know.'

"I drew up all of a flutter, of course. 'You're a good woman, Lauretta Ann,' says she, 'and you've never poked and pried, or shown desires for what's another's, an' you've worked hard to keep me livin', which I've done to my satisfaction beyond my expectations.'

"I burst out cryin', I couldn't help it; for I never thought she set any store by me, and I felt guilty about wishes I'd had last night and had fed with thoughts inwardly.

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"'Hush up, now, and don't spoil all by pretendin',' she ran on; 'I know you'd like to have my farm, though not a day before I'm done with it. *I'll* credit you that. It's natural and proper and I'm glad to have interest took in it, likewise I've said I'd share and share alike between my nephews, which I intend; but listen, Lauretta Ann, for there's ways of circumventin' that suits me, *I've left you the farm for your own*; moreover, I've fixed it so there'll be no talk and no one'll know it but you. You think I'm crazy, I guess, and that you couldn't get the farm unbeknown, nohow. Just wait and see!'

"Then she asked me to draw her a cup of tea, and when I went to fetch that battered old pewter tea-pot she's used I reckon these fifty years, 'twasn't in its place, but on her mantel-shelf, and when I reached up to take it down she said, 'Leave that be and take the chiney one; its work's over for me and we're both takin' a rest;' then she dozed off after the very first sup."

"Mother," said Lammy, who was now leaning on her knees with his hands behind her head and drawing it close, while his eyes glowed like coals, "if—if you ever get the farm—will—you—"

"Bring Bird back?" she finished for him, hugging him close. "Yes, I will, and you shall both go to school to Northboro, too; but mind you, Samuel, no crowdin' Aunt Jimmy, and it may be years yet.

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"Now bustle round and help me cook up something, for I must go back to Aunt Jimmy's before seven, as Mis' Judge o' Probate Ricker is the only one I'll trust to spell me, for Dinah Lucky's mush in a bowl when the village folks smooth her down with their palarver."

So Lammy flew about, sifting flour, skimming milk, or rattling cups and saucers, and it was not quite dark, supper over, and every dish washed, when he went back to the porch steps and whispered the precious hope to Twinkle, who raised one ear and his lip together as much as if he understood and cautioned silence. Then the boy began day-dreaming anew, but this time his mind, instead of following flying wheels, was busy weeding strawberry plants and carefully picking raspberries, so as not to crush them, while Bird stood by and watched. "And," he startled himself by saying aloud, "the first thing I'll do 'll be to divide off a root of those red pineys and plant it up on the hill, so Bird 'll find it next spring all in blow."

* * * * *

A few days later when Dr. Jedd and all the neighbours were convinced that Aunt Jimmy would be out in the garden again by raspberry time, with good chance of another ten years, and Mrs. Lane had made indoors more comfortable than it had been for years by a thorough cleaning and renovating, the strange old lady again upset all their calculations and died. Then in due time the lawyer from Northboro sent letters to the three nephews and their families, to Dr. Jedd, to the minister of the First Congregational Church, and to the superintendent of the new School of Industrial Art of Northboro, to meet on a certain Friday afternoon at Aunt Jimmy's house to hear the will read.

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Once more was the entire community involved in a guessing match. The summoning of the kin was a matter of course, and usually took place immediately, so that the lawyer was evidently carrying out special directions in delaying the matter for more than a week, but as to what the doctor, the minister, and the teacher from Northboro could possibly have to do in the matter was a mystery that not even the fertile brain of Mrs. Slocum could settle, either for good nor evil.

It couldn't be that Aunt Jimmy had left these three outside men anything, for it was known that she only employed Dr. Jedd because she couldn't help it, that she hadn't been to church for five years because the minister had preached a sermon against avarice and the vanity of hoarding money, and as to the Northboro teacher it was positively certain that she had never even seen him, for he was a stranger in these parts, having recently been sent from New York, to take charge of the school, by a wealthy man who had been influential in founding it and whose country place was on the farther edge of the town.

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Mrs. Lane was as much in the dark as any one and did not hesitate to say so, while excitement ran so high that on this particular Friday afternoon the women sat in their fore-room windows overlooking the village street with the expectant air of waiting for a passing procession.

Mrs. Dr. Jedd, Mrs. Judge of Probate Ricker, and the minister's wife were privileged to attend the reading by courtesy for reason of being their husband's wives, and cakes had been baked and several plans made to waylay them separately on their divers routes home to drink a cup of tea, that every detail might be gleaned for comparing of notes afterward.

"We shall soon see whether Lauretta Ann Lane's cake is dough or fruit loaf," sniffed Mrs. Slocum, angrily, drawing in her head suddenly from the third fruitless inspection of the road that she had made in fifteen minutes and giving it a smart bump against the sash as she did so. "Either the folks is late, or they're gone around the back road, and if so, why? I'd just like you to tell me," she snapped at Hope Snippin, the meek little village dressmaker who, drawn over as if she had a perpetual stitch in her side, was remaking a skirt for the lady of the house and felt very much discouraged, as it had been turned once before, at the possibility of making it look startlingly new.

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"Maybe they've stopped down to the Lane's and have walked around the meadow path," ventured Hope Snippin. "The other day when I was fixin' up Mis' Lane's black gown, changing

the buttons and such like to turn it from just Sunday best to mourning, I heard her tell Mis' Jedd that, as there was no convenience for gettin' up a proper meal down to Aunt Jimmy's, seein' as nothing must be touched until the will was read, she'd asked all the folks concerned to dinner—a roast-beef dinner with custards—at her house so's they could be comfortable and stable their teams, and then walk right around short cut to the other house after. You see the two farms meets the road separate, like the two heels of a horseshoe, and then join by going back of the doctor's hill woods. My father was sayin' last night if those two farms *and* the wood lot went together, they'd be something worth while," and Miss Snippin smiled pleasantly as if she thought she had propitiated Mrs. Slocum by her news.

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"Then you knew all the while they wouldn't come by here and never told me, though seein' me slavin' over that cake," snapped Mrs. Slocum. "I wish you'd mind your work closer; you're makin' that front breadth up stain out."

"But it runs clean through," pleaded the dressmaker, miserably.

"Depend upon it," Mrs. Slocum muttered to herself, not heeding the protest, "she's made sure of that farm, or she wouldn't risk the cost of a roast dinner for a dozen folks if she wasn't."

* * * * *

Meanwhile this dinner had been eaten and the party, headed by the lawyer and the teacher, had gone through the sweet June fields to Aunt Jimmy's house and seated themselves upon the stiff-backed, fore-room chairs that were ranged in a long row, as if the company expected to play "Go to Jerusalem."

Outside, the bees were humming in the syringa bushes while the cat-birds and robins, unmolested, were holding a festival in the great strawberry bed, for to-day there was no one to see that the birds "kept moving" after the usual custom, as the hired man on returning from taking eggs to market had gone to sleep in the hay barn, knowing that the stern voice of the old lady in rubber boots and sunbonnet would not disturb his dreams.

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* * * * *

"Hem," the lawyer cleared his throat and read the usual preliminaries about "last will and testament, sound mind," etc., "paying of just debts," etc., in a clear but rapid voice that grew gradually solemn and important, until, as the pith of the matter was reached, every word was separated from its neighbour, and the buzzing of a fly on the window-pane seemed an unbearable noise.

"I give and bequeath to Amelia, the wife of William Jedd, doctor of medicine in this town, the sum of two thousand dollars, because I think she may need it owing to her husband's slack way of collecting bills."

Mrs. Jedd, who had for a moment looked radiant, quickly cast down her eyes after a frightened glance at her husband who was, with apparent difficulty, refraining from laughter as he looked crosswise at the minister.

"I give and bequeath to Sarah Ann, wife of Joel Stevens, minister of the First Congregational Church, a like sum of two thousand dollars because she is sure to need it, this being twice the amount that he once desired me to give to foreign missions. If he still holds to his views of avarice and hoarding, he will doubtless be able to persuade her to share his ideas as to its use."

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It was the minister's turn now to look red and confused, while his wife's face expressed her views on the subject beyond a doubt.

"I give and bequeath to the Trust Fund of the School of Industrial Art in Northboro the sum of \$10,000, the income therefrom to be applied to the board and teaching of two girls each year who cannot afford to pay, for the reason that I think a girl is usually worth two boys if she has a chance, and I don't like to see our best girls running to the big cities for schooling.

"I direct that my fruit farm of ten acres, more or less, with the adjoining one hundred acres of meadow and woodlands, and all buildings and fixtures, other than household furniture, appertaining thereto, shall be sold at public auction within six months of my death, and that the cash proceeds be divided between my three nephews, share and share alike, I holding the hope that one of them will be the purchaser. I also direct that the pieces of household furniture mentioned in the enclosed memorandum shall be divided between the wives of my three nephews by the drawing of lots, and I charge that all other furnishings not mentioned in this paper, being of no value except to myself, shall be destroyed either by burning or burying in the swamp bog-hole according to their character, as I don't wish them scattered about for the curiosity of the idle, of which this town has its full share.

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"Making one exception to the above, I give to my dear niece by marriage, Laretta Ann, wife of Joshua Lane, in token of my respect for her, my old pewter tea-pot that, as she knows, I have treasured as having laid buried in the garden through the War of Independence and had in daily use for years, hoping she will cherish it and by like daily use hold me in constant remembrance by the sight of it."

At this juncture no one dared look up, for all felt the cruelty of the gift after Mrs. Lane's years of service, and the poor woman herself merely tightened her grasp upon the chair arms, but she could not prevent the sickening sense of disappointment that crept over her.

"I hereby appoint my nephew, Joshua Lane, as my sole executor, directing that he be paid the sum of \$1000 from my estate for his services, desiring him to carry on the fruit business for the current year, the profits to be added to my estate. (Here followed special instructions.) If there be any residue after paying to the before-named legacies, I direct that he divide it equally between himself and his two brothers, and I hope that all concerned may feel the same pleasure in hearing this testament that I have had in making it."

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As the lawyer stopped reading there was a pause, and then a rush of voices, congratulations

and condolences mingled. That he had made an error in summoning Dr. Jedd and the minister instead of their wives was plain.

The two brothers, who cared nothing for the fruit farm except its cash price and had been too indolent to bother about the matter or go to see their aunt except in fruit time, assumed importance and talked about wounded pride and the injustice of having but one executor. The school superintendent, an Englishman of fifty or so who had received his art training at South Kensington and brought it to market in America, confused by his surroundings, but of course pleased at the gift by which his school benefited, made haste to leave, feeling that he was intruding in a gathering where a family storm was brewing. [56]

"Mebbe there's something *in* the tea-pot," suggested the minister's wife, hopefully, "else I can't think she knew her own mind."

"There's surely something in it," echoed Mrs. Dr. Jedd.

The lawyer, who himself had thought this possible, went upstairs, and took down the battered bit of pewter from the best bedroom shelf, where it had remained since the day Mrs. Lane had placed it there at Aunt Jimmy's request, opened it, shook it, and held it toward the eager group,—it was absolutely empty!

Mrs. Lane stretched out her hand for the legacy, but her husband grasped her arm and asserting himself for the first time in his married life, said: "Lauretta Ann, don't you tech it; it'll go down in the swamp hole with the other trash for all of you. I'll not have you a-harbourin' a viper. I'll do my lawful duty, but, by crickey, I'll not have you put upon no more."

This very ambiguous speech so impressed the hearers that it was reported that "Joshua Lane wasn't tied to Lauretta's apron-strings and could hold his own equal to anybody," which had been seriously doubted, while the news was a surprise and disappointment to every one but Mrs. Slocum, who said, "Dough! I told you so,"—and actually cut a big slice of cake for Hope Snippin to take home for tea. [57]

As for Lammy he seemed dazed for a while, and then set to work daily with his father on the fruit farm, so that he might earn the tickets to send to Bird when hot weather and the time for her visit came. His mother noticed that he did not gaze about as much as usual, and, while he was picking berries for market, he said to himself, "I'll snake a root of those red pineys for Bird anyhow before the auction, 'long in November, and maybe before then something 'll turn up."

IV

A CAGED BIRD

WHEN the high banks of the cut shut off Lammy from Bird's sight, she followed her uncle into the car, vainly trying to blink back her tears. He, however, did not notice them; but, putting her valise on a seat, told her she had better sit next to the window so that she could amuse herself by looking out, as it would be two hours before they changed cars at New Haven, and then, taking another seat for himself, pulled his hat over his eyes and promptly fell asleep. [58]

At first the poor child was content to sit quite still and rest, trying to realize who and where she was. The changes of the past two weeks had been so sudden that she did not yet fully realize them. Beginning with the day when her father, all full of hope, had been soaked by the rain in walking back from Northboro, where he had gone to buy materials for beginning his work for the wall-paper man, and caught the deadly cold, until now when she was leaving the only friends she had ever known, seemed either a whole lifetime or a dream from which she must awake. [59]

But as the train flew on and the familiar places one by one were lost in the distance, little by little the bare cold truth came to her. Not only was she going to a strange place to live among strangers, but the hope that had comforted her the previous night had been swept away when her uncle had refused to let her bring her paint-box, and she knew by the contemptuous way he spoke that he was even more set against her father's work than their farming neighbours had been.

"Never mind," thought the brave, lonely little heart, "I simply *must* learn somehow, and perhaps my aunt and cousins may be different and help me to persuade Uncle John to let me go on with drawing at the school he sends me to, for I heard him tell Mrs. Lane that I should go to school." Then Bird began to imagine what the aunt and cousins would be like, and what sort of a house they would live in. She thought the house would be brick or stone like some in Northboro, and she did not expect that there would be a very big garden, perhaps only at the back with a little strip at the sides and in front, but then that would hold enough flowers for her to draw so that she need not forget the way in which Terry had taught her to do it from life, and even if she had no paints and only bits of paper and a pencil, she could work a little out of the way up in her room so as not to annoy her uncle and yet not quite give up. That she was determined she would never do, for Bird had, in addition to a talent that was in every way greater than her father's, something that came from her mother's family and that he had wholly lacked,—perseverance, a thing that people are apt to call obstinacy when they do not sympathize with its object. [60]

So busy was she with castle-building that she was quite surprised when the brakeman called: "New Haven! Last stop. Change cars for New York and Boston. Passengers all out!" and her uncle jumped up, flushed and stupid with sleep and bundled her out of the train into the station

restaurant "to snatch a bite of dinner" before they went on.

Now Bird, being a perfectly healthy child, even though overwrought and tired, was hungry and gladly climbed up on one of the high stools that flanked the lunch counter, while her uncle gathered a sandwich, two enormous doughnuts, and a quarter of a mince pie on one plate and pushed it toward her saying: "Tea or coffee? You'd better fill up snug, for we won't be home until well after dinnertime," then John O'More proceeded to cool his own coffee by pouring it from cup to saucer and back again with much noise and slopping.

"Please, I'd rather have milk," answered Bird, rescuing the sandwich from under the pie and making a great effort not to stare at her uncle, who had begun by stuffing half a doughnut into his mouth and pouring the larger part of a cup of coffee after it before he swallowed, so that his cheeks bulged, his eyes seemed about to pop from their sockets, and beads of sweat stood on his forehead, while the next moment he was shovelling up great mouthfuls of baked beans and ramming them down with cucumber pickles, very much as she had seen Lammy charging his father's old muzzle-loading shot-gun when going to hunt woodchucks.

Though sometimes the food at home had not been any too plentiful, Bird's parents had always been particular about her manners at table. She had had their example before her and was naturally dainty in her own ways, so that her uncle's gorging gave her another shock, and unconsciously she began to pick at her food like a veritable feathered bird.

"The country ain't what it's cracked up to be," remarked O'More, when he was able to speak. "I thought country girls was always fat and rosy and ate hearty. Just wait until you get to New York and see my kids stoke in the vittles; it'll learn you what it means to eat right."

"Express train for New York, stopping at Bridgeport and Stamford only," called a man through the open door.

"Come along," shouted O'More, wedging in another doughnut, throwing the pay to the waiter and seizing a handful of toothpicks from a glass on the counter, and before Bird had but half finished the sandwich and milk, she found herself on the train again.

The second part of the journey passed more cheerfully, for all along at the east side of the road were beautiful glimpses of the Sound and silvery creeks and inlets came up to the track itself.

Bird had never before seen the sea, or any river greater than the mill stream, and she exclaimed in delight.

"Like the looks of salt water, do you? Then you're going to an A 1 place to see it. New York's an island, and you only have to go to the edge anywhere to see water all round, not forsaken lookin' empty water like this either, but full of ships and boats and push. Down at the far end of the town is Battery Park, smash on to the water, and there's sea air and seats in it and music summer nights, along with a building full of live swimmin' fishes that little Billy's crazed over goin' to see. Oh, you'll find sport in the city for sure."

"Who is little Billy?" asked Bird, feeling that she was called upon to say something, and now realizing that she knew nothing about the cousins she was to meet.

"Little Billy? Oh, he's the youngest of the four boys. Tom, he's the eldest, and a wild hawk; he's got a rovin' job, and he seldom turns up lest he's in trouble, but for all that his mother's crazed after him. Jack, he's next, seventeen, and fine and sleek and smart with the tongue, and keeps the clean coat of a gentleman; he's in a clerking job, but he goes to night school, and he'll be somebody. Larry's fifteen, and he's just quit school and got a place helping a trainer on the race-track; he's minded to make money quick, and thinks that's the road, which I don't. Then little Billy,—he's turning six, and he's worth more'n the whole lot together to me, if he is only a four-year size and hops with a crutch. Ah, but he's got the head for thinkin', and he's every way off from the rest of us, pale and yellow-haired, while the others are coloured like sloes and crows' wings in the eyes and hair."

As O'More spoke his whole face softened and lightened up, and it was plain to see that little Billy filled the soft spot that is in every heart if people only have the eyes to see it.

"Until little Billy was turned three he was as pretty as an angel," he continued, "and sturdy as any other child. Then come a terrible hot summer,—oh, I tell you it was fierce; you couldn't draw a breath in the rooms, and so the missis she fixed a bed for Billy out on the fire-escape and used to take him there to sleep."

Bird was just about to ask what sort of a place a fire-escape was, for this was the second time her uncle had mentioned it that day having said that if she had a dog, it would likely fall from it, but he talked so quickly that she forgot again.

"As luck had it, one night the wind come up cool, and, the woman bein' dead tired, never woke up to notice it, and in the morning little Billy set up a terrible cry, for when he tried to get up he couldn't, for the wind had checked the sweat and stiffened his left leg, as it were. Of course we had a big time and had in full a dozen doctors, and some said one thing and some another, but they all give it the one name 'the infant paralysis.'"

"The doctors they wanted him to go to the 'ospital and have the leg shut into a frame and all that, but I said 'twas a shame to torment him, and I'd have him let be till he could say for himself.

"The woman takes him awful hard, though, and if he was a reproach to her for not wakin' up, which is no sense, for what be's to be, be's—that's all," which shiftless argument Bird afterward found was her uncle's answer to many things that could have been bettered.

"I hope Billy will like me," said Bird, half to herself after a few minutes' silence; "somehow I think I like him already."

"If you do that and act well by him, I buy you a hat with the longest feather on Broadway for your Christmas," said O'More, grasping her slender fingers and almost crushing them in his burst of enthusiasm. "But whist a minute, girl, for we're most home now. If the woman,—I mean my missis, your Aunt Rosy,—is offish just at the start, don't get down-hearted, for you see as she

don't expect I'm bringing you, she may be—well—a trifle startled like. She'll soon settle down and take what be's to be straight enough," and with this rather discouraging remark the train crossed the Harlem River and entered the long tunnel that is apt to cast a gloom over every one's first entrance to New York, even when they are bent on pleasure and not sad and lonely.

"We're in now," said O'More in a few minutes, as the echo of the close walls ceased and the train slid across a maze of tracks into an immense building with a glass roof like a greenhouse.

"Grand Central Station—all out," called a brakeman, and Bird found herself part of a crowd of men, women, children, and red-capped porters moving toward a paved street, full of carriages, wagons, trucks, electric cars, besides many sort of vehicles that she had never seen before, coming, going, dashing here and there in confusion, while on every side there was a wall of houses, and below the earth was upturned and trenched, not a bit of grass or tree to be seen anywhere, and the sky, oh, so far away and small. Bird almost fell as she stumbled blindly along toward a trolley car after the uncle, for what could seem more unreal to this little wild thrush from the country lane, with song in her throat, and love of beauty and colour born in her heart, than Forty-second Street in the middle of the first warm summer afternoon?

* * * * *

The car they boarded went through another short tunnel, and on every side could be heard the noise of hammers or drilling in the rock.

"Is this a stone quarry?" asked Bird, innocently, not understanding, and wondering why the near-by passengers smiled as her uncle replied: "Lord bless yer! no; it's the subway, a road below ground they're building to let out folks from where they work to where there's room to live; there's such push here below town there's little room for sitting, let alone sleeping. Oh, but it's a fine city is New York, all the same."

Next a broad avenue with a jumble of old, low shops and fine new buildings side by side; still Bird looked anxiously out for some place where it seemed possible that people might live and found none.

"Here's 2—th Street where we land," said O'More, presently looking up, and when the car had stopped, Bird found herself walking along a sidewalk between another wall of buildings without gardens, while the heat of the first warm day rising from the pavement made her dizzy, and she asked, "Is it far from here to where you live, Uncle John?"

"No, right close by, only a few steps farther. We're facing east now and down yonder half a dozen blocks is the river, the same as we crossed coming in saving a turn in it.

"Getting tired, ain't yer? Well, it's been a long day for us, and I'm mighty glad to be gettin' to a homelike place myself."

"Do you live right by the water, and is there any garden?" Bird continued, a feeling of nameless dread creeping over her as she saw nothing but buildings still closing in on all sides; even a blacksmith's shop, from which a spirited pair of horses were coming with newly shod polished hoofs, seemed strange and out of place. Then there were more poor looking buildings, and a great stable with many men standing about and horses being constantly driven in and out to show the people who waited on the curbstone.

"By the river, and do I have a garden," he echoed, laughing heartily. "Do you think I'm one o' the millionaires you read about in the papers, my girl? Do I keep an automobile and eat at the Waldorf-Astoria?" and then, seeing that Bird could not understand the comparison, he patted her good-naturedly on the shoulder.

As they passed the stable quite a number of the men spoke to her uncle, but instead of resenting it as she expected, he joked and laughed and seemed very glad to see them.

"It's called the 'Horse's Head,' and it's out of there my job is," he said to Bird, pointing over his shoulder at the stable, "for half the time I'm over the country from Kentucky to Canada picking up horses, and the other half of the time I'm helping to sell them out again, so I live as near by as may be for convenience."

At this Bird's heart sunk still farther, for in the prim New England town where she was born and bred a Puritan, a horse-dealer meant either some oversharper farmer who could outwit his neighbours or a roving fellow, half gypsy, half tramp, of very ill repute, who went about from town to town buying and selling animals who mostly had something the matter with them that had to be concealed by lying.

John O'More, striding on ahead, did not notice her expression, nor would he have understood if he had read her thoughts, for he was perfectly satisfied with himself and everything else in his surroundings, except the fact of little Billy's lameness, and for a man of his class he was roughly honest and good-hearted.

"Here's where!" he said at last, turning into the doorway of a tall building with one door and many windows. The square vestibule was dusty and had a ragged mat in the centre, while on one side were ten letter-boxes in a double row, with a bell knob and speaking-tube, as O'More explained, over each.

"Is this your house? It seems pretty big," said Bird, wearily.

"One floor of it is," he answered, laughing again; "it's what's called 'a flat house,' because each tenant lives flat on one floor, with conveniences at hand and no water to carry, which beats the country all out," he added slyly. "See, I'll but touch the bell and the door 'll open itself."

And he suited the action to the word, the door opening to reveal a narrow, dark hall with a flight of steep stairs covered with a shabby red carpet.

As Bird groped her way up, one, two, three flights, fairly gasping for breath in the close, hot place, she stumbled against groups of children who were sitting or playing school on the stairs.

"It's lighter near the top; that's why I choose it," called her uncle, himself puffing and blowing

as he climbed. "Here we are," and he pushed open a door into an inner hall, and then another into a sort of sitting room where a tall, red-haired woman, clad in a collarless calico sack was sewing on a machine, while a pile of showy summer silks and muslins was lying on a chair beside her.

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"Hello, Rosie, old woman; here's Bird O'More, Terry's orphan, that I brought back to stop a bit until we see where we're at," and he gave his wife a knowing wink as much as to say, "I know it's sudden on you, but let her down as easy as you can."

The "old woman," who was perhaps forty, or at most forty-five, glanced up, and then, either not understanding or pretending not to, her face flushed as she jerked out, her eyes flashing, "Well, if you ain't the aggravatment of men, John O'More, to bring company just when I've got Mame Callahan's trou-sew to finish, and she gettin' married next week, and Billy bein' that cantankerous with cryin' to go over to the park or down to see them fishes that my head's ready to split," she whimpered.

With all his will the man cowered before her tongue, and in spite of her own pain Bird's womanly little heart pitied him. She saw the piled-up garments and knew at once that her aunt was a dressmaker, and her gentle breeding led her to say the one thing that could have averted an explosion.

"Aunt Rose, I could take Billy to see the fish or something if you'll tell me the way."

"That's what I figured on when I brought her," said O'More, greatly relieved, and quickly following the lead; "I knew you'd often spoke of gettin' a girl from the Sisters, and that's why I brought Bird instead of leavin' her to slave fer strangers," he stammered.

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"Humph," answered Mrs. O'More, at least somewhat pacified, "Billy's fastened in his chair on the fire-escape; she'd better go there and sit with him a while until it's supper-time. It's too late for them to go traipsing around the streets to-night. Can you do anything useful?" she said, fixing her sharp, greenish eyes on Bird, who tried to gather her wits together as she answered, "I can make coffee, and toast, and little biscuits, and two kinds of cake, and—" then she hesitated and stopped, for she was going to say "do fractions, write, read French a little, and draw and paint," but she felt as if these last items would count against her.

"Humph," said her aunt again, this time more emphatically, "I guess you done well to bring her, Johnny. Turned thirteen, you say. Of course she'll have to make a show of goin' to school for another year on account of the law, but they can't ask it before the fall term. I suppose she'll have to sleep on this parlour lounge, though; there's no other place."

John O'More was now beaming as he led Bird through a couple of dark bedrooms toward the kitchen, where the mysterious "fire-escape" seemed to be located.

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Going to an open back window he looked out, motioning Bird to follow. What she saw was a small platform, about three feet wide and ten feet long, surrounded by an iron railing; one end was heaped with a litter of boxes and broken flowerpots that partly hid a trap door from which a ladder led to the balcony belonging to the floor below. At the other end, fastened in a baby's chair by the tray in front, sat a dear little fellow with great blue eyes and a curved, sensitive mouth, while tears were making rivers of mud on his pale cheeks as he sobbed softly to himself, "I want to go; oh, I want to get out and see the fishes."

"So you shall," said O'More, undoing the barrier and lifting the child on his strong arm while he tried awkwardly to wipe his face.

"Let me," said Bird, wetting her handkerchief at the kitchen sink and gently bathing eyes, nose, and mouth carefully, as Mrs. Lane had bathed hers—only a day ago, was it? It seemed a lifetime.

"Who are you?" said Billy, gazing at Bird over his father's shoulder, as he wound his little arms around the thick neck.

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"She's your cousin Bird, come from the country to play with Billy and take him to see the fishes. Go out there on the platform with him a spell till the heat dies down; the doctor says he's to get plenty of air you see."

"Where do you get the air here?" asked Bird, wonderingly, looking at the paved yards filled with rubbish, the tall clothes poles, and the backs of the other buildings where more fire-escapes clung like dusty cobwebs.

"Air? Oh, out here and down in the street mostly if there's no time fer going across to any o' the parks. Get a bit acquainted now, youngsters, for I've got to report at the stable before supper," said O'More, putting Billy back into his chair and preparing to leave, wiping the sweat from his face as if he had thus put the whole matter of Bird from him.

For a few minutes the pair were silent. "Is your name Bird?" asked Billy, eying her solemnly, and, upon her nodding "Yes," he rambled on, "There's a yellow bird in a cage downstairs at Mrs. Callahan's—it's name is Canary and it can sing. Can you sing?"

"Yes; that is, I used to last week," she said uncertainly, the tears running between her fingers that she held before her face, for in the past ten minutes her last hope had fled. No room where she could work alone, not even a back-yard garden or a leaf to pick, and the bars of the fire-escape seemed to be closing in like a cage.

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"Now you're crying, too," said Billy, prying open her hands with his thin fingers, while his lip quivered; "do you want to get out and see the fishes too?"

"Yes, Billy, I do; but we can't go just now, so we must play we are birds in a cage like the one downstairs," smiling through her tears. "I'll sing for you," and she began in a low voice a song that Terry had taught her:—

"When little birdie bye-bye goes,
Silent as mice in churches,
He puts his head where no one knows
And on one leg he perches."

When she finished, the little arms stole around her neck also, and Billy, his face all smiles, said, "That bird's me, cause I've only got one good leg, and I'm going to have you for my canary, only," looking at her gown and hair, "you're more black than yellow," and giving her a feeble squeeze, "and some day you'll get me out to see the fishes, won't you?"

At his baby caress Love lit a new lamp in her dark path and Hope stole back and led the way as she hugged Billy close and said, "Yes, some day we'll surely get out of the cage together and fly far away."

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V

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MRS. LANE PLAYS DETECTIVE

FOR several weeks after the reading of Aunt Jimmy's will, it was the talk of the neighbourhood, the alternate topic of conversation being the death of Terence O'More and the sudden disappearance of Bird. For Bird's Uncle John had come and gone so suddenly that few knew of his flying visit, and those who did turned it into an interesting mystery. Some said that he was a very rich relation from the west, others that he was not an uncle at all, but the agent of the State Orphan Asylum to which the Lanes, afraid of being expected to care for Bird, had hurried her off. It is needless to say that it was Mrs. Slocum, piqued at not securing Bird as a maid of all work and no pay, who concocted this tale.

In due time Probate Judge Ricker appointed Joshua Lane administrator, to take charge of the furniture and few effects that O'More had left and settle up his debts as far as possible. There was a little money left of what his wife had inherited, in the Northboro Bank, but only enough to pay his debts, it was feared, without so much as leaving a single dollar for Bird.

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Since the homestead and Mill Farm property that belonged to Mrs. O'More had been forfeited through some defect in the drawing up of a mortgage coupled with O'More's slackness in attending to the matter, Joshua Lane had felt there was something wrong and that a little good legal advice, combined with common sense, might have at least saved something if not the entire property.

When, a year later, the mill had slipped into Abiram Slocum's hands, Joshua's suspicions were again aroused, for Slocum's transactions in real estate were usually adroit and to the cruel disadvantage of some one, if not absolutely dishonest according to the letter of the law; but when Joshua had spoken to O'More about the matter, he, feeling hopeful about his painting, had put him off with a promise to "some day" show him the "letters and papers" that bore upon the unfortunate business.

The day had never come, and now that Joshua had the right he determined to sift the affair thoroughly, but the papers were nowhere to be found. The envelope containing O'More's bank-book held nothing else but the certificate of his marriage with Sarah Turner, and some letters from his mother in the old country.

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Joshua, though slow, was not without shrewdness, and he had not only kept the old house where the O'Mores had lived securely locked by day, until when, upon the selling of the furniture, it should again return to the Slocums from whom it was rented, but at Mrs. Lane's suggestion he had Nellis, his oldest son, sleep there at night, as she said, "To keep folks whom I'll not name from prowlin'."

Joshua looked to the sale of the furniture to at least pay the last quarter's rent due. By a strange happening the afternoon before the vendue was to take place, as he was about to drive up to the old house at the cross-roads to make a final thorough search in closets, drawers, and the old-time chimney nooks for the missing papers, a passer-by, hurrying in the same direction, called out to him: "There's a fire up cemetery hill way; smoke's comin' over the hickory woods. Maybe Dr. Jedd's big hay barn or Slocum's old farm, both bein' in a plum line from here." When, sharply whipping up the old mare, much to her astonishment, he hurried to the place, he not only found that it was the old farm-house hopelessly ablaze from roof to cellar, but Abiram Slocum appearing a few moments later by the road that ran north of the place, flew into either a real or well-acted rage, shaking his fist and calling: "It's that there hulking boy, Nellis, o' yourn, that has done me this mischief. Must 'a' smoked his pipe in bed or left his candle lighted until it burned down, for it's plain to be seen by the way the roof's ketched, the fire started upstairs and smouldered around all day until it bust out everywheres to onct."

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"I reckon yer insured," said Joshua, dryly, taking little account of what he said, as he began to realize that the fire had put an end forever to the discovery of the papers that might have brought good luck to Bird, as well as destroyed a part of the slender property.

"A trifle—a mere trifle—not the cost of the wood in the house, let alone the labour at present rates. I could hev rented the place tew teachers for a summer cottage for twenty a month, and I intended buyin' in the furniture so to do. If"—and he drew his mean features together, and then spread them out again in a spasm of indignation—"law was just, you'd ought to make it up to me, Joshua Lane,—that you had."

But when he found that the few neighbours who had gathered were not sympathetic, and only seemed to regret the fire on account of the O'More furniture, he disappeared, and, strangely

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enough, later on no one could tell in which direction he went or if he had gone afoot, on horseback, or in the yellow buckboard in which he was wont to drive about to harry his tenants and surprise his farm hands if they but paused to straighten their backs.

When Joshua told of the fire at the supper-table, Mrs. Lane fairly snorted with indignation, saying, "Firstly, Nellis didn't smoke last night, bein' out o' tobacco and leavin' his pipe on the chimneypiece, where it is now, and secondly he asked me for a candle; and then, the Lockwood boys comin' along, and offerin' to walk up with him, he went off while I was lookin' for the store-closet key which had fallen off its nail, and clean through the bottom of the clock"—(the inside of the long body of the tall clock being the place where the Lane family's keys lived, each on its own nail).

"This morning when he came down home to breakfast he mentioned it, and said it didn't matter because the moon was so bright he undressed by light of it, Bill Lockwood stopping up there with him for company's sake.

"A trifle of insurance indeed! and all hope of Bird bein' righted gone! Joshua Lane, do you know what I think and believe?" And Lauretta Ann jumped up so suddenly that her ample proportions struck the tea-tray edge and an avalanche of cups and saucers covered the floor. [82]

"Your thoughts and beliefs 'll soon fill a book, big as the dictionary and doubtless be worth as much," said Joshua, pausing a second with a potato speared on his fork, while he gave his wife a stern, silencing look that was so rare that whenever she saw it, she gave heed at once, "but in this here matter I'd advise you to keep 'em good and close to yourself. We've got plenty ahead to shoulder this summer, besides which if papers had been found, 'tain't likely any lawyer hereabouts would risk taking the matter without money to back him, and 'Biram Slocum to face."

So saying, Joshua, having put himself outside of the potato, a final piece of pie, and the tea that had been cooling in his saucer, pushed back his chair and drew on his coat, saying as he went out: "The first strawberries over ter Aunt Jimmy's 'll be ready for marketing on Monday, and this is Thursday. I must look around and engage pickers. That acre bed of the new-fangled kind is a week ahead of Lockwood's earliest. Aunt Jimmy was no fool when it came to foresighted fruit raisin'." [83]

"I never said she was, nor in other things either if her meanin' could be read. What time did you say the fire started?" she added in an unconcerned sort of way, as she stooped to pick up the scattered cups, which were so substantial that they had not been broken by their fall.

"Let me see—it must hev been close to two o'clock when I drove out of the yard; the mail carrier had just passed, and he's due at the corner at two, and at the rate I went I wasn't fifteen minutes from the fire. From the way it had holt, it must have been goin' all of half an hour. Queer 'Biram didn't scent it sooner workin' in the corn patch back of the wood lot as he appeared to be, leastways he came down the lane from there.

"Fire couldn't hev ketched before one o'clock, for the hands up at Lockwood's go up that way before and after noon as well as of mornings, and if Nellis had left anything smouldering, they'd have surely smelt it, first or last."

Joshua paused a moment, but, as Mrs. Lane asked no more questions, went out, closing the door. No sooner did she hear the latch catch than she jumped up, saying to herself: "Appeared to come from the corn patch, did he? I wonder what he was doin' there? He planted late, so the corn can't be set for hoeing; he *might* be watchin' for crows or riggin' a scarecrow." As she pronounced the last word she had reached the dresser where hung a large square calendar that advertised one of the husky sorts of breakfast foods that taste as if they might have been the stuffing of Noah's pillow. [84]

Lifting this down she carried it to the table, and, after hunting in the dresser drawer for the pencil with which she kept her various egg and butter accounts, she proceeded to put a series of dots about the particular day of the month (it was June 10th), and then reversing the sheet, she covered the back with a collection of curiously spelled and, to the casual observer, meaningless words.

She had barely time to replace the calendar when the boys came in for their supper, and she fell vigorously to rearranging the table and brewing fresh tea.

The elder boys spoke of the fire as a bit of "old Slocum's usual luck," for it was known that the house would need a great deal of repairing before any one but the artist, whose thoughts were always in the clouds, would be willing to hire it. Lammy alone rejoiced in the fire because, as he said, "When Bird comes back, the house won't be there for her to see and make her sorry." [85]

"Better not say that outdoors," warned Nellis, "or Slocum 'll say you fired it on purpose—he'd like nothing better. By the way, mother," he continued, as Mrs. Lane glanced keenly at Lammy, "what do you think I heard at the shop to-day?"

"Concernin' what?"

"The Mill Farm."

"I can't think. Those Larkin folks hev worked the land these two years past, but the mill hasn't run this long while,—not since the winter Mis' O'More died and the ice bulged the dam; the fodder trade has all gone away, and I don't know what 'Biram Slocum can turn it to 'nless he can insure the water an' then let it loose somehow."

"There is a party of engineer fellows, or something of the sort, just come to camp out up by Rooster Lake,—sort of a summer school, I guess, for there are some older men along that they call professors. They scatter all over the country surveyin' and crackin' up the rocks with little hammers to see what they are made of.

"This afternoon half a dozen of them came down to the shop to see some new kind of a boring tool that our foreman has designed, and Mr. Clarke was with them,—you know he is the man who started the Art and Trade School in Northboro, and has his finger in a dozen pies. Pretty soon the [86]

superintendent called me and said, 'Here, Lane, you live out at Laurelville; these gentlemen wish to see the old Turner Mill Farm place. I'll let you off the rest of the day if you'll show them the way over.'

"I got in the runabout with Mr. Clarke and the others followed in a livery six-seater. The old gentleman asked me all sorts of questions about the water-power, and how low the stream fell in summer, and if the pond ever froze clear through, and one thing and another.

"When we got to the Mill Farm, there was no one at home but the dogs and hens; I suppose the folks had all gone to Northboro to the circus."

"Sure enough, it is circus day! How did I forget it?" ejaculated Mrs. Lane. "That accounts for why there were so few folks on the roads this noon!"

"Yes, everybody seems to have gone but ourselves, even Lockwood's field-hands took a day off."

"They did? Then they didn't go up and down the cemetery hill road this noon?"

"Of course not, why should they?" replied Nellis.

"You didn't remember that it was circus day, did you, and I guess it is the first time you ever forgot it," said Mrs. Lane to Lammy.

"I knew—all right, but I'm savin' up for—you know," replied Lammy, wriggling out of his chair and going to the door where he began crumbing bread and throwing it to some little chickens that had strayed up out of bounds.

"I do wish you had mentioned it, anyhow; it would hev done us all good to have a change, though to be sure I *do* suppose some folks would have turned our going into disrespect to Aunt Jimmy,—Mis' Slocum in particular."

"She went, and Ram, and Mr. Slocum, though he came home early. I saw him down in the turnpike store back of the schoolhouse this noon; he was sayin' he'd had to come back early on account of havin' a lot of things to attend to over at the Mill Farm this afternoon," said Lammy.

"The turnpike store? He doesn't trade there—it's a mile out of his way," said Mrs. Lane, thoughtfully.

"He didn't get to the Mill Farm, anyway," said Nellis, "because I was there from after dinner until I came home just now. Where was I? You got me all off the track."

"You were sayin' that Mr. Clarke asked you all sorts of questions about the mill stream," said Mrs. Lane, who now seemed to have lost interest in Nellis's story.

"Oh, yes,—well, Mr. Clarke and that Mr. Brotherton,—that is superintendent of the engine shop in Northboro,—poked about a lot together, measuring things and figuring in a little book he had in his pocket. It looked as if they were going to make an afternoon of it, and as I saw a fishin' pole inside one of the open sheds, I thought I'd go down the sluice way and try for a mess of perch. I was lyin' quiet out along a willow stump, thinkin' the folks were in the mill, when I heard voices on the dam above. Mr. Clarke said: 'I tell you what, Brotherton, I want you to negotiate this affair for me. That Slocum is a tricky fellow. I saw him a month ago and told him I'd not touch the property until that snarl about the mortgage foreclosure was untangled, the price he asked was outrageous for two hundred acres, of course the buildings are only fit for kindling. Now I want you to either buy me the farm and water right, or else lease it for say twenty years; then I will run a spur of the Northboro Valley railroad down here, move the locomotive works and the paper-mill, and enlarge both plants. This is the right place; plenty of room to build houses for the hands, and close enough to my place to be under my eye without being annoying.

"It will suit my daughter Marion, too. She has all sorts of ideas about building a model village. Of course this is between ourselves, for if that old Slocum rat dreamed that I was behind you, he would ask a dollar a blade for every spear of run-out wire-grass on the farm."

"To think of it!" sighed Mrs. Lane, sitting down so suddenly in the big rocking-chair that it nearly turned a somersault in surprise, "and it was only a scrap of a mortgage, not more'n \$2500, that was the cause of workin' the O'Mores out of property that had been in her family near two hundred years. Everybody knows there was crooked business if it could only be proved. But your father can't find any papers, and now just as he was going this afternoon to search through poor O'More's furniture and things at the house, it had to go and burn down, and the hopes we had that something might be worked out for Bird hev all gone up in smoke," she said, addressing the stove solemnly.

The boys went out together to take a stroll up to the scene of the fire. Hardly had they disappeared when Mrs. Lane jumped from the chair with such a bound that it completed the somersault and stood on its head facing the wall.

"I wonder!" she ejaculated, addressing the pump by the sink, and shaking her finger at it as if the gayly painted bit of iron was her husband. "Yes, it must be it. All along I allowed 'Biram Slocum fired that house for the insurance. Now, by a new light I read he did it so in case there was any papers or letters to and fro about that mortgage that they'd get burned.

"I've noticed he and she hev made plenty of excuses to get into the house alone, but I never reckoned it was for anything else but for general meddlin', and pa's keepin' everything so close, even nailing up the cellar doors and winders, balked 'em.

"He knew the auction was ter-morrow, and that he'd rather burn the papers and furniture than risk Joshua or others finding 'em is my firm belief, and I'd like to prove it. Not that it'll do Bird any good now, but it would be a satisfaction, even though, as Joshua says, 'We've got enough business of our own to shoulder before fall and settlin' time comes.' I wonder if 'Biram 'll hev the cheek to ask for the rent now.

"Yes, I'm going to do a little nosing on my own account,—yes I be!" she continued, adding more mysterious words to the back of the calendar and nodding determinedly at the pump as if it had contradicted. "Knowing never does come amiss, even if it is salted down for a spell. Shoo!" she

cried presently, waving the dish towel at the chickens who had boldly ventured in, and then the tumult, caused by Twinkle's chasing them back to their yard with much barking and sundry nips, brought her back to the present and the work of dish-washing and tidying the kitchen for the evening.

Even then her head and hands did not work together. She hung the biscuit in a pail down the well and set away the butter in the bread-box, put sugar instead of salt into the bread sponge she was setting; and, finally, before she sat down to rest remembering that the pantry door locked hard and creaked when it opened, she poured toothache drops instead of oil upon both hinges and key, and presently began to sniff about and wonder if Dinah Lucky, who had been in that day to do the weekly laundry, was doctoring for "break-bone pains" again, and hoped she had used the laudanum outside instead of in, otherwise nobody could tell when she would turn up to do the ironing.

* * * * *

Next morning if Joshua Lane and Lammy had not been in such a hurry to get down to the fruit farm to prepare the crates and small boxes for the coming strawberry picking, they would have noticed that Lauretta Ann seemed to be quite excited and anxious to get them out of the way. [92]

But Joshua was unusually absorbed and quiet—he was disappointed at not finding the papers—but he had a hard summer's work ahead of him with plenty of thinking in it; while as for Lammy,—he was trying to calculate how many strawberries he must pick at a cent and a half a quart to buy a round-trip ticket from Laurelville to New York, so that he might invite Bird to come up for a Fourth of July visit; also as to whether it would be possible to do this and have anything left to buy fire-crackers. Yet, after all, crackers were of small account, for Bird did not care much for noisy pleasure, and if she didn't come, he wouldn't care for even cannon crackers himself.

"I suppose 'Biram Slocum will go over to Northboro smart and early to collect his insurance," Mrs. Lane remarked, apparently looking out of the window, but stealing a side glance at her husband's face.

"Mebbe he will; but when I turned the cows out an hour ago, I saw him driving Milltown way in his ordinary clothes with a plough and a dinner-pail along, so I reckoned he was goin' to work on that patch of early corn he's got down at the Mill Farm." [93]

At this Mrs. Lane's eyes glistened, and she plunged some dishes into the tub of suds with a splash that was an unmistakable signal that breakfast was over and all but lazy people should be out.

This morning she bustled so that a half hour did all the work of "redding" up that usually took two at the very least, and when Dinah Lucky came to do the ironing with no sniff of laudanum about her, though the kitchen was still heavy with it, Mrs. Lane looked puzzled, then much to that fat aunty's astonishment popped the batch of six plump loaves into the oven and, leaving Dinah to tend the baking,—a thing that save for illness she had never trusted to other hands in her twenty years of housekeeping,—she took a small basket, a knife, and her crisp gingham sunbonnet, and muttering something about trying to get one more mess of dandelion greens, even if it was counted late, disappeared through the woodshed door.

Dandelions grew in plenty in the moist meadow below the cow barn, but Mrs. Lane crossed the road and took a winding path through the woods. After following this for some distance and crossing several fields where she filled her basket with greens, cutting only the very youngest tufts with the greatest deliberation, she turned into the highway through the cemetery gate and walked rapidly past the "four corners," never stopping until she stood in the enclosure that had once been Bird O'More's garden. Then she set down the basket, and, seating herself on the scorched chopping-block, looked about her. [94]

The house had burned down to the foundation; some of the heavy chestnut beams had not been wholly consumed but lay in a heap on the hard dirt floor of the cellar. Otherwise the only bits of woodwork remaining were the frames of two cellar windows that had been protected by the deep stone niches in which they rested. The great centre chimney, around which so many old houses are built, held its own, and its various openings, most of them long unused, marked the location of the different rooms; several of these, such as the smoke closet and brick oven, being closed by rusty iron doors.

Presently Mrs. Lane set out on a tour of inspection. The half dozen outbuildings were quickly explored, for, with the exception of the barn, they were quite open to the weather and as rickety as card houses. Tall weeds struggled with the straggling sweet-william and fiery, hardy poppies in the strip before the lilac bushes that Bird had called her garden, and the rusty wire of the henyard fence enclosed a crowd of nettles that stretched toward the light like ill-favoured prisoners in a pen. The grass and low bushes had been trampled by the people who had gathered to watch the fire, as well as by the cows that had strayed in through the latchless gate. [95]

Clearly there was nothing to be discovered here. Next Mrs. Lane walked about the ruined foundation looking for a likely spot to get down into the cellar. The old chimney with its nooks and crannies was the only thing left to examine, and she had made up her mind to do it even if it meant a rough climb, bruised knees, and scratched fingers.

In some places little heaps of ashes were still smouldering, but by picking her way carefully down the stone steps that had been under the flap-door, she reached the base of the chimney and tried the first iron door. It was warped with the heat, but after some difficulty she opened it, only to find the ample closet absolutely empty. Talking to herself and saying that it was not likely that anybody, even an artist, would hide papers in a cellar, Mrs. Lane looked up to see how it would be possible to reach what had been the kitchen level, where the chances looked brighter; for there was the brick oven and a wide fireplace, closed by sheet iron through which a stove-pipe had pierced. There was no way up but to use the chinks between the big stones for stairs and [96]

climb. True, she had seen an old ladder in the barn, but Lauretta Ann was too practical a woman to trust a dozed rickety ladder—she preferred to cling with her fingers and climb, and cling and climb she presently did.

To young people it seems a very small feat to climb the outside of a broad, rough, stone chimney that slopes gradually from a wide base toward the top. For Mrs. Lane—stout, thick of foot and nearer fifty than forty—it was a terrible exertion, and she paused between every step she took to catch her breath, muttering, “Lauretta Ann Lane, you are a fool if ever there was one. Suppose folks should pass by and see you creepin’ up here like a squawkin’ pigeon woodpecker hanging to a tree?”

She, however, did not in the least resemble even that heavy-bodied bird. Did you ever see a woodchuck mount a low tree when cornered by dogs? That was what Mrs. Lane looked like as she climbed. And did you ever see the same woodchuck scramble, slip, and flop down, flatten himself, and then amble to his hole, when he thought his pursuers had ceased their hunt? Well, that was the way in which Mrs. Lane came down to the cellar bottom, when she found that the brick oven had been used merely to hold broken crockery and such litter. [97]

For a minute or two she sat flat on the floor, resting, nursing her bruised hands, and gazing idly at the outline of the sky through one of the window holes in the stone wall. Then, as she recovered herself, a bit of something fluttering from a broken staple in the scorched window-frame attracted her attention. She picked herself up and examined it. The glass had broken and fallen in, while the bit of metal had caught a narrow rag of woollen material some six inches in length. This was singed at the edges, but enough remained to show that it was a herring-bone pattern of brown and gray such as is often seen in men’s suitings.

Mrs. Lane looked at the rag thoughtfully for a moment, then, detaching it, pinned it carefully inside the lining of her waist, picked up her basket of greens which were by this time rather withered, freshened them with water from the well, and trudged home openly by the highway, saying, as she walked, “‘Tain’t much, and most likely it’s nothin’—still maybe it’s a stitch in the knittin’, and if it is, another ‘ll turn up sooner or later to loop on to it.”

At dinner Mr. Lane gave his wife an odd look saying: “Why, mother, where’ve you been? You look as if you’d gone a berryin’ on all fours! You’re scratched on the nose and chin, let alone your hands.” [98]

“Be I?” answered “mother,” so fiercely that Joshua quailed, and remembered guiltily that he had forgotten her request to clear a tangle of cat brier from over a tumble-down stone wall in the turkey pasture, where his wife passed many times a day to herd this most contrary and uncertain of the poultry tribe, so he said nothing more, but held his quarter of dried apple pie before his face like a fan, while he slowly reduced its size by taking furtive bites at the corners.

About four o’clock Mrs. Lane seated herself on the front porch to sew. She was dressed in a clean print gown, with her collar fastened by a large photograph “miniature” pin of Janey when a baby, a sign that she considered herself dressed for callers. True it was Saturday and Dinah Lucky was still pounding the ironing board, but that was because she had “disappointed” on the two first week-days sacred to such work, and not through any slackness on Mrs. Lane’s part.

The weekly mending was always a knotty bit of business, and to-day doubly so, for now that Lammy was working at the fruit farm, it seemed as if he fairly moulted buttons and shed the knees and seats of his trousers as crabs do their shells. Spreading a well-worn pair of knickerbockers on the piazza floor, she trimmed the edges of the holes and dived into a big piece bag for material for the patches. [99]

“Seems to me I can’t find two bits alike and I do hate to speckle him up all colours and kinds as if he was a grab-bag. I know what I’ll do—I’ll put in what I’ve got and clip down to the store for some blue jean, and run him up a couple o’ pairs of long overalls to cover him, same as his brother’s and Joshua’s. Wonder I didn’t think of ‘em before, only I can’t realize that Lammy is big enough to be at work.”

A man’s shadow crossed the piazza. Mrs. Lane looked up quickly; she had not heard the gate click, and Twinkle, who kept both eyes open as well as ears cocked most of the time, was down at the fruit farm with Lammy.

“Buy something to-day? Nice goots, ver’ cheap,” said a voice in broken English, and a pedler stood on the broad step and swung two heavy packs down to the floor, while he wiped his face and asked if he might get some water from the well.



“Buy something to-day? Nice goots ver’ cheap.”

“Certainly, ’nless you’d prefer milk,” said Mrs. Lane, cheerfully, for she was naturally cheerful and generous, unless she was imposed upon. The pedler, a foreigner, had a full-moon face, that looked both young and tired, two things that always appealed to her, besides which his packs were temptingly fat, and she had a weakness for pedlers. So after getting the milk, she leaned back in her rocker, folded her arms, and prepared to enjoy the exhibition, saying in the same breath: “I don’t know as I care to buy. What have you got?”

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The packs contained a little of everything in addition to the usual tinsel jewellery and cheap finery which she motioned aside, while she selected half a dozen gingham shirts, the overalls, which the man assured her truthfully were only what the goods would cost in the village, and some stout red handkerchiefs.

“You don’d need trouble vit him,” he said, pointing to the tattered trousers. “I sells you somedings vot you can make down schmall,” said the pedler, growing confidential and pulling a stout pair of long pants from a separate compartment in his pack. “Only a dollar, and I give the schentlemens ninety cents for him,—yes, I did. I keep dem for mineself if I home vas going, but I joust stard out. Only von dollar, and only von leetle place broke.”

“I don’t like to trust to buy second-hand clothes; nobody knows what kind of folks have wore ’em,” objected Mrs. Lane, yet at the same time fingering the substantial goods lovingly. “Where are they tore?”

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“Here it vas, joust by der side leg ver you can schmaller make him, and so help me gracious it vas no dirdy peoples wore dem. It vas a rich mans to sell so fine a pants for ninety cents for such a break. Maybe you knows him alretty, for he live”—pointing eastward—“in a big what you call red house by the road there farther.”

“Slocum’s!” ejaculated Mrs. Lane, her hands trembling with excitement.

“Yes, dat vas his name. You take de pants, hein?”

For a moment Mrs. Lane was silent, examining the rent, for the trousers though bright and new were of the same brown and gray herring-bone pattern as the dingy rag she had brought from the cellar window of the burned house.

“Yes, I’ll take ’em. They *could* be cut to advantage, and you may leave me a box of that machine cotton, too; I’m clean out. Now, pack up and move on, my man; I’ve got to see to supper.”

“She vas very glad of dose pants,” thought the pedler to himself, as he trudged away, smiling at the sales he had made.

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Up in the attic Mrs. Lane presently stood by a gigantic cedar chest, the lid of which she lifted with difficulty, next the top tray. In the one below she spread the pair of pants to the torn leg of which was pinned *the* rag.

“It does seem a shame to lay away a pair of ’Biram Slocum’s pants so near my weddin’ shawl, but so must it be. Well, now, there’s two stitches in the garter I’ve set up to knit for the hobbling of ’Bi Slocum’s pace; the third stitch will be to show why he crawled in that cellar window before the fire for he surely didn’t do it after, and why he was afeared to let his wife mend his torn pants.”

ON the night of Bird's arrival in New York Jack and Larry O'More were late for supper. In fact they did not come in until she had gone to bed on the "extension" lounge in the parlour, where she was lying with her teeth clenched in an effort to keep her eyes shut and to choke down the nervousness to which crying would have brought the quickest relief. If Bird could only have been alone in the dark and quiet for a few hours, it would have been much easier for her to have overcome her great disappointment. But in the corner of the family sitting room, amid a litter of sewing and the smell of pipe smoke, with the glare and noise of a busy street coming in the two small windows, sleep was impossible. Finally her aunt closed the lid of the sewing-machine with a bang, tossed her work into a heap in the corner, and, turning out the gas, went into the kitchen.

There were six rooms in the flat, all quite small. The sitting room in front and the kitchen in the rear had windows that opened out, above the three bedrooms clustered round an air-shaft that was like a great chimney having small windows let into it, through which even at noon only a gray, sunless light entered, and the air had no freshness but was full of odours and noises from the flats above and below.

Mr. and Mrs. O'More occupied the room next to the sitting room, Billy sleeping beside them on a small mattress that was propped up nightly upon two chairs; for when the bed was thus made, there was no room to move about. Jack and Larry slept in the middle room which had a door into the hallway, while the third room, opening out of the kitchen, had been used by the oldest boy, Tom, before he had taken wholly to wild ways and drifted off. Now it was more than a year since he had slept there and it was tightly packed with broken furniture, old boxes, and various kinds of trash that it had been easier to throw in there than to dispose of in any other way. A small bath-room at the end of the hall was littered up in much the same way, and it was evident that no one cared for bathing, as the tub was used as a cubby hole for pails, a mop, broom, and the wash boiler and board, for which there was no room on the overloaded fire-escape. Still Mrs. O'More felt the dignity of having a bath-room, for it stamped her home as a "flat," tenements so called having no such luxuries.

Presently Bird gave up all idea of going to sleep or even of closing her eyes, and do her best she could not keep from hearing the conversation that passed between her aunt and uncle in the kitchen, for they made no effort to lower their voices, and she dared not close the door as the only breath of air that reached little Billy, who was tossing about and muttering in his sleep, came through the front windows.

After hearing herself thoroughly discussed until her cheeks burned, her uncle closed with the remark, "Well, of course Terry was all kinds of a helpless fool, but he shouldn't be blamed for it, his mother was a lady out of our class, and his wife too, judging from the looks and ways of the kid, and don't you forget it, and it must come rough to her to be shoved about, anyhow."

Then a new resolve came to Bird from the rough but well-meaning words. Her grandmother and her mother had been ladies,—she would not forget that any more than she would forget her father's wish that she should learn to paint and win the success that had been denied to him.

Presently the subject changed and she heard her aunt speak of Tom and say that it was three months since she had heard from him, and she feared he was dead.

"I hope it will be three months more, then," O'More had cried with an oath that made Bird quiver and pull the pillow over her head, but she was obliged to take it off again because of the heat. "He never minds us unless he's in a scrape, or there's something to pay. But he's not dead, if that's any comfort, for he wrote to me two weeks gone, saying he must have fifty dollars or leave his job, and I wrote him that he'd leave it for all of me."

"And you never told me! I could have sent him a trifle; God knows what he's done by this," and Mrs. O'More covered her red head with her apron and began to whimper.

"Look here, Rose O'More," answered her husband, while Bird judged by the jar that he had brought his fist down on the table with a bang, "that scoundrel has bled you long enough; now we are saving up to have little Billy doctored, and I'll not see you rob yourself and him for that other that we gave the best of everything, and he's turned it to the worst, even if he is the eldest born. If I were you, I'd bank the bit o' money that comes in from the sewin' and not keep it about ye."

"The top drawer of the bureau is bank enough for me. The sum is near complete to buy the frame for his leg, and it will be wanted next week when I take Billy to the doctor, for it's to his own house he shall go, and not to the thing they call the "clink" at the hospital, to be stood up and twisted before a crowd o' dunce heads."

So Billy was to go to a doctor. That was good news, and Bird began to take an interest in life again, for Billy, in a single hour had crept quickly into her sensitive, motherly little heart, and with her to love and to serve were one and the same impulse.

Presently two new voices joined the conversation, knives and forks rattled, and amid pauses she heard scraps of conversation muffled by food-filled mouths, and knew that they were talking of her. Jack and Larry had come home and were having supper. Jack, who worked in an office by day, was attending an evening school of type-writing and bookkeeping, while Larry, who was of slight build and whose ambition was to be a jockey and ride races, was kept late on the track where he was serving an apprenticeship as handy man to a well-known trainer.

"Where is she? Let's have a peek at her. I hope she's pretty if I've got to look at her steady," said Larry, who prided himself on his eye for beauty, and wore plaid clothes and wonderful pink and green neckties, the colours of the stable to which he was attached, and thought it the finest thing in the world, for jockeys are often as loyal to their racing colours as college men are to theirs.

"She isn't so handsome but what it'll keep until morning, and she's dead asleep by this. Quit yer noise, all of ye; ye'll wake little Billy, and he's been that fretful to-day that the rasp of his voice would wear through an iron bar," Mrs. O'More added, as the three burst into loud laughter

over some tale of track happenings that Larry told.

Then the voices dropped to a hum, and then turned to the song of the bees in Mrs. Lane's hives, and Bird drifted away into that sleep that God sends to make our tired bodies and minds able to live together without quarrelling.

* * * * *

Bird slept heavily for many hours, yet to her it seemed only a few minutes when she awoke again, a streak of light shining directly across her face and the same noises coming from every side. This time, however, the light was from the sun, not from the gas, and the noises were fourfold, for there is nothing so varied, penetrating, and stunning as the sound of the awakening of a great city to unaccustomed ears.

For a few moments she lay quite still, gazing about, and trying to realize where she was, and whether awake or asleep, for so many things had happened during the past week, that it all seemed like a bad dream. [109]

Not many days before, morning light brought the hope to Bird that this day her father might be better; only the day before she had waked in Mrs. Lane's big white bed, to see that kind soul watching beside her and Twinkle had come racing upstairs.

Presently it all came back to her, and, getting up, she raised the shade quietly, for no one else was awake, and looked down into the street in which wagons of all kinds were passing, while the sidewalks were already, at six o'clock, swarming with children, driven into the air as early as possible by the heat of the night. Then she looked about for her clothes and a place where she might go to bathe and dress, for the small rooms were all open through, and the lack of privacy and the sight of the flushed disordered sleepers was a fresh jar to her.

Finally she tiptoed into the kitchen where a friendly clothes-horse offered shelter, and managed to make herself neat, and arranged her hair at a mirror hung over the kitchen sink, which she afterward found was the family toilet place; then she stepped out on to the fire-escape where there was the possibility of a breeze. [110]

At that moment she heard Billy's querulous little voice wail, "Oh, I'm so tired—tireder than last night, and I hurt all over," and she slipped back through the hallway into the front room again to meet her aunt who stood in the middle of the parlour, gazing at the empty sofa and open window in some alarm.

"Oh, so yer up and dressed betimes and not fallen out of the winder through sleep-walkin'," she said, not unkindly. "Jack has turns of it at the coming of every hot weather, and he's been down the escape to the ground, up to the roof and every place he could get, so it gave me a turn when I missed yer. Here, I'll just throw a few clothes on Billy and you can take him down to the street for a mouthful of air, while I get the breakfast. I'll fetch him to the doctor to-day if it does put back my sewin', and see if I can't get some ease for him."

"Shall I wash him first?" Bird asked quickly, as his mother began to pull and jerk at his clothes, and then stopped short as she saw a flash in her aunt's eyes that told her that she must be careful what she said.

"Wash him this time of the morning when he's scarce awake, and have him all tired before he has a bite of breakfast? I guess not. You can clean him up this noon, before I take him to the doctor's," and Billy, now hopping, now stumbling along on his little crutch, led the way down the three flights of dark stairs, moving carefully from step to step so that he should not trip in the holes in the carpet with which they were covered. [111]

Once in the street Bird was at the same time interested and confused by what was going on about her. A Jewish fish pedler, with much wagging of head and hands, was trying to sell some stale-smelling flat-fish to a woman who had preceded them downstairs. Another pedler, with a push cart, piled high with cabbages, radishes, and greens, went into one of the houses with a basketful of his wares at the very moment that a big, roan truck-horse halted with his soft, inquisitive nose dangerously near the green stuff. First he sampled a bunch of radishes, but these were too hot for his taste, so he tried a carrot or two, and mangled fully a peck of spinach before he sniffed the cabbages. At these he gave a whinny of delight and nosed among them so vigorously that half a dozen rolled into the gutter, and when the man returned, the horse had started back a yard or so in fright and looked guiltless of the mischief, and the pedler ran down the street after some suspicious-looking boys. Meanwhile the horse stepped forward and nibbled the biggest cabbage with great relish, while Billy clapped his hands, half a dozen other children cheered, and Bird herself laughed and felt glad to see the horse, who did not look overfat, have such a good breakfast. [112]

For if Bird loved flowers and all outdoors, she loved animals still more even if she did not know it, but the other children did not think of the horse at all; they were only glad because it had outwitted the pedler, for between the people of poorer New York and the push-cart people there is everlasting war. This lesson Bird learned that morning before the various factories in the neighbourhood had blown their seven-o'clock whistles.

Another thing that struck her sensitive ear was the different languages that were spoken by the passers-by,—the various mixtures of slang and foreign idioms that the speakers used for English being almost as difficult for her to understand as the German and Italian.

At Laurelville, to be sure, people spoke in two ways. The real country folk had a vigorous, if homely, dialect, such as the Lanes spoke, while Dr. Jedd, the minister, and her father and mother used a purer speech, though her father alone had the soft, distinct way of pronouncing the words that was one of Bird's great attractions. [113]

Little Billy, however, was quite at home with this street language, as far as understanding it went, but no word of it came from his baby lips, strangely enough, and though he was really over six years old, he had the slight frame and innocent, open-eyed gaze of a child of four, and he was

entirely "different like" from the rest of his family, as his mother said, and it provoked her as if the fact of the child's being apart from her own rudeness was a personal reproach.

"Hullo, Billy," called a freckled, lanky-looking girl of perhaps fifteen,—reading by her face, though she was no taller than Bird,—who was coming across the street from a grocer's carefully carrying a bottle of milk as if it was a rare possession.

"Hello, Mattie," he answered cheerfully, hopping to the curb to meet her. "Where've you been? I thought you moved away."

"I've been working all of two weeks, and we moved right in back of your house yesterday. We've got two fine rooms now, and I buy Tessie a bottle of milk every morning now my own self," she said proudly.

"Tessie's legs are very bad again, and I can't get her out except Sundays when mother's at home to help, but she's got a rocking-chair and she can pull it all round the room an' see up out the winder to your 'scape. We seen you sittin' up there last night. Who's the girl?" she added, dropping her voice as Bird drew near to Billy, not knowing how he went about alone and fearful lest he should fall.

"It's Bird, my cousin; she came last night from the far-away country," he answered, clinging to Bird's hand, while the two girls looked at each other, one shyly and the other—city bred and quick-witted—curiously, noticing at once the plain black gown.

"Come to visit or stop?" she asked presently.

"I've come to stay," said Bird, slowly, only half realizing the truth of the words.

"Father dead?"

"Yes."

"Mother living?"

"No."

"Any brothers and sisters?"

"No."

"Well, that's tough luck," said Mattie, her tone full of sympathy. As she set the precious bottle on a damp spot on the sidewalk, so that her hands need not heat the milk, she noticed the tears in Bird's eyes and changed the subject quickly.

"Ain't you going to work soon? I've got a good job—cash-girl—\$3.50 a week, Saturday afternoons off all summer; 'n, if I'm smart in a year, I can get to be an assistant stock-girl. How old are you, anyhow? I'm fifteen and over."

"I'm thirteen and Uncle John is going to send me to school by and by; he says that it closes too soon to make it worth while this term."

"Yes, you'll have to go until you're fourteen or they'll chase you up, even if you do live in a flat with stair carpet. It's too bad, though; you'd have lots more fun working."

"But I want to go to school as long as I can," said Bird, smiling at Mattie's mistake.

"Oh, then you want to begin in an office type-writing or keeping sales books. I don't like that; it's too slow and you can't see the crowd. You'll have a daisy time this summer, though, with nothin' to do but takin' Billy riding in trolleys and seein' the town. I'll tell you all the parks where they have music. Billy's pa is free with dimes for trolley rides. Last year, before my pa's falling accident, we lived down this street, and when Tessie's legs were well enough, Mr. O'More 'd often give me a quarter to take Billy along fer a ride. You can ride near all day fer that, if you know how to work the transfers and stick up fer yer rights."

"Was your father badly hurt?" asked Bird, drawn to this stranger by a common chord.

"Yes, hurt dead," she answered, in a matter-of-fact tone without the trace of a tremble, "and then pretty soon we had to move, and we've been doin' it most ever since, so I kinder lost track o' Billy. You see mother worried sick and we all got down on our luck, but now she's got a steady job to do scrubbin' at the Police Court, and I've got a job, and we've got two rooms and everything is all hunky; that is 'cept Tessie's legs, but some's worse than her and can't even sit up."

"You say you live behind us; which house is it? Perhaps I could see your sister through the window," said Bird, somehow feeling reproached at Mattie's cheerfulness.

"It's the little low house down in the yard, back of yours, that's got winders that stick out of the roof. Ours is the top middle and it's got blinds to it,—all the winders haven't,—and they're fine to draw-to if it rains, 'cause you don't have to shut the window. It's a rear building, and some don't like 'em, and of course Tessie would rather see out to the street, but rents come so high and rear buildings are stiller at night; that is, when there's not too many cats. Were rents high a month where you came from?"

"I don't exactly know," said Bird, trying to remember. "I think we paid ten dollars, but we had a whole house, though it was old, and a garden, and a woodshed, and a barn, and chickens. Everybody lived in whole houses in Laurelville, even though some had only two or three rooms."

"Ten dollars for all that, and we pay eight for two rooms!" ejaculated Mattie, looking hard at Bird to see if she was in earnest, and, seeing that she was, quickly grew confidential, and, coming close, whispered: "Would you, may be, sometime come in and tell Tessie about it and the garden and chickens? She's read about the country in a book she's got,—oh, yes, she can read; she's twelve and went to school up to last year, for all she isn't much bigger 'n Billy—but she can't seem to understand what it's just like and she's cracked after flowers; the man in the corner market gave her one in a pot last year, but it didn't live long because we hadn't a real window that opened out then. Maybe your aunt won't let you come 'cause we live in a rear; my mother says she's awful proud; but then, most anybody would be, living in a whole flat with bells and a stair carpet."

"Say, Bird," she continued, after a moment's silence,—during which the pedler had given up chasing the boys, rearranged his scattered wares, and plodded patiently on,—this time dropping her voice to a whisper and putting her lips to the other's ear, "if yer aunt won't let yer come over, maybe you'd wave to Tessie when you and Billy's takin' the air on the 'scape. I'll tie a rag to our blind so's you'll know the winder. It would be an awful lot of company fer her daytimes when we're out to have somebody to wave to. Yer will? I believe ye; somehow I could tell in a minute ye'd be different from the rest," and giving Bird a thump on the back expressive of gratitude, Mattie picked up her milk bottle and hurried round the corner.

A shout from above next attracted Bird, and looking up she saw her uncle leaning out of the window and calling to them to come up for breakfast. Billy could hop downstairs quite easily, but in going up he was obliged to crawl, baby fashion, on his hands and knees, so Bird followed, slowly carrying his crutch.

Her uncle and cousins were already seated at the table when the pair came up, both rather out of breath. Of the two boys, Larry made no attempt to rise and shake hands, but stared hard at Bird's pale, clear-cut face and neatly brushed almost blue-black hair and lashes that made her violet-black eyes darker yet, then gave a quick nod in which recognition and approval were combined, and continued his meal; while Jack got up, came forward pleasantly, if with the very flourishy sort of manner that somehow always reminds one of the pigeon wings and squirrels in old fashioned writing-books, and waved her to a seat between himself and his father and began to collect the dishes about her plate.

"Go on with yer eatin'," said Mrs. O'More, rather sharply, as if resenting the attention. "Bird can wait on herself,—she's got all day to do it in and it's time you were off. Come round this side by Billy's chair so's you can spread his bread; he's always cuttin' himself," she added.

The food was plentiful enough, if rather coarse in quality,—a dish of oatmeal, slices of head-cheese and corn-beef on the same dish, potatoes sliced cold with pickled cabbage, a bowl of hard-boiled eggs, a huge plate of bread with a big pot of coffee, still further heating the close room from its perch on the gas range. But the table-cloth was soiled and tumbled, and Bird saw with horror that her uncle wiped his mouth on the edge of it, using it as a napkin, while the dishes seemed to have been thrown on without any sort of arrangement.

Not feeling hungry herself, she began to cut up some meat for Billy, who fed himself awkwardly using his knife instead of a fork; but Bird did not dare say anything, and in a few minutes his appetite failed and he sat picking holes in a piece of bread, while Bird looked at the heaped-up plate her uncle pushed toward her with dismay, yet forced herself to eat from inbred politeness.

Larry and Jack, having finished, pushed back their chairs, and hastily filling their lunch-boxes with bread, meat, and eggs, took their coats from the rack in the narrow hall and went out, Larry calling, "So long," as he went downstairs, but Jack turned back and said pleasantly to Bird, "Good-by till night, and don't get homesick, Ladybird!"

"Ladybird, indeed," snapped Mrs. O'More, "you needn't bother; she can't well sicken long over what she ain't got," at which unnecessarily cruel remark, that made Bird stoop lower over her plate and swallow some coffee so quickly that coughing hid her tears, O'More looked up and said: "What's wrong with yer to-day, Rosy? You've no call to hit out when nobody's touchin' yer."

"What's wrong? What's right, I'd like you to tell me?" she flashed; "me with a lot uv sewin' to do, and to get Billy up-town to the doctor's by ten."

"You don't do that tomfool dressmakin' with my leave and consent. I can keep my family and well, too, if you weren't so set on robbin' yerself fer Tom, who'll land himself in prison yet for all of you, if, please God, he doesn't drag the rest of us along with him."

"I can wash the dishes and dress Billy if I may," said Bird, timidly, feeling the tension of a bitter quarrel in the air.

"Well, you may try it for onct, but look to it you neither smash them nor make him cry; there's days he near takes fits at the sight of water. Here's his clean suit, and I'll just go and finish up that silk skirt," and Mrs. O'More pulled some clothes from a corner bureau and left Bird and Billy alone.

"Don't you worry with what she says," said O'More, in a gruff whisper, pressing Bird's shoulder with his kindly grasp. "Just you be good to the little feller and yer Uncle John 'll stand by yer, and maybe ye'll see some way to chirk things up a bit. I've been thinkin' some of puttin' a bit uv an awning out on the 'scape to keep the sun off him while he's takin' the air, only travellin' so much I've not got to it. I'd do it to-day, only I must go to the yards to unload a car o' horses. To-morrer, maybe, I'll stay around home."

"Don't you want any breakfast, Billy?" Bird asked, as her uncle clumped downstairs.

"No,—yes,—I'm hungry, but I'm tired more," he answered, laying his head on the table.

"Suppose I wash and dress you first, and then you can go out on the piazza and eat something and see if you can spy Tessie."

"Will you hurt Billy's bones when you wash him? Ma always does," he added, his lower lip beginning to quiver. He always called himself by name and often spoke in short sentences as very young children do.

"I'll try not to; and if I do, you must tell me and I'll stop right away."

Bird looked about the room to see what she could find without calling her aunt, whose very presence seemed to irritate Billy. There were two stationary wash-tubs beside the range; one of these being empty, she proceeded to fill it half full of water, making it comfortably warm by aid of the tea-kettle. Next she hunted up a piece of soap and found a towel with much difficulty, for the roller towel on the kitchen door was for general use.

"Come and play duck and go in swimming," she said to Billy, who had been watching her with interest as she overturned a pail and put it in the corner of the tub for a seat.

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The idea struck the child's fancy so completely that he could hardly wait to slip out of his few clothes and be helped up on a chair and then into the tub, where he sat comfortably pouring the water over himself with a tea-cup, and chuckling in a way that would have warmed his father's heart.

Meanwhile, Bird gathered the dishes together in the sink, wiping off the plates with bits of bread,—as she had done ever since she could remember and had seen her mother do in the short "better days" when they had a pretty home and her mother had always herself washed the best china in the inside pantry,—and straightened the furniture and hung up various articles that littered the floor so that there was room to move about. By this time Billy was ready for drying, which Bird did so gently that he did not even wince, for she had ministered to her father, seen her father care for her mother, and God had given her the best gift that a girl, be she child or woman, can have,—the gift of loving touch, of doing the right thing almost unconsciously for the weak or helpless.

Billy, clean, refreshed, with his bright hair brushed into a wreath around his forehead, sitting in his little chair on the fire-escape, and being fed with bread and milk by Bird, who talked to him as he ate, was a different being from the crumpled little figure that had only a few moments before looked so pathetic sitting in his high-chair, head on table.

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As Bird gave him the last morsel and wiped his mouth, he leaned backward to where she knelt behind him and, clasping his arms around her neck, pulled her head down to him, and, nestling there, whispered, "Billy loves Bird very much, and she must stay close by him forever 'n' ever, won't she?"

"See, that must be Tessie's window down there," she said, not trusting herself to answer and catching sight of a white rag hanging from the blind of a low building that stood in the rear of a shop that fronted on the next street. It was an old-fashioned, two-story, wooden house, with dormer windows in a roof that had been once shingled. There were a dozen such in Laurelville, and as Bird looked at it she wondered how it came to be there, built in on all sides, and if it didn't miss the garden that must have once surrounded it.

Then as she looked she saw the outline of a face inside the window. It was so far down and across that she could not distinguish the features, but she waved the towel she held, and Billy shook his hand. Presently something white waved back, and thus a telegraph of love and sympathy crossed the dreary waste of brick and clothes-lines, and put the three in touch, and the Bird, who had been taken from the country wilds and put in a city cage, and the two little cripples were no longer alone, for even at these back windows there was some one to wave to and respond.

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Mrs. O'More was in a better mood when, an hour later, having finished the gown, she came back to the kitchen to find the dishes washed and set away, and Billy sitting contentedly in his chair throwing crumbs to try to coax some pigeons that lived in the stable next door from the roof to the fire-escape.

"I'll take him up to the doctor's now," she said to Bird, without vouchsafing any remarks upon the improved appearance of the kitchen, though she saw it all. "You can come along with me if you like, or you can stop here and look about and rest yourself a bit. There's plenty of passing to be seen from the front room."

Bird said she thought she would rather stay at home.

"Mind, now, and lock the inside hall door as soon as we've gone and don't let anybody in, for, in spite of the catch on the door below, there's always pedlers and one thing and another pushing up."

After Mrs. O'More had left, Bird went through into the sitting room. Seating herself by the window with her arms on the sill, she looked down into the street. It was an intensely hot day in spite of a breeze that blew from the East River; down by the pavement the mercury was climbing up into the nineties—summer had come with a jump. Could it be only a week ago that she had been picking long-stemmed, purple violets by the brook beyond the wood lot at Laurelville? Was it only day before yesterday that Lammy had brought her the red peonies, and they had walked up the hill road together?

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She had stayed by the window for some time, perhaps half an hour, watching the horses that were led out from the stable to be cooled by spray from the hose attached to the hydrant in front, when a slight noise in the kitchen caused her to turn. The light from the window opening on the fire-escape was darkened, and a man's figure showed for a second in outline against the sky and then swung noiselessly into the kitchen.

Bird's first impulse was to scream, but, checking it, she shrank trembling behind a tall rocking-chair and watched. The man glanced about the kitchen and came directly through to the room where her uncle and aunt slept. It did not seem to occur to him that there was anybody at home, though Bird did not think of this until afterward.

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Pausing before the bureau, he opened the upper drawer, and, after passing his hand rapidly through the clothing it contained, drew out a long wallet, which Bird recognized as the one from which her aunt had taken some money before going to the doctor's. Without thinking of the result or counting the cost, she rushed forward and caught the wallet tight in both hands, crying, "You mustn't take it, you shan't; for it's the money to pay for mending poor Billy's leg."

The man, taken utterly by surprise, fell back, but only for a moment, and, muttering a string of such words as Bird had never before heard, seized her by the shoulder with one hand while he tried to wrench the pocket-book from her with the other; but, strong as he was, this took several minutes, for Bird hung on desperately, clinging to his arm after he had secured the wallet, until finally he picked her up bodily and threw her on to the bed, and before she could recover herself, locked the door into the sitting room, and, taking out the key, did the same to the door into the

boys' room, through which he retreated, leaving her a prisoner, for the window into the air-shaft was high out of reach.

As Bird sat on the edge of the bed sobbing with fright and the thought of what the loss of the money might mean to Billy, noise of a scuffle reached her ears from the kitchen and the locked door burst open suddenly as it had closed, pushed by a strong shoulder, but it was the face of a perspiring policeman that peered through the crack.

"Catch him, oh, do catch him!" she implored; "he's got the money from Aunt Rose's drawer that's to pay for mending Billy's leg!"

"He's caught safe enough, my girl,—me mate has him in the kitchen and the money, too, though he did try to throw it over the yards when we grappled him. You see there's been a slew of these daylight thieves around these parts lately, sneaking over roofs and down escapes when folks are at work. We spotted this one goin' through the saloon on the corner and in among the skylights, and we followed but lost track, for he has another wallet lifted besides this one, and if he'd slid out a minute sooner, we'd have lost him."

"Then holding on did some good, after all," Bird gasped, still standing with tightly clasped hands as if she were holding the precious money in them.

"An' did yer grab him, now? Look at that fer pluck,—it's a wonder he didn't smash yer entirely. Come out and take a look at him; maybe ye can tell did ye see him before."

Bird looked, but the young man was a stranger to her. He did not appear to be more than twenty, and, as they led him away, handcuffed to an officer, he pulled his hat so low over his face that the crowd that gathered and followed as soon as the street was reached could not see his features, or if he was old or young.

Bird gave the officer her uncle's name, and he said: "When he comes in, tell him to come round to the station-house and he'll get his money all right. I've got to take it in as evidence." The street was hardly clear again of the curious crowd when the twelve-o'clock whistle sounded and workmen appeared from all quarters, either with pails to eat their dinners in the shade of the house fronts, or on the way to their various homes.

Mrs. O'More and her husband—for he had been watching for their car—came up the street together, little Billy between them, and it was strange that they did not meet the policemen with their prisoner. Bird was watching eagerly for them, and, after hearing their news,—that the doctor said it was possible to help the lame leg, only that Billy must grow stronger before it could be done,—told them hers.

Both listened eagerly. Her uncle said, "Yer pluck does credit to the O'Mores, but did ye mind the villain's face what it was like?"

"Oh, yes," Bird answered excitedly, "it was smooth and fair, and he had very blue eyes with a long scar over one, and his hair was quite red." Glancing at her aunt, she saw that she had turned deadly pale, and a certain resemblance struck her for the first time.

"God help us,—it's Tom come back to rob his own mother," gasped poor John O'More.

"But you'll not appear against him, John," cried his wife, throwing her arms around him as he seized his hat and turned to go out.

"I can't, woman, I can't; but maybe it'll do no good. I must go round to the station and get the wallet and see to this, anyway."

And Bird, after laying Billy on the lounge for a nap, sat by her aunt,—who, while waiting to hear the outcome, had collapsed and was crying noisily,—and tried to take off her tight waist and bathe her face, and she realized that there were even worse griefs than leaving one's home and father, for surely dear Terry was safe beyond all harm now.

VII

SUMMER IN NEW YORK

THE arrest of Tom O'More threw the matter of little Billy's leg into the background for a time. When the father had gone to the court where his son was arraigned, he found that not only was there another charge against him, but that all unknown to his family he had committed petty thefts in other places, and had already what the police call "a record," so that he had to go to the penitentiary for a year, and John O'More, feeling his disgrace keenly, for though he was a rough man and coarse in many ways he was as honest as the day, turned doubly to little Billy, and could not bear to have him out of his sight when he was at home.

The doctor's orders concerning Billy had been short and clear, but it was fully a week after the visit before his mother could pull herself together or even think of carrying them out, and then when O'More took a day at home and had leisure to ask for details, she began by saying that what the doctor had ordered to get the child in condition for treatment was nonsense, and only to be had by rich folks.

"Well, well, woman, let's hear and get to the core o' the matter," said John O'More, tired of the continual word warfare.

"He's to have a real bed and no shake-down, so's he can stretch out and roll about, and it's to be in a room opening to the light where he can lie quieter by himself an hour or so every day. Then he's to get a full bath every morning and a light meal, and fresh meat at noon, and a bite

and sup between that at supper, and the between times filled in with air and a bottle o' tonic, and the saints knows what else.

"Do yer think I keep a 'ospital to do all them things,' sez I to the doctor.

"No,' he answers quick like, 'and for that reason I think it will pay you best to send him to the 'ospital to get him built up.'

"His father will not hear to it,' I said.

"Very well, then,' said he, 'you know what I think; go home and talk it over.'"

So John O'More sat and thought and blinked at the ground, and thought some more, but it was Bird who first spoke, though very hesitatingly, for her aunt resented almost everything she said, and in her ignorance and prejudice seemed to owe poor Bird a grudge as being partially responsible for Tom's arrest, rather than showing any gratitude toward her for trying to prevent the theft of the money. [133]

"Couldn't Billy have a bed in the little room that was—that is shut up?" she asked finally. "The door is close to the kitchen window, and a good deal of air would come in."

"It's packed solid full, and besides the room is off from me, so's I couldn't hear the child to tend him in the night if needs," objected Mrs. O'More, somewhat hotly.

"Couldn't the things be put in the attic or somewhere?" persisted Bird, seeing a flash of approval cross her uncle's face, "and then there would be room for two beds, and I could stay with Billy and give him his bath every morning."

"Attic! do you hear her?" mocked the aunt, "and a fine slop there'd be in me kitchen, and a nice place for folks to eat breakfast, with the bath."

"If the things were taken out of the bath-tub we could use that," continued Bird, waxing bold at the prospects, "and I'm sure, Aunt Rose, it would be much nicer for you to have the parlour to yourself, and not have to make me a bed there every night."

"That last is true; I've been greatly put out these days when company called," the company being the slipshod factory girls for whom she did sewing, but, as often happened, Bird had unconsciously said the one thing that could have appeased her aunt, for only when something was suggested that would benefit herself was she willing to have others considered. [134]

"The tub is full of holes, and the agent he won't mend it, saying that I made them with the ice-pick, when for convenience I used that same tub for an ice-box, me own givin' out."

"If that's all, a bit o' solder is cheap," said O'More, springing to his feet, and preparing to take action.

"I've the day on me hands, and a few extry dollars in me pocket, and if something can't be worked out o' this, 'twon't be my fault; and while I recommember it, I think you'd be the better of a new hat, Rosie, and while yer out buyin' it, jest step in the store, round on Third Avenue and get two o' them light-lookin', white iron beds; they're cheap, for I saw yesterday when passin' that they be havin' a bargain sale of them," and John, with the quick-witted diplomacy of his race, handed his wife some money which she took, and, half mollified, at once prepared to go out, instructing Bird to "do up the rooms" while she was gone.

The door had not fairly closed when O'More gave a shout that almost frightened Bird, and said: "Now we'll do some hustlin'; there's no attic, me girl, but there's the coal-closet in the cellar which is empty, now that we use gas in the range. Half the stuff is but fit for the ashman, and the rest I'll bundle down there quick as I get a man from the stable to help. Now watch sharp whilst I put the truck out and see if there's aught yer can use." [135]

When the room was finally cleared, a mirror, a chair, and a small chest of drawers were the only useful assets, and these Bird pulled into the kitchen, while she dusted and wiped away at them until they looked clean, even if somewhat shabby.

Returning from the cellar O'More (in his youth a handy man in a stable) attacked the dust in the little room with broom, mop, and finally a scrubbing-brush to such good purpose that in an hour it was quite another place, for the walls fortunately had been painted a light cream and were in fairly good condition.

If John O'More had been asked to go down on his knees and scrub a room, he would have resented the work as an insult to his manhood, but love had set the task. Little Billy, sitting there in his chair, his face all eagerness, needed the room, and so he did the work as nonchalantly as he would have stepped into the stable and curried a horse in a hurry time. It was only when Bird clapped her hands in admiration and said, "Why, uncle, how nice and quick you did that; Dinah Lucky would have taken a whole day," that he became embarrassed, and, giving her an apologetic wink, said with lowered voice, "It's a job well done, but whist! 'tis not for the good of my health to be repeated," and Bird understood and wondered, as she did a hundred times during that long summer, why she always understood her uncle and he her, while life with her aunt seemed one long misunderstanding. [136]

A plumber, living in the flat below, came up in the noon hour and soldered the holes in the tub, which O'More declared to be too black even for a pig's trough, so he sped out around one of those many "corners," of which at first Bird thought the city must be made, for a quart of boat paint and a brush.

"Yer aunt must be havin' a hard time with her tradin'," he remarked on his return, seeing that his wife had not come back to prepare dinner. But just as Bird had spread the table with various articles of cold food, whose abiding-places she very well knew, and was making Billy some little sandwiches to coax him to eat meat for which he had a distaste, Mrs. O'More came in, talkative and almost pleasant as the result of her morning's bargaining.

Before night two narrow beds were carefully fitted into opposite sides of the little room, with the chest of drawers set between, in front of the now-closed door that led to the boys' room, with the looking-glass hung above it. It was only a bit of a place and still very close and stuffy, but [137]

Billy and Bird had at least beds of their very own, if only in a niche apart, and Bird's heart took fresh courage.

The next step was to coax her uncle to fill some long boxes with earth and set them inside the outer railing of the fire-escape. There is a law against filling up these little balconies with boxes or furniture of any kind, but Bird knew nothing about it, and her uncle regarded it as a sort of tyranny that he, a free-born citizen, should disregard. All Bird thought of was that she might plant morning-glory seeds in the earth so they would climb up the strings she fastened to the next story, and later on there was, in truth, a little bower blooming above that arid waste of bricks and ashes.



Bird and Billy on the Fire-escape.

After the new room was arranged, and permission given to Bird to see that Billy had what the doctor ordered that he should eat, and to take him out whenever he wanted to go, everything began to move more regularly and in some respects more comfortably, then Bird, to her dismay, saw the city summer, like a long roadway without a tree or bit of shade, stretching out before her.

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There was not a book in the house and no one to tell her of the free library where she might get them, and school, where she hoped to find a sympathetic teacher for a friend, belonged to September three months away. No one who has always lived in the city can possibly understand what this change, with its confinement and lack of refined surroundings, meant to this young soul. To be poor, in the sense of having little to spend and plain food, she was accustomed,—in fact, she had much more to eat now, and through her uncle's careless kindness she was seldom without dimes for the trolley rides to Battery Park "where the fishes lived," or Central Park with the swan-boats that were to "make a man" of Billy. But to be shut away from the woods, the sky, the beauty of the sunsets, to have no flowers to gather and love, and to be brought face to face daily with all the ugliness of the life that is merely of the body, was almost too much for her courage.

How could she keep her head above the street level, how remember what her father had taught her?—already the memory of the past was becoming confused. Sometimes she was on the verge of ceasing to try and settling down into a silent drudge, content to take what came, and falling into the habits and commonplace pleasures of the girls of her cousins' acquaintance with whom she was thrown in the parks and on the stoop and streets. It would have been much easier in some respects,—her aunt would have been better pleased to see her go off with the others, to some noisy if harmless excursion, arrayed in a cheap, flower-wreathed hat and gay waist, shrieking with laughter, and chewing gum, than to see her always neat amid disorderly surroundings and ever willing to do the endless little tasks that her own mismanagement piled up, and Ladybird—Jack's name for her—strangely enough seemed a term of reproach, not compliment.

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At first Bird had hoped that Sunday might bring better things; but no, Sunday in the quiet, peaceful, Protestant sense that Bird understood it,—there was none. The family straggled to early mass one by one, for Mrs. O'More and her sons were Romanists, though O'More was not, being from the north of Ireland, and the rest of the day was spent by the men either lying in bed and smoking, or standing in groups about the street.

In these hard days little Billy was Bird's only ray of light. The two, being of equally sensitive natures, clung together, and the child was so happy in his new-found friend and ceased his incessant fretting whenever he was with her, that Mrs. O'More at last gave him completely to Bird's charge with a sigh of relief, for her youngest child was as much a puzzle to her as her niece, and she felt that he also was of a different breed, as it were, and it annoyed her.

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All the fierce scorching summer days Bird and Billy wandered about together, sometimes going over to Madison Square, sometimes riding in the trolley to Central Park, but more often down to the Battery where the air tasted salt and good, where the wonderful fishes lived in the round house and the big ships went past out to that unknown sea of which Bird was so fond of telling Billy stories.

Bird, too, soon learned to find her way about, for six-year-old Billy had all the New York gamin's knowledge of his whereabouts coupled with a cripple's acute senses. He hopped along with his crutch quite well, and many a lesson in human nature and life did Bird learn these days in the treeless streets of poorer New York.

After a time she found that her uncle had seemed to forget his hatred of anything like drawing or painting, so one day she ventured to buy a good-sized pad and pencil, and then watching Bird "make pictures" became Billy's great joy, while she to her surprise found that she could draw other things besides flowers.

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Oftentimes the children would go down to sit on the steps and watch the horses from the great sales stable being exercised up and down the street. Bird tried to draw these too, and one day succeeded so well that her uncle, passing in at the door, stopped and looked down, and then said, "Bully! any one would know it for a horse, sure!" After that she worked at every odd minute.

She loved horses dearly, but she and Billy were forbidden to go into the stables, which were almost underneath the flat, and Bird really had no wish to, for the men there were so rough and there was so much noise and confusion; but a few doors away was a fire-engine house where lived three great, gentle, gray horses that ran abreast, and had soft noses that quivered responsively when they saw their driver even in the distance. Bird made friends with these, taking them bits of bread or green stuff, until the firemen came to expect the daily visit and "Bird" and "Billy" became familiar names in the engine-house; and there was a little dog there that ran with the engine and reminded her of Twinkle.

Dan was the heaviest of the three horses and Bird's favourite, and one day, after many attempts, seated on the stoop of the next house, she succeeded in drawing a small head of him that was really a good likeness, at least so the firemen thought, for they put it in a frame and hung it in the engine-house, and the next day big Dave Murray, Dan's driver, gave her a small box of paints "with the boys' compliments."

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Ah, if the big, bluff fellow only knew what the gift meant to poor little Ladybird struggling not to forget and to still keep the heavenly vision in sight.

Bird had written a short note to Mrs. Lane telling of her safe arrival in the city, and giving her address, but more than that she could not say. If she said that she was happy and gilded the account of her surroundings, it would have been false. If she told the truth, her Laureville friends would be distressed, and it would seem like begging them to take her back when it evidently was not convenient, for she did not know that her Uncle John had refused to let her stay with Mrs. Lane unless she was legally adopted.

Neither was Bird worldly wise enough to act a part and simply write of her visits to the park and the little excursions with Billy which in themselves were pleasant enough. She was crystal clear, and knew of but two ways, either to speak the whole truth or keep silent. She was too loyal to those whose bread she was eating to do the first, and so she did not write.

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In due time a long letter came from Lammy written with great pains and all the copy-book flourishes he could master, telling of Aunt Jimmy's strange will, of how he was going to work all summer at the fruit farm, and ended up by telling her of the preparations he had made for the Fourth, never dreaming it possible that, the matter of tickets disposed of, Bird should refuse his invitation.

At first the thought of getting away from the city, and being among friends again quite overcame her. She began to wonder if Twinkle would be glad to see her, and if the ferns met over the brook as they did last year, and if Mrs. Lane would have the white quilt on the best-room bed, or the blue-and-white patch with the rosebuds. Then she realized that if she met the Laureville people face to face, she would surely break down, while the saying "good-by" again would be harder than not going. Then, too, there was little Billy. How could she leave him at the very time when, in spite of continued hot weather, he seemed to be gaining?

No—she sat down resolutely and wrote a short note that wrung her heart and kissed it passionately before she mailed it, for was it not going to the place that now seemed like heaven to her?

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But the letter that arrived as the Lanes sat on porch after supper said no word of all this, and seemed but a stiff, offish little note to warm-hearted Mrs. Lane and Lammy who, having now quite earned the ticket money, was cut to the quick when he found that it was all in vain.

"She's gone to the city and forgotten us," he gulped in a quavering voice, as he read the letter, coming as near to letting a tear run down his nose as a sturdy New England boy of fourteen could without losing his self-respect.

"It doos *appear* that way," said Mrs. Lane, who was gazing straight before her out of the window with an abstracted air; "but, after all, what's in appearances, Lammy Lane? Don't your copy-book say that they are deceitful? Well, that's what I think of 'em. Likely 'nough it appears to Bird that I didn't want to keep her, 'cause owing to this other mix-up, I couldn't divide the share of you boys without thinking it over, and 'dopt her then and there. But my intentions and them

appearances is teetotally different.

"No, Lammy, I'm goin' straight on lovin' Bird and trustin' her and keepin' a place in my heart for her, besides havin' the best-room bed always aired and ready, and jest you keep on lovin' and trustin' her, too, and like as not the Lord will let her know it somehow, for I do believe kind feelings is as well able to travel without wires to slide on as this here telegram lightnin' that hollers to the ships that's passin' by in the dark. 'Think well and most things 'll come well,' say I."

"How about Aunt Jimmy's will? Yer always thought well enough o' her," said Joshua, who had laid down his paper and folded his spectacles to listen to the reading of the letter.

"An' I do still," Mrs. Lane averred stoutly; "it doos *appear* disappointing, but I allers allowed that if we was only able to read her meanin', 'twould be a fair and kindly one."

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VIII

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THE FLOWER MISSIONARY

It was the last day of June when one morning, before the sun had a chance to turn the pavements into ovens, Bird, having finished some marketing for her aunt, was leading Billy slowly in and out along the shady sides of the streets toward Madison Square, where they were watching the lotus plants in the fountain for the first sign of an open flower, for already buds were pushing their stately way through the great masses of leaves.

Chancing to glance at the window of a newly finished store that was not yet rented, Bird read the words, "Flower Mission." As she paused to look at the sign, wondering what it might mean, an express wagon stopped at the curb and several slat boxes and baskets filled with flowers, for sprays peeped from the openings, were carried into the building, a wave of moist coolness and perfume following them.

Bird's heart gave a bound of longing, for the fragrance of the flowers painted a picture of her little straggling garden and held it before her eyes for a brief moment.

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"Oh, look, Bird, come quick and look; it's all full of pretty flowers in there! Do you think they would let Billy go in and smell close?" Billy was standing by the open door, and, as Bird glanced over his shoulder, she saw that one side of the store was filled by a long counter, improvised by placing boards upon packing cases, which was already heaped with flowers of every description in addition to those that the expressman had just brought.

An elderly lady, with a big, white apron tied over a cool, gray, summer gown, was sorting the flowers from the mass, while a tall, slender young girl, of not more than sixteen, dressed all in white, was making them into small bouquets and laying them in neat rows in an empty hamper.

It was the young girl who overheard Billy's question to Bird and answered it, saying, "Of course Billy may come in and smell the flowers as much as he pleases, and have as many as he can carry home."

"Oh, can we?" said Bird, clasping her hands involuntarily with her old gesture that expressed more joy than she could speak.

At the sound of the second voice, the young girl pushed back the brim of her drooping, rose-trimmed hat and looked up with clear, gray eyes. As she did so Bird recognized her as Marion Clarke, the daughter of the man who spent his summers in the stone house on the hillside beyond Northboro, and it was she who had passed Bird and Lammy on the roadside the day when she had left her old home and, carrying Twinkle, was going to Mrs. Lane's.

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But if Bird recognized Marion, the memory was on one side, as it is apt to be where one sees but few faces and the other many. This however did not prevent Marion from holding out her free hand to the younger girl, as she made room for her to pass between the boxes, saying, in a charming voice, low-keyed and softly modulated, yet without a touch of affectation: "If you are fond of flowers and can spare the time, perhaps you would help us this morning; so many of our friends have left the city that we are short-handed. Here is a little box your brother can sit on if he is tired." Oh, that welcome touch of companionship, and that voice,—it made Bird almost choke, as she said:—

"Billy is my cousin, and I should love to tie the flowers, for Aunt Rose does not expect us back until noon."

It was one of Marion Clarke's strong points, young as she was, that she had insight as well as tact. She saw at a glance that these children were not of the ordinary class that play about the streets, interested in every passing novelty, merely because it is new, so she had given Bird a friendly greeting and asked her to help, instead of merely offering the children a bouquet and letting them pass on as objects of charity, no matter how light the gift.

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When Bird replied in direct and courteous speech, Marion knew that she had read aright. An ordinary street child of that region would have said, "I dunno 's I will," or "What 'll ye give me 'f I do?" or perhaps declined wholly to answer and bolted off after grabbing a handful of flowers.

"Aunt Laura, will you let us have some string? There, see, it is cut in lengths, so that you can twist it around twice and tie it so. I do wish people would tie up their flowers before they send them, they would keep so much better; but as they do not, we have to manage as best we may.

"Oh, how nicely you do it," she continued, as Bird held up her first effort for approval,—a dainty bouquet of mignonette, a white rose, and some pink sweet-william, with a curved spray of

honeysuckle to break the stiffness.

"So many people put the wrong colours together, and tie the flowers so tight that it seems as if it must choke the dear things,—see, like this," and Marion held up a bunch in which scarlet poppies and crimson roses were packed closely together without a leaf of green.

"Yes, I understand; those colours—hurt," Bird answered, groping for a word and finding exactly the right one.

"You must have lived in the country and been a great deal with flowers to touch them so deftly and know so well about the colours."

"I always lived in the country until this summer, and Terry taught me all about the colours and how to mix them."

"Who was Terry?" asked Marion, much interested, and not knowing that she was treading upon dangerous ground.

"He was father," and Bird, remembering where she was, stopped abruptly, and Marion, who had noticed the rusty black gown, understood that there was a story in its shabby folds and forbore to intrude.

Miss Laura Clarke, who was the lady in gray, gave Billy a pasteboard box lid of short-stemmed blossoms to play with, and he sat quite content, while the others kept on tying the flowers until only one basketful was left.

"The flowers come in every Wednesday morning, and I ask people to send them in as early as possible, so that they may be sorted and tied up by ten o'clock when the ladies come to distribute them," Marion explained as they worked. "They are Miss Vorse, the deaconess from the mission, beside two workers from the College Settlement, and half a dozen district visitors. Those two hampers go direct to hospitals, but the ladies take the flowers about to the sick in the tenements and to special cases.

"I have come here from the country place where I live every week all through May and June, but this is my last day this season, because I'm going to Europe next week with my aunt, and Miss Vorse will take my place."

Another disappointment for Bird. At last she had met some one to whom she had felt drawn, and whom she thought she might see occasionally, and almost in the same breath learned that she was going away.

"Do you know of any children who would like some flowers, or any one who is ill?" she added, as she noticed that Bird was silent and loath to go, even though all the bouquets were ready and Miss Laura was packing them in the baskets and boxes for distribution.

"There's Tessie; oh, I know that Tessie would love to have some!" cried Bird, eagerly; "she has not waved to us for nearly a week, and I was going to see her this afternoon when Billy takes his nap, if Aunt Rose will let me," and Bird told what she knew of the little cripple who "kept house" by herself while her mother and sister worked.

Then a happy idea came to Marion Clarke. Handing out a flat wicker basket, that held perhaps twenty-five bouquets, to Bird, she said: "Would you like to be one of the Flower Missionaries this summer and carry bouquets? Yes?" as she saw the glad look in her eyes; "then you may fill this basket, and here is a big bouquet for you and something extra sweet to add to the basket,—see, a bunch of real wallflowers, such as grow over seas, some foreign-born body will go wild with joy over it, and here is a fruit bouquet a youngster has evidently put together,—big strawberries on their stalks set in their own leaves.

"Miss Vorse is coming now. I will introduce you and tell her to give you the flowers. What is your name? Bird O'More. I'm glad of that; it seems to fit you. I should have been disappointed if it had been Jane Jones," she continued, as a sweet-faced, tall young woman, dressed in a dark blue gown and bonnet, entered, saying: "I'm afraid that I am late, but there is so much illness among the little children in the district now that I could not get away. A new Flower Missionary! That is good; children can reach those whom we cannot."

Presently Bird found herself walking along the street, Billy's hand in one of hers, and the basket of flowers in the other. Billy was prattling happily, but for once she scarcely heard what he said, the flower voices were whispering so gently and saying such beautiful things.

"Take us to Tessie," whispered one. "God lets us bring sunlight to dark places," said another—"You can do the same." "Be happy, you have something to give away," breathed another, and this flower was a spray of cheerful honeysuckle that blooms freely for every one alike.

Yes, Bird was happy, for Marion Clarke had held her by the hand and called her a Flower Missionary; she had flowers to give away and flowers to take home. Oh, joy! she could try to paint them, and she pushed the bouquet that held the old garden flowers, the mignonette, sweet brier and honeysuckle under the others to keep for her own.

If she waited to go home first, the flowers might fade, so an impulse seized her to give Tessie her flowers first, and then turned into the street below their own, trying to remember Mattie's directions—"Count six houses from the butcher's, and then go through the arch, and up two pairs of stairs to the top."

Before she had gone a block, two little girls had begged her for flowers, one rosy and sturdy chose red and yellow zenias; the other, who, like Billy, had a "bad leg" and hopped, chose delicate-hued sweet peas. Bird had never seen a lame child in Laurelville, but now she met them daily, for such little cripples are one of the frequent sights of poorer New York.

At the first corner a blind woman, selling the mats she herself crocheted, begged for "a posy that she could tell by the smell was passing." To her Bird gave the bunch of mignonette. A burly truckman, who thought she was selling the flowers, threw her a dime and asked for a "good-smellin' bokay for the missis who was done up with the heat," so she tossed him back the coin and a bouquet of spicy garden pinks and roses together, while Billy called in his piping voice,

"We're a Flower Mission—we gives 'em away," so that the man drove off laughing, his fat face buried in the flowers.

When Bird had counted the "six houses from the butcher's" and found the archway, which was really the entrance to a dismal alley, her basket was almost empty. She hesitated about taking Billy into such a place, and in fact but for her great desire to give Tessie the flowers, she would have turned back herself. As she looked up and down the street, a policeman passing noticed her hesitation and stopped.

"Sure it's the plucky girl from Johnny O'More's beyond that tried to catch the thief,—and what do you be wantin' here?"

Bird recognized the policeman and explained, and he said, "Ye do right not to be pokin' in back buildings heedless; it's not fit fer girls like you, but this same is a dacent place, though poor, and as I'm not on me beat, only passin' by chance, I'll go through to the buildin' with ye, and the kid can stay below with me while ye go up, for stairs isn't the easiest fer the loikes av him."

So through they went, the big policeman leading the way, and entering the back building Bird began to grope upward. When the house had stood by itself in the middle of an old garden, the sun had shone through and through it, but now the windows on two sides were closed, and the halls were dark, and the bannister rails half gone.

At the first floor landing she paused a moment. What was that tap, tapping? It came from a small room made by boarding off one end of the broad, old-fashioned hallway. The door was open and a single ray of sun shot across from an oval window that had originally lighted the stairs and was high in the wall.

In the streak of sun was a cobbler's bench and on it sat a man busily at work fastening a sole to a shoe, so old that it scarcely seemed worth the mending.

Then she went on again and, after knocking at two wrong doors, finally found the right one.

"Come in," piped a shrill, cheery voice; "I can't come to open it," and in Bird went.

"I hoped that you would come to-day," said the small figure, sitting bolstered up in a wooden rocking-chair with her feet on a box covered with an end of rag carpet, by way of greeting. No introduction was necessary, for the two girls knew each other perfectly well, although their previous acquaintance had merely been by waving rags across the yards.

"My legs haven't felt as if they had bones in 'em in a week," Tessie continued, "so's I couldn't reach up high enough to wave, and it seemed real lonesome, but I've got a new pattern for lace, and there's a man in the store where Mattie works who says he'll give me half-a-dollar for every yard I make of it,—what do you think of that?" and she spread out proudly a handsome bit of Irish crocheted lace upon which she was working. It was four inches wide, a combination of clover leaves, and very elaborate, of the kind that is so much sought now and costs many dollars a yard in the shops.

"It is beautiful," explained Bird; "how do you know how to do it?"

"My mother learned long ago in the Convent in the old country, but her hands are too stiff to make it now, and besides she says it wouldn't pay her. So she showed me the stitch and some of the old patterns, and one night last week, when I couldn't sleep very good, I was thinkin' of the lace work, and I guess I must have dreamed the new pattern, for the next morning I worked it right out. Those leaves is like some that came in a pocketful of grass Mattie fetched me home; one day they were cutting it over in the square, and the man let her take it. I just love the smell o' grass, don't you? And now's I can't get out, Mattie brings me some in her pocket every time she can. I guess she will to-night if they've cut it to-day."

All this time Bird held her basket behind her, but now she wheeled about and rested it on the arm of Tessie's chair. The joy of the child was wonderful, almost startling. Her dark eyes dilated and she looked first at Bird and then at the flowers, as she almost whispered in the excitement of her surprise, "Ye ain't got 'em to keep, have ye?" Then as Bird tipped them into her lap, "They ain't fer me, fer sure?"



"They ain't fer me, fer sure?"

"Yes, they are, and I'm going to bring you some every Wednesday," said Bird, joyfully, and then she told about Marion Clarke and the Flower Mission.

"Ain't it jest heavenly to think of,—me with a whole winder to myself that opens out and the crochet to do and real flowers, new ones that ain't been used at all," and Tessie leaned back and closed her eyes in perfect content.

Then suddenly Bird's sorrow seemed to grow lighter and life a little brighter, and the sunlight as it were crept in to sweeten them both—she had something to give away, and lo, it was good.

Tessie was down handling the blossoms again and discovered the berry bouquet beneath. "Oh, but here's growing strawberries on a bush like! Well, I never, never! But they're handsome! Maybe I could make a pattern from them, too. Oh, surely there's angels about somewhere doin' things. You know Father John, he says I've got a Guardian Angel looking out after me, and St. Theresa my name saint chose her, and that everybody has, though for a long spell I didn't know it. You see it's been easier for her to look after me since we've got a room with an opened-out winder. I reckon if I was an angel, I wouldn't care to poke around air-shafts much. Oh, what's these brown-yeller flowers that smell so elegant?" and Tessie held up the wallflowers.

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When Bird told their name, Tessie gave a little cry and said, "They're what mother talks about that grew up in the wall below the big house at home where her father was a keeper, and the smell of them came in the cottage windows in the night air right to her, and she's often said she'd cross the sea again to smell them if she had the price, and now she won't have to take that trouble. That angel has found our winder for sure. Would you get me the little pitcher and some water in it yonder?"

The larger of the two rooms, the one with the window, had two clean beds in it, over which a newspaper picture of the Madonna and Child was pinned to the wall, two chairs, and an old bureau, while the smaller room, little more than a closet, held a table, a few dishes, and an oil cooking-stove, all as neat as wax. A pail of water stood on the table, from which Bird filled the pitcher, and set it on a chair by Tessie that she might herself arrange the flowers. Then, remembering that the policeman and Billy were waiting, she picked up her basket and her own flowers, and, promising to come the next week, groped her way downstairs again.

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Bird did not see the tired mother, when she returned from her day's scrubbing, enter the dark room and drawing a quick breath say, in an awe-struck voice, "I smell them—I smell the wallflowers! Sure, am I dreaming or dying?" or see the way in which she buried her face in the mass, laughing and crying together, when the lamp was lit and Tessie had told her the how and why of it.

There were dreary days often after this, when her uncle was away on long trips and her aunt was cross, but though Bird did not yet give up all hope of going back some day among her friends, or studying, as she had promised her father, she was learning the lesson of patience, which, after all, is the first and last one to know by heart.

Now the morning-glories had reached the window tops, and in the little bower above the clothes-lines she and Billy often sat as she told him stories of the real country, of Lammy and Twinkle, the old white horse, and the red peonies, and flew there in imagination. Then the child's big eyes would flash as he gazed at her, and he always ended by asking, "When we stop being birds in this cage, we'll fly right up there to your country and be real birds and see Lammy and Twinkle, won't we?" And Bird always answered, "Yes," to please him, but it was a word that meant nothing to her. So the summer wore on, and Bird did not go back to Laurelville.

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'RAM SLOCUM'S TAUNT

WHILE Bird was putting away from her all thought of going back to Laurelville for a summer visit, Lammy Lane was trying in every way to bring about her return.

His mother was the only person in the family or village who really read Lammy aright and valued him at his worth. She never laughed at his various contrivances and mechanical inventions, and when he appeared to be star-gazing, she firmly believed that it was not idleness, but that he was interested in things other than the mere jog-trot work on the farm.

His brothers had all taken up other occupations in factory and shop, and Joshua Lane had expected that easy-going Lammy, the youngest by several years, would naturally drift along into farm work; but the boy had said, when his father had spoken upon the subject, "Farming is all right, only this one isn't big enough for mo'n two, and I like to live in the country for pleasure; but for a trade I'm going into making somethin' that bugs can't eat, and that won't get dried up, nor drowned out neither." To Joshua this remark savoured of feeble-mindedness; but when he repeated it to Dr. Jedd, that keen-eyed person laughed, saying they need not worry about Lammy, for that some day he might surprise them all.

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All through June he worked diligently at strawberry picking; then currants and raspberries followed in quick succession, so that it was nearly August, when, with twenty dollars to his credit in the Northboro Savings Bank, he took a vacation and went to his old haunts with the other boys.

Lammy had been bitterly disappointed when he found that Bird could not return to spend the Fourth of July, but he was not in the least daunted; for, after all, what was a whole summer even, when some day Bird would come back for good? The boy firmly believed that something would turn up to enable his father to buy the fruit farm, or if that was impossible, he would try to coax his father and mother to get her back without. There was always plenty to eat, and his home seemed so pleasant to him that he did not realize how hard his parents had to struggle to make both ends meet in the bad seasons when the bugs ate and the drought dried. He did not, of course, know of John O'More's requirement that if Bird ever returned she must be legally adopted, and share and share alike with his brothers and himself; but if he had, it would have made no difference.

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Lammy was very fond of prowling in the deep woods and along the river. He had intimate acquaintances among the gray squirrels, always knew where fox cubs could be found, and had once reared a litter of skunk pups under an abandoned barn. Their mother had evidently been trapped,—for he never saw her,—and he fed the young with milk and scraps, in the childish belief that they were some sort of half-wild kittens, and was very much disgusted, when they were old enough to follow him home, that his father declined to have them about, and that they disappeared the very same night.

But the river interested him the most, and he not only knew every swimming and pike hole, perch run and spawning shallow, along its ten-mile course from Northboro down to the Mill Farm at Milltown, and the windings of every trout brook that fed it, but he understood all that went on in the half dozen mills or shops along the route. He could explain exactly how the water was turned on and off and the gearing adjusted in the gristmill, the stamping and perforating done at the button factory, or the sand moulds prepared at the forge where scrap iron was turned into cheap ploughshares and other cast implements.

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One very hot day the last part of July when Lammy, together with 'Ram Slocum and Bob Jedd, was going to the pet swimming-hole of the Laurelville boys, a clear pebble-lined pool with a shelving rock on one side that approached the water by easy steps, they heard voices in the woods and came suddenly upon a party of young fellows from the Engineers' Summer School, which had its camp farther down the ridge of hills.

"Hullo!" shouted the foremost, addressing Lammy, who also chanced to be in the lead; "can you tell us if there is any decent place to swim hereabouts? The pond at the Mill Farm is posted 'No Trespassing,' most of the river bed is either too rocky or too shallow, and the only good place we've struck below here has a mud bottom, and looked too much like an eel hole to suit me."

"Yes, 'tis an eel hole, this side of the course," Lammy answered readily, "and t'other side there's pickerel could bite yer toes if they was minded to. I'll show yer a bully place. We're going there now, and it isn't much further up."

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"Charge him a quarter for the steer," said 'Ram Slocum, in a loud whisper, kicking Lammy's bare shins to stop him, for he had stepped forward eagerly to lead the way.

"Shan't either," Lammy replied spicily, to 'Ram's astonishment; "water's free up here, even if your pop won't let us swim in the mill-pond, and does charge folks three cents a barrel for taking water when their wells are dry."

'Ram, a strong boy of sixteen, with bright red hair, who usually domineered over all the boys of his age and under,—particularly under,—had never before been so answered by any of his companions, much less Lammy, to whom he often referred as "softy," and his temper rose accordingly. His nickname "'Ram," short for Abiram, referred to his fighting proclivities and the way in which he frequently used his bullet head to knock out an antagonist instead of his fists; and though he did not see fit to follow the matter then and there, in his mind he put down Lammy for punishment when he should next catch him alone.

Meanwhile Lammy, silently threading through the dense underbrush, followed by Bob Jedd, reached the swimming-hole, while 'Ram slowly brought up the rear, crashing along sullenly, kicking the dead branches right and left so that the little ground beasts fled before him, now and then pausing either to pound a luckless land turtle with a stone, or shake from its perch some bird who, silent and dejected, had sought deep cover for its moulting time.

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When he reached the others, he found not only that Lammy had made friends with the students, who, by the way, were a new lot who had recently come to camp, but that they were asking him all sorts of questions to draw out his knowledge of the neighbourhood, and were actually making Lammy a good offer if he would come to the camp daily during their stay, be "chainboy" on their surveying expeditions, and show them many things about the country that it would be a waste of time for them to search out for themselves.

Now Mr. and Mrs. Slocum had been very much stirred up by these same surveyors, and being suspicious, as shifty people usually are, wondered very much if the men were only practising as they claimed, or if they were in the pay of some land company, and prospecting, that they might see where land could be bought in large blocks. They had tried all summer to have 'Ram employed about the camp, that he might keep his eyes and ears open, but so far to no avail. Consequently, when the boy heard the coveted position offered to Lammy, his rage and disappointment got the better of his usually shrewd discretion, and pushing into the group, he almost shouted, his voice pitched high with eagerness:—

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"Lammy ain't the one you want; he ain't strong, and he's got no go. I'm two years older and worth twice as much, but I'll take the job at the same price and get pop to let you swim in the mill-pond if you'll hire me."

"I rather think not," said the spokesman, a bronzed, broad-shouldered young fellow of about nineteen. "I'm afraid you might charge us for the air we breathed while we were in swimming; besides, I never employ a sneak if I know it."

Then 'Ram knew that he had been overheard, and he slunk away toward home, owing Lammy a double grudge, and the sounds of shouts of merriment and the splashing of water did not tend to cool his wrath.

As for Lammy, he sat on the edge of the rock, trailing his brown toes in the water in the seventh heaven of content; for he was to help carry those mysterious instruments about for a whole month, and go in and out of the Summer School camp, knowing what was said and done there, instead of gazing at it across the fields. Then, too, perhaps he might some day meet Mr. Clarke, and possibly, though it was a daring thought, get leave to go into the mysterious building in his locomotive works at Northboro that bore the sign "Strictly Private—No Admittance."

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Bird and he had often talked of such a possibility. How glad she would be to know! He would write to her all about it.

He did, but had no reply; for the letter reached Bird at one of the times when her uncle was away. Billy had been suffering more than usual, and his mother was consequently very cross and difficult to bear with. Bird put the letter by to answer "to-morrow"; but every day bore its own burden, and the days piled up into weeks.

* * * * *

Joshua worked steadily on the fruit farm all the season, preparing for future crops as conscientiously as if he himself was to be the owner. Of this, however, he had no hope; it was impossible for him to bid on the place, as he had little or no ready money, and the only way to raise this would be to mortgage his own little farm.

This several of his neighbours had suggested, offering to loan him the money; but Joshua had struggled along some fifteen years under the weight of a mortgage, and now that he was freed he did not wish to pick up the burden again. Then, too, his farm with its old ramshackle outbuildings was not worth more than three thousand dollars, while the fruit farm with its rich land, good barn, poultry house, and newly shingled dwelling was valued by good judges at any figure from five to six thousand dollars. For though Aunt Jimmy had scrimped herself in many ways, she was too good a business woman to let her property get out of repair.

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Neither of the Lane brothers were as well off as Joshua, so by the last of October the community had decided that the fruit farm must go out of the family, and attention was divided between who would buy it and what Joshua would do with his third of the proceeds,—better his house, or buy more land.

The Slocums were considered to be the most likely purchasers; for Abiram Slocum was known to have much money stored away in various paying farms as well as in the Northboro bank, though the way in which he came by it was not approved, even by the most close-fisted of his neighbours, for 'Biram was what was called a "land shark." He sold worthless parcels of land that would grow nothing but docks and mullein to the hard-working Poles and Hungarians who were fast colonizing the outskirts of Northboro, taking part cash payment, the rest on mortgage, and encouraging them to build. Then when the interest became overdue, owing to inevitable poor crops, he foreclosed, put out the family, and sold the place anew.

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So sure did Mrs. Slocum appear to be that she would own the fruit farm, that she took it upon herself to watch the place to see, as she explained when caught by Joshua Lane peering in at the kitchen window, "that nothing properly belonging to it was took off." He told her in very plain language that whoever bought the farm would buy what there was on it at the time, and no more, as his aunt had trusted him with the management until the final settlement, and that what he did was no man's business save that of the heirs.

In the interval, before it was time to tie up vines and bed the various berries with their winter covering of manure, he turned his attention to Aunt Jimmy's flower garden, a strip of ground enclosed by a neat picket fence, where a box-edged path starting under a rose trellis ran down

the middle and disappeared in a grape arbour at the farther end, and everything that was fragrant and hardy and worth growing flanked the walk, while behind, the sweet peas and nasturtiums climbed up to the very fence top in their effort to see and be seen.

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This garden had been the apple of Aunt Jimmy's eye, and in spite of all "spells" and oddities, she had tended it wholly herself, her one gentle feminine impulse, as far as the outside world knew, having been giving nosegays to the children that passed the house on their way home from school. If they handled the flowers carelessly, they never received a second bunch, but if they cherished them, slips, seeds, and bulbs were sure to follow, so that Aunt Jimmy's flowers lived long after her in childish garden plots.

Prompted by Lauretta Ann,—for Joshua was too hard-headed and practical to have learned anything about flowers, except that they must be fed and watered like other stock, whether animal or vegetable,—he regulated the various borders, dividing and resetting the roots of hardy plants under his wife's direction, as Aunt Jimmy had done each autumn, while Lammy stood by, eagerly waiting for the "weedings," which he carried home with great care and set out in a corner south of the barn, "to make," as he said, "a little garden for Bird, in case we don't get the fruit farm." His mother encouraged him in this and praised his efforts, giving him some strips of chicken wire to make a trellis, so that his vines might in time cover the end of the old, gray-shingled barn. Even she, however, did not know of another little garden strip on a far-away hillside that he had tended all summer for the sake of his little friend.

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In spite of Joshua Lane's rebuke to Mrs. Slocum, she continued spying and insinuating, and not many days later, chancing to drive by the fruit farm half an hour after school was out, and seeing Lammy going up the road, carrying a basket, spade, and water can, followed by faithful Twinkle, she hurried home and bade 'Ram "step lively and follow that Lane boy up, an' see where he's goin', and what he's got, and what he's agoin' to do with it."

Mrs. Slocum was more than usually determined upon annoying the Lanes, since Joshua, as administrator for Terence O'More, had refused payment of the rent owed for the little cottage, until the insurance company had satisfied themselves as to the cause of the fire and paid Abiram's claim. The furniture destroyed, at the lowest estimate, would have been more than enough to cancel the debt.

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'Ram, only too glad to do his mother's errand, after the manner of all bullies, waited until Lammy was out of reach of protection and well up on the sheltered "hill road" before he overtook him, asking in a "you've-got-to-tell" tone what he had in the basket and where he was going. Upon Lammy's declining to tell, he announced his intention of following until he found out for himself.

Now it must be remembered that Lammy had the name of being girlish, if not exactly cowardly, that he was only fourteen, and though tall, was of a slender build; while 'Ram was not only broad-shouldered and sixteen, but the village braggart to boot, so that it really took some pluck for Lammy to continue up that houseless road with 'Ram muttering threats and marching close behind. Still Lammy walked straight on past all the farms, to where the runaway Christmas trees stood sentinels around the hillside graveyard. There is no denying that his hand shook as he unlatched the gate, but he did not falter or look back, but went to the corner where were the mounds that marked the graves of Bird O'More's father and mother.

Why the turf was so much greener and smoother than anywhere else in the enclosure no one but Lammy knew, and for a moment 'Ram paused outside the fence in sheer surprise; but as Lammy, kneeling down, took a couple of roots of the red peony from his basket, and prepared to plant one at the top of each flowery mound, his surprise vanished in derision.

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"Ain't you a fool for sure!" he shouted, not coming in the enclosure, for, stupid and superstitious like all real cowards, he thought it bad luck to cross a graveyard,—“a fool for sure, planting posies yer stole; top of paupers, too, when even that stuck-up girl that was yer sweetheart's gone off to live with rich folks and has clean forgotten them and you!”

Lammy's trembling fingers fumbled with the earth and his head swam. The first part of 'Ram's jeer made his blood boil, but after all it was a lie, and lies do not sting for long; for poor though O'More was, his debts would be paid to a penny, and Lammy had *bought* the peony roots from his father as executor by doing extra weeding on the fruit farm.

The last sentence, however, hurt cruelly; for though Lammy did not believe it, he had no way of disproving it even to himself, and so could not say a word to 'Ram in reply; for during the five months since Bird went away only two brief notes had come from her, and these told about city streets and sights, and little or nothing of herself. While, to make it the more strange, when, in the hot August weather, Mrs. Lane had sent her an invitation to come up for the promised visit, enclosing the tickets, which represented some weeks of egg money, and offered herself to go down to New Haven to meet the child, a stiff little note returning the tickets had come by way of reply, and though it was grateful in wording and said something vague about going with Billy for sea air, etc., he could not guess the disappointment that it covered, and that the sea air was merely a chance ferry ride, or the breeze that blew over Battery Park, where they herded daily with hundreds of other children of poorer New York. Lammy had been cut to the heart, and 'Ram's taunt rankled indeed.

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Mrs. Lane, however, had read between the lines, her keen insight, confidence in Bird, and motherly love serving as spectacles. She still felt, as she always had done, that Bird was unhappy, and yet too proud to confess it, and that she did not dare write often or come among them, for fear that they should discover what they could not as yet better. For Mrs. Lane remembered O'More's conditional promise only too well, and the possibility of fulfilling her part of adopting the little girl within the year seemed to grow more and more remote.

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Silently Lammy finished his work, picking up every dead leaf that lay on the mounds, and then taking his spade and basket, turned to go home, but there stood his tormentor by the gate.

If anything angers a bully, it is silence. If Lammy had engaged in a war of words, the chances are that 'Ram would have gone away, having had, as he considered it, his fun out. As it was, he really felt that he had been neglected and affronted, so, making believe open the gate as Lammy closed it, he said, "I can dig up them posies twict as quick as you planted 'em."

"Maybe you can, but you won't," cried Lammy, suddenly growing pale and rigid, while he stood outside the gate, but square in front of it.

"Oh, ho, and who 'll stop me?" sneered 'Ram, in amused surprise, standing with his arms akimbo.

Without saying another word, Lammy, the meek, the boy-girl in name, flew at 'Ram with such suddenness, beating and buffetting him, that the big boy was knocked down before he knew it. Recovering his feet quickly, he tried to grapple with the lanky little lad, but Lammy twisted and turned with the litheness of a cat, landing rapid if rather wild blows at each plunge, while Twinkle nipped at 'Ram's heels, until finally 'Ram, seeing that he was outmatched in agility, and determined to conquer without more ado, lowered his head for the celebrated "butt" that generally winded his antagonist.

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Lammy's fighting Yankee ancestors must have left the lower end of the graveyard and marched up to encourage him on this occasion; for he was nearly spent and was pausing to get breath when the lunge came, so that his final effort was to give a side twist, and the blow of the red bullet head was received square and full by the locust gate post instead of by Lammy's stomach.

'Ram dropped to the ground, where he lay for several minutes seeing stars, planets, and comets, while a bump as big as an apple appeared in the middle of his forehead and the cords of his neck ached like teeth. Meanwhile Lammy, his nervous strength gone, ran all the way home, and throwing himself on his bed, whither he was followed by his mother, who saw his livid face as he dashed through the kitchen, sobbed as if his heart would break, not from fear, but because in the reaction he remembered what Bird had said of people who fought either with their tongues or fists.

It was not until long afterward that he thought it strange, and wondered why his mother had not scolded him, only hugged him to her comfortable, pillowy breast, when he told his story, and put nearly all of her precious bottle of Northboro cologne on his head to soothe it, and gave him buttered toast, when, after having his cry out, he came down to supper, which dainty was generally regarded as only for the minister or else a "sick-a-bed" luxury. His father meanwhile actually broke into a laugh and said, "Hear yer've been doin' a leetle Declaration o' Independencing on yer own account. Wal, it's sometimes a necessary act fer folks same as countries; Lauretta Ann, I reckon Lammy and me could relish a pot of coffee to-night"—coffee being a Sunday-morning treat.

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When it came to the part of his story concerning 'Ram's taunt and his fear that Bird had forgotten them, his mother reassured him for the hundredth time with her own ample faith, but he quite startled her by saying emphatically:—

"That is all right, mother, as far as it goes, but we've just *got* to buy that fruit farm somehow." And he fell asleep that night, happy in making impossible plans for the purchase.

It was perhaps as well for Lammy's self-conceit that he did not hear his mother talk with Mrs. Slocum, who came in about nine o'clock, tearful, yet at the same time in a threatening rage, demanding that he be "whipped thoro' for half murdering her harmless boy when he was taking an innercent walk, and that if he didn't get the whippin', she'd get a warrant immedjet."

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Mrs. Lane waited until she had finished her tirade, and then calling Joshua, who had retreated to the wood-shed, said: "Mis' Slocum here needs a warrant writ hasty; jest you escort her down to the Squire's, as her husband don't seem interested to go with her. I hate to see a neighbour obleeged to play the man and risk goin' out in the dark alone."

Then as her adversary, seeing herself outflanked, rose to go, she added with apparent sympathy: "Of course I know it's hard for you to feel 'Ram's beat by one half his size, even if the gate post did help Lammy, and folks 'll be surprised to hear it, but you mustn't blame him too much; it was maybe me, his mother, in him worked Lammy's fists so good." And Lauretta Ann looked her visitor straight in the eyes. Some weeks later Mrs. Slocum had reason to remember that look.

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LAMMY CONSULTS OLD LUCKY

WHEN November came, Joshua Lane had completed his work of preparing the fruit farm for the auction, according to Aunt Jimmy's wish that it should be in full running order when sold.

The old fowls were mostly sold off, and the henhouse was full of the vigorous laying pullets that mean so much in early winter. The fall cow had calved, and the two or three yearlings were as sleek as does.

When the time came for the division of the furniture between the wives of the three Lane brothers by drawing lots, public interest again awakened, and Mrs. Slocum expressed great

anxiety lest it should not be done fairly, saying to her husband: "It's a fussy, mixed-up business anyway. Why didn't they auction off the stuff and let folks in to see it done fair? They do say, for all Miss Jemima lived so plain, she had stores of good stuff shut up in those top rooms that even Dinah Lucky never's had a peek at when she went to houseclean. Those old mahogany pieces are worth money at Northboro, and Lauretta Ann's cute enough to know it, but I don't believe those other slab-sided Lane women do; so do you watch your chance and make them an offer so soon as it's divided. There's a wardrobe there, solid mahogany, twice as big as one they ask fifty dollars for in the 'curious' shop. Most likely they'd value cheap, new stuff better."

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If it had not been rather pathetic to Mrs. Lane, this breaking up of a house where she had been so much at home, the day of the division would have been one of unalloyed merriment.

In the first place, owing to the way in which Aunt Jimmy had directed the drawing should be managed, the articles were not valued in the usual way and divided so that each of the three women shared alike, but merely numbered, the duplicate slips being shaken up in a basket and drawn by Probate Judge Ricker for Lauretta Ann, the others drawing for themselves, as Joshua preferred that there should be no possible chance of his wife being criticised. While she, cheerful and thoughtful as ever of the comfort of others, prepared a nice lunch on the afternoon appointed, which she and Lammy carried to the fruit farm, and had a cheerful fire in the kitchen stove, with a big pot of fragrant coffee purring away on top of it, when Jason and Henry Lane, the younger brothers, following each other closely, drove into the yard with their wives.

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Mrs. Henry Lane was a delicate, sad-looking little woman, quite above the average. She had been one of the teachers in the Milltown public school at the time of her marriage, but the struggle to wrest a living from a small hillside farm, coupled with ill health, had broken her spirit, and she sank into a rocking-chair and began to jiggle the baby that she carried to and fro.

Mrs. Jason, on the contrary, was tall and gaunt, with high cheek-bones. Life had not been very kind to her either, but still she looked as if she could hold her own; and her husband, who only reached her shoulder, fairly quaked and fell away before her like ill-made jelly.

"Do draw up to the table, sisters-in-law both," cried Lauretta Ann, after greeting each heartily. "You must have hurried dinner to get down here by now, and I always do feel hungrier the first cool days than when winter has set square in."

"I *should* feel better for a cup of coffee," said Mrs. Henry, in a plaintive voice; "we haven't had any for more than two weeks. Henry forgot it when he went to the store, and he doesn't get there as often as he used, now that the mail is delivered around the country by wagon. I've been using tea right along, and I think it's made me nervous; besides, the last I bought from the travelling spice-and-sugar man tasted more like buckwheat shucks and musty hay than anything else."

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At this Henry Lane's head sank still farther into the collar of his coat, which was three sizes too big anyway, and he began whittling recklessly at a hard-wood clothespin with a broken knife, which quickly caused a deeply cut finger and much consternation, as the sight of blood always made his wife faint away, and the present occasion was no exception to the rule.

After Lauretta Ann had bathed and bound up the finger, and sent Lammy home for a little of the cherry cordial for which she was famous, she made another effort to serve the lunch, and finally succeeded in cheering the mournful company by sheer force of good temper.

"I do hope you'll draw Grandma Lane's canopy-top cradle and the big rocker that matches, they'd be such comforts to you as you are fixed," Mrs. Joshua said to Mrs. Henry, as putting a friendly arm about her, they went into the sitting room, where Judge Ricker was busy kneading up the numbered papers in the basket as carefully as if he was working lard into flour for tea biscuits, and seated themselves in a semicircle.

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"Do you begin, sister-in-law Jason, and you follow next, sister-in-law Henry," said Mrs. Joshua, laying her hand, which would tremble in spite of herself, on Lammy's shoulder. Lammy, by the way, had grown broader and stronger and lost much of his timidity of manner during the two months past. Whether it was the sense of responsibility that working with the college men had given him, or his determination to have Bird come back, his mother could not decide, while his father chuckled whenever the matter was referred to, saying, "'Tain't neither; it was squarin' up at 'Ram Slocum that made a man of him;" and though Lauretta always said, "Sho, pa! ain't you ashamed of aidin' and abettin' a fight?" her smiling expression belied her words.

Mrs. Jason stepped forward and drew—the canopy cradle! A roar of laughter greeted her venture, in which she joined grimly, for her youngest offspring was a six-foot youth of seventeen, while Mrs. Henry sighed and felt secretly injured, though she said nothing.

Next came her turn, and she drew a worked motto in a gilt frame, which read, "The Lord Will Provide," whereat she smiled feebly and whimpered, "I've tried to think so, but I do wish Henry Lane would help Him out better." Mrs. Joshua drew the best china, Mrs. Henry the tall clock, which she straightway declared to be a foot higher than any of her rooms,—she finally traded it with Mrs. Jason for the cradle and rocking-chair,—until at the end of two hours the last number left the basket and three tired and confused women wandered about trying to collect their property.

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The great wardrobe had fallen to Mrs. Jason's share, but upon close inspection it proved to be merely stained cherry and not mahogany at all, and its owner remarked that she wished some one would take it off her hands, as it was too big to go in her door, and more than it was worth to truck it home, much less get it in to Northboro, where it would be possible to sell it. Her husband, however, ventured to say it would make a good harness closet for the barn and keep the rats from gnawing the leather; and so with much stretching of muscles and groans of "now heave together" it was loaded with the other articles upon the wagon.

There was quite a lively interchange of articles between the women before the rooms were finally cleared, but in the end, owing to Mrs. Joshua's good sense, they all declared themselves

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well satisfied. Mrs. Jason had secured a good sewing-machine, and Mrs. Henry a parlour organ for which her melancholy spirit pined; while Mrs. Joshua, who had a machine and inwardly detested parlour organs, saying that when needful she could do her own groaning, was made happy by the best parlour set, her own chairs and lounge having been fatally collapsed by her family of men folks of assorted ages.

One thing they all regretted, which was that Aunt Jimmy had ordered all articles of every kind not mentioned in her list should be either burned or buried, according to their kind, and there were many things dear to their feminine hearts in the mass of rubbish that had been accumulating in garret and cellar, barn and loft, these many years as well as much that was salable as junk. It was of no use to object; for Joshua was determined to carry out the will in both spirit and letter, and though it had amused the eccentric old lady to collect and hoard the stuff, she was equally determined that it should never be exposed to the gaze of the curious. Joshua knew that though she thought him slow and without ambition, she trusted him, and he was not going to disappoint her.

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As the loaded wagons filed out of the yard, a lean figure might have been seen peering through the branches of a small maple tree in the wood lot just above. It was Abiram Slocum, who, goaded by his wife, was trying to see which cart contained the wardrobe; for she had come back from Northboro the day before all eagerness to get possession of it, for the owner of the "curious shop" had said if the wardrobe was of the size and quality she described, he would pay her fifty dollars for it. Now if the owner would let it go for fifteen or even twenty-five dollars, the profit would give her new paper and a carpet for her best room; for rich as Slocum was reputed to be, he was close-fisted with his wife, and she was obliged to pick up her own pin money like her poorer neighbours, with the exception that she had not succeeded in the egg business, owing to her tendency, whenever possible, to give eleven to the dozen, and sell limed eggs at a high price to ignorant people who desired them for setting.

Abiram presently spied the wardrobe on Jason Lane's load. He was sorry for this, for Mrs. Jason was one of the few people who had ever got the better of him in trade, and a horse trade at that, so he feared she would never sell the furniture, or if she did, would extort full value.

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Nevertheless, he slipped hastily from the tree, cut across lots toward the road they must take on their way home, and fifteen minutes later met them when they stopped to rest the horse, as if he was merely sauntering toward the pasture for his cows, and was soon engaged in general conversation upon farm topics that gradually led up toward the furniture.

"Heavy load you've got there," he remarked; "ain't that there closet big for your haouse?"

Jason was about to say that it was, and that they were going to put it in the barn, when he felt his wife looking daggers, and refrained.

"'Tis big, but we can use it," she answered dryly, starting up the horse.

"How about selling it and buying somethin' handier?"

"I ain't anxious. Get along, Whiteface," she said, touching the horse with the whip.

"I'll give yer fifteen dollars for it, here and now, if you'll leave it to my house," Abiram shouted as the wagon began to move away.

"'Twouldn't pay me to turn back."

"Twenty dollars then."

"Nope, I'm in a hurry, and there's a pile of good seasoned wood in the thing."

"She knows its value, sure enough," he said to himself, as the wagon began to climb the hill.

"Give yer twenty-five, and yer can leave it here by the road."

"I reckon you might unpack, pa," the gaunt woman said, a smile hovering about her mouth, adding to Abiram, "Hand up the money, and down she goes."

In five seconds two ten-dollar bills and a five, after a searching scrutiny, found their way into Mrs. Jason's pocket, and the clumsy piece of furniture leaned tipsily against the pasture fence exposed to the full glare of the sun.

Just as Jason Lane had remounted the seat and the wagon had begun to move again, a shout made them look round. There stood Abiram in the middle of the road, stamping and choking with rage so that he could barely speak.

"Stop! hey, stop!" he yelled; "it ain't mahogany; it's only stained wood. Hey, give me my money back or I'll hev ye arrested."

"Who said it was mahogany?" called Mrs. Jason, stopping the horse and fairly beaming with the pleasure of the contention.

Abiram hesitated a moment, felt himself caught, stammered, and said, "Mis' Slocum did."

"Well, go ahead and arrest Mrs. Slocum, then," chimed in Jason, his speech for once meeting his wife's approval.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy, what 'll she say, 'n' what 'll I do with it?" he moaned to himself, completely caught in the trap set by his own greed.

"I dunno," shouted Mrs. Jason as she moved away, "'nless you put wheels on it to make a wagon and hitch that sorrel mare I sold you to it."

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The day of the sale drew near. All that remained to be done was the destroying of the rubbish, and this was no small task.

One entire day a bonfire had raged in the back lot, and what would not burn was the next day taken in the ox-cart thrice filled by Joshua himself and dumped carefully in the great bog-hole.

This quaking bog was one of the wonders of the neighbourhood and its common dumping

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ground, even though it could only be reached by fording the river above the mill-pond. To the eye it was merely an oozy-looking swamp tract, such as are plentiful near the back-water of rivers, but this particular bit was an ogre that swallowed up everything that was cast in it, only a few hours being necessary to engulf, without leaving a sign, an unlucky cow that had once strayed into it. So that now it was securely fenced about except at one spot, used for dumping, which was protected with logs secured to driven piles.

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Mrs. Lane watched the loading of the wagon very ruefully, for she now fully realized that all her hopes concerning the fruit farm had come to as complete an end as the load of broken china and rusty tinware. When she saw the old pewter tea-pot, the dents supplemented by a crack, go by on top of a basket of broken flower pots, she begged her husband to let her keep it, saying:—

“Even if it’s worth nothin’ now, even for drawin’ tea, Aunt Jimmy must hev meant somethin’ kind when she left it to me, and I’d like it to mind me of the idea, only she got fogged up some way and didn’t plan right; fer if she set store by anything, it was by that pot on account of its bein’ buried half of the Revolution with great-grandmother Cuddy’s best teaspoons and twenty gold guineas all safe inside.”

“Lauretta Ann,” said Joshua, pausing to rest the heavy basket on the tail-board of the cart, “‘tain’t often I put my foot down, but now they’ve set, heel and toe, sock and leather, both of ‘em. I’m goin’ to do my work legal, but you’ve been treated shabby, and I ain’t a-goin’ to hev that teapot set up on a shelf for a monument to that same. If you’re too Christian to resent, I’m goin’ to do it for yer, which she, bein’ my aunt, the quarrel is for me to take upon me, so there!”

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Joshua had never before made such a long speech in all their married life, and his wife, fairly awed by his earnestness, said no more, but turning away, took the private pathway homeward that led through the meadow and garden, closing the gap in the wall with brush as she went, for soon now she would have no longer any right to come and go.

That afternoon as Lammy came home from school he saw in the distance his father and the ox-team taking the last load along the highway, and as he realized how soon the auction would take place, his heart sank and his feet dragged heavily along. Turning to take a short cut through the lane, he came face to face with an old coloured man with snow-white, woolly hair, who was scratching up the leaves with his cane, in search of chestnuts.

His name was Nebuchadnezzar Lucky, or Old Lucky, as he was called for short, and he was the husband of Dinah, who was general factotum of the village, and supported her man, who was double her age, by cooking, nursing, or housecleaning, as the season or circumstances demanded, absolutely taking pride in the fact, as if it was his right and his due. For was not Old Lucky a superior being who made charms, brewed herb medicines, and told fortunes, in addition to having turns of “seeing things,” which caused him to be regarded with awe by children and the credulous of all ages, even in this prim New England town where witches were once burned?

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“Howdy, Massa Lammy? ‘Pears like the squir’ls and chippin monkeys has got all the chestnuts this season, and dey ain’t left one for old Uncle Lucky to bile soft so’s him can eat ‘em. You ain’t got a handful laid up you could spare ‘thout missin’, I reckon now?” And the old man gave a persuasive, yet terrifying leer with eyes that were so badly crossed that they fairly seemed tangled.

An idea struck Lammy, as the tales of Lucky’s power came back to him, for even the practical folk who scoffed, allowed that there was something queer in it. He would consult the old man as to what he could do to get the fruit farm and Bird back at the same time. But stop! Where was the money to come from? For it was well known among his customers that Lucky could not “see things” until he had rubbed his eyelids with a piece of silver. Lammy’s money was all in the bank. Ah! he had it! John O’More’s silver dollar that was hidden away in Bird’s paint-box!

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Away he flew like a scurrying rabbit, leaving Old Lucky muttering in amazement, and in a half-hour returned, carrying a salt-bag full of chestnuts in one hand and the coin wrapped in paper in the other.

The old man, by this time having grown tired of his useless hunt for nuts, had gone home, and Lammy followed him to his cabin that was perched on the edge of the bank overhanging the mill stream. Lucky was sitting in an arm-chair by the window when Lammy entered and stammered out his wish and request for advice, at the same time offering his bag of nuts and the coin which he first polished on his trousers.

If Lucky was surprised at the size of the offering, his usual fee being a quarter, while he never refused a dime, he did not show it, but felt the money carefully, passed it across his dim eyes, munched a nut or two, and falling back in his chair, covered his head with a red and yellow handkerchief and began to mutter, beckoning Lammy to come near and listen, which he did, scarcely daring to breathe. The mutterings went on for several minutes, and then took the form of words.

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“Take—a—shotgun,” said the voice in a tone meant to be hollow, but which stopped at being cracked, “load him wif bullets you make umself, go up on de churchyard hill and shoot der shadder of a Christmas tree on a—black,—dark night,—an’ den,—an’ den—”

“Then what?” besought Lammy, in an agony of suspense.

“Den you’ll hear sumpfin’!” shouted Lucky, suddenly pulling the handkerchief from his face and fixing Lammy with a cross-eyed stare that was paralyzing.

“But recommember,” Lucky added, shaking his forefinger ominously, “make dem bullets out o’ sumpfin’ yo’ find, not bought nor lead uns, but sumpfin’ white like silver, or dis year charm hit won’t work.”

“But *where* shall I find it?” gasped Lammy, so much in earnest that he did not realize the absurdity of what the old man said.

This question seemed to take the magician out of his depth, and annoyed him not a little. After

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casting his eyes helplessly about, they chanced to rest on the stream below the window, when he quickly closed them and whispered, "Yo' must look in water—not in a pond, but in running water!" after which he refused to say another word.

When Lammy reached home, his mother was setting the supper on the table, while his father and brothers were going over the same old arguments as to the possibility or impossibility of buying the fruit farm. Lammy smiled to himself as he lifted Twinkle to his shoulder and then put the dog on a chair beside him, his usual place at meal-times, where he waited, one ear up and one down, until it was time to be fed.

No one noticed how red the boy's cheeks were and how his eyes shone, as he hurried from supper to learn his lessons, that he might have time in the morning to begin his search for metal for the magic bullets before going to school. He thought if he had the material, all else would be easy, for there was an old bullet-mould in the workroom in the barn, where mending was done, also an iron pot that had been used for melting solder.

He did not tell his mother of his plan, not that he meant in any way to deceive her; but if she knew nothing, the surprise at the result would be all the greater. [198]

For the next two or three days Lammy went up and down the river banks from the Mill Farm to the upper fork, apparently as aimlessly as in the time that he was dubbed "Look-out Johnny," and the neighbours nodded, and said, "The brace he got fightin' didn't last,—he's trampin' again," while his mother took it to heart and thought it was because he was grieving for Bird, as they had heard nothing definite or satisfactory from her for more than a month, and then only a few words on a card inquiring for Twinkle.

When Saturday came, Lammy started off in the morning early, asking his mother for a lunch to carry with him, which was nothing unusual. This day, instead of heading downstream, he started above the mill and followed the river up toward the woods. All the forenoon he looked here and there, and after eating his luncheon came out of the woods near where the highway branched and crossed the ford on the way to the bog dumping ground.

He stood there a few minutes, idly watching the dead leaves swirl along, and an occasional fish dart by, when his eyes became fixed upon an object lying close under a big stone in mid-stream; it glistened as the sun shone upon it, and then turned dull again. Whatever it was, it fascinated him strangely, and jumping from stone to stone, he soon reached it. "Only an old tin pan," he muttered in disgust; "that won't make bullets." [199]

As luck would have it, the stone upon which he stood turned, making him jump splash into the water, kicking the pan as he went. When he recovered himself, he looked about for footing, and there where the pan had been, to his amazement, lying almost at his feet, was the pewter tea-pot!

"However did that get here?" he exclaimed; but the answer was so simple that he guessed it at once. The tea-pot, in company with the pan, had been jolted from the ox-cart in crossing the ford on its way to the dump, and so escaped being swallowed.

"Hurrah!" cried Lammy, picking up the treasure and making his way to land, where he danced about in glee. "This 'll melt into bullets first rate, and it's kind of white like silver if it's cleaned. When it's melted, pop can't call it 'an eyesore' or a 'moniment,' so it's no harm for me to take it home."

He could not tell why, but he took off his coat and wrapped it carefully around the tea-pot, and then slipped from the highway into the woods again. [200]

When he reached home, it was still early afternoon. His father was cutting wood in the upper lot, and his mother had gone to Northboro with eggs for her Saturday customers, so Lammy had the place to himself.

First he buried the tea-pot deep in the feed bin, and taking the key of the house from its hiding-place under the door-mat, stole up to his room for dry shoes and socks, as it was a cold day and his sopping feet were already making him shiver and feel tight in the throat. Somehow the possession of the tea-pot gave him an uneasy feeling. Did it really belong to him? He hung about the house for a time, then walked straight out the gate and down to the Squire's office in the town house. This same "Squire" was a man of education as well as a lawyer, and Lammy's knock was answered by a cheery "Come in!" which he did, saying, all in one breath and quite reckless of grammar, "Please, sir, if I find anything that's been took to the dump, but fell off and not been swallowed, would it be mine to make bullets of?"

The Squire looked up from under his bushy eyebrows and smiled at the lad encouragingly. "Certainly it would be yours, my boy; what is intentionally thrown away is fair plunder for any one." And with a hasty "Thank you, sir," Lammy was off again with an easy conscience, to find an old axe, break up the tea-pot, and melt it if possible before his parents' return. Ah, but Lucky's charm was surely working. [201]

"Strange child that," said the Squire, looking after him; "he'll either turn out a fool or a genius. There is no middle path for such as he. I must keep my eye on him."

In looking about for an old axe whose edge would not be hurt by chopping metal, he stumbled over a rusty anvil that was half buried in litter. This he managed to drag into the light; then digging the tea-pot from the feed bin, he began his work.

First he wrenched off the cover and battered it into small pieces, which he put into the solder pot. Chop, chop! the handle gave way next, then the queer sprawling legs. He made several blows at the thick, clumsy, curved spout without hitting it, for his hands trembled with excitement combined with the chill of his wet feet.

Finally he landed a square blow a little above where the spout joined the body, but instead of cutting the metal quite through, the blade wedged, so he dropped the axe and seizing the tea-pot, proceeded to wrench off the spout.

"It's got tea leaves stuck in it," he said to himself, as he pulled and twisted at it. "Nope, brown paper," as a small roll of paper, the size, thickness, and length of a cigarette fell to the floor. To this he paid no attention, but continued to chop at the tea-pot until it was all in bits, tightly packed in the solder pot, and covered with an old plate.

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As he went to push back the anvil he stepped on the little bit of rolled-up paper and idly picking it up, turned it between his fingers, but with his mind wholly filled with the making of the magic bullets. It was too late to melt the pewter now; he would have to wait until Monday afternoon. How could he ever eat two more breakfasts, dinners, and suppers with the precious stuff in his possession?

As his hands worked, the stout oiled paper between his fingers unrolled by their warmth, as a leaf unfolds in the heat, and showed something green inside.

Lammy looked, and his heart almost stopped beating, while the sun, moon, and stars seemed to be floating past, trailing cloud petticoats and dancing, for the green stuff was money,—clean, crisp banknotes rolled as hard as a pencil!

Lammy sank down all in a heap on a pile of straw, his eyes closed and his fist clutching the little bundle like a vice. It was several minutes before he could steady himself sufficiently to part the tightly twisted roll and count his treasure, which was so compact that he had to use great care. Fortunately the oil paper had kept the money dry in spite of the bath in the river, in addition to a bit of cork that had been rammed tightly into the spout, but which Lammy had not noticed as it dropped out at the first chop.

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At last a bill peeled from the roll. Lammy smoothed it out, and rubbed his eyes. Could it be? He had never seen a bank bill for a larger sum than twenty dollars before, but five hundred was printed on this. Then he fell to work in earnest, and after many stops to moisten his fingers, twelve of the green, damp-smelling bits of paper lay spread upon the barn floor, while Lammy was saying over to himself, "Twelve times five are sixty—sixty hundred dollars—ten into sixty six times—six thousand dollars! Oh, mother—Bird—the fruit farm!" he fairly shouted. This then was what Aunt Jimmy's will had meant, after all.

Gathering the bills into his grimy handkerchief, blackened by polishing the tea-pot, he buttoned them inside his shirt and rushed into the house at the moment his mother was getting out of the chaise and bringing in the week's supply of groceries, for which she had traded her eggs.

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His father having come home from the wood lot, took the horse to the barn, fed and bedded him immediately,—for old Graylocks never went fast enough to become heated,—and then came to the kitchen sink to make his toilet for supper.

Lammy sat waiting his time by the stove with his feet in the oven door, trying to suppress the shivers that ran through him. Would his mother ever put the things away and stop bustling? They could not have supper until late that night, for the shop where his brothers worked was running over time, and they would not be home before seven.

Mrs. Lane put the potatoes on to fry, arranged the steak in the broiler (she was the only woman in Laurelville who did not fry her meat), and then sat down to rest, keeping one eye upon the clock. Presently she caught sight of Lammy's face, and promptly jumped up again to grab one of his hands and ask anxiously: "Be you feelin' sick, Lammy Lane? Your hands is frogs and your cheeks hot coals. I do hope and pray it ain't goin' to be a fever spell o' any kind."

"Spell be blowed!" said Joshua, who was now seated by the lamp, enjoying his weekly paper. "He's been a-traipsin' round all day among them soggy marshes that fairly belches chills in fall o' the year, on a snack o' cold food. What he needs is a lining o' hot vittles; likewise do I."

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But Lammy had left the stove and stood by the table, his hands clasped tightly, and such a strange expression on his face that both his parents were startled.

"I ain't sick—that is, not much," he began, "though I'm awfully hungry, but I've got something to tell out first."

Then he began slowly, and told about his visit to Old Lucky and his search for bullet material.

Here his father interrupted him with, "Shucks, Lammy Lane, ain't you got better sense than to throw away dollars?" but his mother gave Joshua a look, and said: "Don't you shet him off the track until he's through. I knew he wasn't working in his mind like he's done lately for nothing."

When he told of chopping up the tea-pot, his father chuckled, but his mother shivered and broke in with, "How could you ever set an axe in it? It seems to me 'bout as bad as cuttin' up poor Aunt Jimmy for sausages!"

When he came to the end, and pulling out his handkerchief, spread the contents before his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lane stood grasping the table edge and staring white and wide eyed, until Joshua broke the silence with "Jehosophat! Nancy Hanks! but I'm kneesprung dumbfounded!"

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"And you'd better be!" snapped Lauretta Ann, as nearly as she *could* snap at her husband; "after all you've said against the memory of sainted Aunt Jimmy, and sneered and snipped at her will and meanings! Don't you see now how she fixed things so's I'd get the farm by biddin' it in fair without bein' hashed over in public for gettin' more'n my equal share? *She* trusted me to

fetch that pot home and, by usin' it daily, find it wouldn't pour out, as I would have did and diskiver the money. Oh, Joshua, Joshua, let this be a lesson to you an' all husbands not to browbeat their trustin' wives, as women's allers the furthest seein' sect."

"Fur seein', shucks!" snorted Joshua, who had enjoyed his recent authority too well to part with it; "between you and Aunt Jimmy yer'd made a fine mess o' it, and it took a male, though not a full-grown one, to pull yer out of it, for yer allowed yer'd only stick up the pot for a monument an' not use it on account o' its taste tainting the tea. It sartinly took us men folks to dig yer out o' it; didn't it, Lammy?"

"Now as we know Aunt Jimmy's intentions was that this be kept close, close it'll be kept, and we'd better pack up them bills until we can bank 'em Monday, in case Mis'is Slocum should be drawd to look in the winder to see if we are havin' a hot or cold supper, and real or crust coffee."

"But mother," said Lammy, as soon as he could be heard, "when shall we get Bird back? Need we wait until the auction?"

"Sakes alive, child, I'll write as soon as I get my head, but there's two letters unanswered now, and I'm afeared they've moved again. Somehow, with all we've got to face just now, I think 'twould be better waitin' until everything's settled up certain and we've got the place safe and sound. Then pa and me and you could kind er celebrate, and take a trip to N'York and get her. I ain't never been there but onct in my life, an' that was to a funeral when it wasn't seemin' fer me to look about to see things, and it rained and I spoiled my best bunnit. I reckon, now we can afford it, 'twould set us all up to go on a good lively errand o' mercy, and maybe see a circus too if there's any there, and eat a dinner bought ready made. Seems to me I should relish some vittles I hadn't cooked, and to step off without washing the dishes."

"Say, Laretta Ann," drawled Joshua, presently, when Lammy, hugging Twinkle and telling him the news, had gone upstairs to look at Bird's paint-box, and sit in the dark and think of the bliss of going to New York and surprising her his very self, "who do you calkerlate owns them *six thousand dollars*?" rolling the words about in his mouth like a dainty morsel.

"Why, me,—that is we, of course!" she gasped. "You don't think there's anything wrong in takin' it? Ah, Joshua, you *don't* think there's any wrong in takin' it?"

"Yes and no, not that egzactly; but as the Squire gave Lammy the law about things that's been throwed out, it 'pears to me the find is hisn."

"Well, if it is, I'm glad, and it's the Lord's doin' anyway. We can put the deed in Lammy's name, and earn him good schoolin' out o' it along o' little Bird, for nobody knows how I've missed that youngster a runnin' in and out these last months and feeling her head on my shoulder times when she was lonesome, and I mothered her in the rocker before the fire. What with the high school, and the painting school, and the female college over at Northboro, there's all the eddication she'll need for years close handy, and it's no wrong to the others, for there's this place for them to divide, and they're strong and likely."

"Remember the auction ain't took place yet, Laretta Ann, and don't set too sure."

"Joshua, the Lord has planned this out; it can't go astray now."

"Amen," said Joshua; "but how about Old Lucky's spell? and supposin' Mr. Clarke takes a fancy to bid on the fruit farm. I hear he's been for land hereabout."

"Father, I'm *shocked* at you, and you nephew-in-law to a deacon!"

Mrs. Lane went upstairs to look for Lammy and found him lying across his bed in an uneasy sleep, with Twinkle keeping guard by him, while his fatigue and the soaked boots in the corner told the cause for the illness that was creeping over him.

"Pa," called Mrs. Lane down the backstairs, in a husky whisper, "do you go for Dr. Jedd without waiting for the boys to come in. Lammy's chilled and fevered and sweatin' all to onct, and I can't read nothing out of such crossway sinktoms. Dear me suz, it does never rain but it pours! Say, Joshua, you'd best fetch that money up here to be put in the iron maple-sugar pot afore you go."

By the time Dr. Jedd arrived Lammy was in a heavy sleep, from which he roused at the physician's firm touch on his pulse, and began to talk wildly.

At first he seemed to think that Dr. Jedd was Old Lucky, for he cried, "I gave you the silver dollar and I made the bullets, but when I went to shoot them, they turned into polliwogs and went downstream." Then raising himself, he shook his pillow violently, saying, "You were a bad man to tell me lies. How could I shoot the shadow of a Christmas tree on a dark night? Cause when it's dark there are'nt any shadows."

Next he seemed to imagine that he was tramping over the hills with the surveyors, and he had an argument with himself, as to whether feet made rods or rods feet, and then mumbled something about $a + b$ that they could not understand for they did not know that one of his new friends had started him in Algebra.

"He is tired out," said Dr. Jedd, presently, "and in his mind more than his body. The professor over at the camp told me that he had a great head for mathematics, and was always asking questions and working out sums and things on every scrap of paper he came across, and that when paper gave out he'd smooth a place in the dirt and scratch away on that with a nail. Said that it was a pity that he couldn't go to the Institute at Northboro and be fitted for the School of Mines in New York. Told me if he ever did, he could put him in the way of free tuition at least."

"The pewter tea-pot! Take Bird out of the pewter tea-pot; she's stuck in the spout, and when you chop it off, it will kill her!" shrieked Lammy, jumping out of bed.

Dr. Jedd gave him some quieting medicine, and he soon sank back among the pillows, with a burning red spot of fever on each cheek.

"Is it typhoid?" asked Mrs. Lane, her face white and drawn; "Janey died of that."

"It is a fever, but I cannot be quite sure of exactly which one," said the doctor, opening a little case he carried and taking out a fine needlelike instrument and a bottle of alcohol. "If I wait to

know until it develops, we shall be losing time; if I prick his finger and send a drop of blood to Dr. Devlin in Northboro, who makes a study of such things, he will look at it through his microscope and tell me in the morning exactly where we stand." So after washing a spot clean with alcohol he took the little red drop that tells so much to the really wise physician and prevents all the mistakes of guess-work, and then began to prepare some medicines and write his directions for the night.

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"Is there any one you would like me to send up to stay with you, Mrs. Lane?" the doctor asked as he prepared to leave. "This may be a tedious illness, and it won't do for you to wear yourself out in the beginning."

"Bye-by, perhaps," Mrs. Lane replied "but not jest now while he talks so wild. You know, doctor, how the best of folks will repeat and spy. Joshua ain't overbusy, and he'll help me out."

"What is that thing hanging round Lammy's neck by a string under his shirt that he has such a tight hold of?"

"It's the key of the lower one of his chest of drawers; he keeps odds and ends in it that he sets store by, and I guess he's lost it so many times that he's took to hanging it on safe by a string."

The next afternoon when Dr. Jedd came, the smile on his face reassured Mrs. Lane even before he said: "No, it isn't typhoid—merely plain malaria, and his worrying so much about Bird has made him light-headed. What has become of the child? Tired as she was in the spring, I would not answer for her little wild-wood ladyship after a hot summer in the city."

Then Mrs. Lane told sadly of the frequent invitations and the unanswered letters.

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"I'm going to town for a little vacation after the holidays, and I will look her up myself," said the doctor, cheerily.

* * * * *

It was many weeks after the night that Lammy chopped up the pewter tea-pot and made his wonderful discovery before the fever left him, and then he felt so limp and weak that after sitting up a few minutes he was glad to crawl into bed again. His mind had only wandered during the first two or three days, but frequently he would wake up with a start from troubled sleep and ask his mother anxiously if it was really true about the tea-pot or only a dream. He was bitterly disappointed when the night before the auction came and the doctor told him that he must not go, even though his big brother Nellis had offered to put the great arm-chair in the cart and take him down in that way, all wrapped in comfortables. For the doctor said the excitement of thinking of the matter was enough without being there.

On his way out, Dr. Jedd spent a few moments before he went home, chatting to Joshua in the kitchen.

"To-morrow the tug of war is coming, Joshua," said the doctor; "all of your neighbours wish you well and set great store by your wife, and we hate to think of seeing strangers in the fruit farm. If you can think up any way that we could accommodate or help you out to buy it, why, just speak out. If the two thousand dollars Miss Jemima left my wife would make any difference to you, she bid me say that, as she knows your dread of mortgages, she would loan it on your note of hand," at the same time holding out his own toward Joshua as if it already held the proffered money.

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Joshua's honest face flushed with pleasure at the implied trust, yet he could hardly keep the smile from his lips and a mysterious twinkle from his eyes as he shook the doctor's hand heartily and answered: "We're much obleeged, and we'll never forget that you and Mis'is Jedd held us well enough in esteem to make the offer, but I reckon the only way we could come to own the fruit farm would be by buying it out fair and square. I don't say but I'd be downhearted to see it go by me, especially to 'Biram Slocum, for they've been days, doc, when I've even kind o' pictured out the two farms, ourn and it, joined fast by your sellin' me that wood bluff that runs in between from the highway. But you know the sayin', doc, 'Man proposes, woman disposes,' and all that."

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This time the doctor caught the wink that Joshua's near eye gave in spite of itself, but thought that it referred to Aunt Jimmy's peculiarities.

"Well," said the doctor, deliberately, a genial smile spreading over his features, "one thing I'll do to help out your picturing, as you call it. If luck should turn so that you buy the fruit farm, I'll sell you the wood knoll for what I gave for it, and that's the first time I ever considered parting with it, though I've had no end of good offers."

"Here's the boys jest come home in time to witness that there remark o' yourn. Ain't yer gettin' kind er rash 'n' hasty, doc?"

"No, Joshua, the more witnesses, the better," and the two men went out the door, toward the fence where the doctor's chaise was tied, laughing heartily.

As to the boys, they were completely bewildered, for not a word did they know, or would until after the auction, and they had not the remotest idea that their father even dreamed of bidding on the fruit farm.

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THE strain that Lammy had been under ever since the reading of Aunt Jimmy's will had told on him in a way that only his mother understood, and after the stubborn malarial fever itself was routed, he felt, as he said, "like the bones in my legs is willer whistles," so Dinah Lucky was engaged to stay with him on the morning of the long talked of auction sale. He would have preferred some one else, for Dinah was a great talker, and his head still felt tired, but she was the only trustworthy person in the entire neighbourhood who for either friendship or money would consent to miss the auction.

According to the terms of the notice that had appeared in the local papers and been posted in a ten-mile circuit from Milltown to Northboro, the sale conducted by Joel Hill, auctioneer, was to be held on the fruit farm itself at ten o'clock on the morning of Thursday, December the ninth, "by order of Joshua Lane, Executor."

When the day came, it was bitterly cold, though clear; a two-days old snow-storm followed by sleet had crusted well, and the walking and sleighing were both good, yet Joshua Lane was surprised when he went down to the fruit farm at nine o'clock in the morning to sweep off the porch and light a fire in the kitchen stove, which still remained on the premises for cooking chickens' food, to see many teams already hitched to the fence, the horses well muffled in blankets. People afoot were also going toward the barn, where a Hungarian, who was retained to tend the stock and act as watchman, had a room and fire which, together with what information they could extract from him, was what they sought.

As the man said, "Yah! ha!" equally loud to every question, Joshua thought no harm could come from that quarter, and proceeded to open the blinds of the kitchen windows and make such preparations as he could for protecting the audience from the cold.

By half-past nine the kitchen, sitting room, north parlours, all bare of furniture, and the stairs were packed with standing people, and when, at a few minutes before ten, the auctioneer and the Northboro lawyer, Mr. Cole, who had made Aunt Jimmy's will, appeared together, they had to push their way into the house.

Mrs. Slocum had been on hand early, of course,—she always was,—and kept dropping mysterious remarks and pursing up her lips. She began by cheapening the entire place, saying the house was not in as good repair as she had been led to think, that the wall papers were frights, and that everything needed paint, that four thousand dollars would be a high price for the property, and she didn't know who'd buy it anyway. Then the next minute she was requesting those about her not to crowd up the stairs, as they might bend the hand rail, which would be just so much out of the pocket of whoever bought the house, adding that red Brussels carpet was her choice for the north room.

To the surprise of all, the two out-of-town Lane brothers, Jason and Henry, were not there. The "all in due time" policy that had always, and would always, keep Henry poor, caused them to start for the auction so late that the delay on the road caused by a broken trace detained them until nearly eleven, when they turned about and went home again so as not to be late for dinner.

After reading the description of the property and the cash terms of the sale, Joel Hill stood up on a soap-box that he might overlook the assembly and called out, "What am I bid, to start?"

There was complete silence for a few moments. Then the door opened, and Mr. Brotherton, one of Mr. Clarke's agents from Northboro, entered, causing a flutter of speculation as to what his presence might mean and making Mrs. Lane's heart thump painfully. Dr. Jedd and his wife, the minister and his lady, together with Mrs. Lane, who were occupying a bench that had been brought from the barn, and were the only people seated, looked at the stove in front of them, so that those who expected a bid from that quarter were disappointed.

Joshua Lane, hands behind him, leaned against the chimney front and gazed steadily at a wire that held the stove-pipe in place.

"What am I bid, to start?" repeated the auctioneer. Abiram Slocum, scanning the various groups with his ferret eyes, moved uneasily, moistened his lips, and, as his wife gave him a prod with her umbrella that exactly hit the "funny bone" of his elbow, jerked out, "Five hundred dollars."

"One thousand," said a clear, distinct, but unfamiliar, voice at the back of the room. There was a unanimous turning of heads and twisting of bodies toward the bidder, who proved to be Mr. Cole the lawyer from Northboro, who made a very impressive appearance, clad as he was in a handsome fur-lined overcoat and a shiny silk hat. As he was also often employed by Mr. Clarke, the mystery deepened.

Abiram Slocum gasped as if some one had poured a pail of water over him at this unexpected competitor, and then called, "One thousand two hundred and fifty."

"Two thousand," from the lawyer.

"Two thousand and fifty," shrieked Abiram.

"Why waste time with small change a cold morning like this?" called the auctioneer.

"Three thousand," said the lawyer.

"Three thousand three hundred," snapped Abiram, vainly endeavouring to get out of range of the faces and gestures his wife was making at him.

"Four thousand five hundred," jumped the lawyer, beginning to button his coat and draw on his gloves, as if the end were well in sight.

Abiram Slocum seemed bewildered, and glancing at his wife, failed to read her signal aright, and resorted to a hoarse whispering in the middle of which she shook him off and shouted with an air of triumph, "Five thousand dollars!"

Mrs. Lane was seen to moisten her lips nervously, and the colour in her cheeks deepened, but then by this time the wood-stove was sending forth red-hot air as only a sheet-iron stove working full blast knows how.

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"Five thousand two hundred and fifty," bid the lawyer. Then followed an altercation between Mr. and Mrs. Slocum. Vainly the auctioneer rapped; they paid no attention, and upon the lawyer saying that any further delay would cause a withdrawal of his bid, the final "Going, going, gone, at five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars" was called, and it was not until fully twenty seconds after the final bang of the hammer that the Slocums came to, and Abiram fairly yelled, "Six—thousand—dollars!"

Of course it was too late, and the fault was nobody's but his own. He tried to protest and was actually hissed down, Laurelville folk preferring to see the property go anywhere so long as Mrs. Slocum was not mistress of the fruit farm.

"Name of buyer?" asked the auctioneer; "self or client?"

"Client," said the lawyer, slowly adjusting his eyeglasses and glancing at a slip of paper, while dead silence again prevailed, and the Slocums glared forked lightning at each other and the world in general.

"The purchase is made by Laretta Ann Lane, as guardian for her son, Samuel Lane, and she is prepared to deposit the price in cash, pending searching of the title and transfer of deed."

There was a shuffle as the people, released from the strain, shifted from one numb foot to the other, and then cheers broke out, for above curiosity and all other feeling was one of joy that their kind, hard-working neighbour had in some mysterious way received what they firmly believed to be her due.

When the applause had subsided and the general handshaking ceased, Laretta Ann Lane pulled a large new wallet from some mysterious place in her dress, and counting out eleven clean five-hundred-dollar bills held them toward the auctioneer, saying, "I'll trouble you for the change, please," adding in a low yet perfectly distinct voice to an irate figure who was elbowing her way out, and meeting many obstacles in so doing, "That change 'll come in right handy for new papers, paint, and furnishings that you said was needful, and I think a red Brussels carpet *would* liven up that north room wonderful. That same was your choice, weren't it, Mis'is Slocum?"

How it all came about the village never discovered; for whatever the lawyer knew or *thought*, he kept it to himself and said the opposite, which is, of course, what lawyers are for.

Dr. Jedd was the only one who suspected in the right direction; for soon after the Lanes had moved into their new home, and curiosity had subsided, he was looking on the parlour mantel-shelf for the matches, and discovered the chopped remains of the pewter tea-pot reposing in a handsome china jar that was bought in New York. But Dr. Jedd only chuckled as the whole thing flashed across him, and he said to himself, "Surely enough, man proposes and woman disposes, and there's a various lot of human nature in woman, especially Aunt Jimmy, who was a blessed, good, spunky, old fool."

One final sensation was given the neighbourhood when it was found that, after the payment of the legacies and other charges against the estate, there was enough surplus to give the three Lane brothers over three thousand dollars each, legal allotment.

XIII

TELLTALE TROUSERS

As Mrs. Lane was hurrying home from the auction, that Lammy need not be kept in suspense a moment longer than was necessary, she bumped into Abiram Slocum, who was trudging moodily along the road. His wife had left the house first, and in her anger appropriated the cutter and gone home, leaving him to walk.

Mrs. Lane intended to go by without speaking, and merely gave a civil nod, but he would not allow it; his ugly mood must find vent in words, and as she passed he squared about, saying:—

"You've no cause to feel so hoity toity if yer *hev* got the fruit farm; *there's underhand business been goin' on here in Laurelville, if the light o' truth was let in.* Moreover, it's time that husband o' yourn as Minstrator of that Irish O'More's debts should pay me the rent due; the fact of the furniture being burned don't release him a copper cent's worth, as he well knows. Tell him from me he'd best come down and settle up; ter-morrow I reckon to be at the tax office all forenoon, or"—with an evil sneer—"mebbe, as you seem to hold the purse, you'd like to pay the debt out of charity to the girl you bragged o' being fond of, to save her the name of pauper."

Mrs. Lane grew hot and cold by turns, and a torrent of words rose to her lips, but the thought of Lammy waiting so patiently checked her in time, and she merely said, "Yes, Abiram Slocum, you'll hear from us to-morrer."

As she reached the home gate, she saw Dinah Lucky, who was stationed at the window to give the first word of her return, and at the same time a wild-looking tawny head and a pair of big questioning gray eyes appeared above her fat shoulder, as Lammy steadied himself by the window-frame. Quick as a flash she pulled off her red knitted shawl and waved it joyfully, so that Lammy knew at least two minutes before she could have reached his room to tell him.

Once upstairs, she was obliged to begin at the beginning and tell him the story of the morning in every detail, holding his hand the while as if to convince him that she was real and what she told the plain truth.

Presently Dinah slipped downstairs, saying she would get the dinner and bring them both some

upstairs, for she was sure "Missy Lane" must be clear tuckered out.

And so she was, though she had not realized it until that moment and sinking back in the homemade arm-chair, she closed her eyes in a state of perfect peace, and must have dozed, for she awoke with a start to hear Lammy say, "This sort of makes up for the Thanksgiving dinner I missed," and there upon the various chairs and the bedstead Dinah had spread a dinner tempting as only a coloured "born cook" knows how to make it, while the clashing of knives and forks below told her that Joshua and the boys were provided for (they had all staid at home from the shop to attend the auction) and that this afternoon at least was her own.

After dinner Lammy lay for a long time, looking at the wood fire flickering through the open front of the stove, planning how they would fix Aunt Jimmy's—or rather *his*—house, as his mother called it, and when they would move. Of course, Lammy wished to go at once—even a week seemed a long delay. Mrs. Lane hesitated, for she had thoughts of waiting until spring; yet, on the other hand, she could not well leave the house empty or travel up and down to tend the chickens. Aunt Jimmy's house was by far the easier to heat, and now as they must keep a hired man permanently, he could be put into their present house and everything settle down for a comfortable winter of work, rest, and planning, so she said, much to Lammy's joy, that she thought they could be in by Christmas and then make the improvements at their leisure.

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"Yes, we can wait to paper the rooms—that is, all except Bird's," he added. "I'd like to have hers fixed up for her when she comes, white and a paper with wild roses—that's what she likes, and she made a pattern for one once and was going to send it to the wall-paper man when her father finished the red piney pattern, only he never did." And Lammy told his mother of Bird's hopes about her work, ending by taking the string that held the key from about his neck and saying:—

"Please unlock my lower drawer and give me Bird's bundle that her uncle would not let her take with her; if I can't see her, I can look at her things. I know she wouldn't mind, because I went back in through the cellar with her that last day and tied them up; only I didn't do it very well because there was no good paper and string. I'd like to fix them better and put up the paint-box by itself," he said, fumbling with the knots, as his mother, much interested, took a fresh sheet of paper from the press closet behind the bed.

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As she reseated herself, the string broke, and the contents of the hastily made bundle were scattered about the bed. Lammy picked up the water-colour drawings carefully, one by one, and smoothed them out with the greatest care. There were a couple of dozen of them, besides those of the wild roses and the peony design, which Mrs. Lane at once recognized from its spirit, even though it was unfinished.

Suddenly Lammy cried out in delight, for there before him was a pen-and-ink sketch of Bird herself, much younger and happier than when he had last seen her, but still his little friend to the life.

"Oh, mother," he said, as soon as he had feasted his eyes on it, "do you think there could be any harm in putting this up on the mantel-shelf where I could look at it—just for a few days until we go to get Bird back?" And of course his mother assured him that there could be no possible harm. Then, completely satisfied, he laid the sheets of drawing-paper together again and prepared to make them into a neat, flat package.

"You've dropped this out," said his mother, reaching across the bed to pick up something that had slid down between the coverlid and the wall, and laid what seemed to be a letter in a long, heavy, brown manila envelope tied with pink tape in front of Lammy.

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"I don't know what that is," he said, looking it over; "it must have been between the pictures when we pulled them out of her father's box, because those were all I saw when I made the bundle up. See, there's writing on this side," and holding it up to the light, for the winter twilight was setting in, he read slowly:—

"'Papers concerning the Turner Mill Farm Property,—to be recorded.' I wonder what that means."

Mrs. Lane's eyes fairly bulged, and great drops of sweat stood on her forehead as she answered: "Means? It means, Lammy Lane, that the Lord don't forget the orphan, and if Bird O'More *is* in New York, he's lookin' after her business right here in Laurelville.



"It means, Lammy Lane, that the Lord don't forget the orphan."

"The meaning of that letter is what Abiram Slocum burnt up his cross-road house to conceal, which he wouldn't hev done if it was of no account." And Mrs. Lane poured out her suspicions and ideas concerning the matter.

* * * * *

At the supper-table that night Mrs. Lane repeated Abiram Slocum's message to her husband, and he, rubbing his chin with a troubled air, replied, "Truth be told, Laretta Ann, owin' to the burnin' of that furniture there isn't a cent left to pay that claim, and I do hate to have poor O'More held up as an insolvent around here for sixty dollars, 'count o' Bird. He was a good-natured, harmless sort o' feller, enjoyin' of himself as he went, very much like I'd be if you hadn't taken up with me, Mis'is Lane."

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At this compliment Mrs. Lane blushed like a girl and murmured something about all men bein' the better for women's handling, provided it was the right woman, which Mis'is Slocum wasn't.

"Now as far as that sixty dollars goes, if it wasn't owed to 'Biram Slocum, I'd undertake ter pay it myself, so as to get the receipt and settle everything square up and clean billed, but, by jinks, it sticks me to pay that low-down swindler."

"Joshua Lane!" cried his wife, in a tragic tone, standing up and pointing her pudgy finger at him with such a jerk that it made him start as if it had been a bayonet, while she used the most grandiloquent language she could muster: "The estate of the late lamented Terence O'More does not owe Abiram Slocum a bent penny, and as to the receipt for the same, I'll hand it to you this time to-morrow night, leastwise if it doesn't blow a blizzard 'twixt now and then, or Mis'is Slocum turn 'Biram into pickled peppers by the sight of the face she wore home from the auction."

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"Come now, Laretta Ann," wheedled Joshua, "you ain't minded of paying it, be ye? I'd think twice—that I would."

"Pay!" snorted Laretta. "Don't I tell you there's nothin' owed?"

"You're talkin' an' actin' enigmas and charades. Not thet it's anything new, but if I was you, I'd be mighty keerful how I baited 'Biram Slocum; he is too cute for most men, and he would take to the law for a heedless word jest now, he's that riled about the wardrobe story leakin' out and losing the fruit farm."

"That's all right, and don't you fret, Joshua; if there is any law called in, it'll be by me." And pump and quiz as he might, not another word could he extract from his wife upon the subject.

* * * * *

Early the next morning Mrs. Lane harnessed the "colt," which, though ten years old, still bore his youthful name, to the cutter, and after putting her egg-basket deep under the robe and depositing her satchel on top of it, turned up the hill road toward Northboro, waving her whip good-by to Lammy, who, seated in the big chair in his window, smiled at her, with his finger pressed to his lips, as if cautioning silence.

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As the sleigh bells jingled and the "colt" loped easily along, Mrs. Lane leaned back as if the motion and jolly sound expressed her own feelings admirably, and the miles flew swiftly by.

When Northboro was reached, she drove to the stable where she always left her horse in unseasonable weather, but instead of carrying the familiar egg-basket into town, she stowed it away under the sleigh seat, and hanging her satchel securely on her arm, drew on her best gloves that she had brought in her pocket, and started up the main street at a vigorous trot. Coming to a gray stone building next the court-house, where many lawyers had offices, she read the various signs anxiously, and then spying that of Mr. Cole, opened the swinging outside door and climbed the two flights of stairs that led to it.

Mr. Cole greeted her pleasantly, for he had a very kindly feeling toward this generous-hearted woman; but when he heard her story and saw the legal-looking envelope, he became doubly interested. Untying the tape, he read the various papers through, one after the other, while Mrs.

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Lane watched his eagerness with evident satisfaction. When he had finished, he replaced the papers and tied them up deliberately before he said: "These papers appear to me to be of great importance to O'More's daughter, though exactly what they amount to I cannot tell until I see the dates of certain mortgages and transfers on record in Milltown. Fortunately the attorney, Mr. King, who drew up the papers before he went to California four years ago, has returned on a visit, and I am to meet him in court this afternoon."

"I suppose you know Bird hasn't anything to pay what Joshua says they call the retainment fee, but if a little money 'll help her get her rights, you may hold me good for it."

"That will not be necessary," said the lawyer, smiling, "for my client, Mr. Clarke, is as anxious to have the title to the Mill Farm cleared as you are, so in serving him I may be able to aid Bird. Slocum, the present owner, seems a slippery man at best. You know that the insurance company, for which I also happen to be the agent, withholds his claim because he gave the date of June 9 for his fire when it took place the 10th."

At this Mrs. Lane's eyes grew steely bright, and she moistened her lips nervously. Then Mr. Cole put the papers in his safe and closed the door with its mysterious lock, and Mrs. Lane breathed a sigh of relief and, asking him to write as soon as he had news, either good or bad, went carefully down the shallow marble stairs of the office building, for elevators she would have none of.

Once more in the street, she spied a bakery and, going in, ordered a cup of coffee and half a custard pie, which she ate with relish and then returned to the stable for the "colt" without doing any of her usual market-day trading.

It was only half-past eleven when Mrs. Lane, coming down the hill road, saw Laurelville lying before her in the valley, and five minutes later when she hitched the colt in front of the town-house, throwing the coon lap-robe over him in addition to his blanket.

The selectmen had been in consultation, and were now standing outside, making holes in the snow with their boot toes and finding it difficult to break away, after the usual manner of rural communities. Mrs. Lane nodded pleasantly and asked if every one else had gone home to dinner.

"Mostly," replied First Selectman Penfield, "but Judge Ricker's in his office, I reckon, and Slocum, he's in the end room as 'cessor, waitin' for folks to swear their taxes, for which they appear to be in no hurry."

This was exactly the information Mrs. Lane wanted, and she walked directly down the corridor, this time firmly grasping the egg-basket and leaving the satchel outside.

Opening the door without knocking, she had entered, closed it, and seated herself opposite Abiram Slocum before he was aware of her presence, and do what he could, he was not able to control the slight start that her appearance gave him.

"Morning, marm," he said formally, putting his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and puffing out his cheeks with importance; "want to swear your taxes?"

"Not to-day; Joshua always attends to that. I've jest dropped in ter get that receipt for the O'More rent, as Joshua intends settling the matter up with Judge Ricker this afternoon."

"Very glad to hear it, Mrs. Joshua Lane; it saves me lots of trouble, and I hate to go to law unless required." And he drew a blank form from a desk, which he filled in, signed, and was about to hand across the table, when he suddenly withdrew it, saying, "Well, where are the sixty dollars?"

"They was paid you June the 10th."

"What!" shouted Abiram, really believing the woman to be crazy, and retreating behind the table.

"Just so; by that I mean all that good furniture you set fire to along with your house."

Slocum turned ghastly white and almost staggered, but quickly recovering himself, he sprang forward furiously, and for a moment Mrs. Lane thought he was going to strike her, but glancing out the window she saw that Selectman Penfield was below, and this reassured her.

"I'll have you arrested for slander as sure as my name's Abiram Slocum," he gasped, trying to get out the door in front of which she stood.

"I wouldn't be too hasty; if you wait, you will hear more to get up that slander claim on, mostlike. Jest you go back and set down while I have my say, and if you want witnesses to it, Judge Ricker will step in, I'm sure, or Mr. Penfield either; they are both real handy. As you said yesterday, *there's underhand business been goin' on in town if the light o' truth could be let in, which I'm now doin'.*"

So Abiram hesitated, and sank back into the chair, casting an uneasy look at his visitor, who proceeded to state her case both rapidly and clearly.

"'Twas Friday, the 10th of June, you fired that house, though you did give into the insurance company 'twas the 9th." (Here again Slocum jumped, and his hands worked nervously.)

"The 10th was circus day, and most all the town had gone to Northboro. Likewise Lockwood's field-hands went, and so there were no men folks working up beyond four corners; this gave you a clear coast.

"You started for the circus with Mis'is Slocum and 'Ram; you turned back, giving it out you'd got important business at the Mill Farm. But you didn't go, and turned up before noon at the turnpike store, where you never trade. There you bought a new gallon can of kerosene, saying you was going up to the north lots to make a wash of it fer tent-worms in the apple trees. Now there ain't even a wild crab tree in the north lots—only corn-fields.

"You went up that way all right, and a-spookin' around the house. Everything was tight fast, and so the only place you could get in was by crawlin' through the cellar winder, which you did, tearin' a new pair o' herrin'-bone pattern trousers so doin'."

Again Slocum started, and his face wore a look of intense wonder mixed with fear.

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"After you looked about for what you didn't find, you spilled the kerosene about and set fire so's nobody could get what maybe you'd overlooked.

"Then you scooted back in the corn lot and hid the can in the big blasted chestnut stump, and when a hue and cry was raised walked down as innercent as May, from hoein' corn that wasn't yet above ground!"

By this time Slocum had pulled himself together, and his defiance returned.

"Woman, you are crazy, and what you say is perfectly redeclous; I'll have you behind asylum bars, if not in jail. Mere talk! You can't prove a word you say, and what is this 'thing' that I couldn't find and wanted to burn? Just tell me that!"

"Prove? Oh, yes, I can; Laretta Ann Lane is no random talker.

"Here's the pants you wore, and that you sold the pedler the same afternoon—they smell yet o' kerosene, and here's the piece ye tore out on the winder-catch!" And Mrs. Lane whipped the telltale trousers out of her egg-basket.

"The kerosene can's in the stump yet, but I've got it all straight; that poor Polack woman you turned out of house and home seen you hide it. Now what else was there?" And Mrs. Lane affected a lapse of memory.

"Oh, yes; you wanted to know what you was a-lookin' for. Why, don't you know? It was a big lawyer's envelope marked 'Papers concerning the Turner Mill Farm Property,—to be recorded.'" [240]

Slocum breathed hard and grasped the table edge to steady himself.

"Jest why you wanted them papers I don't know, but Lawyer Cole in Northboro, who's got 'em, is goin' to find out."

"Lawyer Cole has them?" Slocum whispered hoarsely; "Lawyer Cole, did you say?"

"Yes, I did!" repeated Mrs. Lane; "and if you don't think the testimony I've been givin' you is true, and consider it a slander, I've got it writ out, and I'll have him search that out too."

"No, no," said Slocum, speaking as if to himself. "How did you ever find—" and then he remembered and stopped. Mrs. Lane waited a few minutes, and then said:—

"It's full noon now, and I must get home to dinner, so I'll trouble you for that rent receipt. Thanks, and I'll give you a word of advice in return. The Lord mostly finds out evil-doers, and not infrequent He trusts women to help Him, and I want you to consider that if I don't give this matter a public airin', it isn't from either pity or fear of you, but because I don't want the county to know that we harboured such a skunk among us so long; my last word being that you'd better get away from my neighbourhood before I change my mind!" [241]

So it came about that before Christmas Abiram Slocum gave it out that his wife's health was poor and he had been advised to go to California, where he intended to buy a vineyard, hinting at the same time that as he expected to sell a large tract of land to Mr. Clarke, he had no further interest in Laurelville; and though only four people knew the real reason, the whole village rejoiced without the slightest effort at concealment.

At the same time Joshua Lane found that his work as administrator of the O'More property had only begun instead of being closed.

XIV

THE FIRE-ESCAPE

WHAT had Bird O'More been doing these many days? It did not need the skill of a magician to tell why even her notes to her Laurelville friends had been brief at best and then finally ceased. A single peep at her surroundings would have told the tale, and the more completely she became merged in them, the more hopeless she felt them to be.

Her weekly work in distributing the flowers was a bright spot indeed, as well as her visits to Tessie; but as she looked forward to the time when frost would kill the blossoms, the Flower Mission be closed, and the liberty of streets and parks cut off for confinement in the dark flat, her heart sank indeed.

All her hopes were centred about going to school, and the possibilities of meeting teachers who would understand her desire to learn, and help her with sympathy. Meanwhile, the city summer had told upon her country-bred body even more than on her sensitive temperament, and she grew thinner every day, until finally her aunt was compelled to see it in spite of herself, and promised to take her down to Coney Island or Rockaway Beach "some day" when she was not busy, to freshen her up a bit; but that day never came, and as little Billy was constantly improving, her uncle had eyes only for him. In fact, the change in the little cripple was little short of marvellous. Of course his lameness remained, but his cheeks were round, his lips had lost their blue tint, and to hear him cry or complain was a rare sound indeed. That all this came of Bird's devoted care her uncle was quite convinced; for it was she who gave Billy his morning bath, and managed,—no easy task,—that the battered tub should not again be used for a cupboard. It was Bird who took his food into the fire-escape bower, and coaxed and tempted him until he had eaten sufficient, and it was she who put him nightly into the little bed opposite her own and taught him to say, as a little prayer, the verse of the hymn her own mother had sung to her in the misty long ago:— [243]

"Jesus, gentle Shepherd, hear me;
Bless thy little lamb to-night:
Through the darkness be thou near me;
Keep me safe till morning light."

But for Billy, Bird could not have endured through that dreadful summer. As it was, she often fingered her "keepsake," still hanging about her neck, the thought comforting her that with the mysterious coin in it she could get back once more to the little village that seemed like heaven to her, no matter what happened after. Often, in fact, the only thing that kept her from running away was the belief that if her good friends could take her permanently, they would have sent for her, and pride, heroic pride, born of Old and New England, was still strong in Ladybird. [244]

"She'll perk up when school begins and she gets acquainted with girls her own age," said O'More, cheerfully, as his attention was called to her pale cheeks by his wife. "I'm owin' her good will for what she's done for Billy, else I most wish I'd left her up there with those hayseeds that wanted her. Somehow she don't fit in here, for all that she never complains. She's different from us, and she makes me uncomfortable, lookin' so solemn at me if I chance to take off my coat and collar of a night at supper to ease up a bit. Terence was different from us, too, and it's bred in the bone."

"Let well enough alone," said Mrs. O'More, glad to have Billy so completely taken off her hands; "folks can't afford to be different to their own, unless they've got the price. I've made her a good dress out of a remnant of bright plaid I bought, so next week she can shell off them shabby black duds that give me the shivers every time I see them. Maybe fixin' up like other girls 'll bring her to and liven her. She's queer though, sure enough, don't give no sass, and it ain't natural; I never seen a girl her age before that didn't talk back, and sometimes it riles me to see her keep so close shet when I up and let fly." [245]

In September school began, but this brought further disappointment, for Bird had hoped to find a friend at least in the teacher. She was, however, graded according to her size and age, not ability, as if she had been a wooden box, and found herself in an overcrowded room, a weak-eyed little Italian, with brass earrings, seated on one side of her, and the Polish sausage-seller's daughter on the other, her dirty hands heavy with glass rings, which caused her to keep whispering behind Bird's back as to her lack of jewellery and style; while at the first recess this little Slav told the astonished Bird, "If yer tink to get in vid us, you'll got to pomp you 'air; dis crowt, we's stylish barticular—ve iss."

As to the teacher in trim shirt-waist, with pretty hands and hair, to whom the class recited in chorus, Bird longed to speak to her, to touch her, but she fled to a purer atmosphere as soon as school was out, and was remote as the stars. [246]

As the weather grew cool, the fire-escape arbour was abandoned; they could spend less time out of doors, and Bird felt caged indeed. The engine-house now was the limit of their walks, for it grew dark very soon after school was out. Still they never tired of seeing the horses dash out, and Billy called Big Dave "my fireman," and used to shout to him as he passed in the street. So the autumn passed.

* * * * *

It was a clear, cold afternoon a little before Christmas; the shops were gay with pretty things, and the streets with people. Billy was in a fever of excitement because his father, who had left home on a business trip a few days before, had promised him a Christmas tree, and Bird had gone out to buy the candles and some little toys to put on it, at a street stall. Billy, however, did not go, for he was not to see the toys until Christmas Eve.

Bird wandered across to Broadway at 23rd Street, and then followed the stream of shoppers southward. Was it only a year since last Christmas when she had helped trim the tree at Sunday-school in Laurelville and had sung the treble-solo part in— [247]

"Watchman! tell us of the night;
What the signs of promise are."

Would there ever again be any signs of promise for her? Somehow she had never before felt so lonely for her father as in that merry crowd. She wondered if he saw and was disappointed in her, and what Lammy was doing. Going up on the hill probably with the other village children to cut the Christmas tree and greens for church.

Not minding where she went, she followed the crowd on past and around Union Square and down town again. Then realizing that she was facing away from home and had not bought her candles, she looked up and saw on the opposite side of the street a beautiful gray stone church. At one side and joined to it was what looked like a house set well back from the street, from which it was separated by a wide garden. People were going in and out of the church by twos and threes.

A voice seemed to call Bird, and she too crossed Broadway and timidly pushed open the swinging door.

At first she could see nothing, as the only lights in the church were near the chancel. Then different objects began to outline themselves. There was no service going on, the people having come in merely for a few quiet moments. [248]

Bird stood quite still in the little open space by a side door back of the pews; it was the first really peaceful time she had known since the day that she and Lammy carried the red peonies to the hillside graveyard, and as she thought of it, she seemed to smell the sweet spruce fragrance of those runaway Christmas trees that watched where her parents slept.

A flock of little choir boys trooped in from an opposite door for the final practice of their

Christmas carols and grouped themselves in the stalls. Next a quiver of sound rushed through the church as the great organ drew its breath and swelled its lungs, as if humming the melody before breaking into voice. Then above its tones rang a clear boy-soprano.

“Watchman! tell us of the night
What the signs of promise are.”

and the chorus answered—

“Traveller! o’er yon mountain height,
See that glory-beaming star.”

The answering echo quivered in Bird’s throat, suffocating her, and as, unable to stand, she knelt trembling upon the floor the odour of spruce again enveloped her, and groping, she found that she was really leaning against a pile of small trees that had been brought there to decorate the church for Christmas Eve, and as the door opened, men came in bringing more—dozens and dozens of them, it seemed. [249]

Bird picked up a broken twig, and in spite of its sharpness pressed it against her face, kissing it passionately, never noticing that she was directly in the passage between the door and aisle, where presently a gentleman coming hurriedly in stumbled over her.

He was about to pass on with a curt apology, but glancing down, he saw that it was a little girl, and that though comfortably dressed and not actually poor, her face showed signs of distress and tears, so he stopped.

“What is it, my child?” he said. “Have you lost your way, or what? Come here and sit in this pew while you tell me about it. I’ve a daughter at home only a couple of years older than you, and she doesn’t like to have any one sad at Christmas time.”

It was months since any one had spoken to Bird in the gentle tongue that had been her father’s and was her own, and though the tears started anew, she made haste to obey, lest he should suddenly disappear like all her pleasant dreams. [250]

He was an alert, middle-aged man of affairs. He had a fine presence and keen eyes and, without making her feel that he was prying, succeeded in drawing out the bare facts of her story, nothing more, so that he had no idea that the trouble was more than a country-bred child’s homesickness at being shut up in the city, and having to go to school instead of reading all day long and trying to paint flowers.

“So you used to live in Laurelville?” he said; “why, I have a country place near there, not far from Northboro, my native town, where I built an Art School, and I have little city girls come to us there every summer for a playtime. If you will remember and write, or come to me when the next summer vacation begins, you shall be one of them. Meanwhile keep this, my address.” He handed her a card and passed on, for he was a good man and rich, with many people to make happy at Christmas time, and to be both rich and good in New York one must work very hard indeed.

Going out into the street again, Bird read the name on the card before slipping it into her pocket. Wonder of wonders! it was Clarke, the same as that of the wall-paper manufacturer whose manager had asked Terry to make designs for him. Of course he must be Marion Clarke’s father. The address was different from the one of the factory, but Bird knew enough of the city now to guess that this number on the card was of his house, and she now remembered that people had said that he conducted many various manufactories. [251]

So he had built the School of Design at Northboro that she had dreamed about ever since she went there with her father to look at an exhibition of drawings! Could it be that this card was the Christmas sign of hope and promise to her? She almost flew homeward after buying the candles and little toys, and laughed and chatted so cheerfully with Billy when she gave him his supper, that her cousin Larry, who had always teased her for being set up, remarked to his mother, “Ladybird is coming down from her perch some; maybe she’ll get to be like us, after all.” But it was upward, not downward, that the brave, clipped wings were struggling.

* * * * *

Between Christmas and New Year there came a snow-storm, and then bitterly cold weather. In Laurelville snow meant sleighing, coasting, bracing air, and rosy cheeks; in East 24th Street it signified soaked skirts, sodden shoes, and sore throats, while for Billy it brought unhappy shut-in days, for his crutch slipped dangerously in icy weather. [252]

One evening Mrs. O’More was called out to sit with a sick neighbour. She told Bird not to wait up as she might be late, and she would take the key with her, as the boys had keys of their own if they came in first.

Bird was used to thus staying shut into the flat alone, and so after she heard the key turn in the door of their narrow hallway, she amused herself for perhaps an hour by drawing, and then went to bed. She had been dragging Billy about on his sled up and down the street all the afternoon, so she soon fell into a heavy sleep.

It must have been a couple of hours after when she waked up suddenly and tried vainly to think where she was. The room felt hot and airless, and a strange smell of scorched leather filled the air. She managed to get on her feet, pulled on a few clothes, and tried to open a side window, but it stuck fast. Going to the front, she raised the sash, and as she did so, a cloud of smoke poured into the room, while the shouts and clashing of gongs in the street told what it was that had wakened her—the fire-engines! The great sales stables with their tons of hay and straw were on fire, and the house also, while in the street all was in an uproar of frightened horses and men. [253]

Rushing back to her room, she shook Billy awake and, wrapping a few clothes about him,

dragged him toward the hall door. It was locked of course, as Mrs. O'More had taken the key. By this time the smoke and flames were pouring in the front windows. Ah, the fire-escape! Through the kitchen she struggled, and out on to the icy balcony, having the sense to close the window behind her.

The back yards were full of firemen, and excited people hung from the windows of opposite buildings. Bird tried to raise the trap in the floor door, but the boxes of frozen earth that had held the morning-glories bore it down, making it useless, and the one below was hopelessly heaped with litter.

Would nobody see her? Billy clung to her, sobbing pitifully, for he was lightly covered, and shivered with cold as well as fear. The window-frame inside was catching, and heat also came up from below. Was this the end? Must the wild bird die in her cage?

Suddenly a great shout arose in the rear; people had seen and were pointing them out. Up came the firemen, climbing, clinging, battering down the obstructions before them. Ah, those wonderful firemen that keep our faith in old-time valour!

A moment more, and an axe struck open the prisoned trap-door, a head came through, and a voice cried, "Good God, it's Bird and little Billy!"

"Dave, my fireman!" sobbed the boy, flinging himself into the strong arms. "Take him," commanded Bird, as the man hesitated an instant; "I can follow." Down the ladder they went step by step until the flames from the lower story crept through and stopped them again, and the slender fire ladder, held by strong arms, shot up to them, and Dave's mate grasped Bird and carried her down to safety. Then the firemen cheered, and tears rolled down Big Dave's cheeks unchecked.

Kind, if rough, people took them in and warmed and fed them, and more kind people guided Mrs. O'More to them when she rushed frantically home. But little Billy had suffered a nervous shock, and lay there moaning and seeming to think that the fire still pursued him.

"He will need great care and nursing to pull him through, for he is naturally delicate," said the doctor the next day when they had moved into a couple of furnished rooms that were rented to Mrs. O'More by a friend in a near-by street until she could pull herself together, as they had lost everything. "He must either go to a hospital or have a nurse," continued the doctor, gravely. But Mrs. O'More could not be made to see it.

"His father'd never forgive me if I put him out o' me hands," she said; "he'll pick up from the fright after a bit, and what with John away, and never saving a cent of cash no more than the boys, and the business all burned out along with us, I've not money in hand for the wasting on nurses."

Bird knew better,—knew that Billy was very sick, and she could not let him die so. Ah! the keepsake, the precious coin! Now was the time to spend it, for there could be no greater necessity than this. What if it was not enough? Even if it was not much, it might do until her uncle got back, and then she knew Billy would have care if his father begged in the street for it.

Going away in a corner, she unfastened the silver chain and detached the little bag from it. With difficulty she ripped the thong stitches, but instead of a coin, out of many wrappings fell a slender band of gold set with one large diamond. As she turned the ring over in surprise, some letters within caught her eye—"Bertha Rawley, from her godfather, J. S."

This was the name of Terence O'More's mother, and the ring had been a wedding gift from her godfather, and the one valuable possession that she had clung to all her troubled life. But Bird knew nothing of this.

What could Bird do with it? She pondered—her city life had made her shrewd; she knew the miseries of the poor who went to the pawn shops, and guessed that any one in the neighbourhood might undervalue the ring, or likely enough say that she stole it.

Mr. Clarke—she would go to him! Now was the time! She borrowed a hat and wrap from the woman of whom the rooms were rented and stole out. In an hour she came back with a triumphant look upon her face, and laying a roll of bills before her aunt, said, "I've sold my keepsake; now we will have a nurse for Billy right away."

After she understood about the money, and found that it was one hundred dollars, Mrs. O'More broke down and cried like a baby, telling Bird that she was a real lady and no mistake. And then adding, to Bird's indignation, "I wonder did you get the value o' the ring, or did he cheat you, the old skin!" But, nevertheless, the nurse came, and not an hour too soon.

Meanwhile a certain rich man sat at his library desk, holding a diamond ring in his hand, saying, half aloud: "I believe the girl's story, though I suppose most people would say she stole the ring, or was given it by those who did. It is healthier to believe than to doubt. I shall investigate the matter to-morrow and keep the ring for the child. It is a fine stone worth four times the sum I gave her, but she would not take any more than the one hundred dollars, nor was it wise for me to press her. Ah! letters inside! Bertha Rawley! She said her grandmother was an Englishwoman. That new superintendent of the Northboro Art School is named Rawley. He studied at South Kensington. I wonder if they could be related. O'More. I think that name comes into that Mill Farm deed mix-up. I will write to Rawley at once and see what is known about the girl in Laurelville, for something tells me that child is 'one of these little ones' who should be helped."

THE BIRD IS FREED

JANUARY was half over before it was possible for the Lanes to take their long-promised trip to New York to look up Bird and bring her back, as her uncle had exacted, a legal sister to Lammy.

Moving from the small house into the large one, even though the necessary repairs were to be made by degrees, was more of an undertaking than Mrs. Lane had bargained for. Also it took Lammy a long time to get "the bones back in his legs," though happiness and Dr. Jedd's tonics worked wonders.

Dr. Jedd had suggested that a furnace required much less care than three or four stoves, and so one had been put in. Mrs. Jedd, who had very good taste, and a tactful way of expressing it that never gave offence, suggested to Mrs. Lane that, instead of covering the mahogany parlour set with red plush, the floor with a red-figured tapestry brussels, replacing the small window-panes with great sheets of glass, bricking up the wide fireplace, and then closing the whole room up except, as Joshua said, for funerals, it should be turned into a comfortable living-room.

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This suited Joshua, the older boys, and Lammy exactly, and though Lauretta Ann demurred at first, saying, "It didn't seem hardly respectable not to hev a best room," she quickly yielded, and said that it "would be a real comfort to have a separate place to eat in when there was a lot of baking on hand and the kitchen all of a tousel, likewise to set in after meals."

So the old furniture was recovered with a suitable dull green corduroy, and some comfortable Morris chairs added, "that pa and the boys wouldn't be tempted to set back on the hind legs of the mahogany, which is brittle." A deep red rug, that would not have to be untacked at housecleaning times, covered the centre of the floor, with Grandmother Lane's long Thanksgiving dinner-table in the centre, and a smaller round one with folding leaves in the corner, for the entertaining of the friends who were constantly dropping in for a chat and a cup of tea and crullers or a cut of mince pie, for no one in the county had such a reputation for crullers and mince meat, combined with a lavish use of them, as Lauretta Ann Lane.

Next Mrs. Jedd ventured to suggest that the fireplace be left open and some of the big logs, with which Aunt Jimmy had always kept the woodshed filled, simply because her mother had done so before her, used for a nightly hearth fire.

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Mrs. Lane said she hadn't any andirons and the ashes would make dust, but Joshua was so pleased with the idea of returning to old ways that she yielded; and when, on the old fire-board being removed to clean the chimney of soot and swallows' nests, a pair of tall andirons and a fender were found, the matter settled itself, and Mrs. Lane soon came to take pride in the cheerful blaze, while the best dishes, which were of really handsome blue and white India porcelain, were ranged in racks over the mantel-shelf.

Then there was a sunny southwest window, and Joshua fastened a long shelf in front of this for his wife's geraniums, wax-plant, and wandering Jew that had shut out the light from the best window in the kitchen, and these brought in the welcome touch of greenery in spite of the particoloured crimped paper with which she insisted upon decorating the pots.

"How Bird will love this room!" Lammy said a dozen times a day, as he remembered how prettily she had arranged the scanty furnishings at the house above the crossroads, and disliked everything that savoured of show or cheap finery, and it seemed to him that Bird's companionship was the only thing necessary to prove that heaven, instead of being a far-away region, at least had a branch at the fruit farm in Laurelville.

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The doctor said that Lammy must not return to school until the midwinter term, and so he spent his time in the shop back of the barn, making many little knickknacks for the house, not a few of them being intended for Bird's room, for which he also designed a low book-shelf that made a seat in the dormer window, and a table with a hinge that she could use when she wished to draw or paint, and then close against the wall.

This room was next to Mrs. Lane's, and had two dormer windows and a deep press closet lighted by a high window, under which the washstand stood. It was furnished with a white enamelled bed and a plain white painted dresser, upon which, Lammy said, Bird could paint whatever flowers she chose. There were frilled curtains of striped dimity at the windows, and a quilt and bed valance of the same, for Mrs. Lane despised any ornamental fabric that would not wash and "bile." The floor was covered with matting, but three sheepskin rugs of home raising and dyed fox colour were placed, one at the side of the bed, one before the bureau, and one under the wall table, upon which Bird's paint-box stood close to the leather-paper portfolio that Lammy had made to hold the precious sketches.

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He had tried his best to find a wall paper with a red "piney" border, but they told him at the great paper warehouse at Northboro that they had never seen such a paper, so he took wild-rose sprays instead.

Lammy had also filled a small bark-covered box with Christmas ferns, ebony spleenwort, wintergreen, partridge-berries, and moss, for the window-ledge, while fresh festoons of ground-pine topped the windows even though Christmas was long past. In fact, Lammy could hardly keep away from the room, and often when he went in, he met his mother, for whom it had the same attraction, and then they would both laugh happily and, closing the door, come away hand in hand.

It never occurred to a single member of this simple, warm-hearted family, that there was any possibility of there being a slip between cup and lip, and in this faith they presently set out upon their pilgrimage to New York, for which event Lammy wore a high collar and a new suit, his first to have long trousers.

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The minister's wife and Dinah Lucky took joint charge of the house while the Lanes were in

New York, for they intended staying several days, perhaps a week, as Dr. Jedd said the change was exactly what they all needed after the doings and anxieties of the past eight months, and Mr. Cole, the lawyer from Northboro, gave them the card of a good hotel close to the Grand Central Station, where they would be well treated and neither snubbed nor overcharged. For he well knew that in a New York hotel, Laurelville's Sunday-best clothes looked as strangely out of place as Dr. Jedd's carryall would on Fifth Avenue.

During the past few weeks, Alfred Rawley, the new superintendent of the Northboro School of Industrial Art, had made several visits to the Lanes, at first upon business connected with Aunt Jimmy's legacy, and then because he seemed to like to come. He was a fine-looking man of fifty, and not only a stranger in Northboro, but a bachelor without home ties. He seemed greatly interested in Bird, about whom Lammy talked so constantly that the visitor could not but hear of her, and asked to see the portfolio of drawings in which were some of hers, and he praised them very highly for their promise.

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The Lanes arrived in New York just before dark of a Tuesday afternoon, and spent the rest of the evening in looking out of their windows at the remarkable and confused thoroughfare below them that was made still more of a spectacle by the glare of electric lights. Lammy wished to go and look for Bird at once, but his father wouldn't hear of doing so until broad daylight, saying:—

"Sakes alive, it ain't safe. I've been across Hill's swamp without a lantern on a foggy night a-callin' up lost sheep, but that down there with them queer kind o' two-wheel carts that bob along in narrow places like teeter snipe crossin' the mill-dam, I'll not venture it, leastwise not with mother along." So Lammy went to bed to kill time, but a little later curiosity got the better of Joshua, and he spent an hour in the lobby, where he learned, besides several other things, that the "teeter snipe" carts were called "handsome cabs."

To the surprise of the early-rising country folk, it was eleven o'clock the next morning before they found themselves ready to take a south-bound Fourth Avenue car, for the visit to Bird, and Joshua told the conductor four times in ten blocks where they wished to get off, and what they were going for, while Mrs. Lane sat still, smiling and quivering all over from the shiney tips of her first boots (other than Congress gaiters) to the jet fandango atop of a real Northboro store bonnet, and the smile was so infectious that it soon spread through the entire car.

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When they got off at 24th Street and made the sidewalk in tremulous safety, they marched east in silence, counting the numbers as they went.

"'Tain't much of a neighbourhood," sniffed Mrs. Lane, wondering at the ash barrels and pails of swill that lined the way.

"Don't judge hasty, mother," said Joshua; "we mustn't be hard on city folks that ain't got our advantages in the way o' pigs to turn swill into meat, and bog-holes ter swaller ashes what don't go to road-makin'."

"We must be near there," gasped Lauretta Ann, presently. She had been persuaded to have her new gown made a "stylish length" by Hope Snippin, the village dressmaker, in consequence of which she was grasping her skirts on both sides, floundering and plunging along very much like an old-style market schooner, with its sails fouled in the rigging.

"Oh, mother, look there!" said Lammy, with white, trembling lips. He had been running on ahead and keeping track of the numbers, but he now stood still, pointing to a half block of burned and ruined buildings, walled in ice and draped with cruel icicles that seemed to pierce his very flesh as he gazed at them.

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For a minute they were all fairly speechless and stood open-mouthed, then Joshua, recovering first, settled his teeth firmly back in place, and laughing feebly, said: "Been a fire, I reckon; that's nothing. I've heard somethin' gets afire as often as every week in N'York. They must be somewhere, and we'll jest calm down and ask the neighbours over the way—in course they'll know."

But to Joshua's wonder they didn't, at least not definitely, and all he could learn was that the O'Mores had moved somewhere a couple of blocks "over."

"Gosh, but ain't N'York a heathen town," muttered Joshua; "jest think, folks burned out an' their neighbours don't take no trouble about 'em; we might even get knocked down, and I bet they wouldn't be a bit surprised. I'd like to strike fer home."

As they wandered helplessly along block after block, the crowd of workmen and children in the streets coming home to dinner told that it was noon.

There was no use in going they did not know where, and they had not met a single policeman whom they could question. As they stood upon a corner consulting as to what they had best do, a group of girls coming up and dividing passed on either side of them, one bold-looking chit in a red plush hat and soiled gown singing out something about "When Reuben comes to town," and giving Lammy a push at the same time.

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As he turned to avoid her, he heard his name called, and breaking from her mates, a slender little figure with big black eyes dropped her satchel and flung her arms around his neck, heedless of the merriment and jeers of her companions. Bird was found at last!



"Bird was found at last."

There was no longer any use in trying to keep up the barrier of pride, or of pretending she was happy, and Bird led her friends home to the new flat, wherein O'More had established his family on his return.

That afternoon there was a long powwow in which Mrs. O'More made herself very disagreeable, as she had come to rely upon Bird and did not wish to have Billy back upon her hands, but John O'More stood firm by his promise, saying, even if he'd never made it, Bird should have her choice after the way she'd stood by Billy in time of need. "She stuck by her blood kin, and she's a lady through and through, and we're different, and it's neither's fault that we're a reproach to each other," was O'More's summing up. "If you can keep her, you can take her, but God help little Billy! The doctor says good care a couple o' years more, an' he'll have a chance for his leg. I can pay for care, but it's not to be bought around here."

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Mrs. Lane saw the tears in the rough man's eyes, and her big mother-heart throbbed, and to some purpose, as usual.

"Our doctor's wife would take him to board, I guess," she said, after thinking a minute. "She took a little boy from Northboro last summer, and did real well by him, her children bein' grown now and out of hand. Dr. Jedd, he'd give him care besides. I'll take him along with us if you think he'll grieve, and you can write or come up and settle it."

It was only then that Bird's happiness was complete, and little Billy hugged and hugged her, and cried in his piping voice, "Now we're going to fly away out of the cage to your country for *sure* this time," and Bird answered joyfully and truthfully, "Yes."

"And the sooner we'll fly, the better I'll like it," added Joshua. "This very afternoon would suit me."

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But Lauretta Ann had determined upon two things: she was going to buy the material for a black silk gown in New York, also a handsome china jar to contain the remains of the pewter teapot and be "a monument to Aunt Jimmy," in the centre of the India china on the living-room mantel-shelf. Mrs. O'More, sullenly accepting her defeat, and now in her element, which was buying dress goods, offered to conduct the stranger through the mazes of Sixth Avenue department stores; so after a hasty lunch they set out, while her husband and Joshua Lane talked matters over, and the children were in a seventh heaven of anticipation.

"One thing's on me mind,—that ring the girl sold to buy doctorin' for Billy. I only hope she got the worth of it, and that the man's on the square, for she won't give me the name of the gent that bought it, and when I'm picked a bit out o' me trouble, I'd like to buy back the same, for the keepsake is her only fortune. Maybe some day you can coax the name out o' her."

"Likely I can—plenty o' time for that," drawled Joshua, who usually knew more than he appeared to.

* * * * *

The next afternoon five tired but happy people arrived at the Centre and electrified the neighbourhood by hiring a hack to take them to Laurelville, Joshua having only been persuaded to stay two days of the proposed week's excursion.

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"I'm goin' to have Hope Snippin up to-morrow morning to shorten my gown," was Mrs. Lane's greeting to the minister's wife when she opened the door in alarm at the unexpected return, while Twinkle leaped into Bird's arms, fairly screaming with dog joy.

It was evident, however, that the sudden return was not wholly a surprise. Somebody had sent

a telegram to somebody, and Joshua's manner in the interval before supper cast the suspicion upon him. After Bird had seen her pretty room and coaxed Billy, who was nodding drowsily, to eat his bread and milk and go to bed before the real supper, she came down to the living-room, where the table was spread for the first time instead of in the kitchen, for Dinah Lucky came in a few hours every day now to do the heavy work and give Mrs. Lane more leisure. A stranger was sitting by the fire. He rose and took Bird by the hand very gently and drew her to the lounge beside him, at the same time handing her a letter. She was too much surprised to notice that no one introduced her or told his name. She opened the letter; her keepsake ring rolled into her lap as she read:—

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"DEAR BERTHA O'MORE: I know all about you now, and I believed in you from the first. Here is your ring; wear it about your neck as before for a keepsake, until some day, ten years or so hence—then ask the one you love best to put it upon your left hand. With the respect of your friend,

"MARION CLARKE'S FATHER.

"P.S. The bearer of this letter is Alfred Rawley, your grandmother's youngest brother!"

In spite of her bewilderment, her first thought was, "So he was really Marion's father!" Next spring she would beg him to give Tessie the holiday that he had offered her that Christmastide in the twilight of the church.

Joshua Lane capered about like a young kid as his wife tried to chase him into a corner, exclaiming, "Now you jest up and tell me how long you've known all this, and not told your lawful wife!"

"Wal, let me see," he said, counting on his fingers; "considerable longer than it'll take us to eat supper," was all the answer she received.

* * * * *

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That night Bird opened her bedroom window and looked out into the frosty moonlight, where far away in the distance the runaway Christmas trees were outlined against the sky and the roots of red peony that Lammy planted were waiting under the ground for their spring blooming time to come. Stretching out her arms as she drew in great reviving breaths of the clear, frosty air, then clasping her hands together, she whispered, "Terry, dear, you know it all; you know your Bird is free again, and that she remembers, and now you must help her to fly the right way."



DOGTOWN

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