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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETTY GORDON AT BRAMBLE FARM; OR,
THE MYSTERY OF A NOBODY ***





**"TAKE YOUR OLD BUTTER!" SHE
STORMED AT THE ASTONISHED MR.
PEABODY.**

"Betty Gordon at Bramble Farm."

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Betty Gordon at Bramble Farm

OR

The Mystery of a Nobody

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "BETTY GORDON IN WASHINGTON,"

"BETTY GORDON IN THE LAND OF OIL,"

"THE RUTH FIELDING SERIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



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RUTH FIELDING HOMEWARD BOUND
RUTH FIELDING DOWN EAST

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BETTY GORDON AT BRAMBLE FARM

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BETTY GORDON AT BRAMBLE FARM

[1]

CHAPTER I WAITING FOR WORD

"I do wish you'd wear a sunbonnet, Betty," said Mrs. Arnold, glancing up from her ironing board as Betty Gordon came into the kitchen. "You're getting old enough now to think a little about your complexion."

Betty's brown eyes laughed over the rim of the glass of water she had drawn at the sink.

"I can't stand a sunbonnet," she declared vehemently, returning the glass to the nickel holder under the shelf. "I know just how a horse feels with blinders on. You know you wouldn't like it, Mrs. Arnold, if I pulled up half your onion sets in mistake for weeds because I couldn't see what I was doing."

Mrs. Arnold shook her head over the white ruffle she was fluting with nervous, skillful fingers.

"There's no call for you to go grubbing in that onion bed," she said. "I'd like you to have nice hands and not be burnt black as an Indian when your uncle comes. But then, nobody pays any attention to what I say." [2]

There was more truth in this statement than Mrs. Arnold herself suspected. She was one of these patient, anxious women who unconsciously nag every one about them and whose stream of complaint never rises above a constant murmur. Her family were so used to Mrs. Arnold's monotonous fault-finding that they rarely if ever knew what she was complaining about. They did not mean to be disrespectful, but they had fallen into the habit of not listening.

"Uncle Dick won't mind if I'm as black as an Indian," said Betty confidently, spreading out her strong little brown right hand and eyeing it critically. "With all the traveling he's done, I guess he's seen people more tanned than I am. You're sure there wasn't a letter this morning?"

"The young ones said there wasn't," returned Mrs. Arnold, changing her cool iron for a hot one, and testing it by holding it close to her flushed face. "But I don't know that Ted and George would know a letter if they saw it, their heads are so full of fishing."

"I thought Uncle Dick would write again," observed Betty wistfully. "But perhaps there wasn't time. He said he might come any day."

"I don't know what he'll say," worried Mrs. Arnold, her eyes surveying the slender figure leaning against the sink. "Your not being in mourning will certainly seem queer to him. I hope you'll tell him Sally Pettit and I offered to make you black frocks." [3]

Betty smiled, her peculiarly vivid, rich smile.

"Dear Mrs. Arnold!" she said, affection warm in her voice. "Of course I'll tell him. He will understand, and not blame you. And now I'm going to tackle those weeds."

The screen door banged behind her.

Betty Gordon was an orphan, her mother having died in March (it was now June) and her father two years before. The twelve-year-old girl had to her knowledge but one single living relative in the world, her father's brother, Richard Gordon. Betty had never seen this uncle. For years he had traveled about the country, wherever his work called him, sometimes spending months in large cities, sometimes living for weeks in the desert. Mr. Gordon was a promoter of various industrial enterprises and was frequently sent for to investigate new mines, oil wells and other large developments.

"I'd love to travel," thought Betty, pulling at an especially stubborn weed. "I hope Uncle Dick will like me and take me with him wherever he goes. Wouldn't it be just like a fairy story if he should come here and scoop me out of Pineville and take me hundreds of miles away to beautiful and exciting adventures!" [4]

This enchanting prospect so thrilled the energetic young gardener that she sat down comfortably in the middle of the row to dream a little more. While her father lived, Betty's home had been in a small, bustling city where she had gone to school in the winter. The family had always gone to the seashore in the summer; but the only exciting adventure she could recall had been a tedious attack of the measles when she was six years old. Mrs. Gordon, upon her husband's sudden death, had taken her little daughter and come back to Pineville, the only home she had known as a lonely young orphan girl. She had many kind friends in the sleepy country town, and when she died these same friends had taken loving charge of Betty.

The girl's grief for the loss of her mother baffled the villagers who would have known how to deal with sorrow that expressed itself in words or flowed out in tears. Betty's long silences, her desire to be left quite alone in her mother's room, above all her determination not to wear

mourning, puzzled them. That she had sustained a great shock no one could doubt. White and miserable, she went about, the shadow of her former gay-hearted self. For the first time in her life she was experiencing a real bereavement.

When Betty's father had died, the girl's grieving was principally for her mother's evident pain. She had always been her mother's confidante and chum, and the bond between them, naturally close, had been strengthened by Mr. Gordon's frequent absences on the road as a salesman. It was Betty and her mother who locked up the house at night, Betty and her mother who discussed household finances and planned to surprise the husband and father. The daughter felt his death keenly, but she could never miss his actual presence as she did that of the mother from whom she had never been separated for one night from the time she was born. [5]

The neighbors took turns staying with the stricken girl in the little brown house that had been home for the two weeks following Mrs. Gordon's death. Then, as Betty seemed to be recovering her natural poise, a discussion of her affairs was instigated. The house had been a rented one and Betty owned practically nothing in the world except the simple articles of furniture that had been her mother's household effects. These Mrs. Arnold stored for her in a vacant loft over a store, and Mrs. Arnold, her mother's closest friend, bore the lonely child off to stay with them till Richard Gordon could be heard from and some arrangement made for the future.

Communication with Mr. Gordon was necessarily slow, since he moved about so frequently, but when the news of his sister-in-law's death reached him, he wrote immediately to Betty, promising to come to Pineville as soon as he could plan his business affairs to release him. [6]

"Betty!" a shrill whisper, apparently in the lilac bushes down by the fence, startled Betty from her day dreams.

"Betty!" came the whisper again.

"Is that you, Ted?" called Betty, standing up and looking expectantly toward the bushes.

"Sh! don't let ma hear you." Ted Arnold parted the lilac bushes sufficiently to show his round, perspiring face. "George and me's going fishing, and we hid the can of worms under the wheelbarrow. Hand 'em to us, will you, Betty? If ma sees us, she'll want something done."

"Did you go to the post-office this morning?" demanded Betty severely.

"Sure I did. There wasn't anything but a postal from pa," came the answer from the bushes. "He's coming home next week, and then it'll be nothing but work in the garden all day long. Hand us the can of worms, like a good sport, won't you?"

"Where did you hide them?" asked Betty absently.

"Under the wheelbarrow, there at the end of the arbor," directed Ted. "Thanks awfully, Betty." [7]

"Where's George?" she asked. "Isn't there another mail at eleven, Ted?"

"Oh, Betty, how you do harp on one subject," complained Ted, poking about in his can of worms with a stick, but keeping carefully out of sight of the kitchen window and the maternal eye. "Hardly anything ever comes in that eleven o'clock mail. Anyway, didn't mother say your uncle would probably come without bothering to write again?"

"I suppose he will," sighed Betty. "Only it seems so long to wait. Where did you say George was?"

Ted answered reluctantly.

"He's in swimming."

"Well I must say! You wait till your father comes home," said Betty ominously.

The boys had been forbidden to go swimming in the treacherous creek hole, and George was where he had no business to be.

"You needn't tell everything you know," muttered Ted uncomfortably, picking up his treasured can and preparing to depart.

"Oh, I won't tell," promised Betty quickly.

She went back to her weeding, and Ted scuffled off to fish.

"Goodness!" Betty pushed the hair from her forehead with a grimy hand. "I do believe this is the warmest day we've had! I'll be glad when I get down to the other end where the arbor makes a little shade." [8]

She had reached the end of the long row and had stood up to rest her back when she saw some one leaning over the white picket fence.

"Probably wants a drink of water," thought Betty, crossing the strip of garden and grass to ask him, after the friendly fashion of Pineville folk. "I've never seen him before."

The stranger was leaning over the fence, staring abstractedly at a border of sweet alyssum which straggled down one side of the sunken brick walk. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and his straw hat pushed slightly back on his head revealed a keen, tanned face and close-cropped

iron gray hair. He did not look up as Betty drew near and suddenly she felt shy.

"I—I beg your pardon," she faltered, "were you looking for any particular house?"

The stranger lifted his hat, and a pair of sharp blue eyes smiled pleasantly into Betty's brown ones.

"I was looking, not for a particular house, but for a particular person," admitted the man, gazing at her intently. "I shouldn't wonder if I had found her, too. Can you guess who I am?"

Betty's mind was so full of one subject that it would have been strange indeed if she had failed to guess correctly. [9]

"You're Uncle Dick!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and running the risk of spiking herself on the sharp pickets. "Oh, I thought you'd never come!"

Uncle Dick, for it really was Mr. Gordon, hurdled the low fence lightly and stood smiling down on his niece.

"I don't believe in wasting time writing letters," he declared cheerfully, "especially as I seldom know my plans three days ahead. You're the image of your father, child. I should have known you anywhere."

Betty put her hands behind her, suddenly conscious that they could not be very clean.

"I'm afraid I mussed your collar," she apologized contritely. "Mrs. Arnold was hoping you'd write so she could have me all scrubbed up for you;" and here Betty's dimple would flicker out.

Mr. Gordon put an arm about the little figure in the grass-stained rose-colored smock.

"I'd rather find you a garden girl," he announced contentedly. "Isn't there a place where you and I can have a little talk before we go in to see Mrs. Arnold and make our explanations?"

Betty drew him toward the arbor. She knew they would be undisturbed there.

CHAPTER II

UNCLE DICK'S PLAN

[10]

THE arbor was rather small and rickety, but at least it was shady. Betty sat down beside her uncle, who braced his feet against the opposite seat to keep his place on the narrow ledge.

"I'm afraid I take up a good deal of room," he said apologetically. "Well, my dear, had you begun to think I was never coming?"

Betty glanced up at him bravely.

"It was pretty long—waiting," she admitted. "But now you're here, Uncle Dick, everything is all right. When can we go away?"

"Aren't you happy here, dear?" asked her uncle, plainly troubled. "I thought from your first letter that Mrs. Arnold was a pretty good kind of friend, and I pictured you as contented as a girl could possibly be after a bitter loss like yours."

He smiled a bit ruefully.

"Maybe I'm not strong on pictures," he added. "I thought of you as a little girl, Betty. Don't know what'll you say, but there's a doll in my grip for you."

Betty laughed musically. [11]

"I've always saved my old doll," she confided, slipping a hand into Uncle Dick's broad fist where it lay clinched on his knee. He was very companionable, was this uncle, and she felt that she already loved him dearly. "But, Uncle Dick, I haven't really played with dolls since we moved from the city. I like outdoor things."

"Well, now, so do I," agreed her uncle. "I can't seem to breathe properly unless I'm outdoors. But about this going away—do you want to leave Pineville, Sister?"

Betty's troubled eyes rested on the little garden hot in the bright sunshine.

"It isn't home any more, without mother," she said slowly. "And—I don't belong, Uncle Dick. Mrs. Arnold is a dear, and I love her and she loves me. But they want to go to California, though they won't talk it before me, 'cause they think I'll feel in the way. Mr. Arnold has a brother on a fruit farm, and he's wild to move out there. As soon as you take me somewhere, they're going to pack up."

"Well, then, we'll have to see that you do belong somewhere," said Mr. Gordon firmly. "Anything else, Sister?"

Betty drew a deep breath.

"It's heavenly to have you to listen to me," she declared. "I want to go! I've never been anywhere, and I feel as though I could go and go and never stop. Daddy was like that. Mother used to say if he hadn't had us to look after he would have been an explorer, but that he had to manage to earn a living and do his traveling as a salesman. Couldn't I learn to be a salesman, a saleswoman, I mean? Lots of girls do travel."

[12]

"We'll think it over," answered her uncle diplomatically.

"And then there's another thing," went on Betty, her pent-up thoughts finding relief in speech. "Although Mrs. Arnold was mother's dearest friend, I can't make her understand how mother felt about wearing mourning."

Betty indicated her rose smock.

"Lots of Pineville folks think I don't care about losing my mother," she asserted softly, "because I haven't a single black dress. But mother said mourning was selfish. She wouldn't wear black when daddy died. Black makes other people feel sorry. But I did love mother! And do yet!"

Uncle Dick's keen blue eyes misted and the brave little figure in the bright smock was blurred for a moment.

"I suppose the whole town has been giving you reams of advice," he said irrelevantly. "Well Betty, I can't promise to take you with me—bless me, what would an old bachelor like me do with a young lady like you? But I think I know of a place where you can spend a summer and be neither lonesome nor unhappy. And perhaps in the fall we can make other arrangements."

[13]

Betty was disappointed that he did not promise to take her with him at once. But she had been trained not to tease, and she accepted the compromise as pleasantly as it was offered.

"Mrs. Arnold will be disappointed if you don't go round to the front door," she informed her uncle, as he stretched his long legs preparatory to rising from the low seat. "Company always comes to the front door, Uncle Dick."

Mr. Gordon stepped out of the summer house and turned toward the gate.

"We'll walk around and make a proper entry," he declared obligingly. "I meant to, and then as I came up the street I remembered how we used to cut across old Clinton's lot and climb the fence. So I had to come the back way for old times' sake."

Betty's eyes were round with wonder.

"Did you ever live in Pineville?" she asked in astonishment.

"You don't mean to tell me you didn't know that?" Uncle Dick was as surprised as his niece. "Why, they shipped me into this town to read law with old Judge Clay before they found there was no law in me, and your father first met your mother one Sunday when he drove twenty miles from the farm to see me."

[14]

Betty was still pondering over this when they reached the Arnold front door and Mrs. Arnold, flustered and delighted, answered Mr. Gordon's knock.

"Sit right down on the front porch where it's cool," she insisted cordially. "I've just put on my dinner, and you'll have time for a good talk. No, Betty, there isn't a thing you can do to help me—you entertain your uncle."

But Betty, who knew that excitement always affected Mrs. Arnold's bump of neatness, determined to set the table, partly to help her hostess and partly, it must be confessed, to make sure that the knives and forks and napkins were in their proper places.

"I'm sure I don't know where those boys can be," scolded the flushed but triumphant mother, as she tested the flaky chicken dumplings and pronounced the dinner "done to a turn." "We'll just sit down without them, and it'll do 'em good," she decided.

Betty ran through the hall to call her uncle. Just as she reached the door two forlorn figures toiled up the porch steps.

"Where's ma?" whispered Ted, for the moment not seeing the stranger and appealing to Betty, who stood in the doorway. "In the kitchen? We thought maybe we could sneak up the front stairs."

[15]

Ted was plastered from head to foot with slimy black mud, and George, his younger edition, was draped only in a wet bath towel. Both boys clung to their rough fishing rods, and Ted still carried the dirty tin can that had once held bait.

"I should say," observed Mr. Gordon in his deep voice, "that we had been swimming against orders. Things usually happen in such cases."

"Oh, gee!" sighed Ted despairingly. "Who's that? Company?"

Mrs. Arnold had heard the talk, and she came to the door now, pushing Betty aside gently.

"Well, I must say you're a pretty sight," she told her children. "If your father were at home you know what would happen to you pretty quick. Betty's uncle here, too! Aren't you ashamed of

yourselves? I declare, I've a good mind to whip you good. Where are your clothes, George?"

"They—they floated away," mumbled George. "Ted borrowed this towel. It's Mrs. Smith's. Say, ma, we're awful hungry."

"You march upstairs and get cleaned up," said their mother sternly. "We're going to sit down to dinner this minute. Chicken and dumplings. When you come down looking like Christians I'll see about giving you something to eat."

Midway in the delicious dinner Ted and George sidled into the room, very wet and shiny as to hair and conspicuously immaculate as to shirt and collar. Mrs. Arnold relented at the transformation and proceeded to pile two plates high with samples of her culinary skill. [16]

"Betty," said Mr. Gordon suddenly, "is there a garage here where we can hire a car?"

"There isn't a garage in Pineville," answered Betty. "You see we're off the state road where the automobile traffic goes. There are only two or three cars in town, and they're for business. But we can get a horse and buggy, Uncle Dick."

"Guess that's better, after all," said Mr. Gordon contentedly. "I want to talk to you about that plan I spoke of, and we'll stand a better chance of having our talk if we travel behind a horse. I wonder—" his eyes twinkled—"if there's a young man about who would care to earn a quarter by running down to the livery stable and seeing about a horse and buggy for the afternoon?"

Ted and George grinned above their respective dishes of ice-cold rice pudding.

"I'll go," offered Ted.

"I'll go, too," promised George. "Can we drive the rig back to the house?"

Mr. Gordon said they could, and the two boys dispatched their dessert in double quick time. While they went down to the town livery stable, Betty hurried to put on a cool, white frock, but, to Mrs. Arnold's disappointment, she refused to wear a hat. [17]

"The buggy top will be up, so my complexion will be safe," Betty declared merrily, giving Mrs. Arnold a hearty squeeze as that lady followed her downstairs to the porch where Mr. Gordon was waiting.

"What's that? Go without a hat?" he repeated, when Betty consulted him. "I should say so! You're fifty times prettier with those smooth braids than with any hat, I don't care how fine it is. This must be our turnout approaching."

As he guessed, it was their horse and buggy coming toward the house. Ted was driving, assisted by George, and the patient horse was galloping like mad as they urged it on.

"Never knew a boy of that age who could be trusted to drive alone," muttered Mr. Gordon, going down to the gate to meet them.

The boys beamed at him and Betty, sure that they had pleased with their haste. They then watched Betty step in, followed by her uncle, and drive away with something like envy.

"Are you used to driving, Betty?" asked Mr. Gordon, as he chirped lightly to the horse that obediently quickened its lagging pace.

"Why, I've driven some," replied Betty hesitatingly. "But I wouldn't know what to do if he should be frightened at anything. Do you like to drive, Uncle?" [18]

"I'm more used to horseback riding," was the answer. "I hope you'll have a chance to learn that this summer, Betty. I must have you measured for a habit and have it sent up to you from the city. There's no better sport for a man or a woman, to my way of thinking, than can be found in the saddle."

"Where am I going?" asked the girl timidly. "Who'll teach me to ride?"

"Oh, there'll be some one," said her uncle easily. "I never knew a ranch yet where there were not good horsemen. The idea came to me that you might like to spend the summer with Mrs. Peabody, Betty."

"Mrs. Peabody?" repeated Betty, puzzled. "Does she live on a ranch? I'd love to go out West, Uncle Dick."

CHAPTER III

DINING OUT

[19]

FOR a moment Mr. Gordon stared at his niece, a puzzled look in his eyes. Then his face cleared.

"Oh, I see. You've made a natural mistake," he said. "Mrs. Peabody doesn't live out West, Betty, but up-state—about one hundred and fifty miles north of Pineville. I've picked up that word ranch in California. Everything outside the town limits, from a quarter of an acre to a thousand, is

called a ranch. I should have said farm."

Betty settled back in the buggy, momentarily disappointed. A farm sounded so tame and—and ordinary.

"The plan came to me while I was sitting out on the porch waiting for dinner," pursued her uncle, unconscious that he had dashed her hopes. "Your father and I had such a happy childhood on a farm that I'm sure he would want you to know something about such a life first-hand. But of course I intend to talk it over with you before writing to Agatha."

"Agatha?" repeated Betty.

"Mrs. Peabody," explained Mr. Gordon. "She and I went to school together. Last year I happened to run across her brother out in the mines. He told me that Agatha had married, rather well, I understood, and was living on a fine, large farm. What did he say they called their place? 'Bramble Farm'—yes, that's it." [20]

"Bramble Farm," echoed Betty. "It sounds like wild roses, doesn't it, Uncle Dick? But suppose Mrs. Peabody doesn't want me to come to live with her?"

"Bless your heart, child, this is no permanent arrangement!" exclaimed her uncle vigorously. "You're my girl, and mighty proud I am to have such a bonny creature claiming kin with me. I've knocked about a good bit, and sometimes the going has been right lonesome."

He seemed to have forgotten the subject of Bramble Farm for the moment, and something in his voice made Betty put out a timid hand and stroke his coat sleeve silently.

"All right, dear," he declared suddenly, throwing off the serious mood with the quick shift that Betty was to learn was characteristic of him. "If your old bachelor uncle had the slightest idea where he would be two weeks from now, he'd take you with him and not let you out of his sight. But I don't know; though I strongly suspect, and it's no place to take a young lady to. However, if we can fix it up with Agatha for you to spend the summer with her, perhaps matters will shape up better in the fall. I'll tell her to get you fattened up a bit; she ought to have plenty of fresh eggs and milk." [21]

Betty made a wry face.

"I don't want to be fat, Uncle Dick," she protested. "I remember a fat girl in school, and she had an awful time. Is Mrs. Peabody old?"

Mr. Gordon laughed.

"That's a delicate question," he admitted. "She's some three or four years younger than I, I believe, and I'm forty-two. Figure it out to suit yourself."

The bay horse had had its own sweet way so far, and now stopped short, the road barred by a wide gate. It turned its head and looked reproachfully at the occupants of the buggy.

"Bless me, I never noticed where we were going," said Mr. Gordon, surprised. "What's this we're in, Betty, a private lane? Where does it lead?"

"Let me open the gate," cried Betty, one foot on the step. "We're in Mr. Bradway's meadow. Uncle Dick. We can keep right on and come out on the turnpike. He doesn't care as long as the gates are kept closed."

"I'll open the gate," said Mr. Gordon decidedly. "Take the reins and drive on through."

Betty obeyed, and Mr. Gordon swung the heavy gate into place again and fastened it. [22]

"Is Mrs. Peabody pretty?" asked Betty, as he took his place beside her and gathered up the lines. "Has she any children?"

The blue eyes surveyed her quizzically.

"A real girl, aren't you?" teased her uncle. "Why, child, I couldn't tell you to save me, whether Agatha is pretty or not. I haven't seen her for years. But she has no children. Her brother, Lem, told me that. She was a pretty girl." Mr. Gordon added reflectively: "I recollect she had long yellow braids and very blue eyes. Yes, she's probably a pretty woman."

To reach the turnpike they had to pass through another barred gate, and then when they did turn into the main road, Mr. Gordon, glancing at his watch, uttered an exclamation.

"Four o'clock," he announced. "Why, it must have been later than I thought when we started. The horse has taken its own sweet time. Look, Betty, is there a place around here where we can get some ice-cream?"

Betty's eyes danced. Like most twelve-year-old girls, she regarded ice-cream as a treat.

"There's a place in Pineville; but let's not go there—the whole town goes to the drug-store in the afternoons," she answered. "Couldn't we go as far as Harburton and stop at the ice-cream parlor? The horse isn't very tired, is it, Uncle Dick?" [23]

"Considering the pace he has been going, I doubt it," responded her uncle. "What's the matter with you and me having a regular lark, Betty? Let's not go back for supper—we'll have it at the

hotel. They can put up the horse, and we'll drive back when it's cooler."

Betty was thrilled at the idea of eating supper at the Harburton Hotel; certainly that would be what she called "exciting." But since her mother's death she had learned to think not only for herself but for others.

"Mrs. Arnold would be so worried," she objected, trying to keep the longing out of her voice. "She'd think we'd been struck at the grade crossing. And, Uncle Dick, I don't believe this dress is good enough."

But Mr. Gordon was not accustomed to being balked by objections. He swept Betty's aside with a half-dozen words. They would telephone to Mrs. Arnold. Well, then, if she had no telephone, they would telephone a near neighbor and get her to carry the message. As for the dress—here he glanced contentedly at Betty—he didn't see but that she looked fine enough to attend the King's wedding. She could wash and freshen up a little when they reached the hotel.

Betty's face glowed.

"You're just like Daddy," she said happily. "Mother used to say she never had to worry about anything when he was at home. Mrs. Arnold doesn't either, when her husband's home. Do all husbands do the deciding, Uncle Dick?" [24]

Mr. Gordon submitted, amusedly, that as he was not a husband, he could not give accurate information on that point. But Betty's active mind was turning over something.

"Mrs. Arnold says Mr. Arnold makes the boys stand round," she confided. "I notice they mind him ten times as quick as they do their mother. But they love him more. Do you make people stand round, Uncle Dick?"

Mr. Gordon smiled down into the serious little face tilted to meet his glance.

"I haven't much patience with disobedience, I'm afraid," he replied. "I suppose some of the men I've bossed would consider me a Tartar. Why, Betty? Are you thinking of going on strike against my authority? I don't advise you to try it."

Betty blushed.

"It isn't that," she said hastily. "But—but—well, I have a temper, Uncle Dick. I get so raging mad! If I don't tell you, some one else will, or else you'll see me 'acting up,' as Mrs. Arnold says, before you go. So I thought I'd better tell you."

Mr. Gordon's lips twitched. [25]

"A temper, out of control, is a mighty useless possession," he said solemnly. "But as long as you know you've got a spark of fire in you, Betty, you can watch out for it. Afraid of going on the rampage while you're at Bramble Farm? Is that what's worrying you?"

"Some," confessed his niece, with scarlet cheeks.

"I'll tell you what to do," counseled Mr. Gordon, and his even, rather slow voice soothed Betty inexpressibly. "When you get a 'mad fit,' you fly out to the wood pile and chop kindling as hard as you can. You can't talk and chop wood, and the tongue does most of the mischief when our tempers get the best of us. You'll remember that little trick, won't you?"

Betty promised she would, and, as they were now driving into the thriving county seat of Harburton, she began to point out the few places of interest.

The hotel was opposite the court house, and as they stopped before the curb and Betty saw the porch well filled with men, with here and there a woman in a pretty summer dress, she felt extremely shy. A boy ran up to take their horse and lead it around to the stables for a rub-down and a comfortable supper. Mr. Gordon tucked his niece's hand under his arm and marched unconcernedly up the hotel steps.

"I suppose he's used to hotels," thought Betty, sinking into one of the stuffed red velvet chairs at her uncle's bidding and looking interestedly about her as he went in search of the proprietor. "I wonder if it's fun to live in a hotel all the time instead of a house." [26]

Her uncle came back in a few moments with a pleasant-faced, matronly woman, whom he introduced as the sister of the proprietor. She was to take Betty upstairs and let her make herself neat for supper, which would, so the woman said, be ready in twenty minutes.

"I'll wait for you right here," promised Mr. Gordon, divining in Betty's anxious glance a fear that she would have to search for him on the crowded piazza.

"You drove in, didn't you?" asked Mrs. Holmes, leading the way upstairs and ushering Betty into a pretty, chintz-hung room. "You'll find fresh water in the pitcher, dear. Didn't your father say you were from Pineville?"

Betty, pouring the clear, cool water into the basin, explained that Mr. Gordon was her uncle and said that they had driven over from Pineville that afternoon.

"Well, you want to be careful driving back," cautioned Mrs. Holmes. "The flag man goes off duty at six o'clock, and that crossing lies right in a bad cut. There was a nasty accident there last [27]

week."

Betty had read of it in the *Pineville Post*, and thanked Mrs. Holmes for her warning. When that kind woman had ascertained that Betty needed nothing more, she excused herself and went down to superintend the two waitresses.

Betty managed to smooth her hair nicely with the aid of a convenient sidecomb, and after bathing her face and hands felt quite refreshed and neat again. She found her uncle reading a magazine.

"Well, you look first rate," he greeted her. "I picked this up off the table without glancing at it; it's a fashion magazine. It reminds me, Betty, you'll need some new clothes this summer, eh? You'll have to take Mrs. Arnold when you go shopping. I wouldn't know a bonnet from a pair of gloves."

Betty laughed and slipped her hand into his, and they went toward the dining room. What a dear Uncle Dick was! She had not had many new clothes since her father's death.

CHAPTER IV AT THE CROSSING

[28]

THE country hotel supper was no better than the average of its kind, but to Betty, to whom any sort of change was "fun," it was delicious. She and Uncle Dick became better acquainted over the simple meal in the pleasant dining room than they could ever have hoped to have been with Mrs. Arnold and the two boys present, and it was not until her dessert was placed before her that Betty remembered her friend.

"Mrs. Arnold will think we're lost!" she exclaimed guiltily. "I meant to telephone! And oh, Uncle Dick, she does hate to keep supper waiting."

Uncle Dick smiled.

"I telephoned the neighbor you told me about," he said reassuringly. "She said she would send one of her children right over with the message. That was while you were upstairs. So I imagine Mrs. Arnold has George and Ted hard at work drying the dishes by this time."

"They don't dry the dishes, 'cause they're boys," explained Betty dimpling. "In Pineville, the men and boys never think of helping with the housework. Mother said once that was one reason she fell in love with daddy—because he came out and helped her to do a pile of dishes one awfully hot Sunday afternoon."

[29]

After supper Betty and her uncle walked about Harburton a bit, and Betty glanced into the shop windows. She knew that probably her new dresses, at least the material for them, would be bought here, and she was counting more on the new frocks than even Uncle Dick knew.

When they went back to the hotel it was still light, but the horse was ordered brought around, for they did not want to hurry on the drive home.

"I guess I missed not belonging to any body," she said shyly, after a long silence.

Uncle Dick glanced down at her understandingly.

"I've had that feeling, too," he confessed. "We all need a sense of kinship, I think, Betty. Or a home. I haven't had either for years. Now you and I will make it up to each other, my girl."

The darkness closed in on them, and Uncle Dick got out and lit the two lamps on the dashboard and the little red danger light behind. Once or twice a big automobile came glaring out of the road ahead and swept past them with a roar and a rush, but the easy going horse refused to change its steady trot. But presently, without warning, it stopped.

[30]

Uncle Dick slapped the reins smartly, with no result.

"He balks," said Betty apologetically. "I know this horse. The livery stable man says he never balks on the way home, but I suppose he was so good all the afternoon he just has to act up now."

"Balks!" exploded Uncle Dick. "Why, no stable should send out a horse with that habit. Is there any special treatment he favors, Betty?" he added ironically.

Betty considered.

"Whipping him only makes him worse, they say," she answered. "He puts his ears back and kicks. Once he kicked a buggy to pieces. I guess we'll have to get out and coax him, Uncle Dick."

Mr. Gordon snorted, but he climbed down and went to the horse's head.

"You stay where you are, Betty," he commanded. "I'm not going to have you dancing all over this dark road and likely to be run down by a car any minute simply to cater to the whim of a fool horse. You hold the reins and if he once starts don't stop him; I'll catch the step as it goes by."

Betty held the reins tensely and waited. There was no moon, and clouds hid whatever light they might have gained from the stars. It was distinctly eery to be out on the dark road, miles from any house, with no noise save the incessant low hum of the summer insects. Betty shivered slightly.

[31]

She could hear her uncle talking in a low tone to the dejected, drooping, stubborn bay horse, and she could see the dim outline of his figure. The rays of the buggy lamps showed her a tiny patch of the wheels and road, but that was every bit she could see.

Up over the slight rise of ground before them shone a glare, followed in a second by the headlights of a large touring car. Abreast of the buggy it stopped.

"Tire trouble?" asked some one with a hint of laughter in the deep strong voice.

"No, head trouble," retorted Mr. Gordon, stepping over to the driver of the car. "Balky horse."

"You don't say!" The motorist seemed surprised and interested. "I'd give you a tow if you were going my way. But, do you know, my son who runs a farm for me has a way of fixing a horse like that. He says it's all mental. Beating 'em is a waste of time. Jim unharnesses a horse that balks with him, leads it on a way and then rolls the wagon up and gears up again. Horse thinks he's starting all over—new trip, you see. What's the word I want?"

[32]

"Psychological?" said the sweet, clear voice of Betty promptly.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" the motorist swept off his cap. "Thank you, whoever you are. That's what I wanted to say. Yes, nowadays they believe in reasoning with a horse. I'll help you unhitch if you say so."

"Let me," pleaded Betty. "Please, Uncle Dick. I know quite a lot about unharnessing. Can't I get out and do one side?"

The motorist was already out of his car, and at her uncle's brief "all right," Betty slipped down and ran to the traces. The stranger observed her curiously.

"Thought you were older," he said genially. "Where did a little tyke like you get hold of such a long word?"

"I read it," replied Betty proudly. "They use it in the Ladies' Aid when they want to raise more money than usual and they hate to ask for it. Mrs. Banker says there's a psychological moment to ask for contributions, and I have to copy the secretary's notes for her."

"I see," said the stranger. "There! Now, Mr. Heady here is free, and we'll lead him up the road a way."

Uncle Dick led the horse, who went willingly enough, and Betty and the kind friend-in-need, as she called him to herself, each took a shaft of the light buggy and pulled it after them. To their surprise, when the horse was again harnessed to the wagon it started at the word "gid-ap," and gave every evidence of a determination to do as all good horses do—whatever they are ordered.

[33]

"Guess he's all right," said the motorist, holding out his hand to Mr. Gordon. "Now, don't thank me—only ordinary road courtesy, I assure you. Hope your troubles are over for the night."

The two men exchanged cards, and, lifting his hat to Betty, though he couldn't see her in the buggy, the stranger went back to his car.

"Wasn't he nice?" chattered Betty, as the horse trotted briskly. Uncle Dick grimly resolved to make it pay for the lost time. "We might have been stuck all night."

"Every indication of it," admitted Mr. Gordon. "However, I'm glad to say that I've always found travelers willing to go to any trouble to help. Don't ever leave a person in trouble on the road if you can do one thing to aid him, Betty. I want you to remember that."

Betty promised, a bit sleepily, for the motion and the soft, night air were making her drowsy. She sat up, however, when they came in sight of the winking red and green lights that showed the railroad crossing.

"No gateman, is there?" inquired her uncle. "Well, I'll go ahead and look, and you be ready to drive across when I whistle."

[34]

He climbed down and ran forward, and Betty sat quietly, the reins held ready in her hand. In a few moments she heard her signal, a clear, sharp whistle. She spoke to the horse, who moved on at an irritatingly slow pace.

"For goodness sake!" said Betty aloud, "can't you hurry?"

She peered ahead, trying to make out her uncle's figure, but the heavy pine trees that grew on either side of the road threw shadows too deep for anything to be plainly outlined. Betty, nervously on the lookout, scarcely knew when they reached the double track, but she realized her position with a sickening heart thump when the horse stopped suddenly. The bay had chosen the grade crossing as a suitable place to enjoy a second fit of balkiness.

"Uncle Dick!" cried Betty in terror. "Uncle Dick, he's stopped again! Come and help me unhitch!"

No one answered.

Betty had nerves as strong and as much presence of mind as any girl of her age, but a woman grown might consider that she had cause for hysterics if she found herself late at night marooned in the middle of a railroad track with a balky horse and no one near to give her even a word of advice. For a moment Betty rather lost her head and screamed for her uncle. This passed quickly though, and she became calmer. The whip she knew was useless. So was coaxing. There was nothing to do with any certainty of success but to unharness the horse and lead her over. But where was Uncle Dick?

[35]

Betty jumped down from the buggy and ran ahead into the darkness, calling.

"Uncle Dick!" shouted Betty. "Uncle Dick, where are you?"

The cheery little hum of the insects filled the silence as soon as her voice died away. There was no other sound. Common sense coming to her aid, Betty reasoned that her uncle would not have gone far from the crossing, and she soon began to retrace her steps, calling at intervals. As she came back to the twinkling red and green lights, she heard a noise that brought her heart into her throat. Some one had groaned!

"He's hurt!" she thought instantly.

The groan was repeated, and, listening carefully, Betty detected that it came from the other side of the road. A few rods away from the flagman's house was a pit that had recently been excavated for some purpose and then abandoned. Betty peered down into this.

"Uncle Dick?" she said softly.

Another deep groan answered her.

[36]

Betty ran back to the buggy and managed to twist one of the lamps from the dashboard. She was back in a second, and carefully climbed down into the pit. Sure enough, huddled in a deplorable heap, one foot twisted under him, lay Mr. Gordon.

Betty had had little experience with accidents, but she instinctively took his head in her lap and loosened his collar. He was unconscious, but when she moved him he groaned again heart-breakingly.

"How shall I ever get him up to the road?" wondered Betty, wishing she knew something of first-aid treatment. "If I could drag him up and then go and get the horse and buggy——"

Her pulse gave an astounding leap and her brown eyes dilated. Putting her uncle's head back gently on the gravel, she scrambled to her feet, feeling only that whatever she did she must not waste time in screaming. She had heard the whistle of a train!

CHAPTER V

MRS. PEABODY WRITES

[37]

THE bad, little stubborn horse standing on the track at the mercy of the coming comet! That was Betty's thought as she sped down the road. In the hope that a sense of the danger might have reached the animal's instinct, she gave the bridle a desperate tug when she reached the horse, but it was of no use. Feverishly Betty set to work to unharness the little bay horse.

She was unaccustomed to many of the buckles, and the harness was stiff and unyielding. Working at it in a hurry was very different from the few times she had done it for fun, or with some one to manage all the hard places. She had finished one side when the whistle sounded again. To the girl's overwrought nerves it seemed to be just around the curve. She had no thought of abandoning the animal, however, and she set her teeth and began on the second set of snaps and buckles. These, too, gave way, and with a strong push Betty sent the buggy flying backward free of the tracks, and, seizing the bridle, she led the cause of all the trouble forward and into safety. For the third time the whistle blew warningly, and this time the noise of the train could be plainly heard. But it was nearly a minute before the glare of the headlight showed around the curve.

[38]

"Look what didn't hit you, no thanks to you," Betty scolded the horse, as a relief to herself. "I 'most wish I'd left you there; only then we never would get Uncle Dick home."

Poor Betty had now the hardest part of her task before her. She went back and dragged the buggy over the tracks, up to the horse and started the tedious business of harnessing again. She was not sure where all the straps went, but she hoped enough of them would hold together till they could get home. When she had everything as nearly in place as she could get them she climbed down into the pit.

To her surprise, her uncle's eyes were open. He lay gazing at the buggy lamp she had left.

"Uncle Dick," she whispered, "are you hurt? Can you walk? Because you're so big, I can't pull you out very well."

"Why, I can't be hurt," said her uncle slowly in his natural voice. "What's happened? Where are we? Goodness, child, you look like a ghost with a dirty face."

Betty was not concerned with her looks at that moment, and she was so delighted to find her uncle conscious that she did not feel offended at his uncomplimentary remark. In a few words she sketched for him what had happened. [39]

"My dear child!" he ejaculated when she had told him, "have you been through all that? Why, you're the pluckiest little woman I ever heard of! No wonder you look thoroughly done up. All I remember is whistling for you to come ahead and then taking a step that landed me nowhere. In other words, I must have stepped into this pit. I'm not hurt—just a bit dazed."

To prove it, he got to his feet a trifle shakily. Declining Betty's assistance, he managed to scramble out of the pit, up on to the road. His head cleared rapidly, and in a few more moments he declared he felt like himself.

"In with you," he ordered Betty, after a preliminary examination of the harness which, he announced, was "as right as a trivet." "You've done your share for to-night. Go to sleep, if you like, and I'll wake you up in time to hear Mrs. Arnold send Ted out to take the horse around to the livery stable. It wouldn't do for me to do it—I might murder the owner!"

Betty leaned her head against her uncle's broad shoulder, for a minute she thought, and when she woke found herself being helped gently from the buggy.

"You're all right, Betty," soothed Mrs. Arnold's voice in the darkness. "I've worried myself sick! Do you know it's one o'clock?" [40]

Mr. Gordon took the wagon around to the stable, and Betty, with Mrs. Arnold's help, got ready for bed.

Betty was fast asleep almost before the undressing was completed, and she slept until late the next morning. When she came down to the luxury of a special breakfast, she found only Mrs. Arnold in the house.

"Your uncle's gone out to post a letter," that voluble lady informed her. "Both boys have gone fishing again. I'm only waiting for their father to come home and straighten 'em out. Will you have cocoa, dearie?"

Before she had quite finished her breakfast, Mr. Gordon came back from the post-office, and then, as Mrs. Arnold wanted to go over to a neighbor's to borrow a pattern, he sat down opposite Betty.

"You look rested," he commented. "I don't like to think what might have happened last night. However, we'll be optimistic and look ahead. I've written to Mrs. Peabody, dear, and to-morrow I think you and Mrs. Arnold had better go shopping. I'll write you a check this morning. Agatha will want you to come, I know. And to tell you the truth, Betty, I've had a letter that makes me anxious to be off. I want to stay to see you safely started for Bramble Farm, and then I must peg away at this new work. Finished? Then let's go into the sitting room and I'll explain about the check." [41]

The next morning Betty and Mrs. Arnold started for Harburton with what seemed to Betty a small fortune folded in her purse. Mrs. Arnold had shown her how to cash the check at the Pineville Bank, and she was to advise as to material and value of the clothing Betty might select; but the outfit was to represent Betty's choice and was to please her primarily—Uncle Dick had made this very clear.

Betty had learned a good deal about shopping in the last months of her mother's illness, and she did not find it difficult to choose suitable and pretty gingham for her frocks, a middy blouse or two, some new smocks, and a smart blue sweater. She very sensibly decided that as she was to spend the summer on a farm she did not need elaborate clothes, and she knew, from listening to Mrs. Arnold, that those easiest to iron would probably please Mrs. Peabody most whether she did her own laundry work or had a washerwoman.

When the purchases came home Uncle Dick delighted Betty with his warm approval. For a couple of days the sewing machine whirred from morning to night as the village dressmaker sewed and fitted the new frocks and made the old presentable. Then the letter from Mrs. Peabody arrived. [42]

"I will be very glad to have your niece spend the summer with me," she wrote, in a fine, slanting hand. "The question of board, as you arrange it, is satisfactory. I would not take anything for her, you know, Dick, and for old times' sake would welcome her without compensation, but living is so dreadfully high these days. Joseph has not had good luck lately, and there are so many things against the farmer.... Let me know when to expect Betty and some one will meet her."

The letter rambled on for several pages, complaining rather querulously of hard times and the difficulties under which the writer and her husband managed to "get along."

"Doesn't sound like Agatha, somehow," worried Uncle Dick, a slight frown between his eyes. "She was always a good-natured, happy kind of girl. But most likely she can't write a sunny letter."

I know we used to have an aunt whose letters were always referred to as 'calamity howlers.' Yet to meet her you'd think she hadn't a care in the world. Yes, probably Agatha puts her blues into her letters and so doesn't have any left to spill around where she lives."

Several times that day Betty saw him pull the letter from his pocket and re-read it, always with the puzzled lines between his brows. Once he called to her as she was going upstairs.

[43]

"Betty," he said rather awkwardly, "I don't know exactly how to put it, but you're going to board with Mrs. Peabody, you know. You'll be independent—not 'beholden,' as the country folk say, to her. I want you to like her and to help her, but, oh, well, I guess I don't know what I am trying to say. Only remember, child, if you don't like Bramble Farm for any good reason, I'll see that you don't have to remain there."

A brand-new little trunk for Betty made its appearance in the front hall of the Arnold house, and two subdued boys—for Mr. Arnold had returned home—helped her carry down her new treasures and, after the clothes were neatly packed, strap and lock the trunk. There was a tiny "over-night" bag, too, fitted with toilet articles and just large enough to hold a nightdress and a dressing gown and slippers. Betty felt very young-ladyish indeed with these traveling accessories.

"I'll order a riding habit for you in the first large city I get to," promised her uncle. "I want you to learn to ride—I wrote Agatha that. She doesn't say anything about saddle horses, but they must have something you can ride. And you'll write to me, my dear, faithfully?"

[44]

"Of course," promised Betty, clinging to him, for she had learned to love him dearly even in the short time they had been together. "I'll write to you, Uncle Dick, and I'll do everything you ask me to do. Then, this winter, do let's keep house."

"We will," said Uncle Dick, fervently, "if we have to keep house on the back of a camel in the desert!" At this Betty giggled delightedly.

Betty's train left early in the morning, and her uncle went to the station with her. Mrs. Arnold cried a great deal when she said good-bye, but Betty cheered her up by picturing the long, chatty letters they would write to each other and by assuring her friend that she might yet visit her in California.

Mr. Gordon placed his niece in the care of the conductor and the porter, and the last person Betty saw was this gray-haired uncle running beside the train, waving his hat and smiling at her till her car passed beyond the platform.

"Now," said Betty methodically, "if I think back, I shall cry; so I'll think ahead."

Which she proceeded to do. She pictured Mrs. Peabody as a gray-haired, capable, kindly woman, older than Mrs. Arnold, and perhaps more serene. She might like to be called "Aunt Agatha." Mr. Peabody, she decided, would be short and round, with twinkling blue eyes and perhaps a white stubby beard. He would probably call her "Sis," and would always be studying how to make things about the house comfortable for his wife.

[45]

"I hope they have horses and pigs and cows and sheep," mused Betty, the flying landscape slipping past her window unheeded. "And if they have sheep, they'll have a dog. Wouldn't I love to have a dog to take long walks with! And, of course, there will be a flower garden. 'Bramble Farm' sounds like a bed of roses to me."

The idea of roses persisted, and while Betty outwardly was strictly attentive to the things about her, giving up her ticket at the proper time, drinking the cocoa and eating the sandwich the porter brought her (on Uncle Dick's orders she learned) at eleven o'clock, she was in reality busy picturing a white farmhouse set in the center of a rose garden, with a hedge of hollyhocks dividing it from a scarcely less beautiful and orderly vegetable kingdom.

Day dreams, she was soon to learn.

CHAPTER VI

THE POORHOUSE RAT

[46]

"THE next station's yours, Miss," said the porter, breaking in on Betty's reflections. "Any small luggage? No? All right, I'll see that you get off safely."

Betty gathered up her coat and stuffed the magazine she had bought from the train boy, but scarcely glanced at, into her bag. Then she carefully put on her pretty grey silk gloves and tried to see her face in the mirror of the little fitted purse. She wanted to look nice when the Peabodys first saw her.

The train jarred to a standstill.

Betty hurried down the aisle to find the porter waiting for her with his little step. She was the only person to leave the train at Hagar's Corners, and, happening to glance down the line of cars, she saw her trunk, the one solitary piece of baggage, tumbled none too gently to the platform.

The porter with his step swung aboard the train which began to move slowly out. Betty felt unaccountably small and deserted standing there, and as the platform of the last car swept past her, she was conscious of a lump in her throat.

[47]

"Hello!" blurted an oddly attractive voice at her shoulder, a boy's voice, shy and brusque but with a sturdy directness that promised strength and honesty.

The blue eyes into which Betty turned to look were honest, too, and the shock of tow-colored hair and the half-embarrassed grin that displayed a set of uneven, white teeth instantly prepossessed the girl in favor of the speaker. There was a splash of brown freckles across the snub nose, and the tanned cheeks and blue overalls told Betty that a country lad stood before her.

"Hello!" she said politely. "You're from Mr. Peabody's, aren't you? Did they send you to meet me?"

"Yes, Mr. Peabody said I was to fetch you," replied the boy. "I knew it was you, 'cause no one else got off the train. If you'll give me your trunk check I'll help the agent put it in the wagon. He locks up and goes off home in a little while."

Betty produced the check and the boy disappeared into the little one-room station. The girl for the first time looked about her. Hagar's Corners, it must be confessed, was not much of a place, if one judged from the station. The station itself was not much more than a shanty, sadly in need of paint and minus the tiny patch of green lawn that often makes the least pretentious railroad station pleasant to the eye. Cinders filled in the road and the ground about the platform. Hitched to a post Betty now saw a thin sorrel horse harnessed to a dilapidated spring wagon with a board laid across it in lieu of a seat. To her astonishment, she saw her trunk lifted into this wagon by the station agent and the boy who had spoken to her.

[48]

"Why—why, it doesn't look very comfortable," said Betty to herself. "I wonder if that's the best wagon Mr. Peabody has? But perhaps his good horses are busy, or the carriage is broken or something."

The boy unhitched the sorry nag and drove up to the platform where Betty was waiting. His face flushed under his tan as he jumped down to help her in.

"I'm afraid it isn't nice enough for you," he said, glancing with evident admiration at Betty's frock. "I spread that salt bag on the seat so you wouldn't get rust from the nails in that board on your dress. I'm awfully sorry I haven't a robe to put over your lap."

"Oh, I'm all right," Betty hastened to assure him tactfully. Then, with a desire to put him at his ease, "Where is the town?" she asked.

They had turned from the station straight into a country road, and Betty had not seen a single house.

[49]

"Hagar's Corners is just a station," explained the lad. "Mostly milk is shipped from it. All the trading is done at Glenside. There's stores and schools and a good-sized town there. Mr. Peabody had you come to Hagar's Corners 'cause it's half a mile nearer than Glenside. The horse has lost a shoe, and he doesn't want to run up a blacksmith's bill till the foot gets worse than it is."

Betty's brown eyes widened with amazement.

"That horse is limping now," she said severely, "Do you mean to tell me Mr. Peabody will let a horse get a sore foot before he'll pay out a little money to have it shod?"

The boy turned and looked at her with something smoldering in his face that she did not understand. Betty was not used to bitterness.

"Joe Peabody," declared the boy impressively, "would let his own wife go without shoes if he thought she could get through as much work as she can with 'em. Look at my feet!" He thrust out a pair of rough, heavy work shoes, the toes patched abominably, the laces knotted in half a dozen places; Betty noticed that the heel of one was ripped so that the boy's skin showed through. "Let his horse go to save a blacksmith's bill!" repeated the lad contemptuously. "I should think he would! The only thing that counts with Joe Peabody in this world is money!"

[50]

Betty's heart sank. To what kind of a home had she come? Her head was beginning to ache, and the glare of the sun on the white, dusty road hurt her eyes. She wished that the wagon had some kind of top, or that the board seat had a back.

"Is it very much further?" she asked wearily.

"I'll bet you're tired," said the boy quickly. "We've a matter of three miles to go yet. The sorrel can't make extra good time even when he has a fair show, but I aim to favor his sore foot if I do get dished out of my dinner."

"I'm so hungry," declared Betty, restored to vivacity at the thought of luncheon. "All I had on the train was a cup of chocolate and a sandwich. Aren't you hungry, too?"

"Considering that all I've had since breakfast at six this morning, is an apple I stole while hunting through the orchard for the turkeys, I'll say I'm starved," admitted the boy. "But I'll have to wait till six to-night, and so will you."

"But I haven't had any lunch!" Betty protested vigorously. "Of course, Mrs. Peabody will let me have something—perhaps they'll wait for me."

The boy pulled on the lines mechanically as the sorrel stumbled.

"If that horse once goes down, he'll die in the road and that'll be the first rest he's known in seven years," he said cryptically. "No, Miss, the Peabodys won't wait for you. They wouldn't wait for their own mother, and that's a fact. Don't I remember seeing the old lady, who was childish the year before she died, crying up in her room because no one had called her to breakfast and she came down too late to get any? Mrs. Peabody puts dinner on the table at twelve sharp, and them as aren't there have to wait till the next meal. Joe Peabody counts it that much food saved, and he's got no intentions of having late-comers gobble it up." [51]

Betty Gordon's straight little chin lifted. Meekness was not one of her characteristics, and her fighting spirit rose to combat with small encouragement.

"My uncle's paying my board, and I intend to eat," she announced firmly. "But maybe I'm upsetting the household by coming so late in the afternoon; only there was no other train till night. I have some chocolate and crackers in my bag—suppose we eat those now?"

"Gee, that will be corking!" the fresh voice of the boy beside her was charged with fervent appreciation. "There's a spring up the road a piece, and we'll stop and get a drink. Chocolate sure will taste good."

Betty was quicker to observe than most girls of her age, her sorrow having taught her to see other people's troubles. As the boy drew rein at the spring and leaped down to bring her a drink from its cool depths, she noticed how thin he was and how red and calloused were his hands. [52]

"Thank you." She smiled, giving back the cup. "That's the coldest water I ever tasted. I'm all cooled off now."

He climbed up beside her again, and the wagon creaked on its journey. As Betty divided the chocolate and crackers, unobtrusively giving her driver the larger portion, she suggested that he might tell her his name.

"I suppose you know I'm Betty Gordon," she said. "You've probably heard Mrs. Peabody say she went to school with my Uncle Dick. Tell me who you are, and then we'll be introduced."

The mouth of the boy twisted curiously, and a sullen look came into the blue eyes.

"You can do without knowing me," he said shortly. "But so long as you'll hear me yelled at from sun-up to sun-down, I might as well make you acquainted with my claims to greatness. I'm the 'poorhouse rat'—now pull your blue skirt away."

"You have no right to talk like that," Betty asserted quietly. "I haven't given you the slightest reason to. And if you are really from the poorhouse, you must be an orphan like me. Can't we be good friends? Besides, I don't know your name even yet." [53]

The boy looked at the sweet girl face and his own cleared.

"I'm a pig!" he muttered with youthful vehemence. "My name's Bob Henderson, Miss. I hadn't any call to flare up like that. But living with the Peabodys doesn't help a fellow when it comes to manners. And I am from the poorhouse. Joe Peabody took me when I was ten years old. I'm thirteen now."

"I'm twelve," said Betty. "Don't call me Miss, it sounds so stiff. I'm Betty. Oh, dear, how dreadfully lame that horse is!"

The poor beast was limping, and in evident pain. Bob Henderson explained that there was nothing they could do except to let him walk slowly and try to keep him on the soft edge of the road.

"He'll have to go five miles to-morrow to Glenside to the blacksmith's," he said moodily. "I'm ashamed to drive a horse through the town in the shape this one's in."

Betty thought indignantly that she would write to the S. P. C. A. They must have agents throughout the country, she knew, and surely it could not be within the law for any farmer to allow his horse to suffer as the sorrel was plainly suffering. [54]

"Is Mr. Peabody poor, Bob?" she ventured timidly. "I'm sure Uncle Dick thought Bramble Farm a fine, large place. He wanted me to learn to ride horseback this summer."

"Have to be on a saw-horse," replied Bob ironically. "You bet Peabody isn't poor! Some say he's worth a hundred thousand if he's worth a penny. But close—say, that man's so close he puts every copper through the wringer. You've come to a sweet place, and no mistake, Betty. I'm kind of sorry to see a girl get caught in the Peabody maw."

"I won't stay 'less I like it," declared Betty quickly. "I'll write to Uncle Dick, and you can come, too, Bob. Why are we turning in here?"

"This," said Bob Henderson pointing with his whip dramatically, "is Bramble Farm."

CHAPTER VII

BRAMBLE FARM

[55]

THE wagon was rattling down a narrow lane, for though the horse went at a snail's pace, every bolt and hinge in the wagon was loose and contributed its own measure of noise to their progress. Betty looked about her with interest. On either side of the lane lay rolling fertile fields—in the highest state of cultivation, had she known it. Bramble Farm was famed for its good crops, and whatever people said of its master, the charge of poor farming was never laid at his door. The lane turned abruptly into a neglected driveway, and this led them up to the kitchen door of the farmhouse.

"Never unlocks the front door 'cept for the minister or your funeral," whispered Bob in an aside to Betty, as the kitchen door opened and a tall, thin man came out.

"Took you long enough to get here," he greeted the two young people sourly. "Dinner's been over two hours and more. Hustle that trunk inside, you Bob, and put up the horse. Wapley and Lieson need you to help 'em set tomato plants."

[56]

Betty had climbed down and stood helplessly beside the wagon. Mr. Peabody, for she judged the tall, thin man must be the owner of Bramble Farm, though he addressed no word directly to her and Bob was too evidently subdued to attempt any introduction, but swung on his heel and strode off in the direction of the barn. There was nothing for Betty to do but to follow Bob and her trunk into the house.

The kitchen was hot and swarming with flies. There were no screens at the windows, and though the shades were drawn down, the pests easily found their way into the room.

"How do you do, Betty? I hope your trip was pleasant. Dinner's all put away, but it won't be long till supper time. I'm just trying to brush some of the flies out," and to Betty's surprise a thin flaccid hand was thrust into hers. Mrs. Peabody was carrying out her idea of a handshake.

Betty stared in wonder at the lifeless creature who smiled wanly at her. What would Uncle Dick say if he saw Agatha Peabody now? Where were the long yellow braids and the blue eyes he had described? This woman, thin, absolutely colorless in face, voice and manner, dressed in a faded, cheap, blue calico wrapper—was this Uncle Dick's old school friend?

[57]

"Perhaps you'd like to go upstairs to your room and lie down a while," Mrs. Peabody was saying. "I'll show you where you're to sleep. How did you leave your uncle, dear?"

Betty answered dully that he was well. Her mind was too taken up with new impressions to know very clearly what was said to her.

"I'm sorry there aren't any screens," apologized her hostess. "But the flies aren't bad on this side of the house, and the mosquitoes only come when there's a marsh wind. You'll find water in the pitcher, and I laid out a clean towel for you. Do you want I should help you unpack your trunk?"

Betty declined the offer with thanks, for she wanted to be alone. She had not noticed Mrs. Peabody's longing glance at the smart little trunk, but later she was to understand that that afternoon she had denied a real heart hunger for handling pretty clothes and the dainty accessories that women love.

When the door had closed on Mrs. Peabody, Betty sat down on the bed to think. She found herself in a long, narrow room with two windows, the sashes propped up with sticks. The floor was bare and scrubbed very clean and the sheets and pillow cases on the narrow iron bed, though of coarse unbleached muslin, were immaculate. Something peculiar about the pillow case made her lean closer to examine it. It was made of flour or salt bags, overcasted finely together!

[58]

"'Puts every copper through the wringer.'" The phrase Bob had used came to Betty.

"There's no excuse for such things if he isn't poor," she argued indignantly. "Well, I suppose I'll have to stay a week, anyway. I might as well wash."

A half hour later, the traces of travel removed and her dark frock changed to a pretty pink chambray dress, Betty descended the stairs to begin her acquaintance with Bramble Farm. She wandered through several darkened rooms on the first floor and out into the kitchen without finding Mrs. Peabody. A heavy-set, sullen-faced man was getting a drink from the tin dipper at the sink.

"Want some?" he asked, indicating the pump.

Betty declined, and asked if he knew where Mrs. Peabody was.

"Out in the chicken yard," was the reply. "You the boarder they been talking about?"

"I'm Betty Gordon," said the girl pleasantly.

"Yes, they've been going on for a week about you. Old man's got it all figured out what he'll do with your board. The missis rather thought she ought to have half, but he shut her up mighty quick. Women and money don't hitch up in Peabody's mind."

[59]

He laughed coarsely and went out, drawing a plug of tobacco from his hip pocket and taking a tremendous chew from it as he closed the door.

Betty felt a sudden longing for fresh air, and, waiting only for the man to get out of sight, she stepped out on the back porch. A regiment of milk pans were drying in the late afternoon sun and a churn turned up to air showed that Mrs. Peabody made her own butter. Betty was still hungry, and the thought of slices of home-made bread and golden country butter smote her tantalizingly.

"I wonder where the chicken yard is," she thought, going down to the limp gate that swung disconsolately on a rusty hinge.

The Bramble Farm house, she discovered, looking at it critically, was apparently suffering for the minor repairs that make a home attractive. The blinds sagged in several places and in some instances were missing altogether; once white, the paint was now a dirty gray; half the pickets were gone from the garden fence; the lawn was ragged and overgrown with weeds; and the two discouraged-looking flower-beds were choked this early in the season. Betty's weeding habits moved her irresistibly to kneel down and try to free a few of the plants from the mass of tangled creepers that flourished among them. [60]

"Better not let Joe Peabody see you doing that," said Bob Henderson's voice above her bent head. "He hasn't a mite of use for a person who wastes time on flower-beds. If you want to see things in good shape, take a look at the vegetable gardens. The missis has to keep that clear, 'cause after it's once planted, she's supposed to feed us all summer from it."

Betty shook back her hair from a damp forehead.

"For mercy's sake," she demanded with heat, "is there one pleasant, kind thing connected with this place? Who was that awful man I met in the kitchen?"

"Guess it was Lieson, one of the hired men," replied Bob. "He came down to the house to get a drink a few minutes ago. He's all right, Betty, though not much to look at."

"You, Bob!" came a stentorian shout that shot Bob through the gate and in the general direction of the voice with a speed that was little less than astonishing.

Betty stood up, shook the earth from her skirt, and, guided by the shrill cackle of a proud hen, picked her way through a rather cluttered barn-yard till she came to a wire-enclosed space that was the chicken yard. Mrs. Peabody, staggering under the weight of two heavy pails of water, met her at the gate. [61]

"How nice you look!" she said wistfully. "Don't come in here, dear; you might get something on your dress."

"Oh, it washes," returned Betty carelessly. "Do you carry water for the chickens?"

"Twice a day in summer," was the answer. "Before Joe, Mr. Peabody, had water put in the barns, it was an awful job; but he couldn't get a man to help him with the cows unless he had running water at the barn, so this system was new last year. It's a big help."

Silently, and feeling in the way because she could not help, Betty watched the woman fill troughs and drinking vessels for the parched hens that had evidently spent an uncomfortable and dry afternoon in the shadeless yard. Scattering a meager ration of corn, Mrs. Peabody went into the hen house and reappeared presently with a basket filled with eggs.

"They'd lay better if I could get 'em some meat scraps," she confided to Betty as they walked toward the house. "But I dunno—it's so hard to get things done, I've about given up arguing."

She would not let Betty help her with the supper, and was so insistent that she should not touch a dish that Betty yielded, though reluctantly. The heat of the kitchen was intense, for Mrs. Peabody had built a fire of corn cobs in the range. Gas, of course, there was none, and she evidently had not an oil stove or a fireless cooker. [61]

Precisely at six o'clock the men came in.

"They milk after supper, summers," Mrs. Peabody had explained. "The milk stays sweet longer."

Betty watched in round-eyed amazement as Mr. Peabody and the two hired men washed at the sink, with much sputtering and blowing, and combed their hair before a small cracked mirror tacked over the sink. If she had not been very hungry, she was sure the sight would have taken her appetite away. Bob did not come in till they were seated. He had washed outside, he explained, and Betty cherished the idea that perhaps he had acted out of consideration for her.

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Peabody, pointing his fork at a tiny pat of butter before Betty's plate.

There was no other butter on the table, and only a very plain meal of bread, fried potatoes, raspberries and hot tea.

"I—I had a little butter left over from the last churning," faltered Mrs. Peabody. "'Twasn't enough to make even a quarter-pound print, Joe."

"Don't believe it," contradicted her husband. "I told you flat, Agatha, that there was to be no

pampering. Betty can eat what we eat, or go without. Take that butter off, do you hear me?"

[63]

A sallow flush rose to Mrs. Peabody's thin cheeks, and her lips moved rebelliously. Evidently her husband was practiced at reading her soundless words.

"Board?" he cried belligerently. "What do I care whether she's paying board or not? Don't I have to be the judge of how the house should be run? Food was never higher than 'tis now, and you've got to watch every scrap. You take that butter off and don't let me catch you doing nothin' like that again."

The men were eating stolidly, evidently too used to quarrels to pay any attention to anything but their food. Betty had listened silently, but the bread she ate seemed to choke her. Suddenly she rose to her feet, shaking with rage.

"Take your old butter!" she stormed at the astonished Mr. Peabody. "I wouldn't eat it, if you begged me to. And I won't stay in your house one second longer than it takes to have Uncle Dick send for me—you—you old miserable miser!"

CHAPTER VIII

BETTY MAKES UP HER MIND

[64]

BETTY had a confused picture of Mr. Peabody staring at her, his fork arrested half way to his mouth, before she dashed from the kitchen and fled to her room. She flung herself on the bed and burst into tears.

She lay there for a long time, sobbing uncontrollably and more unhappy than she had ever been in her short life. She missed her mother and father intolerably, she longed for the kindness of the good, if querulous, Mrs. Arnold and the comfort of Uncle Dick's tenderness and protection.

"He wouldn't want me to stay here, I know he wouldn't!" she whispered stormily. "He never would have let me come if he had known what kind of a place Bramble Farm is. I'll write to him to-night."

A low whistle came to her. She ran to the window.

"Sh! Got a piece of string?" came a sibilant whisper. Bob Henderson peered up at her from around a lilac bush. "I brought you some bread with raspberries mashed between it. Let down a cord and I'll tie it on."

[65]

"I'll come down," said Betty promptly. "Can't we take a walk? It looks awfully pretty up the lane."

"I have to clean two more horses and bed down a sick cow and carry slops to the pigs yet," recited Bob in a matter of fact way, as though these few little duties were commonly performed at the close of his long day. "After that, though, we might go a little way. It won't be dark."

"Well, whistle when you're ready," directed Betty. "I won't come down and run the risk of having to talk to Mr. Peabody. And save me the bread!"

It seemed a long time before Bob whistled, and the gray summer dusk was deepening when Betty ran down to join him. He handed her the bread, wrapped in a bit of clean paper, diffidently.

"I didn't touch it with my hands," he assured her.

Bob's face was shining from a vigorous scrubbing and his hair was plastered tight to his head and still wet. He had so evidently tried to make himself neat and his poor frayed overalls and ridiculous shoes made the task so hopeless that Betty was divided between pity for him and anger at the Peabodys who could treat a member of their household so shabbily.

"I guess you kind of shook the old man up," commented Bob, unconscious of her thoughts. "For half a minute after you slammed the door, he sat there in a daze. Mrs. Peabody wanted to take some supper up to you, but he wouldn't let her. She's deathly afraid of him."

[66]

"Did he ever hit her?" asked Betty, horrified.

"No, I don't know that he ever did. He doesn't have to hit her; his talk is worse. They say she used to answer back, but I never heard her open her mouth to argue with him, and I've been here three years."

"Do they pay you well?"

The boy looked at Betty sharply.

"I thought you were kidding," he said frankly. "Poorhouse children don't get paid. We get our board till we're eighteen. We're not supposed to do enough work to cover more'n that. Just the same, I do as much as Wapley or Leison, any day."

Betty walked along eating her bread and wondering about Bob Henderson. Who, she speculated, had been his father and mother, and how had he happened to find himself in the

poorhouse? And why, oh, why, should such a boy have had the bad luck to be "taken" by a man like Mr. Peabody? Betty was a courteous girl, and she could not bring herself to ask Bob these questions pointblank, however her curiosity urged her. Perhaps when they were better acquainted, she might have a chance. But that thought suggested to Betty her letter.

[67]

"I'm going to write to Uncle Dick before I go to bed to-night," she announced. "He said I needn't stay if for any good reason I found I wasn't happy here. I can't stay, Bob, honestly I can't. He wouldn't want me to. Shall I ask him about a place for you? And where do I mail my letter?"

Bob Henderson's face fell. He had hoped that this bright, pretty girl, with her independent and friendly manner, might spend the summer at Bramble Farm. Bob had been so long cut off from communication with a companion of his own age that it was a perfect luxury for him to have Betty to talk to. Still, he could not help admitting, the Peabody circle had nothing to offer Betty.

"Don't mail your letter in the box at the end of the lane," he advised her. "Joe Peabody might see it and take it out. I'll take it to Glenside with me to-morrow—unless you want to go along? Say, that would be great, wouldn't it?"

Betty liked the idea, and so before they turned back to the house they arranged to mail the letter secretly in Glenside the following morning. Immensely cheered, Betty went in to write to her uncle and Bob disappeared up the stairs to the attic, where he and the two hired men shared quarters.

[68]

It was too dark to see clearly in her room, and after Betty had groped around in a vain hunt for a lamp and matches, she went down to the kitchen intending to ask for a light.

Mrs. Peabody stood at the table, mixing something in a pan, and a small glass lamp gave the room all the light it had.

"I'm setting my bread," the woman explained, as Betty came in. "Where have you been dear? You must be hungry."

"No, I'm not hungry," answered Betty, avoiding explanations. "I've been out for a little walk. May I have a lamp Mrs. Peabody?"

Her hostess glanced round to make sure that the door was shut.

"You can take this one in just a minute," she said, indicating the small lamp on the table. "Mr. Peabody's gone up to bed. You see we don't use lights much in summer—we go to bed early 'cause all hands have to be up at half-past four. And lamps brings the mosquitoes."

Betty sat down in a chair to wait for her lamp. She was tired from her journey and the exciting events of the day, but she had made up her mind to write to her uncle that night, and her mind made up, Betty was sure to stick to it.

"Aren't you going to bed?" asked Betty, taking up the lamp when Mrs. Peabody had finished.

[69]

Mrs. Peabody made no move to leave the kitchen.

"I like to sit out on the back stoop awhile and get cooled off," she said. "Sometimes I go to sleep leaning against the post, and one night I didn't wake up till morning and Bob Henderson fell over me running out for wood to start the fire. I like to sit quiet. Sometimes I wish I had a dog to keep me company, but Mr. Peabody don't like dogs."

Betty went back to her room and began her letter. But all the while she was writing the thought of that lonely woman "sitting quiet" on the doorstep haunted her. What a life! And she had probably looked forward to happiness with her husband and home as all girls do.

The mosquitoes were singing madly about the light before the first five minutes had passed, but Betty stuck it out and sealed and addressed her letter, putting it under her pillow for safe keeping. Then she blew out the light and undressed in the dark. The bed was the hardest thing she had ever lain upon, but, being a healthy young person and very tired, she fell asleep as quickly as though the mattress had been filled with softest down and only wakened when a shaft of sunlight fell across her face. Some one was whistling softly beneath her window.

Seizing her dressing gown and flinging it across her shoulders, Betty peered out. Bob Henderson, swinging a milk pail in either hand, was back of the lilac bush again.

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"Say, it's quarter of six," he called anxiously, as he saw Betty's face at the window. "Breakfast is at six, and if you don't hurry you'll be cheated out of that. I'm going to Glenside right after, too."

"I'll hurry," promised Betty. "Thank you for telling me. Have you been up long?"

"Hour and a half," came the nonchalant answer as Bob hurried on to the barn.

Betty sat down on the floor to put on her shoes and stockings. At first she was angry to think that she should be made to rush like this in order to have any breakfast when her uncle was paying her board and in any other household she would have been accorded some consideration as a guest. Then the humor of the situation appealed to her and she laughed till the tears came. She, Betty Gordon, who often had to be called three times in the morning, was scrambling into her clothes at top speed in the hope of securing something to eat.

"It's too funny!" she gasped as she pulled a middy blouse on over her head. "I'll bet the Peabody's never have to call any one twice to come to the table; not if they're within hearing distance. They come first call without coaxing."

[71]

The breakfast table was set in the kitchen, and when Betty entered Mrs. Peabody was putting small white saucers of oatmeal at each place. Ordinarily Betty did not care for oatmeal in warm weather, but this morning she was in no mood to quarrel with anything eatable and she dispatched her portion almost as quickly as Bob did his. Mr. Peabody grunted something which she took to mean good-morning, and the two hired men simply nodded to her. After the oatmeal came fried potatoes, bread without butter, ham and coffee. There was no milk to drink and no eggs.

"If I was going to stay," thought Betty to herself, "I'd get some stuff over in town and hide it in my room. I wonder if I couldn't anyway. When I leave, Bob would have it."

She fell to planning what she would buy and became as silent as any of the other five at that queer table.

CHAPTER IX

ONE ON BOB

[72]

As soon as the men finished eating they rose silently and shuffled out. Any diffidence Betty might have felt about facing any one at the table after her dramatic exit of the night before was speedily dispelled; no one paid the slightest attention to her. Mrs. Peabody had risen and begun to wash the dishes at the sink before Betty had finished.

"I want to ride over to Glenside with Bob," said the girl a trifle uncertainly as she pushed back her chair. "You don't care, do you, Mrs. Peabody? And can I do any errands for you?"

"No, I dunno as I want anything," said the woman dully. "You go along and try to enjoy yourself. Bob's got to get back by eleven to whitewash the pig house."

"Come, drive over with us this morning," urged Betty kindly. "I'll help you with the work when we get back. The air will do you good. You look as though you had a headache."

"Oh, I have a headache 'most all the time," admitted Mrs. Peabody, apparently not thinking it worth discussion. "And I couldn't go to town, child, I haven't a straw hat. I don't know when I've been to Glenside. Joe fusses so about the collection, I gave up going to church two years ago."

[73]

Betty heard the sound of wheels and ran out to join Bob, an ache in her throat.

"I think it's a burning shame!" she announced hotly to that youth, as he put out a helpful hand to pull her up to the seat. "I pity Mrs. Peabody from the bottom of my heart. Why can't she have a straw hat? Doesn't she take care of the poultry and the butter and do all the work in the house? If she can't have a hat, I'd like to know why not!"

"Regular pepper-pot, aren't you?" commented Bob admiringly. "Gee, I wanted to laugh when you lit into old Peabody last night. Didn't dare, though—he'd have up and pasted me one."

It was a beautiful summer morning, and in spite of injustice and unlovely human traits housed under the roof they had left, in spite of the sight of the poor animal before them suffering pain at every step, the two young people managed to enjoy themselves. Betty had a hundred questions to ask about Bramble Farm, and Bob was in the seventh heaven of delight to have this friendly, cheerful companion to talk to instead of only his own thoughts for company.

"I've got the letter to Uncle Dick here in my pocket," Betty was saying as they came in sight of the blacksmith's shop on the outskirts of Glenside. "I suppose I'll have to be patient about waiting for an answer. It may take a week. I don't know just where he is, but I've written to the address he gave me, and marked it 'Please forward.'"

[74]

The blacksmith came out and took the horse, Bob helping him unharness and Betty improving the opportunity to see the inside of a smithy.

"I guess you'll want to look around town a bit?" suggested Bob, coming up to her when the sorrel was tied in place awaiting his turn to be shod. Two other horses were before him. "I'll wait here for you."

Betty looked at him in surprise.

"Why, Bob Henderson!" she ejaculated, keeping her voice low so that the two or three loungers about the door could not hear. "Are you willing to let me go around by myself in a perfectly strange town? I don't even know my way to the post-office. Don't you want to go with me?"

Bob was evidently embarrassed.

"I—I—I don't look fit!" he blurted out. "The collar's torn off this shirt, and I get only one clean pair of overalls a week—Monday morning. I don't look good enough to go round with you."

"Don't be silly!" said Betty severely. "You look all right for a work day. Come on, or we won't be back by the time the shoe is on."

[75]

Between the shop and the town there was a rather deserted strip of land, very conspicuous as to concrete walks and building lots marked off, but rather lacking in actual houses. Betty seized her opportunity to do a little tactful financiering. She knew that Bob had no money of his own—indeed it was doubtful if the lad had ever handled even small change that he was not accountable for.

"Uncle Dick gave me some money to spend," remarked Betty, rather hurriedly, for she did not know how Bob was going to take what she meant to say. "And before you show me the different stores, I want you to take me to the drug store. I'm going to buy Mrs. Peabody the largest bottle of violet toilet water I can find. It will do her headache heaps of good. If I give you the money, you'll buy it for me, won't you Bob?"

"Sure I will," agreed the unsuspecting Bob, and he pocketed the five dollar bill she gave him readily enough.

The wily Betty hoped that the drug store would be modern, for she had a plan tucked up her white sleeve.

"Want to go to the drug store first or to the post-office?" asked Bob.

"Oh, the post-office!" Betty was suddenly anxious to know that her letter was actually on the way.

[76]

"Don't forget—get a big bottle," said Betty warningly, as she and Bob entered the drug store.

Her dancing dark eyes discovered what she had hoped for the moment they were inside the screen door—a large soda fountain with a white-jacketed clerk behind it.

Bob led the way to the perfume counter, and though the clerk, who evidently knew him, seemed surprised at his order, he very civilly set out several bottles of toilet water for their inspection. Betty chose a handsome large bottle, and when it was wrapped, and with it some soap, for Betty did not fancy the thin wafer of yellow kitchen soap she had found in her soapdish, Bob paid for the package and received the change quite as though he were accustomed to such proceedings. Indeed he stood straighter, and Betty knew she was right in her conclusions that he had sensitiveness and pride.

The time had come to put her plan into action.

"Oh, Bob!" She pulled his coat sleeve as they were passing the fountain on their way out. "Let's have a sundae!"

The clerk had heard her, and he came forward at once, pushing toward them a printed card with the names of the drinks served. Bob opened his mouth, then closed it. He sat down on one of the high stools and Betty on another.

[77]

"I'll have a chocolate marshmallow nut sundae," ordered Betty composedly, having selected the most expensive and fanciful concoction listed with the fervent hope that it would be plentiful and good.

"I'll have the same," mumbled Bob, just as Betty had trusted he would.

While the clerk was mixing the delectable dainty, Betty stole a look at Bob. His mouth was set grimly. Then he turned and caught her eye. An unwilling grin flickered across his face and he capitulated as Betty broke into a delighted giggle.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" admitted Bob, "you've certainly put it over on me."

They laughed and chattered over the sundaes, and Betty, when they were gone, would not listen to reason, but insisted they must have another. She did not want a second one, but she knew Bob's longing for sweets must have gone ungratified a long time, and she was too young to worry about the ultimate effect on his surprised organs of digestion. Bob was fairly caught, and could not object without putting himself in an unfavorable light with the impressive young clerk, so two more sundaes were ordered and disposed of. Then Bob paid for them from the change in his pocket and he and Betty found themselves on the sunny sidewalk.

[78]

"That's the first sundae I ever had," confessed Bob shyly. "Of course we had ice-cream at the poorhouse sometimes for a treat—Christmas and sometimes Fourth of July. But I never ate a sundae. Do you want your change back now?"

"No, keep it," said Betty. "I want to go to a grocery store now. And where do they keep mosquito netting?"

"Same place—Liscom's general store," answered Bob.

The general store was well-named. Betty, who had never been in a place of this kind, was fascinated by the shelves and the wonderful assortment of goods they contained. Everything, she privately decided, from a pink chiffon veil to a keg of nails could be bought here, and her deductions were very near the truth.

"I can't stand being chewed by the mosquitoes another night," she whispered to Bob. "So I'm

going to get some netting and tack it on the window casings. I'd buy a lamp if I was going to stay."

After the netting was measured off, Betty, to Bob's astonishment, began to buy groceries. She chose cans of sardines and tuna fish, several packages of fancy crackers, a bottle or two of olives, a pound of dried apricots, a box of dates and one or two other articles. These were all wrapped together in a neat bundle. [79]

"Do they make sandwiches here?" asked Betty, watching a machine shaving off a pink slice of cold boiled ham and a layer of cheese and the storekeeper's assistant butter two slabs of bread with sweet-looking butter at the order of a teamster who stood waiting.

"Sure we do, Miss," the proprietor assured her. "Nice, fresh sandwiches made while you wait, and wrapped in waxed paper."

"I'll have two ham and two cheese, please," responded Betty, adding in an aside to Bob: "We can eat 'em going home."

She was afraid that perhaps she had spent more money than she had left from the five dollar bill. But Bob had enough to pay for her purchases, it seemed, and they left the store with their bundles, well pleased with the morning's work.

CHAPTER X

ROAD COURTESY

 [80]

"WE'LL have to hurry," said Bob, quickening his steps, "if I'm to get back at eleven. I hope Turner has the sorrel ready."

"Hasn't the horse a name?" queried Betty curiously, running to keep up with Bob. "I must go out and see the cows and things. Do you like pigs, Bob?"

The boy laughed a little at this confusion of ideas.

"No, none of the horses are named," he answered, taking the questions in order. "Peabody has three; but we just call 'em the sorrel and the black and the bay. Nobody's got time to feed 'em lumps of sugar and make pets out of them. Guess that's what you've got in mind, Betty. Old Peabody would throw a fit if he saw any one feeding sugar to a horse."

"But the cows?" urged Betty. "Do they get enough to eat? Or do they have to suffer to save money, like this poor horse we brought over to be shod?"

"Cows," announced Bob sententiously, "are different. A cow won't give as much milk if she's bothered, and Joe Peabody can see a butter check as far as anybody else. So the stables are screened and the cows are fed pretty well. Now, of course, they're out on pasture. They're not blood stock, though—just mixed breeds. And I hate pigs!" [81]

Betty was surprised at his vehemence, but she had no chance to ask for an explanation, for by this time they had reached the smithy, and the blacksmith led out the sorrel.

After they were well started on their way toward the farm, she ventured to ask Bob why he hated pigs.

"If you had to take care of 'em, you'd know why," he answered moodily. "I'd like to drown every one of 'em in the pails of slop I've carried out to 'em. And whitewashing the pig house on a hot day—whew! The pigs can go out in the orchard and root around, while I have to clean up after 'em. Besides, if you lived on ham for breakfast the year round, you'd hate the sight of a pig!"

Betty laughed understandingly.

"I know I should," she agreed. "Isn't it funny, I never thought so much about eating in my life as I have since I've been here. It's on my mind continually. I bought this canned stuff to keep up in my room so if I don't want to eat what the Peabodys have every meal I needn't. You can have some, too, Bob. Let's eat these sandwiches now—I'm hungry, aren't you? Why didn't you tell me you were tired of ham and I would have bought something else?" [82]

But Bob was far from despising well-cooked cold, boiled ham, and he thoroughly enjoyed his share of the sandwiches. While eating he glanced once or twice uncertainly at Betty, wishing he could find the courage to tell her how glad he was that she had come to Bramble Farm. Bob's life had had very few pleasant events in it so far.

"Don't you think it was funny that Mr. Peabody let me come?" asked Betty presently, following her own train of thought. "If he's so close, I should think he'd hate to have any one come to see his wife."

"He's doing it for the check your uncle sent," retorted Bob shrewdly. "Didn't you know your board was paid for two weeks in advance? That's why Peabody isn't making a fuss about your going; he figures he'll be in that much. Hello, what's this?"

"This" was a buggy drawn up at one side of the road, the fat, white horse lazily cropping grass, while two slight feminine figures stood helplessly by.

Bob was going to drive past, but Betty put out her hand and jerked the sorrel to a halt.

"Ask 'em what the matter is," she commanded.

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"They've lost a wheel," said Bob in a low tone, his practiced eye having detected at once that one of the rear wheels was lying on the grass. "We can't stop, Betty; we're late now, and Joe Peabody's in a raging temper anyway this morning."

"Why, Bob Henderson, how you do talk!" Betty's dark eyes began to shoot fire. "Just because you have to live with the meanest man in the world is no excuse for you to grow like him! If you drive on and don't try to help these women, I'll never speak to you again—never!"

Bob looked shamefaced. His first impulse had been to stop and offer help, but he had had first-hand experience with the Peabody temper and had endured more than one beating for slight neglect of iron-clad orders. When he still hesitated, Betty spoke scornfully.

"They're old ladies—so don't bother," she said bitingly. "Uncle Dick says no one should ever leave any one in trouble on the road, but I suppose he meant men who could whack you over the head if you refused to assist them. Why don't you drive on, Bob?"

"You hush up!" Bob, stung into action, closed his mouth grimly and handed over the reins to his tormentor. "It's a half hour's job to put that wheel on, but I suppose there's no way out of it, so here goes."

The two women were, as Betty had said, old ladies; that is, each had very white hair. And, although the day was warm, they were so muffled up in veils and shawls and gloves that the boy and the girl marveled how they could see to drive.

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"The wheel just came off without warning," said the taller of the two, in a high, sweet voice, as Bob asked to be allowed to help them. "Sister and I were so frightened! It might have been serious, you know, but Phyllis is such a good horse! She never even attempted to run."

Bob with difficulty repressed a grin. Looking at the fat sides of Phyllis he would have said that physical handicaps, rather than an inherent sweetness of disposition, kept Phyllis where she belonged between the shafts.

"You've lost a nut," announced the boy, after a brief examination.

"Dear, dear!" fluttered both ladies. "Isn't that unfortunate! You haven't a—a—nut with you, Mr. —?"

"I'm Bob Henderson," said the lad courteously. "I'll look around here in the dust a bit and maybe the nut will turn up. Why don't you sit down in the shade and rest awhile?"

The two ladies accepted his suggestion gratefully. They retired to a crooked old apple tree growing on the bank further down the road, evincing no desire to make the acquaintance of Betty, who sat quietly in the wagon holding the reins.

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"I suppose they think we're backwoods country folks," thought Betty, the blood coming into her face. "Don't know that I blame them, seeing that this wagon is patched and tied together in a hundred places and the horse looks like a shadow of a skeleton."

Bob continued to search in the dust of the road painstakingly. The two women clearly had shifted their trouble to him, and apparently had no further interest in the outcome. Betty longed to offer to help him, but the severity of his profile, as she glimpsed it now and then, deterred her.

"I wish I could stop before I say so much," mourned the girl to herself. "I ought to know that Bob can't help being afraid of Mr. Peabody. If he had control over me, I'd probably act just as his wife and Bob do. When you can get away from an ogre, it's easy enough to say you're not afraid of him. Doesn't Bob dominate the situation, as Mrs. Arnold used to say!"

Bob had found the nut, and was now fitting the wheel into place, working with a quickness and skill that fascinated Betty. She timidly called to him and asked if she should not come and hold the axle, but he refused her offer curtly. In a very few minutes the wheel was screwed on and the two ladies at liberty to resume their journey. They were insistent that Bob accept pay for his help, but the boy declined, politely but resolutely, and seemingly at no loss for diplomatic words and phrases.

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"Were you born in the poorhouse, Bob?" Betty asked curiously, wondering where the lad had developed his ability to meet people on their own ground. The volubly thankful ladies had driven on, and the sorrel was now trotting briskly toward Bramble Farm.

"Yes, I was," said Bob shortly. "But my mother wasn't, nor my father. I've got a box buried in the garden that's mine, though the clothes on my back belong to old Peabody. And if I'm like Joe Peabody in other things, perhaps I'll learn to make money and save it. My father couldn't, or I wouldn't have been born in an alms-house!"

"Oh, Bob!" Betty cried miserably, "I didn't mean you were like Mr. Peabody—you know I didn't. I'm so sorry! I always say things I don't mean when I'm mad. Uncle Dick told me to go out and

chop wood when I get furious, and not talk. I am so sorry!"

"We've got a wood pile," grinned Bob. "I'll show you where it is. The rest of it's all right, Betty. I'd probably have stayed awake all night if I'd driven by those women. Only I suppose Peabody will be in a towering rage. It must be noon."

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If Betty was not afraid of Mr. Peabody, it must be confessed that she looked forward with no more pleasure than Bob to meeting him. Still she was not prepared for the cold fury with which he greeted them when they drove into the yard.

"Just as I figured," he said heavily. "Here 'tis noon, and that boy hasn't done a stroke of work since breakfast. Gallivanting all over town, I'll be bound. Going to be like his shiftless, worthless father and mother—a charge on the township all his days. You take that pail of whitewash and don't let me see you again till you get the pig house done, you miserable, sneaking poorhouse rat! You'll go without dinner to pay for wasting my time like this! Clear out, now."

"How dare you!" Betty's voice was shaking, but she stood up in the wagon and looked down at Mr. Peabody bravely. "How dare you taunt a boy with what he isn't responsible for? It isn't his fault that he was born in the poorhouse, nor his fault that we're late. I made him stop and help put a buggy wheel on. Oh, how can you be so mean, and close and hateful?"

Betty's eyes overflowed as she gathered up her bundles and jumped to the ground. Mrs. Peabody, standing in the doorway, was a silent witness to her outburst, and the two hired men, who had come up to the house for dinner, were watching curiously. Bob had disappeared with the bucket of whitewash. No one would say anything, thought Betty despairingly, if a murder were committed in this awful place.

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"Been spending your money?" sneered Mr. Peabody, eyeing the bundles with disfavor. "Never earned a cent in your life, I'll be bound, yet you'll fling what isn't yours right and left. Let me give you a word of advice, young lady; as long as you're in my house you hold your tongue if you don't want to find yourself in your room on a diet of bread and water. Understand?"

Betty Gordon fled upstairs, her one thought to reach the haven of her bed. Anger and humiliation and a sense of having lowered herself to the Peabody level by quarreling when in a bad temper swept over her in a wave. She buried her head in the hard little pillow.

CHAPTER XI

[89]

A KEEN DISAPPOINTMENT

"I'm just as bad as he is, every bit," sobbed poor little Betty. "Uncle Dick would say so. I'm in his house, much as I hate it, and I hadn't any right to call him names—only he is so hateful! Oh, dear, I wonder if I shall ever get away from here!"

She cried herself into a headache, and had no heart to open the parcel of groceries or to go down to ask Mrs. Peabody for something to eat, though indeed the girl knew she stood small chance of securing as much as a cracker after the dinner hour.

Suddenly some one put a soothing hand on her hot forehead, and, opening her swollen eyes, Betty saw Mrs. Peabody standing beside the bed.

"You poor lamb!" said the woman compassionately. "You mustn't go on like this, dear. You'll make yourself sick. I'm going to close the blinds and shut out the sun; then I'll get a cold cloth for your head. You'd feel better if you had something to eat, though. You mustn't go without your meals, child."

"I've got some crackers and bouillon cubes," replied Betty wearily. "I suppose Mr. Peabody wouldn't mind if I used a little hot water from the tea kettle?"

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She bit her tongue with vexation at the sarcasm, but Mrs. Peabody apparently saw no implication.

"The kitchen fire's gone out, but the kettle's still hot," she answered. "I'll step down and get you a cup. I have just ninety cobs to get supper on, or I'd build up a fresh fire for you. Joe counts the cobs; he wants they should last till the first of July."

"Oh, how do you stand it?" burst from Betty. "I should think you'd go crazy. Don't you ever want to scream?"

Mrs. Peabody stopped in the doorway.

"I used to care," she admitted apathetically. "Not any more. You can get used to anything. Besides, it's no use, Betty; you'll find that out. Flinging yourself against a stone wall only bruises you—the wall doesn't even feel you trying."

"Bring up two cups," called Betty, as Mrs. Peabody started down stairs.

"I'll bet she flung herself against the stone wall till all the spirit and life was crushed out of her," mused the girl, lying flat on her back, her eyes fixed on the fly-specked ceiling. "Poor soul, it

must be awful to have to give up even trying."

Mrs. Peabody came back with two cracked china cups and saucers, and a tea kettle half full of passably hot water. Betty forgot her throbbing head as she bustled about, spreading white paper napkins on the bed—there was no table and only one chair in the room—and arranging her crackers and a package of saltines which she deftly spread with potted ham.

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"We'll have a make-believe party," she declared tactfully, dropping a couple of soup cubes in each cup and adding the hot water. "I'm sure you're hungry; you jump up so much at the table, you don't half eat your meals."

Mrs. Peabody raised her eyes—faded eyes but still honest.

"I've no more pride left," she said quietly.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Betty, "I bought you something this morning, and haven't given it to you."

Mrs. Peabody was as pleased as a child with the pretty bottle of toilet water, and Betty extracted a promise from her that she would use it for her headaches, and not "save" it.

"If I was going to stay," thought Betty, stowing her packages of goodies under the bed as the most convenient place presenting itself, "I might be able to make things a little pleasanter for Mrs. Peabody. I do wonder when Uncle Dick will write."

She had allowed four days as the shortest time in which her uncle could possibly get an answer to her, so she was agreeably delighted when, on going out to the mailbox at the head of the lane the third morning, she found a letter addressed to her and postmarked "Philadelphia." There was no other mail in the box. The Peabodys did not even subscribe for a weekly paper.

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"Bob!" shouted Betty, hurdling a fence and bearing down upon that youth as he hoed corn in a near by field. "Bob, here's a letter from Uncle Dick! He's answered so soon, I'm sure he says I can come to him. Won't that be great?"

Bob nodded grimly and went on with his work while Betty eagerly tore open her envelope. After she had read the first few lines the brightness went out of her face, and when she looked up at Bob she was crying.

"What's the matter, is he sick?" asked the boy in alarm.

"He hasn't had my letter at all!" wept Betty. "He never got it! This was written the same day I wrote him, and he says he's going out to the oil wells and won't be in touch with civilization for some weeks to come. His lawyer in Philadelphia is to hold his mail, and send the checks for my board. And he thinks I'm having a good time with his old friend Agatha and encloses a check for ten dollars for me to spend. Oh, Bob!" and the unhappy Betty flung her arms around the neck of the astonished Bob and cried as though her heart would break.

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"There, there!" Bob patted her awkwardly, in his excitement hitting her with the hoe handle, but neither of them knew that. "There, Betty, maybe things won't be as bad as you think. You can go to Glenside and get books from the library—they've got a right nice little library. It would be nice if you had a bicycle or something to go on, but you haven't."

"Uncle's sending me a riding habit," said Betty, wiping her eyes. "And a whole bundle of books and a parcel of magazines. He says he never yet saw a farm with enough reading material on the parlor table. I will be glad to have something to read."

"Sure. And Sundays I can borrow a magazine," and Bob's eyes shone with anticipated enjoyment. "Sunday's the one day I have any time to myself and there's never much to do."

Betty slipped the letter into her blouse pocket. She was bitterly disappointed to think that she must stay at Bramble Farm, and she did not relish the idea of having to confess to the Peabodys that her plans for leaving them had been rather premature.

"I say," Bob looked up from his hoeing, the shrewd light in his eyes that made him appear older than his thirteen years. "I say, Betty, if you're wise, you won't say anything about this letter up at the house. Old Peabody doesn't know you've written to your uncle, and he'll think you changed your mind. I half believe he thinks you were only speaking in a fit of temper, anyway. If you tell him you can't reach your uncle by letter, and have to stay here for the next few weeks whether you will or no, he'll think he has you right where he wants you. He can't help taking advantage of every one."

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"Doesn't any one ever come to call?" Betty asked a day or two later, following Bob out to the pasture to help him salt the sheep.

It was a Sunday morning, and even Mr. Peabody so far respected the Sabbath that he exacted only half as much as usual from his help. The milking, of course, had to be done, and the stock fed, but that accomplished, after breakfast, Wapley and Lieson, the hired men, had set off to walk to Glenside to spend their week's wages as they saw fit. They had long ago, after wordy battles, learned the futility of trying to borrow a horse from Mr. Peabody.

Bob had finished his usual chores, and after salting the sheep would be practically free for the day. He and Betty had planned to take their books out into the orchard and enjoy the peaceful

sunniness of the lovely June weather.

"Come to call?" repeated Bob, letting down the bars of the rocky pasture. "What would they come to call for? No one would be civil to 'em, and Mrs. Peabody runs when she sees any one coming. She hasn't got a decent dress; so I don't blame her much. Here, you sit down and I'll call them."

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Betty sat down on a flat rock and Bob spread out his salt on another. The sheep knew his voice and came slowly toward him.

"Come on now, Betty, and let's have a whack at that magazine, the one about out West," said Bob at last.

The promised package of books and magazines had arrived, and Betty had generously placed them at the disposal of the household. Wapley and Lieson had displayed a pathetic eagerness for "pictures," and sat up after supper as long as the light lasted, turning over the illustrated pages. Betty doubted if they could read.

CHAPTER XII

BETTY DEFENDS HERSELF

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APPARENTLY Mr. Peabody had never taken Betty's threat to ask her uncle to take her away seriously, and her presence at the farm soon came to be an accepted fact. Conditions did not improve, but Betty developed a sturdy, wholesome philosophy that helped her to make the best of everything. Uncle Dick wrote seldom, but packages from Philadelphia continued to come at intervals, and always proved to be practical and needful.

"Though as to that, he couldn't have the lawyer send me anything that wouldn't be useful," said Betty to herself. "I never saw a place where there was so much *nothing* as here at Bramble Farm."

One morning when the pouring rain kept her indoors, Betty was exploring the little used parlor. Mrs. Peabody seldom entered the room save to clean it and close it up, and Betty opened a corner of the blind with something like trepidation. A large shotgun over the mantel attracted her attention at once.

"Don't touch that thing—it's always kept loaded," said the voice of Lieson at the door.

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Betty shivered and drew away from the shelf. Lieson showed his tobacco-stained teeth in a friendly grin.

"I was up attic getting my rubber boots," he explained, "and I saw the mail wagon stop at the box. Do you want I should go down and get the mail?"

"Oh, would you?" Betty's tone was eager. "Perhaps there is a letter from my uncle. That would be so kind of you, Mr. Lieson, because otherwise I may have to wait till it stops raining."

"I'll go," said Lieson awkwardly, and he went stumping down the hall.

Wapley and Lieson were rough and untidy, but Betty found herself liking them better and feeling sorry for them as time went on. They worked hard and were never thanked and had very little pleasure after their day's work was over. Several times now they had done little kindnesses for Betty, and she had tried to show that she appreciated their efforts.

Lieson came back from the mail box carrying a square package, but no letter. Though Mr. Peabody was presumably waiting in the barn for him and fuming at his delay, the man showed such a naive interest in the parcel that Betty could not resist asking him to wait while she opened it.

"Why, it's a camera!" she exclaimed delightedly, as she took out the square box. "I'll take your picture, Mr. Lieson, as soon as the sun comes out, to pay you for walking through all this rain to get the mail for me."

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"Say, would you?" Lieson showed more animation than Betty had ever noticed in him. "Honest? I got a lady friend, and she's always at me to send her my picture. She sure would admire to have one of me."

"All right, she hasn't long to wait," promised Betty gaily. "Here are two rolls of film, and luckily I know how to operate a camera. Mr. Arnold had a good one and he taught me. The first sunny day, remember, Mr. Lieson."

The rain continued all that day, and at night when Betty went up to bed she heard it pattering on the tin roof of the porch which was under her window.

Betty had managed to make her room more habitable, and, relieved of any fear of embarrassing her hostess, had tacked netting at the two windows and bought herself a lamp with a good burner. She scrupulously paid Mr. Peabody for the oil she used, and while he showed plainly that he considered burning a light at night in summer a wicked extravagance, he did not

interfere.

"Now let me see," mused Betty. "Shall I answer Mrs. Arnold's last letter or go to bed? I guess I'll go to bed. I'll have all day to write letters to-morrow."

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She was brushing her hair when a noise in the next room startled her. She knew that it was not occupied, for, besides herself, the Peabodys were the only ones who slept on the second floor. Bob Henderson and the hired men were housed in the attic. The Peabodys' bedroom was further down the hall, on the other side of the house.

"Pshaw!" Betty put her brush back on the table and gave her head a shake. "I mustn't get nervous. We're too far out in the country for burglars; and, besides, what in the world would they come here after?"

Mr. Peabody differed from the majority of his neighbors in that he banked most of his funds. Some said it was because, if he had been in the habit of keeping money in the house, his help would have murdered him cheerfully and taken the cash as a reward. Be that as it may, it was well known that Joseph Peabody seldom had actual money in his pocket or in his tin strong box, and now Betty was glad to recall this.

She had braided her hair and put out the light and was just slipping into bed when she heard the noise again. This time it sounded against the wall. Betty stealthily crept out of bed and ran to her door. There was no door key, but she shot the bolt.

"That's some protection," she murmured, hopping into bed again. "If there are burglars in the house, I suppose I've locked 'em out to scare Mr. and Mrs. Peabody to death. But at any rate they have each other, and I'm all alone."

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Closing her eyes tight, Betty began to say her prayers, but she fell asleep before she had finished.

She woke in the dark to hear a noise directly under her bed!

She sat up, her eyes trying to pierce the darkness, wondering why she had not taken the precaution of looking under the bed before she locked herself into a room with a burglar.

"If I look now and see his legs, I'll faint away, I know I shall," she thought, her teeth chattering, though the night was warm. "I wish to goodness Uncle Dick had sent me a revolver."

That reminded her of the shotgun downstairs. With Betty to think was to act, and she sprang noiselessly out of bed and ran to the door. Thank goodness, the bolt slipped without squeaking. Downstairs ran Betty and lifted the heavy shotgun from its place over the mantel. She was no longer afraid, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. She was having a grand adventure. She had shot a gun a few times under Mr. Arnold's instructions and careful supervision when he was teaching his boys how to handle one, and she thought she knew all about it.

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She gained her room, breathless, for the gun was heavy. At the threshold she stopped a moment to listen. Yes, there was the noise again. The burglar was unaware of her flight.

Unaware herself of the absurdity of her deductions, Betty raised the heavy gun and pointed it toward the bed. As well as she could tell, she was aiming under the bed. She shut her eyes tight and fired.

The gun kicked unmercifully, and Betty ejaculated a loud "Ow!" which was lost in the babble of sound that immediately followed the shot. There was the sound of breaking glass under the bed, a shrill scream from Mrs. Peabody, and the thunderous bellow of Mr. Peabody demanding: "What in Sam Hill are those varmints up to now?" Evidently he attributed the racket to Wapley and Lieson, who had been known to come home late from Glenside.

In a few minutes they were all gathered at Betty's door, Bob open-mouthed and speechless, the two men sleepily curious, the Peabodys loudly demanding to know what the matter was.

"Are you hurt, Betty?" asked Mrs. Peabody anxiously. "Where did you get the gun, dear? Did something frighten you?"

"It's a burglar!" declared Betty. "I heard him under the bed! But I got him, I know I did!"

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"Light the lamp and look under the bed, Bob," commanded Mr. Peabody harshly. "I don't believe this burglar stuff, but the girl's shot off a good charge of buckshot, no doubt of that. Find out what she hit."

Bob lit the lamp and stooped down to look. Then his lips twitched.

"Rat!" he announced briefly. "A big one."

"Haul him out," directed Lieson. "Let's have a look at him."

Betty had shrunk inside the doorway when the lamp was lit, conscious of her attire, and now she managed to reach her dressing gown and fling it around her.

"He's in too many pieces," said Bob doubtfully. "Guess we'll have to get a dustpan and brush."

Mr. Peabody and the two men went grumbling back to bed, Peabody taking the gun for

safekeeping, but Mrs. Peabody sent Bob down to the kitchen for the articles he mentioned, declaring that Betty should not have to finish the night in a room with a dead rat.

"If there was another bed made up, I'd move you into it," she said. "But I haven't an extra place ready."

Betty had pinned up her hair and put on her slippers before Bob came back, and had put her best pink crepe dressing gown around Mrs. Peabody, who presented an incongruous vision so attired. Bob looked at Betty in admiration. With her tumbled dark hair and pink cheeks and blue gown and slippers, the boy thought her the prettiest thing he had ever seen. [103]

"I didn't want to tell you—don't look," he whispered, getting down on his knees to sweep out the remains of the slaughtered rat, "but the buckshot hit two olive bottles, and there's some mess here under your bed. I guess the rat was after the crackers."

Bob carried down the dead rat and mopped up the brine from the olives and threw out the debris, making several trips downstairs without a murmur. Finally it was all cleaned up, and they could go back to their rooms and finish the remainder of the night in probable peace.

"If you hear a noise"—Bob could not resist this parting shot—"run down and grab the dinner bell. We'll hear it just as quick, and you might shoot the potted ham full of bullets next time."

Betty did not sleep well, and once she woke, sure that she had heard loud talking and shouts. She thought the noise came from the attic.

"Lieson had the nightmare after your shindy," announced Bob at the breakfast table. "He suddenly began shouting and got me by the throat, declaring that if I didn't pay him every cent I owed him he'd kill me. Wapley had to come and pull him away, or I don't know but he would have choked the breath out of me." [104]

"I had a bad dream," said Lieson sullenly.

The rain was still coming down and all the good-nature of the day before had left Lieson. He refused to answer a remark of Mr. Peabody's, and was evidently in a bad humor.

"He and the old man had a run in before breakfast," whispered Bob, pulling on his boots preparatory to carrying out food to the pigs. Betty stood at the window and they could talk without being overheard. "It was something about money. Well, Betty, are you going gunning to-day?"

"You needn't tease me," replied Betty, laughing. "I feel foolish enough, without being reminded of last night. I think I'll go upstairs and sew on buttons as a penance. There's nothing I hate to do worse."

"Do it well then," suggested the irrepressible Bob, slamming the door just in time to avoid the glass of water Betty tossed after him.

CHAPTER XIII

FOLLOWING THE PRESCRIPTION

THE sound of some one chopping wood caught the alert ear of Bob Henderson as he came whistling through the yard on his way to the tool house. Some peculiar quality in the strokes seemed to suggest something to him, and he turned aside and made for the woodshed. [105]

"For the love of Mike! Betty Gordon, what do you call it you're doing now?" he inquired, standing in the frame of the woodshed, at a respectful distance from the energetic figure by the wood block.

"Chopping wood!" snapped Betty, hacking a dry rail viciously. "Did you think I was cutting out paper dolls?"

"My dear child, that isn't the way to chop wood," insisted Bob paternally. "Here, let me show you. You'll ruin the axe, to say nothing of chopping off your own right ear."

Betty brought the axe down on the rail with unnecessary violence.

"Let me alone," she said ominously. "I'm mad! This is Uncle Dick's prescription, but I can't see that it works. The more I chop, the madder I get!" [106]

Bob grinned, and then as a shout of "You, Bob!" sounded from outside, his expression changed.

"Wapley is waiting for nails to fix the fence with," he said hurriedly. "I'll have to hurry. But come on down to the cornfield, can't you, Betty? We can talk there."

Bob ran off, and Betty regarded the axe resentfully.

"Seems to me he's hoed enough corn to reach round the earth," she said aloud. "I wonder if Bob ever gets mad? Well, I guess I will go down and talk to him, though I did mean to weed the garden for Mrs. Peabody. I can do that this afternoon."

In spite of the absence of fresh eggs and milk from her diet, the weeks at Bramble Farm had benefited Betty. She was deeply tanned from days spent in the sun, and while perceptibly thinner, a close observer would have known that she was hardy and strong. She was growing taller, too.

"Mr. Peabody is so mean!" she scolded, dropping down under a scrubby wild cherry tree in the field where Bob was already hard at work hoeing corn, having delivered the nails to Wapley. "You know this is the first fair day we've had since those three rainy ones, and I promised Mr. Lieson I'd take his picture. He wants it for his girl. And Mr. Peabody wouldn't let him go upstairs and put on his best clothes. Said it was his time and that foolishness could wait till after supper. You know I can't take a snapshot after supper!"

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Bob hoed a few minutes in silence.

"Try a little diplomacy, Betty," he finally advised. "Sunday is the time to take Lieson in his glad rags. He looks fierce all dressed up, I think; it probably will break off the match if his girl is marrying him for his beauty. But Lieson the way he is now—in that soft shirt and without his hat—isn't half bad. He's got a kind of wistful, gentle face, for all he can jaw so terribly; have you noticed it? Go down in the potato field and take his picture while he's working and tell him you'll take him dressed up Sunday and he can have both pictures. He'll be so pleased, he'll offer to let you hold a pig."

Betty made a little face. Lieson had already done just that. Thinking that Betty, who made such a fuss over the baby lambs, would be equally delighted with the little pigs, Lieson had told her to shut her eyes one day and hold out her hands; into them he had dropped a squirming, slippery, squealing baby pig and Bob had always declared he could not tell which made the most noise—Betty when she opened her eyes, or the pig when she dropped him. Lieson had been much disappointed.

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"I'll go and get the camera now," said Betty, jumping up, all traces of temper vanished. "I'll put in the film that holds a dozen and just go round taking everything. That will be fun!"

She went running up the field and Bob's eyes followed her wistfully.

"She's a good kid," he said to himself. "Trouble is, she's never been up against it before and she doesn't always know how to take it. It does make her so mad to see old Peabody walk all over every one; but there's no sense in letting her buck against him when you can turn her thoughts in another direction. Gee, I'm sick of this blamed corn!"

Bob went up and down the endless rows, and Betty skipped about, "snapping" views of Bramble Farm to her heart's content. Lieson was delighted to learn that he might have two pictures of himself, and though it seemed to him a waste of time to be photographed in his work clothes, still he admitted that even an "ordinary" picture was preferable to none.

"My lady friend," he announced proudly, as Betty clicked her bulb, "she like me anyway."

Wapley, while without the excuse of a "lady friend," was nevertheless almost childishly pleased to pose for his photograph, and him, too, Betty promised to take again on Sunday. Mrs. Peabody, weeding in the large vegetable garden that was her regular care, alone refused to be taken.

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"Oh, no!" she shrank down among the cabbages and pulled her hideous sunbonnet further over her eyes when Betty pressed her to reconsider her refusal. "Child, don't ask me. When I look at the picture of me taken in my wedding dress and then see myself in the mirror mornings, I wonder if I'm the same person. I wouldn't have my picture taken for one hundred dollars!"

Betty used up one roll of films that morning, but she decided to save the other roll for Sunday, as she was not sure she could get another in Glenside. She determined to take her pictures over that afternoon and have them developed, for she was as eager to see the results as Lieson and Wapley. Bob, too, owned up to a desire to see how he "turned out."

"It's a pretty hot day," ventured Mrs. Peabody uncertainly, when Betty, at the dinner table, announced her intention of walking to Glenside that afternoon. "Maybe, dearie, if you wait till after supper, some one will be driving over."

"Horses ain't going a step off this farm this week," said Mr. Peabody impressively. "They're working without shoes, as anybody with any interest in the place would know. If some folks haven't any more to do than gad around spending good money, it's none of my affair; but I don't aim to run a stage between here and Glenside for their convenience."

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Dinner was finished in silence after this speech, and immediately after she had helped Mrs. Peabody with the dishes, Betty went up to her room to change her dress. She did not mind the walk; indeed she had taken it several times before, and knew that one side of the road would be comparatively shady all the way.

Betty took an inexplicable whim to put on her prettiest dress, a delicate pink linen with white collars and cuffs that Mrs. Arnold had taught her to embroider herself in French knots. She untied the black velvet ribbon she usually wore on her broad-brimmed hat and substituted a sash of pink mull.

"You look too nice!" exclaimed Mrs. Peabody when the girl came downstairs. "Don't you think you should take an umbrella, though? Those big white clouds mean a thunder storm."

Betty laughingly declined the umbrella, and, promising Mrs. Peabody "something pretty," started off on her walk. Poor Mrs. Peabody, though Betty was too inexperienced to realize it, was beginning, very slowly it is true, but still beginning, to break under the long strain of hard work and unhappiness. Betty only knew that she was pitifully pleased with the smallest gift from the town stores.

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"If I don't see a girl of my own age to speak to pretty soon," declared Betty to herself, walking swiftly up the lane, "I don't know what I shall do! Bob is nice, but, goodness! he isn't interested in lots of things I like. Crocheting, for instance. I never was crazy about fancy work, but now I'm kind of hungry for a crochet needle."

Half way to Glenside a farmer overtook her, and after the pleasant country fashion offered her a "lift." Betty accepted gladly. He lived, as she discovered after a few minutes' conversation, on the farm next to the Peabodys, and he had heard about her and knew who she was.

"When you get time," he said kindly, when she told him she was going to Glenside, "walk through the town and out toward Linden. There's quite a nursery out that way, and you'd like to see the flowers. Folks come from the city to buy their plants there."

At the nearest crossroads to Glenside he turned, and Betty got out, thanking him heartily for the ride. It was a matter of only a few moments now to reach Glenside, and she found herself in the town much sooner than she had counted on. So when the drug-store clerk said he would have her pictures developed and printed within an hour if she could wait, Betty determined to wait instead of having them mailed to her. She had a sundae and bought some chocolates for Mrs. Peabody, and then remembered the farmer's remark about the nursery.

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"How far is it to the nursery they talk about?" she said to the woman clerk who had weighed out the candy.

"Baxter's? Oh, not more than three-quarters of a mile," was the answer. "You go right up Main Street as far as the sidewalk goes. When it stops, keep right on, and pretty soon you'll see a big sign of a watering-pot; that's it."

Betty followed these directions implicitly, and she had reached the end of the town sidewalk when she heard the distant mutter of thunder.

"I guess I can reach the nursery and be looking at the flowers while it storms," she said to herself.

Betty had no more fear of thunderstorms than of a tame cat, but she mightily disliked the idea of getting her hat wet. So she hurried conscientiously.

The sun went under a heavy cloud, and a violent crash of thunder directly overhead stimulated her into a run. There was not a house in sight, and Betty began to wish she had turned and gone back to the town. At least she could have found shelter in a shop.

Splash! A huge drop of rain flattened in the dust of the road. The tall trees on either side began to sway in the slowly rising wind.

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"I'll bet it will be a big storm, and I'll be soaked!" gasped Betty. "Where is that plaguey nursery!"

She began to run, and the drops came faster and faster. Then, without warning, the long line of swaying trees stopped, and a tidy white picket fence began on the side of the road nearest Betty. Back of the pickets was a well-kept green lawn; and set in the center of a circle of glorious elm trees was a comfortable white house with green blinds and a wide porch. A woman and two girls were hastily taking in a swing and a quantity of sofa pillows to protect them from the storm.

"Come in, quick!" called the woman, as Betty came in sight. "Hurry, before you're soaked. Just lift the latch and the gate swings in."

"Just lift the latch." Betty thought she had never heard a more cordial or welcome invitation.

CHAPTER XIV

WINNING NEW FRIENDS

[114]

BETTY opened the gate and ran up the path. The younger girl, who seemed about her own age, put out a friendly hand and touched her sleeve.

"Not wet a bit, Mother!" she announced triumphantly. "And I don't believe her hat's spotted, either!"

A jagged streak of lightning and another thundering crash sent them all scurrying indoors. The lady led the way into a pleasant room where an open piano, books, and much gay cretonne-covered wicker furniture gave an atmosphere at once homelike and modern. Betty had craved the sight of such a room since leaving Pineville and her friends.

"Pull down the shades, Norma; and, Alice, light the lamp," directed the mother of the two girls.

The younger girl drew the shades and Alice, who was evidently some years older than her sister, lighted the pretty wicker lamp on the center table.

"I'm so glad you reached our house before the storm fairly broke," said their mother, smiling at Betty. "In another second you would have been drenched, and there isn't a house between here and Baxter's nursery." [115]

Betty explained that she had been on her way to the nursery, and thinking that her kind hostess should know her guest's name, gave it, and said that she was staying at Bramble Farm.

"Oh, yes, we've heard of you," said the lady, in some surprise. "I am Mrs. Guerin, and my husband, Dr. Guerin, learns all the news, you know, on his rounds among his patients. Mrs. Keppler, I believe, was the one who told him there was a girl visiting the Peabodys."

Betty wondered rather uncomfortably what had been said about her and whether she was regarded with pity because of the conditions endured by any one who had the misfortune to be a member of the Peabody household. The Kepplers, she knew, were their nearest neighbors.

Norma and Alice each took a seat on the arms of their mother's chair, and regarded the guest curiously, but kindly.

"Do you like the country?" asked the younger girl, feeling that something in the way of conversation was expected of her.

Betty replied in the affirmative, adding that, aside from lonesomeness now and then, she had enjoyed the outdoor life immensely. [116]

"But what do you do all day long?" persisted Norma. "The Peabodys are so queer!"

"Norma!" reproved her mother and Alice in one breath.

"Well they are!" muttered Norma. "Miss Gordon isn't a relation of theirs, is she? So why do I have to be polite?"

"I'm only twelve," said Betty, embarrassed by the "Miss Gordon," and puzzled to know how to avoid a discussion of the Peabodys. "No one ever calls me 'Miss.' My Uncle Dick went to school with Mrs. Peabody, and he thought it would be pleasant for me to board with them this summer."

"When you get lonesome for girls, come over and see us," suggested Mrs. Guerin cordially. "Come whenever you are in Glenside, anyway. Norma hasn't many friends of her own age in town, and she'll probably talk you deaf, dumb and blind."

"I don't get over very often," said Betty, thinking how fortunate Norma was to have such a lovely, tactful mother, "because I usually have to walk. But if your husband is a doctor, couldn't he bring you over to call some afternoon? Doctors are always on the road, I know."

A curious expression swept over Mrs. Guerin's face, inexplicable to Betty. She avoided a direct answer to the invitation by sending the girls out to the kitchen for lemonade and cakes and blowing out the lamp and raising the shades herself. The brief thunderstorm was about over, and the sun soon shone brightly. [117]

Alice wheeled the tea-wagon out on the porch, and the four spent a merry half hour together. Betty felt that she had made three real friends, and the Guerins, for their part, were agreeably delighted with the young girl who was so alone in the world and who, while they knew she must have a great deal that was unpleasant to contend with, resolutely talked only of her happy times.

Betty had just risen to go when a runabout stopped at the curb and a gray-haired man got out and came up the path.

"There's father!" cried Norma, jumping up to meet him. "Father, the Rutans telephoned over an hour ago. I couldn't get you anywhere. It was before the storm."

"Hal, this is Betty Gordon," said the doctor's wife, drawing Betty forward. "She is the girl staying with the Peabodys. Do you have to go out directly?"

"Just want to get a few things, then I'm off," answered the doctor cheerily. "Miss Betty, if you don't mind waiting while I stop in at the drug store, I'm going half of your way and will be glad to give you a lift. The roads will be muddy after this rain." [118]

Betty accepted the kind offer thankfully, and Mrs. Guerin and the girls went down to the car with her. They each kissed her good-bye, and Mrs. Guerin's motherly touch as she tucked the linen robe over Betty's knees brought thoughts of another mother to the little pink-frocked figure who waved a farewell as the car coughed its sturdy way up the street.

At the drug store the doctor got his medicines and Betty her pictures, which she paid for and slipped into her bag without looking at. She liked Doctor Guerin instinctively, and indeed he was the type of physician whom patients immediately trusted and in whom confidence was never misplaced.

"You look like an outdoor girl," he told her as he turned the car toward the open country. "I don't believe you've had to take much in the way of pills and powders, have you?"

Betty smiled and admitted that her personal acquaintance with medicine was extremely

limited.

"Mrs. Peabody has headaches all the time," she said anxiously. "I think she ought to see a doctor. And one day last week she fainted, but she insisted on getting supper."

Doctor Guerin bit his lip.

"Guess you'll have to be my ally," he said mysteriously. "Mrs. Peabody was a patient of mine, off and on, for several years—ever since I've practiced in Glenside, in fact. But—well, Mr. Peabody forbade my visits finally; said he was paying out too much for drugs. I told him that his wife had a serious trouble that might prostrate her at any time, but he refused to listen. Ordered me off the place one day when Mrs. Guerin was in the car with me, and was so violent he frightened her. That was some time ago." The doctor shook his head reminiscently. "Mrs. Peabody in the house was groaning with pain and Mrs. Guerin was imploring me to back the car before Peabody killed me. He was shouting like a mad man, and it was Bedlam let loose for sure." [119]

"I went, because there was nothing else to do, but I managed to get word to the poor soul, through that boy, Bob Henderson, that if she ever had a bad attack and would send me word, day or night, I'd come if I had to bring the constable to lock that miser up out of the way first. I suspect he is a coward as well as a bully, but fighting him wouldn't better his wife's position any; he would only take it out on her."

"Yes, I think he would," agreed Betty. "I used to wonder how she stood him. But telling her what I think of him doesn't help her, and now I don't do that any more if I think in time."

"Well, you may be able to help her by sending me word if she is taken ill suddenly," said the doctor. "I'm sure it is a comfort to her to have you with her this summer. Now here's the boundary line. Sorry I can not take you all the way in, but it would only mean an unpleasant row." [120]

Instead of half way, the doctor had taken her almost to the Peabody lane, and Betty jumped down and thanked him heartily. She was glad to have been saved the long muddy walk. She was turning away when a thought struck her.

"How could I reach you if Mrs. Peabody were ill?" she asked. "There's no 'phone at Bramble Farm, you know."

"The Kepplers have one," was the reply, Doctor Guerin cranking his car. "They'll be glad to let you use it any time for any message you want to send."

Betty found no one in the house when she reached it, the men being still at work in the field and Mrs. Peabody out in the chicken yard. Betty took off her pretty frock and put on a blue and white gingham and her white shoes. She was determined not to allow herself to get what Mrs. Peabody called "slack," and she scrupulously dressed every afternoon, whether she went off the farm or not.

The pictures, she discovered when she examined them, were exceptionally good. Lieson, in particular, had proved an excellent subject, and Betty privately decided that he was more attractive in his working clothes than he could ever hope to be in the stiff black and white she knew he would assume for Sunday. She took the prints and went downstairs to await an opportunity to show them. [121]

Bob Henderson was in the kitchen, doing something to his hand. Betty experienced a sinking sensation when she saw a blood-stained rag floating in the basin of water on the table.

"Bob!" she gasped. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Bob glanced up, managing a smile, though he was rather white around the mouth.

"I cut my finger," he said jerkily. "The blame thing won't stop bleeding."

"I have peroxide upstairs!" Betty flew to get the bottle.

It was a nasty cut, but she set her teeth and washed it thoroughly with the antiseptic and warm water before binding it up with the clean, soft handkerchief she had brought back with her. Bob had been clumsily trying to make a bandage with his dark blue bandana handkerchief, all the lad had.

"How did you do it?" asked Betty, as she tied a neat knot and tucked the ends in out of sight. "I'll fix you some more cloths to-night; you'll have to wash that cut again in the morning."

Bob was putting away the basin and now he went off to get the pails of slop for the pigs. Betty thought he had not heard her question, but when Lieson came in for a drink of water and saw the pictures he unconsciously set her right. Lieson was greatly pleased with his picture, and looked so long at the other prints that Betty feared lest Mr. Peabody should come in and make an accusation of wasted time. [122]

"That's a good picture of Bob, too," commented Lieson. "He cut his hand this afternoon on the hoe. The old man come down where he was hoeing corn, and just as he got there Bob cut a stalk; you can't always help it. Peabody flew into a rage and grabbed the hoe. Bob thought he was going to strike him with it and he put up his hand to save his head, and Peabody brought the sharp edge of the hoe down so it nicked his finger. Guess he won't be able to milk to-night."

Betty stood in the doorway of the kitchen and stared away into the serene green fields.

"It looks so peaceful," she thought wearily. "And yet to live in such a place doesn't seem to have the slightest effect on people's dispositions. I wonder why?"

CHAPTER XV NURSE AND PATIENT

[123]

WHEN the next Sunday came round the shrill song of the locusts began early, foretelling a hot day. The heat and the flies and the general uninviting appearance of the breakfast table irritated Betty more than usual, and only consideration for Mrs. Peabody, who looked wretchedly ill, kept her at the table through the meal. Lieson and Mr. Peabody bickered incessantly, and Wapley, who had taken cold, coughed noisily.

"Guess I'll go over and see Doc Guerin an' get him to give me something for this cold," Wapley mumbled, after a particularly violent paroxysm. "Never knew folks had colds in summer, but I got one for sure."

"You take some of that horse medicine out on the barn shelf," advised Peabody. "The bottle's half full, and I'll sell it to you for a quarter. The doctor's stuff will cost you all of a dollar, and that horse medicine will warm you up fine. That's all you want, anyway, something to kind of heat up your pipes."

Betty hoped fervently that the man would not follow this remarkable prescription, and it was with actual relief that she saw him come downstairs an hour later arrayed in his best clothes ready to walk to town. She had her camera ready and stood patiently in the sun for fifteen minutes till she had taken the promised pictures. Wapley was snapped alone and with Lieson, and then a photograph of Lieson alone, and then it was Bob's turn. That usually amiable youth was inclined to be sulky, but finally yielded to persuasion. Betty was anxious to send a full set of pictures to her uncle, and while Bob's "Sunday best" was exactly the same as his week-day attire, still, as she pointed out, he could wear his pleasantest expression for a "close up."

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The cause for Bob's crossness was revealed after Lieson and Wapley had started for Glenside. His sore finger was swollen and gave him considerable pain.

"Why didn't you go with them and see the doctor?" scolded Betty. "Go now. I think the cut should be opened, Bob."

"I'm not going," said Bob flatly. "Where'd I get any money to pay him?"

"I have some—" Betty was beginning, but he cut her short with the curt announcement that he was not going to let her do everything for him.

"Well, then, go over and let Doctor Guerin examine your finger and offer to work it out for him in some way," urged Betty. "Don't be silly about money, Bob; any doctor does his work first and then asks about his pay. Won't you go?"

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"No, I won't," retorted Bob ungraciously. "I'm too dog-gone tired to walk that far, anyway. Let's take books out to the orchard, and if you have any crackers or anything, we won't come back for dinner. I hate that hot kitchen!"

This was very unlike Bob, and Betty noticed that his face was flushed and his eyes heavy. She was sure he had fever, but she knew it was useless to argue with him. So, like the sensible girl she was, she tried to make him comfortable without further consulting him. She had a new parcel of magazines he had not seen, and without asking Mrs. Peabody, she took a square rug from the parlor for him to lie on and the pillow from her bed. Mrs. Peabody she knew would not object to the rug being used, but Mr. Peabody was shaving in the kitchen, and if he heard the request would instantly deny it.

On her last trip to the town Betty had bought a dozen lemons and a package of soda fountain straws, and when Bob complained of thirst, she surprised him with a lemonade. Fortunately the water from the spring in one of the meadows was icy cold.

Bob's "Gee, that's good!" more than repaid her for her trouble and the heat headache that throbbed in her temples from her hurried journeys down to the spring.

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There was a faint breeze stirring fitfully in the orchard, and it was shady. Betty read aloud to Bob until he fell asleep. After he was unconscious, she looked at him pityingly, noting the sore finger held stiffly away from its fellows and the pathetic droop of the boyish mouth.

"His mother would be so sorry!" she thought, folding up a paper to serve as a fan and beginning to fan him gently. "I wonder how he happened to be born in the poorhouse. He has nice hands and feet, well-proportioned, that is, and mother always said that was a mark of good breeding. Besides, I know from the way he speaks and acts that he is different from these hired men."

Betty continued to fan till she saw Mrs. Peabody come out of the kitchen and go to the

woodshed. Then she ran in to tell her that Bob would probably sleep through dinner and that would be one less for the noon meal. Sunday dinner was never an elaborate affair in the Peabody household, and Betty insisted on helping Mrs. Peabody to-day, since she could not induce her to go away from the kitchen and lie down. The men had said they were going to stay in town till milking time, and only Mr. and Mrs. Peabody and Betty sat down to the sorry repast at one o'clock. There was little conversation, and Mr. Peabody was the only one who made a pretense of eating what was served.

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"Now you go upstairs, and let me do the dishes," said Betty to Mrs. Peabody, as her husband put on his hat and went out at the conclusion of the meal. "If you'll undress and go to bed, I'll get supper and feed the chickens. You look so fagged out."

"It's the heat," sighed Mrs. Peabody. "Land, child, I've crawled through a sight of summers, and won't give out awhile yet, I guess. You're the one to watch out. Keep in out of the sun, and don't run your feet off waiting on Bob. I'll show you something, though, if you won't let on."

She beckoned Betty to one corner of the kitchen where a fly-specked calendar hung.

"Look here," said Mrs. Peabody. "Nobody knows what these pencil marks mean but me—I made 'em. Now's the second week in July—there's seventeen days of July left. Thirty-one days in August. And most generally you can count on the first week of September being hot—that makes fifty-five days. Three meals a day to get, or one hundred and sixty-five meals in all."

"Then what?" asked the hypnotized Betty.

"Oh, then it begins to get a little cooler," said Mrs. Peabody listlessly. "I've counted this way for three summers now. Somehow it makes the summer go faster if you can see the days marked off and know so many meals are behind you."

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Inexperienced as Betty was, it seemed infinitely pathetic to her that any one should long for the summer days to be over, and she realized dimly that the loneliness and dullness of her hostess' daily life must be beginning to prey on her mind. She helped dry the dishes, went upstairs with Mrs. Peabody and bathed her forehead with cologne and closed the shutters of her room for her. Then, hoping she might sleep for a few hours as she resolutely refused to give up for the rest of the day, Betty hurried to put on her thinnest white frock and went back to the orchard. She found her patient awake and decidedly feeling aggrieved.

"I've been awake for ages," he greeted her. "Gee, isn't it hot! You look kind of pippin' too. Do you know, I've been thinking about that riding habit of yours, Betty. What are you going to do with it?"

"Keep it till I go somewhere else where there'll be a chance to learn to ride," answered Betty. "Why?"

"Oh, I was just thinking," and Bob turned over on his back to stare up through the branches. "You'll get away from here sooner than I shall, Betty. But, believe me, the first chance I get I'm going to streak out. Peabody's got no claim on me, and I've worked out all the food and clothes he's ever given me. The county won't care—they've got more kids to look after now than they can manage, and one missing won't create any uproar. I'd like to try to walk from here to the West. They say my mother had people out there somewhere."

[129]

"Tell me about her," urged Betty impulsively. "Do you remember her, Bob?"

"She died the night I was born," said Bob quietly. "My father was killed in a railroad wreck they figured out. You see my mother was a little out of her head with grief and shock when they found her walking along the road, singing to herself. All she had was the clothes on her back and a little black tin box with her marriage certificate in it and some papers that no one rightly could understand. They sent her to the alms-house, and a month later I was born. The old woman who nursed her said her mind was perfectly clear the few hours she lived after that, and she said that 'David,' my father, had been bringing her East to a hospital when their train was wrecked. She couldn't remember the date nor tell how long before it had happened, and after she died no one was interested enough to trace things up. I was brought up in the baby ward and went to school along with the others. Many is the boy I've punched for calling me 'Pauper!' And then, when I was ten, Peabody came over and said he wanted a boy to help him on his farm; I could go to school in the winters, and he'd see that I had clothes and everything I needed. I've never been to school a day since, and about all I needed, according to him, was lickings. But if I ever get away from here I mean to find out a few things for myself."

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Bob paused for breath. His fever made him talkative, and Betty had never known him so communicative.

"Where is the tin box?" she asked with interest.

"Buried, in the garden. I had sense enough to do that the first night I came to Bramble Farm, and I've never dared dig it up since. Afraid old Peabody might catch me. It's safer to leave it alone."

Presently Bob went off to sleep again and Betty mused silently till he woke, hungry, and then she gave him bouillon cubes dissolved in hot water, for Mrs. Peabody was getting supper and Bob refused to go to the table. The men came back and did the milking, grumbling a little, but on the

whole willing to save Bob's finger. They had a rough fondness for the lad.

When the heavy dew began to fall Betty had to appeal to Leison to make Bob go into the house. He declared fretfully that the attic was hot, and Betty knew it was like an oven, but it was out of the question for him to lie in the damp grass. She dressed his finger freshly for him, Mrs. Peabody looking on, but offering not a word, either of pity or curiosity. Betty wondered if she had grown into the habit of keeping still till now it was impossible for her to voice an emotion. [131]

Bob's finger dressed, Lieson bore him upstairs despite his protests, and before the others went up to their rooms, Betty had the satisfaction of hearing that Bob had already gone to sleep.

Betty herself was extremely tired, for she had worked hard all day, waiting on Bob and trying to save Mrs. Peabody in many ways. She brushed out her thick hair and slipped into her nightgown, thankful for the prospect of rest even the hardest of beds offered her. She was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

She had been asleep only a few minutes, or so it seemed, when something woke her.

She sat up in bed, startled. Had some one groaned?

CHAPTER XVI

A MIDNIGHT CALL

[132]

BETTY's first thought was of Bob. Was he really sick? Then she remembered that the boy slept in the attic and that she probably could not have heard him if he had made the noise that woke her.

Then the sound began again, deep guttural groans that sent a shudder through the girl listening in the dark, and Betty knew that Mrs. Peabody must be ill. She lit her lamp and looked at her watch. Half-past one! She had been asleep several hours. Slipping on her dressing gown and slippers, Betty opened her door, intending to go down the hall to the Peabodys' room and see what she could do. To her relief, she saw Mr. Peabody, fully dressed except for his shoes, which he carried in his hand, coming shuffling down the hall.

"You're going for the doctor?" said Betty eagerly. "Is Mrs. Peabody very ill? Shall I go down and heat some water?"

"I don't know how sick she is," answered the man sourly. "But I do know I ain't going for that miserable, no-account doctor I ordered off this farm once. If you're going to die, you're going to die, is the way I look at it, and all the groaning in the world ain't going to help you. And a doctor to kill you off quicker ain't necessary, either. I'm going out to the barn to get a little sleep. Here I've got a heavy day's work on to-morrow, and she's been carrying on like this for the better part of an hour." [133]

Betty stared at Mr. Peabody in horror. Something very like loathing, and an amazement not unmingled with terror, seized her. It was inconceivable that any one should talk as he did.

"She must have a doctor!" she flung at him. "Send Bob—or one of the men, Bob's half sick himself. If you won't call them, I will. I won't stay here and let any one suffer like that. Listen! Oh, listen!"

Betty put her hands over her ears, as a shrill scream of pain came from Mrs. Peabody's room.

"Send the men on a wild goose chase at this time of night?" snarled Mr. Peabody. "Not if I know it. Morning will do just as well if she's really sick. You will, will you?" He lunged heavily before Betty, divining her intention to reach the stairway that led to the attic. A heavy door stood open for the freer circulation of air, and this Peabody slammed and locked, dropping the key triumphantly in his pocket.

"You take my advice and go back to bed," he said. "One woman raising Cain at a time's enough. Go to bed and keep still before I make you." [134]

Betty scarcely heard the implied threat. She heard little but the heart-breaking groans that seemed to fill the whole house. Her mind was made up.

"I'm going myself!" she blazed, wrapping her gown about her. "Don't you dare stop me! You've killed your wife, but at least the neighbors are going to know about it. I'm going to telephone to Doctor Guerin!"

With a quick breath Betty blew out the lamp, which bewildered Peabody for a moment. She dashed past him as he fumbled and mumbled in the dark and slid down the banisters and jerked open the front door, which luckily for her was seldom locked at night. She ran down the steps, across the yard and into the field, her heart pounding like a trip hammer. On and on she ran, not daring to stop to look behind her. When she heard steps gaining on her, her feet dragged with despair, but her spirit flogged her on.

"I won't give up, I won't give up!" she was crying aloud through clenched teeth when the voice of Bob Henderson calling, "Betty! Betty! it's all right!" sounded close to her shoulder.

"You dear, darling Bob!" Betty turned radiantly to face the boy. "How did you get out? Hurry! We must hurry! Mrs. Peabody is so sick!"

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"Easy there!" Bob caught her elbow as she stumbled over a bit of rough ground. "The noise woke me up, and when we heard you and Peabody, Lieson lowered me out of the window by the bedsheet. We weren't sure what he'd do to you. Say, Betty, you'd better let me go in and telephone unless you're afraid to go back. If the Kepplers see you like that, they'll know there's been a row, and they'll insist on your staying with them."

"Oh, I have to go back," said Betty in a panic. "Mrs. Peabody needs me. And I'm not afraid, if Doctor Guerin comes. I'll wait under this tree for you, Bob. Only please hurry." And the boy hurried off.

"Doctor'll be right out," reported Bob, coming back after what seemed a long wait but was in reality a scant ten minutes. "I had a great time waking the Kepplers up and a worse time getting hold of Central. And of course Mrs. Keppler wanted all the details—just like a woman. But doc answered right away after I gave his number and said he'd be here in twenty minutes. He sure can run his car when he has a clear road at night."

"Bob," whispered Betty, beginning to tremble, "I—I guess maybe I am afraid to go back to the house. Let's sit on the bank at the head of the lane and wait for Doctor Guerin. He'll take us in the car. Mr. Peabody won't dare do anything with a third person around."

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"Sure we will," agreed Bob. "It's fine and cool out here, isn't it? Wonder why it can't be like this in the daytime."

They walked back to the lane, cross-lots, and sat down under a thorn-apple tree. Betty tucked her gown cosily around her feet and sat close to Bob, prepared to watch the stars and await quietly the doctor's coming. Then, to her astonishment as much as to Bob's consternation, she began to cry. She could not stop crying. And after she had cried a few minutes she began to laugh. She laughed and sobbed and could not stop herself, and in short, for the first time in her life, Betty had a case of hysterics.

It was all very foolish, of course, and when Doctor Guerin found them there in the road at half-past two in the morning, he scolded them both soundly.

"I gave you credit for more sense, Bob," said the doctor curtly, as he helped Betty into the machine. "You should have left Betty with Mrs. Keppler over night, or at least taken her straight home. If she hasn't a heavy cold to pay for this it won't be your fault. I never heard of anything quite so senseless!"

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"I wasn't going to stay with the Kepplers!" retorted Betty with vigor. "I don't know them at all, and I hadn't anything to wear down to breakfast! 'Sides there is Mrs. Peabody dreadfully sick with no one to help her and Bob has a festered finger. He had a high temperature this afternoon."

"I'll look at the finger," promised Doctor Guerin grimly. "Don't let me have to hunt for you, either, young man; no hiding out of sight when you're wanted. And, Betty, you go to bed. I'll get Mrs. Peabody comfortable and give her something so that she'll sleep till I can send some one out from town. You can't nurse her and run the house, you know. Your Uncle Dick would come up and shoot us all. Go to bed immediately, and you'll be ready to help us in the morning."

They had reached the house and Betty followed the doctor's orders. Every one obeyed Doctor Guerin. Even Mr. Peabody, summoned from the barn, though he was surly and far from pleasant, brought hot water and a teaspoon and a tumbler at his bidding. Mrs. Peabody had had these attacks before, and when she had taken the medicine was soon relieved. Doctor Guerin stayed with her till she fell asleep and then went down to the kitchen, taking the unwilling Bob with him. The cut finger was lanced and dressed and strict instructions issued that in two days Bob was to present himself at the doctor's office to have the dressing changed.

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"And you needn't assume that obstinate look," said the doctor, who watched him closely. "If you're so afraid you won't be able to pay me, we'll drive a bargain. You recollect that odd little wooden charm you made for Norma last summer? Well, the girls at boarding school have 'gone crazy,' to quote my daughter, over the trinket, and one of them offered her a dollar for it. Carve me a couple more, when you have time, and that will make us square. The girls were wondering the other day if you could do more."

"I'll make six——" Bob was beginning radiantly, when the doctor stopped him.

"You will not," he said positively. "One dollar is your price, and two of them will fully meet your obligations to me. If you can be dog-gone businesslike, so can I."

Doctor Guerin drove over again in the morning, bringing a tall raw-boned red-haired Irish-woman who looked as though she were able to protect herself from any insult or injury, real or fancied. Wapley and Lieson were pitifully in awe of her, and Mr. Peabody simply shriveled before her belligerent eye. She was to stay, said the doctor, for a week at least and as much longer as Mrs. Peabody needed her.

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"Did you see her spreading the butter on her bread?" demanded Bob in a whisper, meeting Betty on the kitchen doorstep after the first dinner Mrs. O'Hara had prepared.

"Did you see Mr. Peabody?" returned Betty, in a twitter of delight. "I was afraid to look at him,

or I should have laughed. She tells me to 'run off, child, and play; young things should be outdoors all day,' and she does a barrel of work. Mrs. Peabody declares she is living like a queen, with her meals served up to her. Poor soul, she doesn't know what it means to have some one wait on her."

Bob dared not stay away from Doctor Guerin's office; and indeed, after receiving the order for the wooden charms, he was willing to go. It was understood that he was to begin his carving as soon as the finger had healed, and Betty was interested in the little trinket he brought back with him to serve as a guide.

"Did you really make that, Bob?" she cried in surprise. "Why, it's beautiful—such an odd shape and so beautifully stained. You must be ever so clever with your fingers. I believe, if you had some paints, you could paint designs and perhaps sell a lot of them to a city shop. Girls would just love to have them to wear on chains and cords."

Bob was immediately fired with ambition to make some money, and indeed he could evolve marvelous and quaint little charms with no more elaborate tools than an old knife and a bit of sandpaper. He had an instinctive knowledge of the different grains, and the wood he picked up in the woodshed, carefully selecting smooth satiny bits. [140]

So all unknown to the Peabodys, Bob in his leisure time began to carve curious treasures, and with his carving to dream boyish dreams that lifted him out of the dreary present and carried him far away from Bramble Farm to big cities and open prairies, to freedom and opportunity.

And Betty, who sometimes read aloud to him as he carved and sometimes sewed, sitting beside him, began to dream dreams too. Always of a home somewhere with Uncle Dick, a real home in which there should be a fireplace and an extra chair for Bob. For your girl dreamer always plans for her friends and for their happiness, and she seldom dreams for herself alone.

So July with its heat and thunderstorms ran into August.

CHAPTER XVII

AN OMINOUS QUARREL

MRS. O'HARA went back to Glenside at the end of ten days, leaving Mrs. Peabody well enough to be about, though the doctor had cautioned her repeatedly not to overdo. Doctor Guerin came for Mrs. O'Hara in his car, and it was to be his last visit unless he was sent for again. Bob's finger had healed, and he was hard at work at his carving in spare moments. [141]

"Norma hopes you will come over to see her soon," said Doctor Guerin to Betty, as he was leaving. "She and Alice have their heads full of boarding school. By the way, Betty, what do you intend to do about school?"

"Well, I keep hoping Uncle Dick will write. It's been three weeks since I've had any kind of letter," answered Betty. She had long ago told the doctor about her uncle and the reasons that led to her coming to Bramble Farm. "When he wrote he was in a town where there were only six houses and no hotel. He must come East soon, and then he will receive my letters and send for me. I'm sure I could go to school and keep house for him, too." [142]

The car with the doctor and his convincing personality and Mrs. O'Hara and her quick tongue and heavy hand were hardly out of sight, before Mr. Peabody assumed command of his household. He had been chafing under the rule of that "red-haired female," as he designated the capable Irish-woman, and now he was bound to make the most of his restored power.

"Gee, he sure is a driver," whispered the perspiring Bob, as Betty came down to the field where the boy was cultivating corn. Betty had brought a pail of water and a dipper, and Bob drank gratefully.

"No, don't give the horse any," he interposed, as Betty seemed about to hold the pail out to the sorrel who looked around with patient, pleading eyes. "He'll have to wait till noon. 'Tisn't good to water a horse when he's working, anyway. Put the pail under that tree and it'll keep cool. Lieson and Wapley go over to the spring when they're thirsty, but Peabody said he'd whale me if he caught me leaving the cultivator."

"The mean old thing!" Betty could hardly find a word to express her indignation.

"Oh, it's all in the day's work," returned Bob philosophically. "What are you doing?"

"Hanging out clothes for Mrs. Peabody. She's getting another basketful ready now. She would wash, and that's as much as she'll let me do to help her, though of course when she irons I can be useful. I don't think she ought to get up and go to washing, but you can't stop her." [143]

"Having a woman come to wash about killed the old man," chuckled Bob, starting the horse as he saw Mr. Peabody climbing stiffly over the fence. "Thanks for the water, Betty."

Betty had no wish to meet her host, for whom another check had come that morning from her uncle's lawyer. Betty herself was out of money, Uncle Dick having sent no letter for three weeks

and apparently having made no provision to bridge the gap.

She hung out clothes till dinner time, and then helped put the boiled dinner on the table in the hot, steamy kitchen. Wapley and Lieson ate in silence, and Bob found a chance to whisper to Betty that he thought there was "something doing" between them and their employer.

Whatever this something was, there were no further developments till after supper. Peabody got up from the table and lurched out to the kitchen porch to sit on the top step, as was his invariable custom. He was too mean, his men said, to smoke a pipe, though he did chew tobacco. Bob had already taken the milk pails and gone to the barn.

As Mrs. Peabody and Betty finished the dishes, Wapley and Lieson came downstairs, dressed in their good clothes, and went out on the porch where Mr. Peabody sat silently. [144]

"Can you let me have a couple of dollars to-night?" asked Lieson civilly. "Jim and me's going over to town for a few hours."

"You'll get no money from me," was the surly answer. "Fooling away your time and money Saturday night ought to be enough, without using the middle of the week for such extravagance. Anyway, you know well enough I never pay out in advance."

There was an angry murmur from Wapley.

"Who's asking you for money in advance?" he snarled. "Lieson and me's both got money coming to us, and you know it. You pay us right up to the jot to-night or we quit!"

Peabody was quite unmoved. He stood up, leaning against a porch post, his hands in his pockets.

"You can quit, and good riddance to you," he drawled. "But you won't get a cent out of me. You overdrew, both of you, last Saturday, and there's nothing coming to you till a week from this Saturday."

The men were a little confused, neither accustomed to reckoning without the aid of pencil and paper, but Wapley held doggedly to his argument.

"We quit anyway," he announced with more dignity than Betty thought he possessed. She and Mrs. Peabody were listening nervously at the window, both afraid of what the quarrel might lead to. "You go pack our suitcases, Lieson, and I will figure up what he owes us. Never again do we work for a man who cheats." [145]

Peabody leaned up against his post and chewed tobacco reflectively, while Wapley, tongue in cheek, struggled with a stub of pencil and a bit of brown wrapping paper.

"There's twenty-five dollars coming to us," he announced. "Twelve and a half apiece. Pay us, and we go."

"I don't know about the going, but I know there won't be any paying done," sneered Peabody, just as Lieson with the two heavy suitcases staggered through the door and Bob with his two foaming pails of milk came up the steps.

Bob put down the milk pails to listen, and Wapley took a step toward Mr. Peabody, his face working convulsively.

"You cheater!" he gasped. "You miserable sneak! You've held back money all season, just to keep us working through harvest. If I had a gun I'd shoot you!"

The man was in a terrible rage, and Betty wondered how Mr. Peabody could face him so calmly. Suddenly she saw something glitter in his hand.

"I've got my pistol right here," he said, raising his hand to wave the blunt-nosed revolver toward Wapley. "I'll give you two just three minutes to get off this place. Go on—I said go!" [146]

Wapley whirled about and saw the milk pails. He seized one in either hand, raised them high above his head and dashed the contents furiously over Bob, Mr. Peabody, the steps and the porch impartially, sprinkling himself and Lieson liberally, too.

"I never knew how much milk those cows gave," Bob said later. "Seems like there must have been a regular ocean let loose."

Mr. Peabody was furious and very likely would have fired, but Bob put out his foot and tripped him, though he managed to pass the matter off as an accident. Wapley and Lieson trudged slowly up the lane, carrying the heavy cheap leather suitcases. Betty watched them as far as she could see them, feeling inexpressibly sorry for the two who had worked through the long hot summer and were now leaving an unpleasant place with what she feared was only a too well-founded grievance.

"Some of you women," Peabody included Betty in the magnificent gesture, "get to work out there and clean up the milk. There's several pounds of butter lost, thanks to those no-'count fools. I'm going after my gun."

"Gun?" faltered Mrs. Peabody. [147]

"Yes, gun," snapped her husband. "I don't suppose it occurs to you those idiots may take it into their heads to come back and burn the barns? Bob and me will sit up all night and try to save the cattle, at least."

Bob was furious at the idea of playing lookout all night, and he was in the frame of mind by early morning where he probably would have cheerfully supplied any arson-plotters with the necessary match. But nothing happened, and very cross and sleepy, he and Mr. Peabody came in to breakfast as usual.

Betty, too, had not slept well, having wakened and pattered to the window many times to see if the barns were blazing. Indeed, if Lieson and Wapley had deliberately planned to upset the Peabody family, they could not have succeeded better.

Bob made up his lost sleep the next night, but his appetite came in for Mr. Peabody's criticism.

"You seem to be aiming to eat me out of house and home," he observed at dinner a day or two later. "You don't have to eat everything in sight, you know. There'll be another meal later."

Bob blushed violently, not because of the reproof, for he was used to that, but because of the public disgrace. Betty, the cause of his distress, was as uncomfortable as he, and she experienced an un-Christianlike impulse to throw the dish of beans at the head of her host. [148]

The following day Bob did not come in to dinner, and Betty, thinking perhaps that he had not heard Mrs. Peabody call, rose from the table with the intention of calling him a second time.

"Where are you going?" demanded Mr. Peabody suspiciously.

"To call Bob to dinner," said Betty. "I'm afraid he didn't hear Mrs. Peabody. The meat will be all cold."

"You sit down, and don't take things on yourself that are none of your concern," commanded Mr. Peabody shortly. "Bob isn't here for dinner, because I told him not to come. He's getting too big to thrash, and the only way to bring him to terms is to cut down his food. Living too high makes him difficult to handle. This morning he flatly disobeyed me, but I guess he'll learn not to do that again. Well, Miss, don't swallow your impudence. Out with it!"

CHAPTER XVIII IN THE NAME OF DISCIPLINE

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BETTY opened her mouth to speak hotly, then closed it again. Argument was useless, and the distressed expression on Mrs. Peabody's face reminded the girl that it takes two to make a quarrel.

Dinner was finished in silence, and as soon as he had finished Mr. Peabody strode off to the barn.

A plan that had been forming in Betty's mind took concrete form, and as she helped clear the table she did not carry all the food down cellar to the swinging shelf, but made several trips to one of the window sills. Then, after the last dish was wiped and Mrs. Peabody had gone upstairs to lie down, for her strength was markedly slow in returning, Betty slipped out to the cellar window, reached in and got her plate, and, carefully assuring herself that Mr. Peabody was nowhere in sight, flew down the road to where she knew Bob was trimming underbrush.

"Gee, but you're a good little pal, Betty," said the boy gratefully, as she came up to him. "I'm about starved to death, that's a fact." [150]

"There isn't much there—just bread and potatoes and some corn," said Betty hurriedly. "Eat it quick, Bob. I didn't dare touch the meat, because it would be noticed at supper. Seems to me we have less to eat than ever."

"Can't you see it's because Wapley and Lieson are gone?" demanded Bob, his mouth full. "We're lucky to get anything at all to eat. Your cupboard all bare?"

"Haven't a single can of anything, nor one box of crackers," Betty announced dolefully. "The worst of it is, I haven't a cent of money. What can be the reason Uncle Dick doesn't write?"

"Oh, you'll hear before very long. Jumping around the way he does, he can't write a letter every day," returned Bob absently.

He handed back the plate to Betty and picked up his scythe.

"Don't let old Peabody catch you with that plate," he warned her. "He's got a fierce grouch on to-day, because the road commissioners notified him to get this trimming done. He's so mean he hates to take any time off the farm to do road work."

Betty went happily back to the house, forgetting to be cautious in her satisfaction of getting food to Bob, and at the kitchen door she walked plump into Mr. Peabody. [151]

"So that's what you've been up to!" he remarked unpleasantly. "Sneaking food out to that no-count, lazy boy! I'll teach you to be so free with what isn't yours and to upset my discipline. Set that plate on the table!"

Betty obeyed, rather frightened.

"Now you come along with me." And, grasping her arm by the elbow, Mr. Peabody marched her upstairs to her own room very much as though she were a rebellious prisoner he had captured.

"Sit down in that chair, and don't let me hear a word out of you," said the farmer, pushing her none too gently into the single chair the room contained.

From his pocket he drew a handful of nails, and, using the door weight as a hammer, he proceeded deliberately to nail up the window that opened on to the porch roof.

"Now there'll be no running away," he commented grimly, when he had finished. "Give kids what's coming to 'em, and they flare up and try to wriggle out of it. You'll stay right here and do a little thinking till I'm ready to tell you different. It's time you learned who's running this house."

He went out, and Betty heard him turn a key in the lock as he closed the door.

"So he's carried a key all the time!" cried the girl furiously. "I thought there wasn't any for that door! And the idea of speaking to me as he did—the miserable old curmudgeon!"

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She supposed she would have to stay locked in till it suited Mr. Peabody to release her, and quite likely she would have nothing to eat. If he could punish Bob in that fashion, there was no reason to think he intended to be any more lenient with her.

"Even bread and water would be better than nothing at all," said Betty aloud.

The sound of wheels attracted her attention, and she peered through the window to see Mr. Peabody in conversation with a stranger who had driven in with a horse and buggy.

Mrs. Peabody was stirring, and presently Betty heard her go downstairs, and a few minutes later she came out into the yard ready to feed her chickens.

"Don't let the hens out in the morning," ordered Mr. Peabody, meeting her directly under Betty's open window. The girl knelt down to listen, angry and resentful. "Ryerson was just here, and I've sold the whole yard to him. I want to try Wyandottes next. He'll be over about ten in the morning, and it won't hurt to keep them in the henhouses till then."

"Oh, Joseph!" Mrs. Peabody's voice was reproachful. "I've just got those hens ready to be good layers this fall. You don't know how I've worked over 'em, and culled the best and sprayed those dirty old houses and kept 'em clean and disinfected. I don't want to try a new breed. I want a little of the money these will earn this winter."

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"Well, this happens to be my farm and my livestock," replied her husband cruelly. "If I see a chance to improve the strain, I'm going to take it. You just do as I say, and don't let the hens out to-morrow morning."

His wife dragged herself out to the chicken yard, her brief insistence having completely collapsed. The girl listening wondered how any woman could give in so easily to such palpable injustice.

"I suppose she doesn't care," thought Betty, stumbling on the heart of the matter blindly. "If she did have her own way, that wouldn't change him; he'd still be mean and small and not very honest and she'd have to despise him just as much as ever. Things wouldn't make up to her for the kind of man her husband is."

Supper time came and went, and the odor of frying potatoes came up to Betty in delicious whiffs, though she had been known to turn up her little freckled nose when this dish was passed to her.

About eight o'clock Mr. Peabody unlocked the door and set inside a plate of very dry bread and a small pitcher of water, locking the door after him. Betty slid the bolt angrily and this gave her some satisfaction. She ate her bread and water and listened for a while at the window, hoping to hear Bob's whistle. But nothing disturbed the velvety silence of the night, and by half-past nine Betty was undressed and in bed, asleep.

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She woke early, as usual, dressed and unbolted her door, hungry enough to be humble. But no bread and water arrived.

The rattle of milk pails and the sounds which indicated that breakfast was in progress ceased after a while and the house seemed unusually quiet. Then, just as Betty decided to try tying the bedclothes into a rope and lowering herself from the window, she heard Bob's familiar whistle.

"Hello, Princess Golden Hair!" Bob grinned up at her from the old shelter of the lilac bush. "Let down your hair, and I'll send you up some breakfast."

This was an old joke with them, because Betty's hair was dark, and while thick and smooth was not especially long.

"I want you to help me get out of here!" hissed Betty furiously. "I won't stay locked in here like a naughty little child. Can't you get me a ladder or *something*, Bob, and not stand there like an idiot?"

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"Gee, you are hungry," said Bob with commiseration. "Dangle me down a string, Princess, and I'll send you up some bread with butter on it. I helped myself to both. We can talk while you eat."

Betty managed to find a strong, long string, and she threw one end down to Bob, who tied the packet to it; then Betty hauled it up and fell upon the food ravenously.

"I got you into this pickle," said Bob regretfully. "Old Peabody licked me for good measure last night, or I would have been round at this window trying to talk to you. Awfully sorry, Betty. It must be hot, too, with that other window nailed up."

"Do you mean he whipped you?" gasped Betty, horrified. "Why? And what did you do yesterday?"

"Oh, yesterday I wouldn't back him up in a lie he tried to tell the road commissioner," said Bob cheerfully. "And last night I sassed him when I heard what he'd done to you. So we had an old-fashioned session in the woodshed. But that's nothing for you to worry over."

"Where is he now?" asked Betty fearfully.

"Gone over to Kepplers to see about buying more chickens," answered Bob. "Mrs. Peabody has gone to salt the sheep, and I'm supposed to be cleaning harness in the barn."

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"Get me a ladder—now's my time!" planned Betty swiftly. "I could bob my hair and you might lend me a pair of overalls, Bob. For I simply won't come back here. It's too far to jump to the ground, or I should have tried it. Hurry up, and bring me a ladder."

"I'll get a ladder on one condition," announced Bob stubbornly. "You must promise to go to Doctor Guerin's. Not cutting your hair and wandering around the country in boy's clothes. Promise?"

Betty shook her head obstinately.

"All right, you stay where you are," decreed Bob. "I have to go to Laurel Grove, anyway, and I ought to be hitching up right now."

He turned away.

"All right, I promise," capitulated Betty, "Hurry with the ladder before Mr. Peabody comes back and catches us."

Bob ran to the barn and was back in a few minutes with a long ladder.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ESCAPE

[157]

BETTY capered exultantly when she was on the ground.

"I packed my things last night," she informed Bob. "If Mr. Peabody isn't too mean, he'll keep the trunk for me and send it when I write him to. Here, I'll help you carry back the ladder."

"Take your sweater and hat," advised the practical Bob, pointing to these articles lying on a chair on the porch where Betty had left them the afternoon before. "You don't want to travel too light. I think we'll have a storm before noon."

Betty helped carry the ladder back to the barn and put it in place. Then she hung around watching Bob harness up the sorrel to the dilapidated old wagon preparatory to driving to Laurel Grove, a town to the east of Glenside.

"I'd kind of like to say good-bye to Mrs. Peabody," ventured Betty, trying to fix a buckle.

"Well, you can't. That would get us both in trouble," returned Bob shortly. "There! you've dawdled till here comes the old man. Scoot out the side door and keep close to the hedge. If I overtake you before you get to the crossroads I'll give you a lift. Doc Guerin will know what you ought to do."

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Her heart quaking, Betty scuttled for the narrow side door and crept down the lane, keeping close to the osage orange hedge that made a thick screen for the fence. Evidently she was not seen, for she reached the main road safely, hearing no hue and cry behind her.

"So you haven't started?" Peabody greeted the somewhat flustered Bob, entering the barn and looking for him, almost amiable. "Well, hitch the horse, and go over to Kepplers. He wants you to help him catch a crate of chickens. The horse can wait and you can come home at twelve and go to Laurel Grove after dinner."

Bob would have preferred to start on his errand at once, so that he might be at a safe distance

when Betty's absence should be discovered; but he hoped that Peabody might not go near her room till afternoon, and he knew Mrs. Peabody was too thoroughly cowed to try to communicate with Betty, fond as she was of her.

"I'll take a chance," thought Bob. "Anyway, the worst he can do to me is to kill me."

This not especially cheerful observation had seen Bob through many a tight place in the past, and now he tied the patient horse under a shady tree and went whistling over to the Keppler farm to chase chickens for a hot morning's work. [159]

"Oh, Bob!" To his amazement, Mrs. Peabody came running to meet him when he came back at noon to get his dinner. "Oh, Bob!"

Poor Bob felt a wobbling sensation in his knees.

"Yes?" he asked shakily. "Yes, what is it?"

"The most awful thing has happened!" Mrs. Peabody wiped the perspiration from her forehead with her apron. "The most awful thing! I never saw Joseph in such a temper, never! He swore till I thought he'd shrivel up the grass! And before Mr. Ryerson, too!"

Bob's face cleared.

"Did he try to cheat Ryerson?" he asked eagerly. "That is, er—I mean did he think Ryerson was trying to cheat him?"

"Cheat?" repeated Mrs. Peabody, sitting down on an old tree stump to get her breath. "No one said anything about cheating. I don't know exactly how to tell you, Bob. Betty has gone and she's taken all the chickens with her!"

Bob opened his eyes and mouth to their widest extent. Chickens! Betty! The words danced through his brain stupidly.

"I don't wonder you look like that," said Mrs. Peabody. "I was in a daze myself."

"But she couldn't have taken the chickens!" argued Bob, restraining a mad desire to laugh. "How could she? And what would she want with them?" [160]

"Well, of course, I don't mean she took them with her," admitted Mrs. Peabody. "But she was mad at Joseph, you know, for locking her in her room, and he says she's just driven the hens off to the woods to spite him."

Bob walked out to the poultry yard, followed by Mrs. Peabody. The doors of the henhouses were flung wide open, and there was not a fowl in sight.

"When did you find it out?" he asked.

"When Mr. Ryerson drove in for the hens," answered Mrs. Peabody. "Joseph went out with him to help him bag 'em, and the minute he opened the door he gave a yell. I was making beds, but I heard him. The way he carried on, Bob, was a perfect scandal. I never heard such talk, never!"

"Where is he now?" said Bob briefly.

"He's gone over to the woods, hunting for the hens," replied Mrs. Peabody. "He wouldn't stop for dinner, or even to take the horse. He says you're to start for Laurel Grove, soon as you've eaten. He's going to search the woods and then follow the Glenside road, looking for Betty."

Bob did not worry over the possibility of Betty being overtaken by the angry farmer. He counted on her getting a lift to Glenside, since the road was well traveled in the morning, and probably she was at this very moment sitting down to lunch with the doctor's family. He was puzzled about the loss of the chickens, and curious to know how the Peabodys had discovered Betty's escape. [161]

He and Mrs. Peabody sat down to dinner, and, partly because of her excitement and partly because in her husband's absence she dared to be more generous, Bob made an excellent meal. Over his second piece of pie he ventured to ask when they had found out that Betty was not in her room.

"Oh, Joseph thought of her as soon as he missed the chickens," answered Mrs. Peabody. "I never thought she would be spiteful, but I declare it's queer, anyway you look at it. Joseph flew up to her room and unlocked the door, and she wasn't there! Do you suppose she could have jumped from the window and hurt herself?"

Bob thought it quite possible.

"Well, I don't," said Mrs. Peabody shrewdly. "However, I'm not asking questions, so there's no call for you to get all red. Joseph seemed to think she had jumped out, and he's furious because he didn't nail up both windows, though how he expected Betty to breathe in that case is more than I can see."

Bob was relieved to learn that apparently Mr. Peabody did not connect him with Betty's disappearance. He finished his dinner and went out to do the few noon chores. Then he started on the drive to Laurel Grove. [162]

"Looks like a storm," he muttered to himself, as he noted the heavy white clouds piling up toward the south. "I wish to goodness, old Peabody would spend a few cents and get an awning for the seat of this wagon. Last time I was caught in a storm I got soaked, and my clothes didn't dry overnight. I'll be hanged if I'm going to get wet this time—I'll drive in somewhere first."

Bob's predictions of a storm proved correct, and before he had gone two miles he heard distant thunder.

With the first splash of rain Bob hurried the sorrel, keeping his eyes open for a mail-box that would mark the home of some farmer where he might drive into the barn and wait till the shower was over.

He came within sight of some prosperous looking red barns before the rain was heavy, and drove into a narrow lane just as the first vivid streak of lightning ripped a jagged rent in the black clouds.

"Come right on in," called out the farmer, who had seen him coming and thrown open the double doors. "Looks like it might be a hummer, doesn't it? There's a ring there in the wall where you can tie your horse."

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"He stands without hitching," grinned Bob. "Only too glad to get the chance. Gee, that wind feels good!"

The farmer brought out a couple of boxes and turned them up to serve as seats.

"I like to watch a storm," he observed. "The house is all locked up—women-folk gone to an all-day session of the sewing circle—or I'd take you in. We'd get soaked walking that short distance, though. You don't live around here, do you?"

"Bramble Farm. I'm a poorhouse rat the Peabodys took to bring up."

He had seldom used that phrase since Betty's coming, but it always irritated him to try to explain who he was and where he came from.

"I was bound out myself," retorted the farmer quickly. "Knocked around a good bit, but now I own this ninety acres, free and clear. You've got just as good a chance as the boy with too much done for him. Don't you forget that, young man."

They were silent for a few moments, watching the play of lightning through the wide doors.

"Didn't two men named Wapley and Lieson used to work for Peabody?" asked the farmer abruptly. "I thought so," as Bob nodded. "They were around the other day asking for jobs."

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"Are you sure?" asked Bob. "I thought they had left the state. Lieson, I know, had folks across the line."

"Well, they may have gone now," was the reply. "But I know that two days ago they wanted work. I've a couple of men, all I can use just now, but I sent them on to a neighbor. They looked strong, and good farm help is mighty scarce."

Bob waited till the rain had stopped and the clouds were lifting, then drove on, thanking the friendly farmer for his cordiality.

"Don't be calling yourself names, but plan what you want to make of yourself," was that individual's parting advice.

"If I had a nickel," said Bob to himself, urging the sorrel to a brisk trot, for the time spent in waiting must be made up, "I'd telephone to Betty from Laurel Grove. But pshaw! I know she must be all right."

CHAPTER XX

STORMBOUND ON THE WAY

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Bob would not have dismissed his misgivings so contentedly had he been able to see Betty just at that moment.

When she shook the dust of Bramble Farm from her feet, which she did literally at the boundary line on the main road, to the great delight of two curious robins and a puzzled chipmunk, she said firmly that it was forever. As she tramped along the road she kept looking back, hoping to hear the rattle of wheels and to see Bob and the sorrel coming after her. But she reached the crossroads without being overtaken.

Years ago some thoughtful person had taken the trouble to build a rude little seat around the four sides of the guidepost where the road to Laurel Grove and Glenside crossed, and in a nearby field was a boarded-up spring of ice-cold water, so that travelers, on foot and in motor-cars and wagons, made it a point to rest for a few minutes and refresh themselves there. Betty was a trifle embarrassed to find a group of men loitering about the guide-post when she came up to it. They were all strangers to her, but with the ready friendliness of the country, they nodded respectfully.

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"Want to sit down a minute, Miss?" asked a gray-haired man civilly, standing up to make room for her. "Didn't expect to see so many idle farmers about on a clear morning, did you?"

Betty shook her head, smiling.

"I won't sit down, thank you," she said in her clear girlish voice. "I'll just get a drink of water and go on; I want to reach Glenside before noon."

"Glenside road's closed," announced one of the younger men, shortly.

"Closed!" echoed Betty. "Oh, no! I have to get there, I tell you."

Her quick, frightened glance fell on the man who had first spoken to her, and she appealed to him.

"The road isn't closed, is it?" she asked breathlessly. "That isn't why you're all here?"

"Now, now, there's nothing to worry your head about," answered the gray-haired farmer soothingly. "Jerry, here, is always a bit abrupt with his tongue. As a matter of fact, the road is closed; but if you don't mind a longer walk, you can make a detour and get to Glenside easily enough."

Betty gazed at him uncertainly.

"You see," he explained, "King Charles, the prize bull at Greenfields, the big dairy farm, got out this morning, and we suppose he is roaming up and down between here and Glenside. He's worth a mint of money, so they don't want to shoot him, and the dairy has offered a good reward for his safe return. He's got a famous temper, and no one would deliberately set out to meet him unarmed; so we're posted here to warn folks. A few automobiles took a chance and went on, but the horses and wagons and foot passengers take the road to Laurel Grove. You turn off to the left at the first road and follow that and it brings you into Glenside at the north end of town. You'll be all right."

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"A girl shouldn't try to make it alone," objected another one of the group. "You take my advice, Sis, and wait till your father or brother can take you over in the buggy. Suppose you met a camp of Gypsies?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid," Betty assured him. "That is, not of people. But I don't know what in the world I should do if I met an angry bull. I'll take the detour, and everything will be all right. I'm used to walking."

The men repeated the directions again, to make sure she understood clearly. Then Betty drank a cup of the fresh, cold spring water, and bravely set off on the new road.

The gray-haired man came running after her.

"If it should storm," he cried, coming up with her, "don't run under a tree. Better stay out in the rain till you reach a house. You'll be safe in any farmhouse."

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He meant safe as far as the kind of people she would meet were concerned, but Betty, who had never in her life feared any one, thought he referred to protection from the elements. She thanked him, and trudged on.

"I certainly am hungry," she said, after a half hour of tramping. "Now I know how Bob feels without a cent in his pocket. I'll have to ask Doctor Guerin for some money. I can't get along without a nickel. Uncle Dick must be awfully busy, or else he's sick. Otherwise he would surely let me hear from him."

When she came to an old apple orchard where the trees drooped over a crumbling stone wall, Betty had no scruples about filling the pockets and sleeves of her sweater with the apples that lay on the ground. Bob had told her that portions of trees that grew over the roadside were public property, and she intended to explain to the farmer, if she met him, how she had come to carry off some of his fruit. But she met no one and saw no house, and presently the rumble of distant thunder put all thoughts of apples out of her mind.

"My goodness!" She looked at the mountain of white clouds piling up with something like panic. "I haven't even come to the road that turns, and I just know this will be a hard thunderstorm. Mrs. Peabody said last week that the August storms are terrors. I'll run, and perhaps I'll come to a house."

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Holding her sweater stuffed with apples in her arms, and jamming her hat firmly on her head, Betty flew down the road, bouncing over stones, jumping over, without a shudder, a mashed black-snake flattened out in the road by some passing car, and, in defiance of all speed regulations, refusing to slow up at a sharp turn in the road ahead. She took it at top speed, and as she rounded the curve the first drops of rain splashed her nose. But her flight was rewarded.

A long, low, comfortable-looking farmhouse sat back in an overgrown garden on one side of the road.

"D. Smith," read Betty on the mail box at the gate. "Well, Mrs. D. Smith, I hope you're at home, and I hope you'll ask me to come in and rest till the storm's over. Shall I knock at the back or the front door?"

A vivid flash of lightning sent her scurrying across the road and up the garden path. As she lifted the black iron knocker on the front door a peal of thunder rattled the loose casements of the windows.

Betty lifted the knocker and let it fall three times before she decided that either Mrs. D. Smith did not welcome callers at the front of her house, or else she could not hear the knocker from where she was. But a prolonged rat-a-tat-tat on the back door produced no further results. [170]

"She may be out getting the poultry in," said Betty to herself, recalling how hard Mrs. Peabody worked every time a storm came up. "Wonder where the poultry yard is?"

The rain was driving now, and the thunder irritatingly incessant. Betty walked to the end of the back porch and stood on her tiptoes trying to see the outbuildings. Then, for the first time, she noticed what she would surely have seen in one glance at a less exciting time.

There were no outbuildings, only burned and blackened holes in the ground! A few loose bricks marked the site of masonry-work, and a charred beam or two fallen across the gaps showed only too plainly what had been the fate of barns and crib houses.

Betty ran impulsively to a window, and, holding up her hands to shut out the light, peered in. Cobwebs, dust and dirt and a few empty tins in the sink were the only furniture of the kitchen.

"It's empty!" gasped Betty. "No one lives here! Oh, gracious!"

A great fork of lightning shot across the sky, followed at once by a deafening crash of thunder. Far across the field, on the other side of the road, Betty saw a tall oak split and fall. [171]

"I'm going in out of this," she decided, "if I have to break a window or a lock!"

She leaned her sturdy weight against the wooden door, automatically turning the knob without thought of result. The door swung easily open—there had been nothing to hinder her walking in—and she tumbled in so suddenly that she had difficulty in keeping her feet.

Betty closed the door and looked about her.

The storm shut out, she immediately felt a sense of security, though a hasty survey of the three rooms on one side of the hall failed to reveal any materials for a fire or a meal, two comforts she was beginning to crave. She took an apple from her sweater pocket, and, munching that, set out to explore the rooms on the other side of the hall.

A curious, yet familiar, noise drew her attention to the front room, probably in happier days the parlor of the farmhouse. Peering in through the partly open folding doors, Betty saw seven crates of chickens!

"Why—how funny!" She was puzzled. "Where could they have come from? And what are they doing here? Even if they saved them from the fire, they wouldn't be left after all the furniture was moved out." [172]

She went up to the crates and examined them more closely.

"That black rooster is the living image of Mrs. Peabody's," she thought, "And the White Leghorns look like hers, too. But, then, I suppose all chickens look alike. I never could see how their hen mothers told them apart."

Still carrying her sweater with the apples, she wandered upstairs, trying to people the vacant, dusty rooms and wondering what had happened to those who had dwelt here and where they had gone.

"I wonder if the fire was at night and whether they were terribly frightened," she mused. "I should say they were mighty lucky to save the house, though perhaps the barns are the most necessary buildings on a farm. Why didn't they build them up again, instead of moving out? I would."

She was standing in one of the back rooms, and from the window she could look down and see what had once been the garden. The drenched rosebushes still showed a late blossom or two, and there was a faint outline of orderly paths and a tangle of brilliant color where flowers, self-sown, struggled to force their way through the choking weeds. The drip, drip of the rain sounded dolefully on the tin roof, and a cascade ran off at one corner of the house showing where a leader was broken. Toward the west the clouds were lifting, though the thunder still grumbled angrily. [173]

Betty went through the rather narrow hall and entered a pleasant, prettily papered room where a low white rocking chair and a pink sock on the floor spoke mutely of the baby whose kingdom had been bounded by the wide bay window.

"They forgot the rocker," said Betty, drawing it up to the window and resting her elbows on the narrow window ledge. "I hope he was a fat, pretty baby," she went on, picking up the sock and holding it in her hand. "Is that some one coming down the road?"

It was—two people in fact; and as they drew nearer Betty's eyes almost popped out with astonishment. The pair talking together so earnestly, completely oblivious of the rain, were Lieson and Wapley, the two men who had worked for Mr Peabody! And they were turning in at the path guarded by the mail box inscribed "D. Smith."

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHICKEN THIEVES

[174]

OVER in one corner of the bay-window room, as Betty had already named it, was a black register in the floor, designed to let the warm air from a stove in the parlor below heat the bedroom above. Toward this Betty crept cautiously, testing each floor board for creaks before she trusted her whole weight to it. She reached the register, which was open, and was startled at the view it opened up for her. She drew back hastily, afraid that she would be discovered.

Lieson and Wapley stood almost squarely under the register, above the crates of chickens and looking down on the fowls.

"I began to think you wasn't coming," Lieson said slowly, putting a hand on his companion's shoulder to steady himself as he lurched and swayed. "I got soaked to the skin waiting for you in those bushes."

"Well, it's some jaunt to Laurel Grove," came Wapley's response. "I got a man, though. Coming at ten to-night. There's no moon, and he says he can make the run to Petria in six or seven hours, barring tire trouble."

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"Does he take us, too?" demanded Lieson. "I'm tired of hanging around here. What kind of a truck has he got?"

Wapley was so long in answering that Betty nervously wondered if he could have discovered the register. She risked a peep and found that both men were absorbed in filling their pipes. These lighted and drawing well, Wapley consented to answer his companion's question.

"Got a one-ton truck. Plenty of room under the seat for us. He's kind of leery of the constables, 'cause he's been doing a nice little night trade between Laurel Grove and Petria carrying one thing and another, but he's willing to do the job on shares."

Lieson yawned noisily.

"Wish we had some grub," he observed. "Guess the training we got at Peabody's will come in handy if we don't eat again till we sell the chickens. Wouldn't you like to have seen the old miser's face when he found his chickens were gone?"

So, thought Betty, she had not been mistaken; the black rooster was the same one who had been the pride of Mrs. Peabody's heart.

A burst of harsh laughter from Wapley startled her. Leaning forward, she could see him stretched out on the floor, his head resting on his coat, doubled up to form a pillow.

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"What do you know!" he gurgled, the tears standing in his eyes. "Didn't I run into Bob Henderson, of all people!"

Lieson was incredulous.

"You're fooling," he said sullenly. "What would Bob be doing in Laurel Grove? Unless he was playing ferret! I'd wring his neck with pleasure if I thought the old man sent him over to spy."

"Don't worry," counseled Wapley, waving his pipe airily. "The lad doesn't hook us up with the missing biddies. They never knew they were stolen till ten o'clock this morning. The old man sold 'em to Ryerson, and the hen houses stayed shut up till he came to get 'em. Can you beat that for luck?"

Both men went off into roars of laughter.

"We needn't have spent the night lifting 'em," said Lieson when he could speak. "I hate to lose my night's rest. What did Bob say about it? Was the old man mad?"

"'Bout crazy," admitted Wapley gravely. "Bob wasn't home, but the old lady told him he carried on somethin' great. Wish we could 'a' heard him rave. But, Lieson, you haven't got it all. Betty Gordon's run off, and Peabody's doped it out she ran off with the hens!"

The girl in the room above clapped her hand to her mouth. She had almost cried out. So Mr. Peabody could accuse her of being a thief! But what were the men saying?

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"What would the girl do with hens?" propounded Lieson. "Bob think she stole 'em?"

"Bob's so close-mouthed," growled Wapley. "But I guess he knows where she went all right. He says she had nothing to do with the hens disappearing, and I told him I thought he was right! But Peabody figures out she was mad and chased 'em into the woods to spite him. And he's hunting for her and his hens with fire in his eye."

Lieson knocked the ashes from his pipe and yawned again.

"Wonder what Peabody's got against her now?" he speculated. "For a boarder, that kid had a pretty pindling time. Well, if we're going to be bumped around in a truck all night, I'll say we ought to take a nap while we can get it."

"All right," agreed Wapley. "But I ain't aiming to go on any such trip without a bite of supper. The rain's stopped, and I'm going to snooze a bit and then go down the road to that farmhouse and see how they feel about feeding a poor unfortunate who's starving. I'll milk for 'em for a square meal."

Betty, shivering with excitement, crouched on the floor afraid to risk moving until they should be asleep. Her one thought was to get away from the house and find Bob. Bob would know what to do. Bob would get the chickens back to the Peabodys and herself over to the haven of Doctor Guerin's house, somehow. Bob would be sorry for Wapley and Lieson even if they had turned chicken thieves. If she could only get to Bob before he set out for home or if she might meet him on the road, everything would be all right, Bob *must* wait for her.

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There were no back stairs to the house, and it required grit to go softly down the one flight of stairs and steal past the door of the parlor where the two men lay, but Betty set her teeth and did it. Once on the porch she put on her hat and sweater, for a cool wind had sprung up; and then how she ran!

The road was muddy, and her skirt was splashed before she slowed down to gain her breath. Anxiously she scanned the road ahead, wondering if there was another way Bob could take to reach Bramble Farm. As usual when one is worried, a brand-new torment assailed her. Suppose he should take the road to Glenside, that he might stop in to see her! He, of course, pictured her safe at the doctor's.

"Want a lift?" drawled a lazy, pleasant voice.

A gawky, blue-eyed boy about Bob Henderson's age beamed at her from a dilapidated old buggy. The fat, white horse also seemed to regard her benevolently.

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"It's sort of muddy," said the boy diffidently. "If you don't mind the stuffing on the seat—it's worn through—I can give you a ride to Laurel Grove."

Betty accepted thankfully, but she was not very good company, it must be confessed, her thoughts being divided between schemes to hasten the desultory pace of the fat white horse and wonder as to how she was to find Bob in the town.

The fat white horse stopped of his own accord at a pleasant looking house on the outskirts of the town, and Betty, in a brown study, was suddenly conscious that the boy was waiting for her.

"Oh!" she said in some confusion. "Is this your house? Well, you were ever so kind to give me a lift, and I truly thank you!"

She smiled at him and climbed out, and the lad, who had been secretly admiring her and wondering what she could be thinking about so absorbedly, wished for the tenth time that he had a sister.

Laurel Grove was a bustling country town, a bit livelier than Glenside, and Betty, when she had traversed the main street twice, began to be aware that curious glances were being cast at her.

"I'd go shopping, I'd do anything, for an excuse to go into every store," she thought distractedly, "if only I had a dollar bill! Where can Bob be? I can't have missed him!"

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There was every reason to think she had missed him, except her determined optimism, but after she had been to the drug store and the hardware store and the post-office, all more or less public meeting places, and found no sign of Bob, Betty began to feel a trifle discouraged. Then two men on the curb gave her a clue.

"I've been hanging around all day," declared one, evidently a thrifty farmer. "Came over to get some grinding done, and the blame mill machinery broke. They just started grinding an hour ago."

So there was a mill, and Bob often had to go to mills for Mr. Peabody. Betty did not know why he should have to come so far, but it was quite possible that some whim of the master of Bramble Farm had sent him to the Laurel Grove mill. Betty stepped up to the farmer and addressed him quietly.

"Please, will you tell me where the mill is?" she asked.

CHAPTER XXII

SPREADING THE NET

[181]

He was a nice, fatherly kind of person, and he insisted on walking with Betty to the corner and pointing out the low roof of the mill down a side street.

"No water power, just electricity," he explained. "Give me a water mill, every time; this current

stuff is mighty unreliable."

Betty thanked him, and hurried down the street. She was sure she saw the sorrel tied outside the mill, and when she reached the hitching posts, sure enough, there was the familiar old wagon, with some filled bags in it, and the drooping, tired old sorrel horse that had come to meet her when she stepped from the train at Hagar's Corners.

"Betty! For the love of Mike!" Bob's language was expressive, if not elegant.

Betty whirled. She had not seen the boy come down the steps of the mill office, and she was totally unprepared to hear his voice.

"Why, Bob!" The unmistakable relief and gladness that shone in her tired face brought a little catch to Bob's throat. [182]

To hide it, he spoke gruffly.

"What are you doing here? It's after four o'clock, and I'll get Hail Columbia when I get back. Mill's been out of order all day, and I had to wait. Haven't you been to Doctor Guerin's?"

"No, not yet." Betty pulled at his sleeve nervously. "Oh, Bob, there's so much I must tell you! And after ten o'clock it will be too late. To think he thought I stole his old chickens! And where is Petria?"

Bob gazed at her in amazement. This incoherent stream of words meant nothing to him.

"Petria?" he repeated, catching at a straw. "Why, Petria's a big city, sort of a center for farm products. All the commission houses have home offices there. Why?"

"That's where Mr. Peabody's chickens are going," Betty informed him, "unless you can think of a way to stop 'em."

"Mr. Peabody's chickens? Have you got 'em?" asked Bob in wonder.

Betty stamped her foot.

"Bob Henderson, how can you be so stupid!" she stormed. "What would I be doing with stolen chickens—unless you think I stole them?"

"Now don't go off into a temper," said Bob placidly. "I see where I have to drive you to Glenside, anyway. Might as well go the whole show and be half a day late while I'm about it. Hop in, Betty, and you can tell me this wonderful tale while we're traveling." [183]

Betty was tired out from excitement, fear, insufficient food and the long distance she had walked. Her nerves protested loudly, and to Bob's astonishment and dismay she burst into violent weeping.

"Oh, I say!" he felt vainly in his pocket for a handkerchief. "Betty, don't cry like that! What did I say wrong? Don't you want to go to Glenside? What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to listen," sobbed Betty. "I'm trying to tell you as fast as I can that Wapley and Lieson stole Mr. Peabody's chickens. They've got 'em all crated, and an automobile truck is coming at ten o'clock to-night to take them to Petria. So there!"

Bob asked a few direct questions that soon put him in possession of all the facts. When he had heard the full story he took out the hitching rope he had put under the seat and tied the sorrel to the railing again.

"Come on," he said briefly.

"Where—where are we going?" quavered Betty, a little in awe of this stern new Bob with the resolute chin.

"To the police recorder's," was the uncompromising reply. [184]

The recorder was young and possessed of plenty of what Bob termed "pep," and when he heard what Bob had to tell him, for Betty was stricken with sudden dumbness, he immediately mapped out a plan that should catch all the wrong-doers in one net.

"The fellow we want to get hold of is this truck driver," he explained. "You didn't hear his name?"

Betty shook her head.

"Well, to get him, our men will have to wait till he comes for the crates," said the recorder. "I'll send a couple of 'em out to this farm—they know the old D. Smith place well enough—and they can hang around till the truck comes and then take 'em all in. I'm sorry, but I'll have to hold the girl here as a witness. My wife will look after her, and she'll be all right."

"I'll stay, too, Betty," Bob promised her hastily, noting the plea in her eyes.

"All right, so much the better," said the recorder heartily. "We'll put you both up for the night. It won't be necessary for you to see the prisoners to-night, and to-morrow you'll both be mighty good witnesses for this Mr. Peabody. I'll send for him in the morning."

Bob's sense of humor was tickled at the thought of stabling the sorrel in a livery stable and charging the bill to his employer. A vision of what would be said to him caused his eyes to dance as he gave orders to the stableman to see that the horse had an extra good measure of oats.

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But when he came back to the recorder's for supper he found Betty sitting close beside the recorder's wife, crying as though her heart would break.

"Why, Betty!" he protested. "You don't usually act like this. What does ail you—are you sick?"

"It isn't fair!" protested Betty passionately. "Wapley and Lieson worked so hard and Mr. Peabody was mean to 'em! I don't want to save his old chickens for him! I'd much rather the hired men got the money. And I won't be a witness for him and get them into prison!"

Bob looked shocked at this outburst, but Mrs. Bender only continued to soothe the girl, and presently Betty's sobs grew less violent, and by and by ceased.

After supper Mrs. Bender played for them and sang a little, and then, declaring that Betty looked tired to death, took her upstairs to the blue and white guest-room, where, after she had helped her to undress and loaned her one of her own pretty nightgowns, she turned off the lights and sat beside her till she fell asleep. For the first time in months, Betty was encouraged to talk about her mother, and she told this new friend of her great loss, her life with the Arnolds, and about her Uncle Dick. It both rested and refreshed her to give this confidence, and her sleep that night was unbroken and dreamless.

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Long after Betty was asleep, Bob and the recorder played checkers, Mrs. Bender sitting near with her sewing. Bob was starved for companionship, and something about the lad, his eager eyes, perhaps, or his evident need of interested guidance, appealed to Recorder Bender.

"You say you were born in the poorhouse?" he asked, between games. "Was your mother born in this township?"

Bob explained, and the Benders were both interested in the mention of the box of papers. Encouraged by friendly auditors, Bob told his meager story, unfolding in its recital a very fair picture of conditions as they existed at Bramble Farm.

Betty lay in dreamless sleep, but Bob, in a room across the hall, tossed and turned restlessly. At half-past ten he heard the recorder go out, and knew he was going to see if the chicken thieves and motor truck driver had been brought in by his men. Bob wondered how it seemed to be arrested, and he fervently resolved never to court the experience. He was asleep before the recorder returned, but woke once during the night. A heavy truck was lumbering through the street, the driver singing in a high sweet tenor voice, probably to keep himself awake, Bob's swift thoughts flew to Wapley and Lieson, and he wondered if they were asleep. How could they sleep in jail?

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Breakfast in the Bender household was just as pleasant and cheerful and unhurried as supper had been. Mrs. Bender in a white and green morning frock beamed upon Bob and Betty and urged delicious viands upon them till they begged for mercy. It was, she said, so nice to have "four at the table."

Mr. Bender pushed back his chair at last, glancing at his watch.

"The hearing is set for ten o'clock," he announced quietly. "Mr. Peabody has been notified and should be here any minute. I think we had better walk down to the office. Catherine, if you're ready——"

Mrs. Bender smiled at Betty. She had promised to see her through.

CHAPTER XXIII IN AMIABLE CONFERENCE

[188]

BETTY'S sole idea of a court had been gained from a scene or two in the once-a-week Pineville motion picture theater, and Bob had even less knowledge. They both thought there might be a crowd, a judge in a black gown, and some noise and excitement.

Instead Recorder Bender unlocked the door of a little one-story building and ushered them into a small room furnished simply with a long table, a few chairs, and a case of law books.

Presently two men came in, nodded to Mrs. Bender, and conferred in whispers with Mr. Bender. There was a scuffling step outside the door and Mr. Peabody entered.

"Huh, there you are!" he greeted Bob. "For all of you, I might have been hunting my horse and wagon all night. Mighty afraid to let any one know where you are."

"Mr. Peabody?" asked the recorder crisply, and suddenly all his quiet friendliness was gone and an able official with a clear, direct gaze and a rather stern chin faced the farmer. "Sit down, please, until we're all ready."

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Mr. Peabody subsided into a chair, and the two men went away. They were back in a few

moments, and with them they brought Wapley and Lieson and a lad, little more than a boy, who was evidently the truck driver.

"Close the door," directed the recorder. "Now, Mr. Peabody, if you'll just sit here—" he indicated a chair at one side of the table. With a clever shifting of the group he soon had them arranged so that Wapley, Lieson, the truck driver, and the two men who had brought them in were sitting on one side of the table, and Betty, Bob, Mrs. Bender and Mr. Peabody on the other. He himself took a seat between Betty and Mr. Peabody.

"Now you all understand," he said pleasantly, "that this is merely an informal hearing. We want to learn what both sides have to say."

Mr. Peabody gave a short laugh.

"I don't see what the other side can have to say!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "They've been caught red-handed, stealing my chickens."

The recorder ignored this, and turned to Lieson.

"You've worked for farmers about here in other seasons," he said. "And, from all I can hear, your record was all right. What made you put yourself in line for a workhouse term?" [190]

Lieson cleared his throat, glancing at Wapley.

"It can't be proved we was stealing," he argued sullenly. "Them chickens was going to be sold on commission."

"Taking 'em off at ten o'clock at night to save 'em from sunburn, wasn't you?" demanded Mr. Peabody sarcastically. "You never was a quick thinker, Lieson."

"Now, Lieson," struck in Mr. Bender patiently, "that's no sort of use. Miss Gordon here overheard your plans. We know those chickens came from the Peabody farm, and that you and Wapley had a bargain with Tubbs to sell them in Petria. What I want to hear is your excuse. It's been my experience that every one who takes what doesn't belong to him has an excuse, good or bad. What's yours?"

At the mention of Betty's name, Lieson and Wapley had shot her a quick look. She made a little gesture of helplessness, infinitely appealing.

"I'm so sorry," the expressive brown eyes told them, "I just have to tell what I heard, if I'm asked, but I wouldn't willingly do you harm."

Lieson threw back his head and struck the table a sounding blow.

"I'll tell you why we took those blamed chickens!" he cried. "You can believe it or not, but we were going to sell 'em in Petria, and all over and above twenty-five dollars they brought, Peabody would have got back. He owes us that amount. Ask him." [191]

"It's a lie!" shouted Peabody, rising, his face crimson. "A lie, I tell you! A lie cooked up by a sneaking, crooked, chicken-thief to save himself!"

Lieson and Wapley were on their feet, and Betty saw the glint of something shiny in Peabody's hand.

"Sit down, and keep quiet!" said the recorder levelly. "That will be about all the shouting, please, this morning. And, Mr. Peabody, I'll trouble you for that automatic!"

The men dropped into their chairs, and Peabody pushed his pistol across the table. The recorder opened a drawer and dropped the evil little thing into it.

"Can you prove that wages are owed you by Mr. Peabody?" he asked, as if nothing had happened.

Wapley, who had been silent all along, pulled a dirty scrap of paper from his pocket.

"There's when we came to Bramble Farm and when we left, and the money we've had," he said harshly. "And when we left, it was 'cause he wouldn't give us what was coming to us—not just a dollar or two of it to spend in Glenside, Miss Betty can tell you that." [192]

"Yes," said Betty eagerly. "That was what they quarreled about."

The recorder, who had been studying the bit of paper, asked a question without raising his eyes.

"What's this thirty-four cents subtracted from this two dollars for—June twenty-fourth, it seems to be?"

"Oh, that was when we had the machinist who came to fix the binder stay to supper," explained Wapley simply. "Lieson and me paid Peabody for butter on the table that night, 'cause Edgeworth's mighty particular about what he gets to eat. He'd come ten miles to fix the machine, and we wanted him to have a good meal."

Mr. Peabody turned a vivid scarlet. He did not relish these disclosures of his domestic economy.

"What in tarnation has that got to do with stealing my chickens?" he demanded testily, "Ain't you going to commit these varmints?"

The truck driver, who had been studying Mr. Peabody with disconcerting steadiness, suddenly announced the result of his scrutiny, apparently not in the least in awe of the jail sentence shadow under which he stood.

"Well, you poor, little, mean-livered, low-down, pesky, slithering snake-in-the-grass," he said slowly and distinctly, addressing himself to Mr. Peabody with unflattering directness, "now I know where I've seen your homely mug before. You're the skunk that scattered ground glass on that stretch of road between the crossroads and Miller's Pond, and then laughed when I ruined four of my good tires. I knew I'd seen you somewhere, but I couldn't place you." [193]

"Why, do you know, Mr. Bender," he turned excitedly to the recorder, "that low-down coward wouldn't put ground glass on his own road—might get him into trouble with the authorities. No, he goes and scatters the stuff on some other farmer's highway, and when I lodge a complaint against the man whose name was on the mail box and face him in Glenside, he isn't the man I saw laughing at all! I made a complete fool of myself. I suppose this guy had a grudge against some neighbor and took that way of paying it out; and getting some motorist in Dutch, too. These rubes hates automobiles, anyway."

"It's a lie!" retorted Mr. Peabody, but his tone did not carry conviction. "I never scattered any ground glass."

The recorder fluttered a batch of papers impressively.

"Well, I've two complaints that may be filed against you," he announced decisively. "One for uncollected wages due James Wapley and Enos Lieson, and one charging that you willfully made a public highway dangerous for automobile traffic. Also, I believe, this boy, Bob Henderson, has not been sent to school regularly." [194]

This was a surprise to Bob, who had long ago accepted the fact that school for him was over. But Mr. Peabody was plainly worried.

"What you want me to do?" he whined. "I'm willing to be fair. No man can say I'm not just."

The recorder leaned back in his chair, and his good wife, watching, knew that he had gained his point.

"Litigation and law-squabble," he said tranquilly, "waste money, time, and too often defeat the ends. Why, in this instance, don't we effect a compromise? You, Mr. Peabody, pay these men the money you owe them and drop the charge of stealing; you will have your chickens back and the knowledge that their enmity toward you is removed. Tubbs, I'm sure, will agree to forget the broken glass, and the schooling charge may lapse, provided something along that line is done for Bob this winter."

Mr. Peabody was shrewd enough to see that he could not hope for better terms. As long as he had the chickens to sell to Ryerson, he had no grounds for complaint. He hated "like sin" as Bob said, to pay the money to Wapley and Lieson, but under the recorder's unwavering eye, he counted out twenty-five dollars—twelve dollars and fifty cents apiece—which the men pocketed smilingly. A word or two of friendly admonition from Mr. Bender, and the men were dismissed. [195]

"I'm so glad," sighed Betty as they left the room, "that I didn't have to say anything against them."

"Well, are you coming along with me?" asked Peabody, almost graciously for him. "There's a letter there for you, Betty. From your uncle, I calculate, since the postmark is Washington. And my word, Bob, you don't seem in any great hurry to get back to your chores; the sorrel must be eating his head off in Haverford's stable."

The recorder exchanged a look with his wife.

"Mr. Peabody," he said, "I shall be detained here an hour or so, and I don't want these young folks to leave until I have a word with them. Mrs. Bender will be only too glad to have you stay for lunch with us, and I'll meet you up at the house. My wife, Mr. Peabody."

"Pleased to meet you, Ma'am," stammered Mr. Peabody awkwardly. "I ought to be getting on toward home. But I suppose, if the chickens were fed this morning, they can wait."

"I'm sure you're hungry yourself," answered Mrs. Bender, slipping an arm about Betty. "Suppose we walk up to the house now, Mr. Peabody, and I'll have lunch ready by the time Mr. Bender is free." [196]

Betty looked back as they were leaving the room and saw the truck driver slouched disconsolately in a chair opposite the recorder.

"Is—is he arrested?" she whispered half-fearfully to Mrs. Bender. Mr. Peabody and Bob were walking on ahead.

"No, dear," was the answer. "But Mr. Bender will doubtless give him a good raking over the coals, which is just what he needs. Fred Tubbs is a Laurel Grove boy, and his mother is one of the sweetest women in town. He's always been a little wild, and lately he's been in with all kinds of

riff-raff. Harry heard rumors that he was trucking in shady transactions, but he never could get hold of proof. Now he has him just where he wants him. He'll tell Fred a few truths and maybe knock some sense into him before he does something that will send him to state's prison."

CHAPTER XXIV A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

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MRS. BENDER insisted that Mr. Peabody should sit down on her shady front porch while she set the table and got luncheon. Betty followed her like a shadow, and while they were laying the silver together the woman smiled at the downcast face.

"What is it, dear?" she asked gently. "You don't want to go back to Bramble Farm; is that it?"

Betty nodded miserably.

"Why do I have to?" she argued. "Can't I go and stay with the Guerins? They'd like to have me, I'm sure they would."

"Well, we'll see what Mr. Bender has to say," answered Mrs. Bender diplomatically. "Here he comes now. You call Bob and Mr. Peabody, and mind, not a word while we're at the table. Mr. Bender hates to have an argument while he's eating."

The luncheon was delicious, and Mr. Peabody thoroughly enjoyed it, if the service was rather confusing. He thought the Benders were very foolish to live as they did instead of saving up money for their old age, but since they did, he was glad they did not retrench when they had company. That, by the way, was Mr. Peabody's original conception of hospitality—to save on his guests by serving smaller portions of food.

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"We'll go into the living-room and have a little talk now," proposed the recorder, leading the way into the pleasant front room where a big divan fairly invited three to sit upon it.

"Betty and Bob on either side of me," said Mr. Bender cordially, pointing to the sofa, "and, Mr. Peabody, just roll up that big chair."

Mrs. Bender sat down in a rocking chair, and the recorder seated himself between the two young folks.

"Betty doesn't want to come back with me," said Mr. Peabody resentfully. "I can tell by the way she acts. But her uncle sent her up to us, and there she should stay, I say, till he sends for her again. It doesn't look right for a girl to be gallivanting all over the township."

"I could stay with the Guerins," declared Betty stubbornly. "Mrs. Guerin is lovely to me."

"I should think you'd have a little pride about asking 'em to take you in, when they've got two daughters of their own and he as hard up as most country doctors are," said the astute Mr. Peabody. "Your uncle pays me for your board and I certainly don't intend to turn over any checks to Doc Guerin."

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Betty flushed. She had not thought at all about the monetary side of the question. She knew that Doctor Guerin's practice was largely among the farmers, who paid him in produce as often as in cash, and, as Mr. Peabody said, he could not be expected to take a guest for an indefinite time.

"You know you could stay with me, Betty," Mrs. Bender broke in quickly, "but we're going away for a month next week, and there isn't time to change the plans. Mr. Bender has his vacation."

"Gee, Betty," came from Bob, "if you're not coming back, what'll I do?"

"Work," said Mr. Peabody grimly.

Betty's quick temper flared up suddenly.

"I won't go back!" she declared passionately. "I'll do housework, I'll scrub or wash dishes, anything! I hate Bramble Farm!"

"Now, now, sister," said the recorder in his even, pleasant voice. "Keep cool, and we'll find a way. There's this letter Mr. Peabody speaks about. Perhaps that will bring you good news."

"I suppose it's from Uncle Dick," admitted Betty, wiping her eyes. "Maybe he will want me to come where he is."

"Well now, Betty," Mr. Peabody spoke persuasively, "you come along home with me and maybe things will be more to your liking. Perhaps I haven't always done just as you'd like. But then, you recollect, I ain't used to girls and their notions. Your uncle won't think you're fit to be trusted to travel alone if I write him and tell him you run away from the farm."

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Betty looked dumbly at Mr. Bender.

"I think you had better go with Mr. Peabody," he said kindly, answering her unspoken

question. "You see, Betty, it isn't very easy to explain, but when you want to leave a place, any place, always go openly and as far as possible avoid the significance of running away. You do not have to stay for one moment where any one is actively unkind to you, but since your uncle placed you in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Peabody, if you can, it is wiser to wait till you hear from him before making any change."

"Make him be nicer to Bob," urged Betty obstinately.

"I aim to send him to school this winter," said Mr. Peabody, rushing to his own defense. "And I can get a man now to help out with the chores. He's lame, but a good milker. Can get him right away, too—this afternoon. Came by asking for work and I guess he'll stay all winter. Bob can take it easy for a day or two."

"Then he can drive over with Betty Saturday afternoon and spend Sunday with us." Mrs. Bender was quick to seize this advantage. "That will be fine. We'll see you, Betty, before we go away. And, dear, you must write to me often." [201]

So it was settled that Betty was to return to Bramble Farm. The Benders were warmly interested in both young folks, and they were not the sort of people to lose sight of any one for whom they cared. Mr. Peabody knew that Bob and Betty had gained friends who would be actively concerned for their welfare, and he was entirely sincere in promising to make it easier for them in the future.

He and Bob and Betty and the crated chickens drove into the lane leading to Bramble Farm about half-past four.

Betty's first thought was for her letter. The moment she saw the hand-writing, she knew it was from her uncle.

"Bob, Bob! Where are you?" she called, running out to the barn, waving the letter wildly after the first reading. "Oh, Bob, why aren't you ever where I want you?"

Mr. Peabody and his wife were still busy over the chickens.

Bob, it seemed, was engaged in the unlovely task of cleaning the cow stables, after having, on Mr. Peabody's orders, gone after the lame man to engage him for the fall and winter work. But Betty was so eager to share her news with him that she stood just outside the stable and read him bits of the letter through the open window. [202]

"Uncle Dick's in Washington!" she announced blithely. "He's been there a week, and he hopes he can send for me before the month is up. Won't that be fine, Bob? I'm not going to unpack my trunk, because I want to be able to go the minute he sends me word. And, oh, yes, he sends me another check. Now we can have some more goodies from the grocery store, next time you go to Glenside."

"You cash that check and put the money away where you and no one else can find it," advised Bob seriously. "Don't let yourself get out of funds again, Betty. It may be another long wait before you hear from your uncle."

"Oh, no, that won't happen again," said Betty carelessly. "He's in Washington, so everything must be all right. But, Bob, isn't it funny? he hasn't had one of my letters! He says he supposes there's a pile of mail for him at the lawyer's office, but he hasn't had time to run up there, and, anyway, the lawyer is ill and his office is in great confusion. Uncle Dick writes he is glad to think of me enjoying the delights of Bramble Farm instead of the city's heat—Washington is hot in summer, I know daddy used to say so. And he sends the kindest messages to Mr. and Mrs. Peabody—I wish he knew that old miser! I've written him all about you, but of course he hasn't read the letters." [203]

All through supper and the brief evening that followed Betty was light-hearted and gay. She re-read her Uncle Dick's letter twenty times, and because of the relief it promised her found it easy to be gracious to Mr. Peabody. That man was put out because his new hired hand refused to sleep in the attic, declaring that the barn was cooler, as in fact it was.

"If I catch you smoking in there, I'll wring your neck," was the farmer's amiable good-night to the lame man as he limped out toward his selected sleeping place.

CHAPTER XXV

THEIR MUTUAL SECRETS

BETTY woke to find her room almost as light as day. She had been dreaming of breakfasting with her uncle in a blue and gold dining-room of her own furnishing, and for the moment she thought it was morning. But the light flickered too much for sunlight, and as she became more fully awake, she realized it was a red glare. Fire!

"Fire!" Bob's voice vocalized her cry for her, and he came tumbling down the uncarpeted attic stairs with a wild clatter of shoes. [204]

She called to him to wait; but he did not hear, and raced on out to the barn. The inarticulate bellow of Mr. Peabody sounded next as, yelling loudly, he rushed down the stairs and out through the kitchen.

"Betty!" Mrs. Peabody ran in as Betty struggled hastily to dress. "Betty! the barn's on fire! No one knows how long it's been burning. If we only had a dog, he might have barked! Or a telephone!"

Betty stifled a hysterical desire to laugh as she followed the moaning Mrs. Peabody downstairs. It was not the main barn, she saw with a little throb of relief as they ran through the yard. Instead it was the corncrib and wagon house which stood a little apart from the rest of the buildings. The cribs were practically empty of corn, for of course the new crop had not yet matured, and the only loss would be the two shabby old wagons and a quantity of more or less worn machinery stored in the loft overhead. A huge rat, driven from his home under the corncrib, ran past Betty in the dark.

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"It's all insured," said Mr. Peabody complacently, watching Bob dash buckets of water on the tool shed, which was beginning to blister from the heat. "Well, Keppler, see the blaze from your place? Nice little bonfire, ain't it?"

Mr. Keppler and his two half-grown sons had run all the way and were too out of breath to reply immediately. They were not on especially good terms with Mr. Peabody, but as his nearest neighbor they could not let his buildings burn down without making an effort to help him. They had left the mother of the family at the telephone with instructions to call the surrounding neighbors if Mr. Keppler signaled her to do so with the pistol he carried.

"Guess you won't need any more help," said Mr. Keppler, regaining his breath. "How'd she start?"

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"Why, when I thought it was the barn, I said to myself that lazy good-for-nothing lame Phil's been smoking," replied Mr. Peabody. "But I don't know how he could set the corncribs afire."

"Where is he now?" cried Betty, remembering the man's affliction. "He couldn't run—perhaps he tried to sleep in the wagon and is burned."

"No, he isn't," said Phil behind her.

He had been watching the fire from the safe vantage point of a boulder in the apple orchard, he admitted when cross-questioned. Yes, the flames had awakened him in the barn where he slept. No, he couldn't guess how they had started unless it could have been spontaneous combustion from the oiled rags he had noticed packed tightly in a corner of the wagon shed that afternoon.

"Spontaneous combustion!" ejaculated Mr. Peabody angrily. "If you know that much, why couldn't you drop me a word, or take away the rags?"

The lame man looked at him with irritating intentness.

"I thought you might wring my neck if I did," he said.

"I don't know whether Phil's a fool or not," confided Bob to Betty the next morning; "but he has old Peabody guessing, that's sure. He was quoting Shakespeare to him at the pump this morning."

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Betty lost little time in speculation concerning Phil, for another worry claimed her attention.

"How can we go to see the Benders Saturday?" she asked Bob. "Both wagons are burned up."

"Well, we still have the horse," Bob reminded her cheerfully. "A wagon without a horse isn't much good, but a horse without a wagon is far from hopeless. You leave it to me."

Betty was willing. She was dreaming day dreams about Washington and Uncle Dick, dreams in which she generously included Bob and the Benders and Norma Guerin. It was fortunate for her that she could not see ahead, or know how slowly the weeks were to drag by without another letter. How Betty waited and waited and finally went to the Capitol City to find her uncle herself will be told in the next volume of this series, to be called, "Betty Gordon in Washington; or, Strange Adventures in a Great City." High-spirited, headstrong, pretty Betty finds adventures aplenty, not unmixed with a spice of danger, in the beautiful city of Washington, and quite unexpectedly she again meets Bob Henderson, who has left Bramble Farm to seek his fortune.

That Bob was planning a surprise in connection with their visit to the Benders, she was well aware, but she would not spoil his enjoyment by trying to force him to divulge his secret. Betty had a secret of her own, saved up for the eventful day, which she had no idea of disclosing till the proper time should arrive.

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Saturday morning dawned warm and fair, and Bob tore into his morning's work, determined to leave Mr. Peabody no loophole for criticism and, possibly, detention, though he had promised Bob the afternoon off. Phil was with them no more, having ambled off one night without warning and taken his peculiarities to a possibly more appreciative circle.

Bob was hungry at noon, but he hardly touched his dinner, so eager was he to get away from the table and wash and dress ready for the trip to Laurel Grove. Poor Bob had no best clothes,

but he resolutely refused to wear overalls to the Benders, and he had coaxed Mrs. Peabody to get his heavy winter trousers out of the mothballs and newspapers in which she had packed them away. She had washed and ironed a faded shirt for him, and at least he would be whole and clean.

"Bob," drawled Mr. Peabody, as that youth declined dessert and prepared to rise from the table, "before you go, I want to see the wood box filled, some fresh litter in the pig pens and some fodder in all the cow mangers. If I'm to do the milking, I don't want to have to pitch all the fodder, too."

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Bob scowled angrily.

"I haven't time," he muttered. "That'll take me till two or half-past. You said I could have the afternoon."

"And I also told you to fill the wood box yesterday," retorted Mr. Peabody. "You'll do as I say, or stay home altogether. Take your choice."

"He's the meanest man who ever lived!" scolded Betty, following Bob out to the woodshed. "I'll fill up that old box, Bob, and you go do the other chores. I'd like to throw this stick at his head."

Bob laughed, for he had a naturally sweet temper and seldom brooded over his wrongs.

"He did tell me to fill the box yesterday and I forgot," he confessed. "Take your time, Betty, and don't get all hot. And don't scratch your hands—they looked as pretty as Mrs. Bender's; I noticed 'em at the table."

Betty stared after him as he went whistling to the barn, her apron sagging with the wood she had piled into it. She glanced scrutinizingly at her strong, shapely tanned little hands. Did Bob think they were pretty? Betty herself admired very white hands with slim pointed fingers like Norma Guerin's.

She worked to such good purpose that she had the wood box filled and was brushing her hair when she heard Bob go thumping past her door on his way to his room. She was dressed and downstairs when he came down, and he caught hold of her impulsively and whirled her around the porch.

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"Betty, you're a wonder!" he cried in admiration. "How did you ever guess the size? And when did you buy it? You could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw it spread out there on the bed."

"I'm glad it fits you so well," answered Betty demurely, surveying the neat blue and white shirt she had bought for him. "I took one of your old ones over to Glenside. Oh, it didn't cost much!" she hastened to assure him, interpreting the look he gave her. "I'm saving the money Uncle Dick sent, honestly I am."

Bob insisted that she sit down on the porch and let him drive round for her, and now it was Betty's turn to be surprised. The sorrel was harnessed to a smart rubber-tired runabout.

"Bob Henderson! where did you get it? Whose is it? Does Mr. Peabody know? Let's go through Glenside and show 'em we look right sometimes," suggested the astonished Betty.

Bob, beaming with pride, helped her in and Mrs. Peabody waved them a friendly good-bye. She betrayed no surprise at the sight of the runabout and was evidently in the secret.

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"She knows about it," explained Bob, as they drove off. "I borrowed it from the Keplers. Tried to get a horse, too, but they're going driving Sunday and need the team. This is their single harness. Nifty buckles, aren't they?"

Betty praised the runabout to his heart's content, and they actually did drive through Glenside, though it was a longer way around, and had the satisfaction of meeting the Guerins.

Recorder Bender and his wife were delighted to see them again, and they had a happy time all planned for them. Saturday night there was a moving picture show in Laurel Grove, and the Benders took their guests. Betty had not been to motion pictures since leaving Pineville and it was Bob's second experience with the films.

Sunday morning they all went to church, and the long, delightful summer Sunday afternoon they spent on the cool, shady porch, exchanging confidences and making plans for the future.

"I'm saving the money I get for the carvings," said Bob, "and when I get enough I'll dig up the little black tin box and off I'll go. I've got to get some education and amount to something, and if I stay with the Peabody's till I'm eighteen, my chance will be gone."

"Promise us one thing, Bob," urged Mrs. Bender earnestly. "That you won't go without consulting us, or at least leaving some word for us. And that, wherever you go, you'll write."

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"I promise," said Bob gratefully. "I haven't so many friends that I can afford to lose one. You and Mr. Bender have been awfully good to me."

"We like you!" returned the recorder, with one of his rare whimsical flashes. "I want to exact the same promise from Betty—to write to us wherever she may go."

"Of course I will!" promised Betty. "I don't seem to have much luck running away; but when I do go, I'll surely write and let you know where I am. And I'll probably be writing to you very soon from Washington!"

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Page 41, "Aronld" changed to "Arnold" (morning Betty and Mrs. Arnold)

Page 66, "Leisen" changed to "Leison" (as Wapley or Leison)

Page 172, "her's" changed to "hers" (look like hers, too)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETTY GORDON AT BRAMBLE FARM; OR,
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