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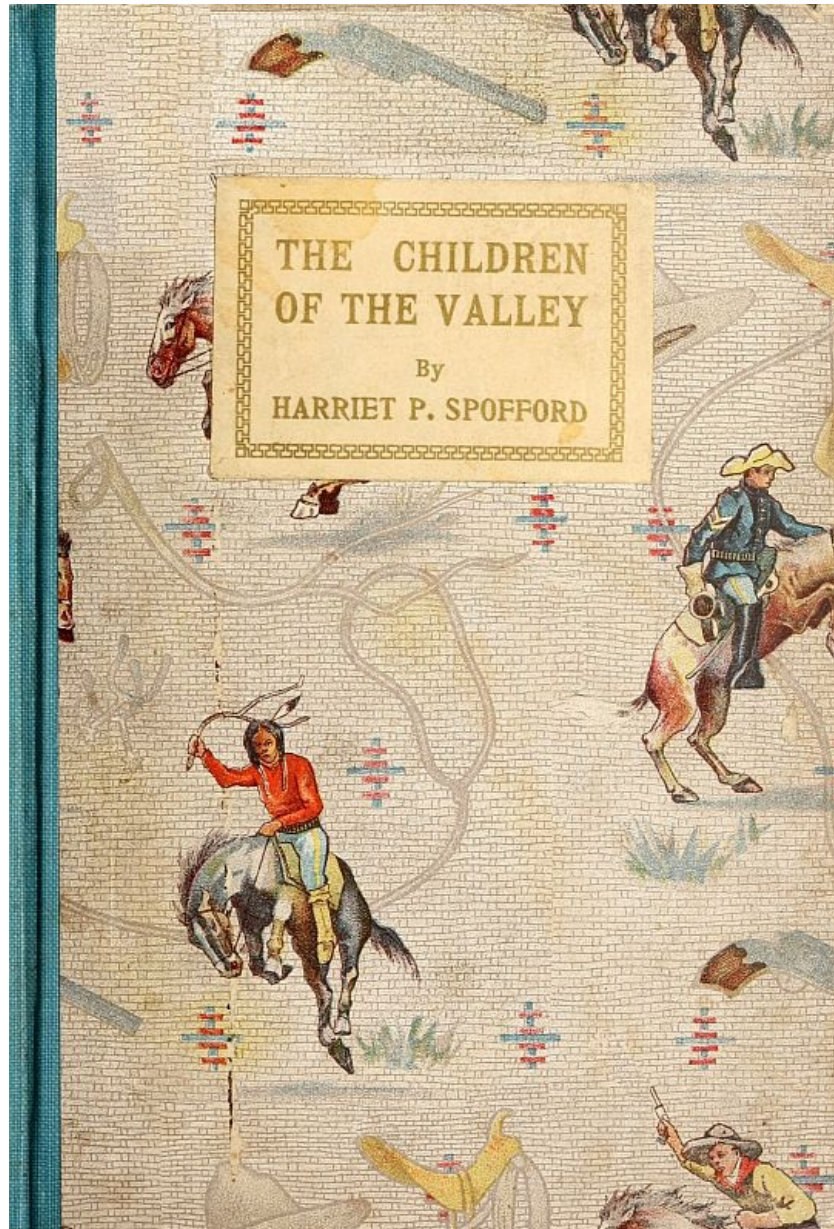
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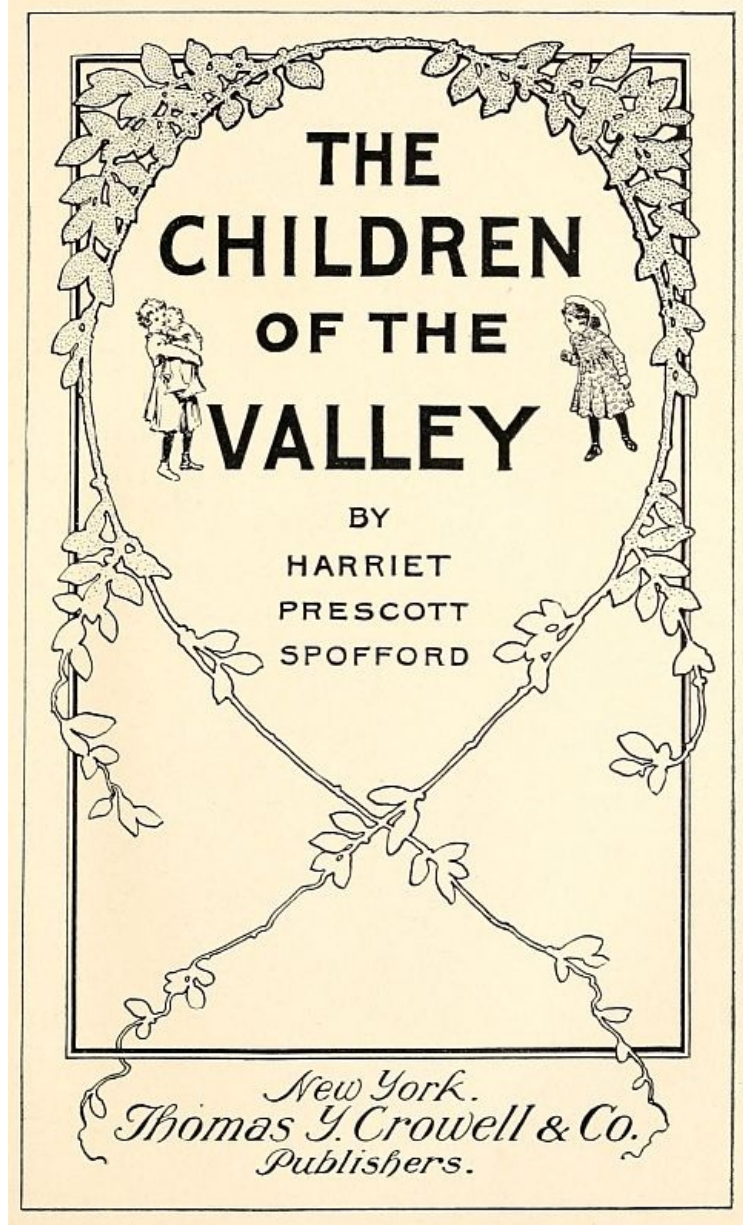
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHILDREN OF THE VALLEY ***





PINCHER DECLARED “. . . SHE WAS ON HER HIND LEGS CARRYING HER BABY IN HER ARMS LIKE ANYBODY.” [Page 25.](#)



THE CHILDREN OF THE VALLEY

BY
HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

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"A LOST JEWEL," ETC.

FIFTH THOUSAND

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The Children of the Valley.

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I. ALLY AND THE CHILDREN OF THE HILL.

ALLY was lost—the little blue-eyed dear! That is to say, she was nowhere to be found. And of course there was commotion in the Valley. Michael, the gardener, was going one way; and John, the house-man, another; and Pincher, one of the loggers, was making for the hills with Uncle Billy in one direction, and Old Uncle and Will and Charlie had gone up in another; and Aunt Rose and Aunt Susan were hunting through the house; and Janet and Essie were running this way and that—and it was noon, and still they hadn't found her.

Will was sure Ally would be found in the strawberry-patch on the farther edge of the intervalle across the river, and as the boat was on the other side he had offered to swim over and fetch it.

Charlie had been equally sure that she was looking for bear-cubs again in the hollow half-way up Blue Top.

Aunt Susan was convinced that she had fallen asleep somewhere under a bush, when she could not be found in the house. [6]

Aunt Rose thought she might have been taken to drive by people passing through the Valley—sometimes some of them were—and they would bring her back.

“Of course,” said Old Uncle, “they’ll bring her back! Ally’ll turn up all right—she makes more noise, when she sets about it, than all the rest of you put together!” Nevertheless, Old Uncle—who believed in whipping, at least he said he did—was making for the hollows of Blue Top as he said it. For Ally was really the darling of the household, always bright and sweet-tempered, and daring and ready for anything.

Essie, who was Ally’s twin, felt indignant with Old Uncle for talking so when no one knew what had become of Ally; she gave it as her opinion that the fairies had taken her into their own invisible country—the fairies who haunted the Valley, as every one knew, or else why should they be seen sailing away on the early breeze in chariots like cobwebs, leaving their coverlets, long spreads of jewels, shining on the sides of all the slopes of Blue Top and Green Ridge. But Essie was always imagining something that wasn’t so, Will said.

Janet said nothing. In her own mind, although she didn’t like to speak of it, she believed Ally had gone up into the clouds round Blue Top to find Aunt Susan’s baby who, they understood, had been taken away by the Children of the Hill. Janet knew that Ally had carried a sore spot in her tender heart ever since that day last fall when Aunt Susan was up in the garret, and not knowing that the twins were there, had kissed the tiny shirt. Janet was a little older than the twins, and she was not quite sure that they had understood correctly what Aunt Rose had said one day after Aunt Susan had come home from a long walk, trying to hide that she had been crying—Aunt Rose had whispered that Aunt Susan had been up to the Children of the Hill. Yes, plainly, to Janet’s mind, Ally had taken it into her own hands to discover if they were right or wrong. For it was brave little Ally who, if there was anything to adventure about, always adventured. It was Ally to whom things were always happening. If there was a scrape round, Ally was always the one sure to get into it, although she usually contrived to come out on top—except on those two dreadful times of which you shall hear—for she had a courageous little spirit and a loving little heart. And it was this courageous spirit, and this loving heart full of childish sympathy for Aunt Susan, that had taken Ally away now all by herself. She loved everything so much that she had no thought of being harmed by anything. [7]

So Janet reasoned.

And when, by and by, you learn where she had really gone, and what it was she brought home, perhaps you will think that the result of this particular adventure of Ally’s was one of the pleasantest things that ever befell the Children of the Valley. [8]

II. ALL THE PEOPLE. [9]

THE children had not always lived in this northern valley.

Janet and Jack and Essie and Ally had come from the far south—where no snow fell, and the only ice they ever saw was made by a machine—to the home of Old Uncle and Aunt Susan, who had lost all their own children. Uncle Billy and Aunt Rose had journeyed down to bring them, after their father and mother had gone into the country from which they never came back. Uncle Billy was a great comfort to them at that time; he was Old Uncle’s brother, and Aunt Rose was Old Uncle’s sister. Aunt Rose was young and pretty—at least as young and pretty as grown people can be, and wherever she was she made everything bright and happy.

It was a queer thing, that although Ally had great blue eyes, and fluffy yellow hair, and dimples all over her rosy face, and Essie had brown eyes, and dark smooth braids, and was a trifle the taller, people should always be taking them for each other, and often had to stop and think: “Oh, no, oh, no, the brown-haired one is the other one!” [10]

Janet’s hair was the most beautiful thing you ever saw; although if you heard anyone call it red, you might not think so till you saw that really there was no red about it. She wore it in long braids, and when it was combed out, it fell round her like a cloud of chestnut overlaid with gold; and her eyes were the very same color. “It isn’t healthy,” said Old Uncle. “That hair really ought to be cut.” But it never was cut.

Jack’s hair was short enough to make up for it, however, for it stood up like a stiff hair-brush above his honest little freckled face. Poor Jack, in those days, was usually to be seen going round with a string tied to one of his front teeth, which he was going to fasten to an open door and then slam the door, so that the tooth would come out quickly—just as soon as he could make up his mind to it.

The four children from the south had missed their own dear people exceedingly at first; Ally and Essie crying themselves to sleep in each other's arms, and Janet getting up several times to see that they were covered, like a little mother herself, and Jack creeping into Will's bed, because he had a lump in his throat, he said.

But the novelty of new surroundings had gradually worn away their sorrow and homesickness. Charlie and Will were very condescending and kind—they were Aunt Susan's nephews, and had lived here ever since they became orphans—and Aunt Susan had said that where there was room for her people there was room for all of Old Uncle's. Michael was delightful with fairy stories out of Ireland. Pincher told them of blood-curdling happenings in the woods. And the maids were very choice people. Aunt Susan always had sweeties and dainties for them. Uncle Billy was great fun when he chose. [11]

It was only Old Uncle who was a drawback. For *this* sound disturbed Old Uncle's nap, and *that* sound hindered Old Uncle's work, and the *other* sound irritated Old Uncle's nerves; and the children tiptoed and held their breath as they went past his office-door, and everybody hushed them down and hushed them down on account of Old Uncle, until Jack said one day, "They don't really like children here at all!"

"It is very unfortunate to be children, anyway," said Janet, with a sigh.

"Yes," said Ally. "They always send you to bed if there's anything going on; and they say it isn't good for you if there's anything nice to eat; and they send you out of the room if there are secrets, or else they spell or talk French or something."

"They say, 'Do-grey they-grey hear-grey,'" said Essie.

"And 'Do-hoolty they-aylty hear-ealty,'" said Janet. [12]

"It's very, very exsulting to children," said Ally.

"But we can't help being children," said Jack.

"And they can't help not liking children," said Essie. "I suppose the reason we're called children is because it gives people a cold chill to hear us coming."

"Well," said Janet, repenting, "I suppose we could *make* them stop not liking us. I suppose we *could* be so careful and so quiet that they'd think it lovely to have us round."

"Let's, then!" cried Ally.

But Jack said Janet was too good to live.

However, for a little while they all went about softly, till Michael called them to see a little furry brown bat clinging to the under-side of an apple-bough, at which strange sight, and with subsequent endeavors to capture the sleepy thing that woke and fluttered just a bough higher every time, the little knot of southerners forgot their good resolution.

There was always a time of comparative peace, though, after breakfast, when Aunt Rose kept school, and also another hour, after their dinner. But when the restraint of lessons was removed, they poured forth to play again with such a joyous outcry that Old Uncle always rose and closed his door.

There was another rapturous season of peace,—on Sunday mornings when they were waiting for the carryalls to take them to church. Janet stepped about the gardens, with the others at her heels, getting as pale and delicate a zinnia as she could find, to pin in the ruffle of her pretty white gown, and a stem of thyme for Jack, and a sprig of southernwood for Will, and a bit of citronella for Charlie; the twins foraging for themselves among the late honeysuckles and early cosmos. [13]

They enjoyed the drive to church. They went in the carryalls, drawn by the three span of farm-horses in the driving harnesses. Janet felt it was like a picnic when they drove away from the piazza in the three carriages, one after the other. It was wrong of Janet, no doubt, to think of a picnic on a Sunday morning; but there certainly was a gala air about the little procession, with so many children in their flowers and ribbons, and their beautiful hair.

They enjoyed the day at church; they enjoyed seeing the people; they enjoyed rambling in the old neglected, bramble-covered graveyard near by, if they arrived too early; they enjoyed tuning up their own little pipes in the singing of the hymns.

There was room for them all in Old Uncle's big square pew, but part of them sat across the aisle. Six children were too many for one pew. Six turning young heads! six pairs of knocking young heels! twelve restless elbows! It was not to be thought of. Old Uncle sat in one pew with three of them, and Aunt Susan across the aisle with the rest. Uncle Billy and Aunt Rose sat farther back, and were able to report on the general behavior when all reached home. [14]

III. WHAT THE TWINS FOUND.

THE mountains had been a great source of interest at first to the children, who had never before seen anything but boundless savannas. The vast blue and purple shapes seemed to be some strange sort of great live creatures lying crouched against the sky; and they had a little awe if not fear of them.

Even when they became familiar enough to perceive that one pasture led to another up their sides, and to know various of the tumbling black and white brooks by name, they still felt that the mountains were alive, in some mysterious way. And the fact that there were bears and panthers in the caves and recesses of the purplest of the hills, lent a shivery sense of danger, particularly for Essie; for, reasoned Essie, how could the mountains be kind to bears and wolves, and kind to children also? Yet at the same time the fact that Old Uncle owned great tracts of their heights and depths, and had his logging teams and men in the forests in winter getting out the lumber, gave the children a cosy feeling as if they, too, had a sort of proprietorship in them, and even in the remote wild beasts. [16]

The late summer of their first year north had brought the little people a great deal of pleasure. More than once Uncle Billy had taken them all in a skiff down the river, slipping along on the current, and then poling in shore. They had kindled a fire on the bank, and joyously cooked their own dinner. Uncle Billy had caught trout, and Aunt Rose had broiled them, while they picked the berries. After dinner they had burned the remnant, and washed the dishes together.

They had gone up the hills, too, on so many picnics, and seen what had looked so blue and so far turn into woods and fields and lonely farms that they had left off expecting to see a big bear reach over their shoulders for their bread and honey. In fact, by this time they almost wished they might see one, and Essie and Ally had many a delightful bear-talk with Pincher.

One day Ally and Essie were out by themselves gathering autumn leaves, which had come as a great surprise to their southern eyes; first making them think the woods afire, and then that the world would not be a green world any more.

They had a large basket with them, with a handle at either end, so that they might lay in twigs and small branches as well as single leaves; and afterwards they were glad that they had brought that peculiar, particular basket. [17]

They had it nearly half filled when they began to feel tired. They had been over the ground before and so were familiar with it; and Ally pointed out their favorite resting-log, and they made their way to it and sat down. It was covered with thick, velvet-green moss, and Ally sank into the deep cushion with a luxurious coo.

At the same moment she felt her feet touching something very soft. It was a dim, shady place, and she peered down curiously. The next minute she was on her knees in the grassy hollow, and Essie saw her with both arms round the very dearest, softest, hairiest little creature alive!

"Oh, Essie," cried Ally, "just see what we've found! Oh, what do you suppose it is?"

"Oh, oh!" cried Essie, "isn't it a dear!"

"Isn't it a dear!" echoed Ally. "I just love it!"

"So do *I* love it! Let *me* feel it!" cried Essie, down in the hollow too, and half crowding Ally away, to get her own arms round the little animal. "Do you think it is a little fox?"

"Oh, no! Essie—foxes are yellowish. And it can't be a wild-cat—wild-cats have blazing eyes, and they scratch. This is a soft sleepy baby, and it isn't a panther—it isn't anything cruel—oh, isn't it cunning?"

"Perhaps it's a quite new sort of animal," said Essie, "and we have found it first of anybody; maybe it is one of the Bible animals—a leviathan, maybe, Ally." [18]

Ally didn't answer. She was holding the little warm flat foot in her hand, and looking the little creature over. "I guess it's a baby bear, Essie," she said. "Bears don't have tails, you know, and this hasn't. Uncle Billy'll know. Essie, if it is a bear, it's our very own bear, and we can have it."

"Yes, we can, and take it home! Oh, *dear* little bear!" cried Essie.

The children sat down by the little fellow in the leaves, and gave themselves up to perfect delight. They examined his ears, and his paws with the long claws, and they smoothed and pored his thick fur, and put their faces down to his; and then they rubbed his little stomach while he lay on his back with his feet curled up in the air, enjoying it all, winking and blinking—the most lovable little brown rogue ever to be seen! Sometimes he lay still, then again he moved in the leaves, sleepy, snuffling, nuzzling.

"Is he too heavy for us to carry?" asked Ally. "If I stoop, and you put his arms round my neck, and I take him pick-a-back?"

Essie shook her head. "I don't believe he would like to be carried that way. What if we put him in our basket? He'd like lying on the leaves."

"Why, yes," said Ally. "He's always lying on leaves and grass. Let's do it. We oughtn't to let him stay out here in the woods all night, all alone." [19]

"Of course not," said Essie. "What a bad mother he must have had to go and leave him here!"

"Perhaps some hunter shot her," said Ally.

Pitiful, the twins stroked him again and put their dear little faces close to his; and the little bear cuddled and snuggled and uttered a soft sound of pleasure.

But the soft sound quite changed its character when they began to try and lift the little fat lump into the basket. "Oh, Ally! he's growling!" Essie cried. "Hear him!" and she went off in gales of laughter; it really was amusing—that little ineffectual growl.

The children tugged and lugged and lifted and hauled him till they had him on the side of the half-tipped basket, then they tipped it back, and he rolled in, on the leaves. Next they stripped off their aprons and tied them across the basket so that he might neither spill out nor jump out.

It seemed as if they never would get home. One on each side they took the basket a little way, and then they sat down to rest. Again they lugged and tugged it a short way farther; and sometimes the little creature inside made queer, uncouth sounds, and they had to stop and soothe and stroke him.

"Oh, he's sucking my fingers," suddenly said Ally, snatching her hand away.

"That's how Pincher teaches the calves to drink," cried Essie, joyously, "and we can give him his dinner just that way." [20]

Again and again it seemed as if they never would reach home. Fortunately it didn't occur to them that there might be any mother-bear alive to follow them through the wood, and express her fear and anger in savage sort, with great cuffs of tremendous paws and cruel, murderous hugs. Cheerfully they dragged their burden along under the warm noonday sun, pink and perspiring, every now and again stopping for breath and strength, and taking a peep under the aprons. As for the little animal, he spent his own time sleeping for the most part. He seemed so warm in his fur, that seized with a sudden fear lest he should suffocate, they uncovered him, just as they came out at the foot of their lawn.

IV.

[21]

MOTHER BEAR'S CALL.

MARIA, from an upper window, spied the children coming, tugging the basket along.

She called down to Old Uncle and Aunt Susan on the piazza.

"If them children ar'n't bringing home a cub!"

Old Uncle stirred in his hammock. Aunt Susan went down the steps. "What will they do next?" said Old Uncle. As the twins came up with a joyful outcry, to exhibit their treasure, he rose and peered into the basket. "'Tis a cub surely," he said. He looked at the children from under his shaggy eyebrows. "Will you fetch in a catamount to-morrow?" he asked sternly.

"We—we thought you would be pleased," Essie faltered.

"Why, Uncle," cried Ally, "why, Old Uncle, don't you love a baby bear? I just want you to see him suck my fingers! You can't help loving him!"

"I love you," teased Old Uncle, catching her up to a place in the hammock beside himself. "But you can't keep him alive on your fingers, even if he only sucked up one a day." [22]

"You're just funning!" said Ally. "Pincher knows how to feed him, and so does Michael. I reckon Essie and I could too."

"Old Uncle, we won't let him be a bit of trouble," said Essie.

"Of course he won't be any trouble," said Aunt Susan. She and Aunt Rose had brought a bottle of warm milk with a rag over the top of it. They put it into the little bear's mouth, and the whole family gathered round to see him take his dinner. His grunts of satisfaction were very funny. At last the little fellow let go the bottle, stretched himself, and rolled over on the grass, and looked so good-natured you would almost have said he was laughing; and Aunt Susan said, "A little bear is a little dear!"

The cub must have been pretty tired with all the attention and endearments he received that day, not to say anything about Master Will's efforts to make him stand on his hind legs, when he tumbled over every time like a mould of jelly.

But at last, and after his supper, he was put to sleep in the shed on a little truss of hay, under an old blanket, where, as soon as he was alone, he began to whimper for his mother. But the children did not hear him; they had trooped up-stairs to their own beds, all of them as tired as the cub himself, and were presently sound asleep.

The great moon rose white and solemn above the hills, and poured her silver over the forests, and the whole world seemed asleep too. [23]

It was just in their first sweet slumber that everyone in that house was waked by the strangest, the most melancholy, the most frightful sound they had ever heard. Now it was loud, high, and shrill. "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" it came. Now it was a long, low growl. Now again it was a series of sharp cries like barks. Now it was a roar; and something was knocking about the chairs on the piazzas, scratching at the windows, lumbering down the steps and plowing and plunging over the grass—something with heavy jaws and coming clap, clap, along the front of the house. Finally it made off clumsily in the direction of the shed, and raised such an uproar there that the sky rang with it.

Every one was out of bed and at the windows. The twins, half hiding behind the curtains in fright, shivered as they saw plainly in the moonlight a big creature standing erect, cuffing away at the side of the shed, and whining and growling all the more when a little whine and a little yelp answered from within.

Pincher saw the children, and laughed. He was standing at the window at the other end of the long hall.

"It's Mother Bear," he called. "Hear her! 'Where's my little bear?' she's askin'. 'Where's my baby? You folks, give him back or I'll eat *your* babies. Little Bruin, I'm a-hearin' of ye. Ye want your mammy, don't you? She's smelled ye all the way here. How 'm I goin' ter fetch ye out blest ef I know! But I'm *goin'* ter fetch ye! I say! Give me my little bear! He's a dreffle bright bear! Ef you folks only seen him eatin' of blackberries you'd know how smart he wuz. Say, I jest can't lend him! I've got to get him real fat 'fore we go into winter quarters. How'd ye get here, any way, ye little scamp? Can't I leave ye five minutes? Ye was safe asleep in a soft holler, an' then w'en I was wadin' inter the river with a bee-hive in my arms, so's to drown the bees an' git the honey, off ye go! Don't ye know little bears should mind their mother? Oh, somebody tuk ye. Br-r-r! I won't leave so much as their aprons if I can lay paws on them! that is, onless so be it's Ally and Essie. But I'll hev to box their ears for 'em, I guess. I say, now, folks! Br-r-r! Br-r-r! I'll tear the place down if ye don't give me my cub!"

[24]

"Oh, Pincher! does she say all that?" asked Ally.

"Pincher! would she tear the house down?" cried Essie.

"The poor mother!" Aunt Susan was exclaiming, hurrying into her dressing-gown and slippers. And then she and Old Uncle ran down the back way, followed by Pincher; and they took up the cub, and opened the shed-door a crack, and pushed him through, and banged and bolted the door behind him.

Everybody looked out that could. The mother bear stood off a moment on her hind legs. Then she fell on the cub like an avalanche, and held him in her arms as any mother holds her baby, and licked him from top to toe, and lay down and gave him his dinner. After that, gazing back at the house every step or two with a growl, she lurched off, little Bruin laboriously following. But Pincher declared that the last he saw, as he watched her out of sight, she was up on her hind legs carrying her baby in her arms like anybody.

[25]

The twins watched as long as they could see her. Then Essie began to cry. "I wanted to keep him," she said, "I—I loved him so."

"So did I," said Ally, with her arms round Essie. "But I guess, Essie, we'll have to get along with Bobbo. I wonder how Pincher knew his name was Bruin. Some day we'll go into the woods, and call 'Bruin, Bruin,' and perhaps he will remember us. His mother loved him, you know, Essie. I suppose she was so sorry when she found him gone. Mothers must have their babies, you know, Essie; why, they belong to them!"

"If you foolish children don't go to sleep," cried Uncle Billy from some remote quarter, "I'll call Mother Bear back!"

"Oh! do you believe you could?" answered Ally. "Oh, Uncle Billy! I wish you would."

V.

[26]

TWO LITTLE CONSCIENCES.

THE garret was a great resort for the children whenever they were shut in by storm or chilly weather, the big chimneys making it quite warm enough to play in.

Essie used to go there, every now and then, and sit with Bobbo, Ally's tabby kitten, in her lap, or with Erminie, the white angora, and dream her dreams among the warm chimneys.

Often Ally would come up, too, with her dolls. Sometimes Will was there, when he had not learned his Latin, sent partly as punishment, and partly that he might study away from disturbances, for at the rate he was going on he would never be ready for college.

But Will was not there that day when Essie had been telling Ally her dreams, and Aunt Susan came up to put something away, not observing them at all, as both sat among the chests, silent for the moment.

Aunt Susan had turned about to go down again, when an old bureau caught her eye. She

seemed to hesitate a moment, then stopped, and opened a low drawer. She snatched something up to her lips; and then she sank down upon the floor, and sat there, holding a little yellow shirt to her face, and crying bitterly.

[27]

For an instant the two children were frightened to see Aunt Susan cry—that very grave and serene person!

“Oh, it’s her baby’s!” Essie whispered to Ally. But though she would have liked to comfort Aunt Susan, she sat still.

But the next moment little Ally sprang up, ran to Aunt Susan, and threw her arms about her neck, and brought her little face round upon Aunt Susan’s cheek till the tears wet it. “Oh, I know just how you feel!” she whispered. “I’m *so* sorry for you! was it a dear baby?”

“Oh, *you* are a dear baby!” cried Aunt Susan, taking her in her arms.

And perhaps that was the beginning of the strong friendship between Aunt Susan and Ally.

For Aunt Susan remembered very vividly that morning in the garret on the day long after—away over near the end of this story—when Ally was found, after the time when she had gone up, as Janet had suspected, to see the Children of the Hill.

But there were sunny days as well as stormy ones, along through that first autumn, and often all the children in the house would be gone out nutting.

At last came the great frost, to open the burrs, and Pincher said next morning that if they didn’t make haste that very day the squirrels would gather all the rest of the nuts.

[28]

John and Michael were spared to beat the trees, and down below the children filled baskets and bags. Squirrels ran everywhere, indignant, darting aloft like streaks of light, scolding as they sat with their tails over their heads among the few golden leaves left, and chattering at the children below.

Ally and Essie, as usual, went off by themselves, Pincher following them. “The oxens,” said he, “allus go together, yoke-fellows, same ez you two do!”

“Pincher!” suddenly called Essie, “look here!”

“Oh, Pincher, do!” cried Ally. “Please do look here!”

“Well, that’s what I call luck,” said Pincher, coming up and stooping over the find—a hoard of nuts that some industrious squirrel, whose nest was probably in a hollow of the tree above, had stored among the roots and dead leaves—an enormous quantity.

“Wal, these had orter do ye!” said Pincher. “Ye couldn’t eat more nuts ’n them.”

Ally and Essie scooped up the nuts by double-handfuls into their baskets, and Pincher filled his bag.

“Oh! isn’t this great, Ally?” said Essie. “Just think of the nut-candy!”

“And the nut-cake!” added Ally.

“And the nuts toasted on the end of a hat-pin—oh, we mustn’t lose one!” said Essie.

[29]

And full of glee, full of eager greed, too, if it must be told, they didn’t lose one.

Pincher hung the bag on his back, and carried the baskets, and the three hurried home together. Pincher took the nuts up and spread them out on the garret floor to dry. Ally and Essie fenced them off from other stores that might be poured out there later, with a dozen or so of old bricks that happened to be there, Pincher dragging up to one end the big hair trunk full of gold-laced soldier’s jackets; then the twins completed the barricade with a row of old school-books along the front.

The little girls stood up and viewed their possessions like two happy misers, and counted up the good things they would do with them like two great philanthropists—so many to stuff the next turkey for Diane, the cook, so many more for the minister’s wife, and a lot for the old woman in the hollow across the mountain.

Ally and Essie awoke the next morning to find all the lovely breezes and melting weather of yesterday had vanished in a fierce storm that was beating up from the coast, tossing the trees, and lashing the panes with rivers of rain and cold sleet.

Home never seemed any sweeter to the Children of the Valley than it did that morning as they basked in the warmth of the great fire roaring up the chimney, and rosy with well-being, planned out their play over their breakfast of dainty sausages, and buckwheat-cakes and maple-syrup.

[30]

It was while making sure of the very last drops of the sweetness on her plate, and looking up, startled by a fresh fury of the rain and sleet against the window-panes, that some sudden disturbing thought struck Essie.

Essie had remembered the little cub, and wondered if his mother had made him comfortable anywhere! And then, immediately, she saw in her mind’s eye a beautiful great squirrel scratching at the big heap of autumn leaves at the foot of his tree, and stopping, full of consternation, to find

his winter's store of food gone, with no dinner to-day—no dinner to-morrow—starvation afterwards! And all his family! Oh! And she had done it! She and Ally had done it! They had robbed him, they had left him nothing to eat all winter! She saw his angry surprise; she saw him scamper up the tree to tell his wife; she heard him chattering over his loss; she saw him sitting dejected and bewildered, not knowing which way to turn, and hungry! And she and Ally had had such a nice breakfast.

Then Essie began to sob; she slipped down and away from the table, and out of the room.

Ally followed her in amazement, calling and trying to overtake her, as she ran up-stairs and up-stairs to the garret itself, and threw herself, sobbing still, on the floor beside the nuts. [31]

"Oh, Essie! what is it? What is the matter?" cried Ally, throwing herself beside her. "Does your tooth ache?"

"Oh, it's the squirrel! the squirrel!" Essie moaned.

"The squirrel?"

"Oh, Ally! you and I robbed him! We took all he had! Oh, just think of him out in this storm and with nothing to eat, and his wife and the little squirrels—and they'll all die—they'll starve!"

By this time Ally felt it too, and sat silent, staring at Essie.

"Don't you suppose there's anything we can do?" asked Essie. "I never thought we were so wicked! Oh! don't you think we might carry the nuts back?" she implored.

Ally sprang up. "Oh, yes, we might, if Pincher helped us! But Pincher's gone round the mountain to the blacksmith's with the horses. Uncle Billy is away too. Perhaps—perhaps Old Uncle"—

"Oh, I would be afraid!" said Essie.

"So am I afraid," said Ally stoutly. "But you stay here, Essie. Oh, I wish Uncle Billy wasn't always going away!"

There was a noise of discussion in Old Uncle's office when Ally timidly turned the handle of the door, and paused there, ready to fly.

Old Uncle was looking over some accounts, and taking certain of his head-men to task for their short-comings. "What is it?" he cried sharply, as Ally hesitated. [32]

"I—I—wanted to speak to you," said Ally, and Old Uncle saw the tear still lying on her cheek.

"Well, then," said Old Uncle to the two men whom he had been arraigning—some would say blowing up—a moment before, "you go out to the kitchen, and tell Diane to give you some of her buckwheat cakes and maple-syrup—Diane makes a good cup of coffee, too—and we'll see to this later. But I'm not going to let any such carelessness pass! Now, little one!"

For a moment Ally hung back—and then, like a burst of the gale itself, she ran and climbed Old Uncle's knee, and threw her arms about his neck, and told him every word of her story, her little face hidden under his chin.

"Well, well," said Old Uncle, "that is bad. But it isn't so bad it can't be mended, maybe. Pretty tough on the squirrel. Yes, Ally, I, too, call it cruel."

"Oh, it is, it is!" sobbed Ally. "We know it is! And Essie wants to take the nuts back."

"In this storm?"

"Oh, we wouldn't mind!"

"But you'd be drenched. And you'd take cold."

"We'd rather!" persisted Ally, sitting up.

"And have to take medicine, and stay up-stairs in bed all day? And you couldn't remember the place!" [33]

"Oh, yes we could!" she cried eagerly. "We know the very tree—the old pine that Pincher said was as old as a pine can be, and that has been struck by lightning so often. The squirrel has his nest up there, and the nuts were in a great hollow at the root. Oh, we know the very spot!" And Ally's smile now was so bright that it made her tears look like sparks of fire.

"And you want to take the nuts back," said Old Uncle. "What for? Because you took what wasn't yours, or because you pity the squirrel?"

"Oh, both, Uncle! both! And we haven't eaten one!"

"Well, I'm glad you've found your consciences. Almost all the nuts on the trees and lying on the ground are yours, if you choose to take them. But the nuts that the squirrels have laid away—why, that's another story! Let's see. It's a rather tough storm. Aunt Susan will be sure you'll be made sick—I tell you what we'll do. We won't tell her!" said Old Uncle. "Where's the bag and the baskets? In the garret? Run up and put the nuts in, and then get on your cloaks and leggings and overshoes, and your hooded waterproofs, and come down here, both of you. Quietly now,

quietly."

Ally danced back to Essie. And presently the twins, and Old Uncle—loaded down with bag and baskets—stole out of the side-door, like conspirators.

[34]

They found the hickory-wood without any difficulty, and the old pine-tree on its farther edge, with two scolding squirrels far aloft in it. The children put back the nuts, and joyously pulled and piled over them the wet leaves and moss, scattering about a few particularly fat ones, while Old Uncle pictured to them the bewilderment of Mr. Squirrel when he should find his nuts there after all. He said Mrs. Squirrel would declare they must have been dreaming, or else had a bad nightmare.

Never did rosier and happier little women come dripping out of a storm than Essie and Ally that day.

"Oh!" cried Aunt Susan, meeting them in the hall "where have you three been? I'm afraid you've caught"—

"Give them hot baths at once, and let Maria and Aunt Rose rub them down hard, and put them to bed till dinner-time," said Old Uncle. "They went off without asking you, and must be punished!" But how his eyes twinkled!

"Oh! I just love Old Uncle, don't you?" asked Essie, as they slipped into the warm bed.

"And I guess he loves us now," said Ally. And they chattered until they fell asleep, and woke only in time for dinner and dumplings.

VI.

[35]

AFTER DARK ON THE ICE.

THE nuts had not been spread a great while, and the crew of loggers had gone up into the woods, when one day, well-clad for cold weather—the girls in their red cloaks and hoods and mittens, the boys in reefers and high boots and ear-laps—Charlie and Will swinging a parcel of glittering steel things led all the little southerners down to the lake.

"Oh!" cried Essie, "your Jack Frost has been here too, and has turned our blue lake into silver!"

"It's like Achilles' shield," said Janet, who was tumbling round by herself, trying to slide.

"What do you know about Achilles?" laughed Will.

"I've heard you reading to Uncle Billy. Perhaps I know as much as you do," said Janet slyly.

"Well, then you don't know much," retorted Will, buckling his last strap.

What witchcraft it seemed to the younger children, when they themselves tottered this way and that, trying to keep their balance, falling and bumping and bruising themselves continually, to see Charlie and Will wheeling in figure-eights, leaning far over on the outer roll, cutting their names in the ice, and sliding off like flying-fish!

[36]

"Ho! I can do that!" cried Jack, stamping his skate into the ice. And over he went!

Aunt Rose took Ally and Essie by either hand, and swept off with them, their little feet close together, so that they really thought they were skating!

"It's most like flying," said Essie, delight in her eyes, her cheeks like red apples, while Ally, looking straight ahead, was silent with joy, her yellow hair streaming out behind her.

Janet went blundering about alone a long time, somehow, anyhow, and all at once finding herself firm on her feet, and making a stroke. Then the dinner-bell rang, and the skates had to come off. But after the lesson-hour they were out again, for the afternoon—except Will, who was behind with his Greek. And after they had spent all the spare hours of a week's time on the ice, they were so expert that they felt like a flock of birds.

It was dark early at that time of the year, and one afternoon what was their surprise to see Uncle Billy and Charlie building a fire on the lake. "Oh, they are going to melt the ice!" cried Jack; and all the others echoed his words in alarm, and started for the shore.

"Pooh!" said Charlie. "How thick do you suppose this ice is?"

[37]

"An inch? Two inches?" inquired Janet.

"Will measured it at the outlet, and he says it's twenty-four."

"I wish Will knew his Greek as well as he knows a lot of other things," said Uncle Billy.

"I don't, though!" said Will. "And I don't know that I want to, anyway. I don't want to go to college. I want to go logging in the woods."

"He wants to be a dunce. Would you believe it?" said Uncle Billy. "Essie, what do you suppose we are building this fire for? For fun, Ally? To warm your toes, Janet? Jack, what do you suppose lives under this ice?"

Near the fire Uncle Billy's big chisel was cutting a hole through the solid floor, and Charlie was cutting another a little bigger.

"The most onluckiest hole ye iver cut, so it is," Michael said afterward to Charlie.

When the holes were ready Uncle Billy began to bob strings in the dark unseen water. In a moment more Janet was bobbing one too.

"He'll pull me under! Oh, he'll pull me under!" she suddenly cried out, as she felt a big twitch on her hook. "Come help me, somebody! He'll pull me down into the hole!"

Uncle Billy put his hands over Janet's, and together they brought up a royal fighting pickerel.

All the other children, still flourishing round on their skates, swarmed up then to see the big creature Janet had caught, and to beg for hooks and lines themselves. And in a moment—oh, horror! what was this? Essie had skated straight into the hole Charlie had cut. There was a wild cry from Essie, as she plunged, a wilder one from all the others. [38]

But on the instant Uncle Billy had flung himself across the hole, and with both arms down in the still cold water had caught hold of her. Then crawling away, with Charlie's help he lifted her to the top and out upon the ice, quite conscious, but terribly scared, and as wet as any seal.

Accidents never come alone, says an old proverb; and it was not to be expected that Ally should not have her share in any dangers going.

Before Essie, shivering in every atom of her, had fairly been set upon her feet, another shriek rang upon the air.

"I'm all afire! Uncle Billy, I'm afire!"

And there was Ally wrapped in a blaze, that made every one, for a single heartbeat, stone still with terror!

For in moving quickly on her skates away from the hole where Uncle Billy was drawing poor little Essie out of the water, Ally had backed straight into the fire, which caught her skirts instantly; and no one knows what might have happened if Charlie had not rushed and thrown her down, and tossed his coat over her, and rolled and pressed and stamped out the flame, although not till it had scorched his good hands and burned poor Ally's little legs. Perhaps he was not very much helped by Essie's running and precipitating herself and all her wetness on them both. [39]

"Well," said Uncle Billy, "here's a chapter of accidents!" And Essie, wet and freezing, and Ally with her two blistered legs and burned and ragged woolens, were huddled in the greatcoats and mounted one on each shoulder, and Uncle Billy ran with them as if he wore seven-league boots.

"I never cried at all!" exclaimed Ally, while Aunt Susan dressed and bandaged her burns—which, however, were not very severe.

Soon the poor twins were lying snugly in bed, Essie in an extra flannel-wrap, with hot-water bottles all around her, and hot catnip-tea inside her.

"But you screamed, Ally," said Essie, "if you didn't cry."

"And so did you! But that was not crying! I was so exprised. I didn't scream because it *hurt*. It hurt me more when you went down that hole!"

"And I thought I was afire when I saw you, for all I was so wet and cold," said Essie. "O Ally! I'm so glad you're saved all but the backs of your ankles! And they'll grow again, you know."

"Isn't it good we're both saved?" said Ally cosily. "Oh, Essie, keep your feet right on the hot soap-stone! Only, please don't touch the back of my legs! They do smart a little. What you going to dream about? Are you awake? I'm going to dream I went into the garden and there—atop of a—big rose—I saw"—And Ally slipped away into dreamland, where Essie had gone before her. [40]

VII. THE SNOW HUT.

IT was December, but all thoughts of Santa Claus were kept out of mind by the preparation of the blocks of snow for the building of the snow hut in the garden. This structure the children from the south could not actually believe in till they saw it rising. But it was a real hut, with a roof, with a low doorway, with a window of thin ice, with a chimney—a chimney that could have a fire in it! It seemed to the children from the south that they were living in a wonder-world!

But, either owing to the fire in the chimney or to a short season of thaw, the roof of their hut one day fell in. It then, almost immediately, became a fort to attack and to defend over the [41]

battlements. The children organized into two parties, for assault and repulse, with soft snow-balls, broken icicles for spears, and baskets for shields.

It was a little hard for them to divide into two parties. It was hard for Ally that Jane took Bobbo inside the fortification—Ally's cat, you remember. It was just as hard for Janet that Bose and Diamond—her dogs—belonged to the attacking party, and were always its most furious members, their bark as good as a war-whoop. And Essie might not have forgiven Janet at all for belonging to the other side had not it been for the sappers and miners later. [42]

Will and Jack and Janet were the colonists, inside the fort. Charlie and Essie and Ally were the Indians. Puss Bobbo was an Indian captive in the fort. The dogs were allies of the Indians; and the Indians were continually being repulsed with great slaughter, although presently very active again, for dead and wounded.

One morning during the siege, Bose happened to find a rabbit-hole. The snow had been blown or scuffed away from it, and into the little tunnel of frozen earth Bose plunged, and of course Diamond after him; and along it both made their way, scratching and burrowing and yelping with all their might. Suddenly their movements were heard inside the fort, which had been built, it seems, directly over the rabbit burrow. Will gave the alarm.

"Sappers and miners! sappers and miners! The enemy are upon us!"

"Oh! we are lost!" cried the garrison.

And then Bose's head emerged in the very middle of the snow fort's floor, and the colonists seized the dogs with tremendous cheering and also, it must be owned, with any amount of hugging, and held them captive.

This unwarrior-like conduct so displeased Bobbo that he sprang upon the battlements and deserted to the enemy on the instant, to the great relief of Ally and Essie. [43]

"Oh, Aunt Rose!" cried Essie, when they went in at night, "do you believe the little Esquimau children in their snow huts have any better time than we do?"

The battles were renewed morning after morning, the weather being bright. Hostilities were sometimes suspended in order that the besieged party might sally out for more snow, after the way in which the Samoan armies borrow ammunition of each other; for, of course, if you want the fun of fighting, both parties must have munitions of war.

"I guess *that* ball did the work!" cried Jack, as his missile hit the captain of the Indians square in the face. "I put a lot of 'em in the water-butt and then froze 'em, last night."

"My goodness, Jack!" cried Will. "That's like poisoning wells in the enemy's country! It's as bad as shooting with poisoned bullets! Don't you know ice-balls might kill people? Ah, it did do the work! See, Charlie's nose is bleeding!"

At this Jack began to cry. "You're a fine bawl-baby for a soldier!" said Will then with much scorn. "You going to pity the enemy? Why, I broke a finger once, and never thought of crying! Here they come! Ready now! Aim low! Fire!" And the garrison overwhelmed the assailants with such a shower of snow that they retreated in disorder.

Charlie rallied his men, however, in spite of the gore that reddened the field, and charged again with such vehemence that there was a scream of real pain, and then one of his soldiers fell over and lay still; and it was found that Ally had fainted with a broken arm. [44]

Charlie carried Ally into the house, followed by every one of the poor little people in dead silence after the first exclaiming and crying, all feeling like murderers.

"Oh! is she going to die?" asked Janet, her face buried in the skirts of her cloak, and her sobs making her words something you had to guess.

"People don't die of simple fractures," said Old Uncle, who knew something of surgery. "But we will send for Dr. Brent. Keep the arm cool—not cold, remember—till he comes." And he went for Dr. Brent himself.

The doctor kept Ally quiet, with Aunt Rose, for some days; and everyone forgot the business and battles of the snow hut, and hung about the house, without lessons and without games. Will used his best exertions to commit to memory the names of the Greek ships, and Essie and Janet spent much of the time in tears till Aunt Susan took them into the kitchen every day for Diane to teach them how to make little frosted cakes and tarts.

At last the doctor allowed them to see the invalid—at first one at a time, and at last all together. One was allowed to put cologne on her handkerchief, one to change her pillows, one to bring the milk for her, and one just to hang over her and kiss her now and then, till Ally felt rather important, and thought it wasn't such a bad thing to have a simple fracture after all. [45]

"I wish it had been my arm," said Will, one day, when Ally had been brought down stairs into the sitting-room, and was lying on the lounge. "Then I shouldn't have to be bothering my head about subjunctives in Latin and aorists in Greek, and dear knows what!"

It was at about this time that a supply-team was starting for the logging-camp in the far woods. That day Old Uncle had taken Aunt Susan up with him, in the driving-sleigh, saying she really

needed some sort of an outing.

When Will had seen the prancing black horses shaking off showers of bell-tones, he had begged hard to go, and harder still when he heard there was a hatchet and knife in the sleigh, and saw Old Uncle examining his revolvers, there being a rumor of wolves on the way, although probably a baseless rumor. But Will's entreaties had been promptly silenced, and he was told that he must stay and attend to his lessons if he wanted to enter Bowdoin year after next.

Well, Will didn't want to enter Bowdoin. He wanted to go to the logging-camp. Year after next was a great way off. The woods, the life there, the stories, the games, the hunting for bears, the gathering of gum, the deer-hunt, the escape from panthers or gray, gaunt wolves, the coming down with the drive in the spring, the jam of the logs at the falls with the raftsmen skipping round on them as lightly as Mercury in the mythology, handling them with long hooks, and springing for dear life as one dexterous thrust loosened the whole mass and sent them rearing, rolling, plunging, and shooting over the cataracts,—all that was close at hand. And Will, as he thought of it, was bound to be a lumberman. [46]

"I want to go up and stay all winter, and come down on the drive and shoot the rapids," grumbled Will, when he went in. "And I might bring home a caribou's horns and a catamount's pelt."

"You!" said Charlie. "A catamount would tear you to bits with his great claws before you could run! You'd be scared to death nights just hearing him cry round the camp!"

"Will," said Aunt Rose, as she gathered up her work and left the room, "it's quite enough for you to read of the killings in your Virgil, if you want to reach Bowdoin before you're gray."

"Oh, Bowdoin, Bowdoin! I don't want to reach Bowdoin! Ever!" shouted Will. "I'm tired and sick of hearing about Bowdoin. I'm going to take my nose-money, and buy a township up in the Aroostook and cut off the timber and be a lumberman, just as much as I please!"

"How many bears and wolves would have to be killed, do you think," said Charlie, who rather loved to tease, "before you've got enough nose-money to buy a township?" [47]

"Oh, don't bother me with your sums!" cried Will.

For the backwoodsmen brought to Old Uncle, who was a justice of the peace, the black and brown noses of the wolves and bears and cubs which they destroyed; and he gave them a certificate which entitled them to collect the bounty paid by the State for the killing of the creatures. Then he gave to the children the small silver piece each man paid as fee, all sharing the fund together. It would require, indeed, quite an arithmetical process to tell just when Will's share would amount to enough to buy one of the plantations in the Aroostook.

"I don't care," continued Will, "I haven't the making of a scholar in me!"

"No one has, without work," said Charlie, going away to learn his own lesson, as he said, in peace.

"But I *should* be a very good—"

"You just be a very good boy now," said Janet, in a patronizing way, "and mind Ally for me while I go and get my eggs. I found old Speckle's nest yesterday."

Pretty work for a boy who had "the making of a very good logger" in him, who could swing an axe in a circle round his head! He pretended not to see when Ally held out her little hand to him—the well hand—not even when her dear lip began to tremble. [48]

He left the room, and sauntered out into the yard; and meeting Janet, with her apron full of eggs, he said, gruffly: "Your sister's all alone."

Then he looked up the axe, and hacked at the chopping-block, feeling much too ill-humored even to make his chopping useful with kindling-sticks.

He chopped till his blood began to circulate, and he was almost in a happy mood when he threw down the axe. He had reached a determination that was highly satisfactory to himself, without a thought of the trouble and anxiety he was going to give everyone in the house.

VIII. A WILFUL BOY.

 [49]

THE determination which Will had made was that if he couldn't be allowed to go to the woods properly, then he would go improperly.

He would be off. Yes, sir—he would be off, just ahead of the supply-team, which had not yet gone, and the men would feel obliged to take him on when they overtook him. They couldn't leave him there, and they couldn't spare the time to turn about and take him home—and so he would get to the logging-camp in spite of everyone.

As he stood thinking, he heard Janet, who had a pretty talent for music, at her practicing, playing in childish fashion the Spinning Song. He half heard in it the whirr of the wheel, the beat of the treadle, the song of the spinning girl, the rustle of leaves outside her, the hum of bees and stir of wind, and twitter of birds in the branches. And that was the last Will heard and saw of home that day. For he put on his reefer, pulled his sealskin cap over his ears, hung his skates on his arm, and with his hands buried in his pockets went down the field to take a short cut and get the start of the team.

[50]

Will felt himself very ill-used. There he was, kept at his books, with a woman to teach him, and obliged to look forward to a life of study, when he wanted to be using his muscles, to be shooting and trapping, following the deer, snaring small game!

It was very short-sighted and a great injustice on Old Uncle's part, Will reasoned; and he couldn't see what Aunt Susan had been thinking of; and he was very indignant with his Aunt Rose, who had insisted on those horrid rules in the subjunctive; and as for Janet she could chop all the Latin she wished—he preferred to chop wood!

Nursing his wrath, Will ran and walked and skipped along. Reaching the highway, he got a lift of some miles by clinging to the runners of a surveying party's cutter. He got a bowl of bread and milk at a wayside shanty, for which he paid all the pennies in his pocket, then had another ride of a couple of hours on a slow ox-team laboring along to an isolated farm.

And now he was already in the woods, not the deep forest of the loggers in the remote north—that was still a journey off—but where the highway was to be guessed by the open spaces between the lower hills, as there were no marks of travel on the snow-crust. The air was already obscure, although he could see a belt of sunset through the boles of the trees. He began to have a very desolate sensation.

[51]

Will was not afraid—oh, no, not he! It was simply mighty lonesome. He trudged away, all the same, and began to whistle.

Presently he stopped whistling. He wondered why the supply-team did not come along. Had he made a mistake—was it to-morrow noon they had been going to start? Pincher had certainly told him they would be off within the hour. Probably they were only waiting for Diane to put up the cold beef and bottle the coffee. He expected to hear the bells every moment.

How surprised Old Uncle would be when he saw him come into the camp with Pincher and Jo! How angry, too, perhaps, at first! But the fact that Aunt Susan was along would counterbalance that. Will could see her sweet serene face in the white fur hood. Well, Old Uncle would understand how impossible it was to drive a boy out of his bent. Yes, he would, sir! Will reflected with pride that now he had taken things into his own hands, and walked on with great resolution. For a fellow who had taken things into his own hands could not afford to be down-hearted because the road was lonely, long, or dark. If he was—he would not say the word "afraid" even to himself. Well, if he was, what would he be in the deep woods of the caribou and the catamount? Thereat a picture came before his eyes of a huge caribou plunging down the forest-depths with great bounds, his nostrils dilating, his black eyes burning, his mighty horns laid back along his shoulders; and if ever any one was glad it was Will when he heard a far-off tinkle, and presently a peal of sledge-bells, and turned about and stood still to meet the supply-team with Pincher and Jo.

[52]

"Wal, he's a chap of speerit, I vum!" cried Pincher, when the boy in the middle of the way raised his hand to halt the horses. "I do' 'no's we got anythin' ter du but ter take him on. But I guess we'll cure him!"

"Ol' man'll be mad," suggested Jo—Old Uncle wearing that appellation on account of his mastership, by no means on account of his years.

"Can't leave the boy here in this woodsy place, and night comin' on, if he is," said Pincher. "Pretty kittle o' fish! Up with ye, youngster!"

Tucked under a lot of horse-blankets on top of the load, Will knew but little more till late the next morning. Then he found they were still jogging on. He had a vague, delightful memory of a misty scene of swinging lanterns and shouting voices, and of their changing horses in the middle of the night at the remote half-way house.

Feeling a little stiff and sore, he stretched himself, and got down to walk a bit and limber up with Pincher. And he found the cold beef and sausage and biscuit and bottled coffee as good as nectar and ambrosia.

[53]

So they plodded on through the day, with a bite here and a sup there. Just at dusk they stopped in a sheltered spot where they were to camp for the night in a rude hut built there for the logging-parties.

"Well, this is great," said Will, standing with his legs far apart in front of the fire that Pincher had snapping outside and sending up whirls of sparks. Pincher was cooking some squirrels he had shot.

After a savory repast, Will went to sleep on a pile of hemlock-boughs, covered with another pile. He seemed to be on the brink of surprising experiences. When Jo waked him in the first glow of red sunrise through the chinks, he felt as if he had been floating on a cloud in the upper sky.

"We must hurry up," exclaimed Jo. "'T's thickening for foul weather." So they broke their fast as they went along, Will refreshing himself with a huge icicle. He felt that even were he sent back to his books, and obliged to learn all about Hector and Andromache by way of punishment, it would be a cheap price to pay for the joy and satisfaction of this trip.

Still, as they approached the camp, Will's heart was not quite as light, though they were welcomed by the baying of dogs, the chorus of clinking axes, and the shouts of the men driving the oxen that hauled the felled trees to the lake. But it rose again when he heard that Old Uncle and Aunt Susan had gone on toward the upper camp, and would not be back for some hours. [54]

Will lost no time in making himself familiar with his new surroundings—the long low house of logs with the bunks inside, the deacon-seat where so many good stories were told, the huge fire where the sturdy little cook was frying a barrel of doughnuts at a time.

"How do you like life here?" said he to the cook.

"First-rate," was the cook's reply, as he dropped his dough into the fat.

"Ever seen a catamount?" Will asked.

"Cry round the camp soon's it's dark."

Will's eyes opened wider. "Really?"

"Cry like a child ter toll the men out."

"Do the men ever go?"

"What'd they go fer? Ter be torn ter pieces?"

"Say! You got any gum?"

The cook pointed to a canister full of the daintiest-looking lumps of pink transparency.

"I suppose you have all the venison you want?" said Will, sampling the gum.

"Jes' comes up and asks ter be et!"

Taking a doughnut, Will went out to investigate the oxen, the logging-roads, and the long frozen lake upon which the logs were being hauled to be all afloat and ready with the breaking up of the ice in the spring.

The ice lay glittering. In less than no time Will had his skates on, and was out careering over the crystal glare, doing his fancy tricks, and speeding away from reach to reach among the islands with which the great lake was sprinkled. [55]

It was daylight much longer out on the open ice than in the woody places. And exhilarated with the glow of his swift motion, Will did not think anything about time until he saw large snow-flakes dancing about him. When he turned, he at once noticed that what light there was was only that of a gray gloaming, and that a chill damp wind was blowing in his face with a snow-storm on its wings.

However, there would be no trouble about skating back; and Will went flying campward against the wind, when the screw of one of his skates snapped and sent him tumbling headlong, rolling over and over. When he had picked himself up, and adjusted the skate again, he could not tell in which direction he had been going, up or down, along or across the lake.

The shores all looked alike. There were no lights of the camp to be seen, whether hidden by the islands or by the projecting shores. Try as he might to find the track of his skates he could not see any, either for the dim light, or for the snow that had fallen and was covering the lake more and more.

When he had skated perhaps a mile, and still saw no lights of the camp, Will was sure he had been turned about, and he reversed his motion and went in the other direction. But still there were no lights—not a twinkle anywhere, and when he halloed no answer came but a far-off echo. [56]

Well, this would never do, Will said. Some one of all the logging-paths would lead to camp, of course. He took off his skates and climbed the shore, and went trudging and whistling along. Still no lights. But hadn't the camp been on the edge of the lake? He would wind along the edge, then, and sooner or later he *must* come to it!

But Will soon found it more than dusky among the trees; and the broad gleam of the lake was gone; and the main logging-path along the shore was gone. He did not know which one of all the dim openings was the right one; the snow was bewildering; it was already dark; he was lost.

IX. THE NIGHT-STORM IN THE WOODS.

WHEN Will realized that he was lost in the woods, of a stormy winter's night, for a few moments

he ran blindly forward, anyhow, anywhere, till he stopped simply because he had not another breath in him.

He leaned against a tree then, to quiet himself. Setting his wits at work he remembered that when he had been skating away from camp the wind had been directly behind him. If now he faced the wind he must be facing toward the camp. Everything was easy enough, after all.

But in a few moments he found that in among the eddies of the wood, face which way he might, he was always facing the wind!

As soon as he had breath enough he shouted with all his might, over and over again; a dull, faint echo answered him—an echo like a child's cry.

All at once he recollected that catamount tolling the men out with a child's cry, and his heart stood still. If that sound were a catamount! He began to run—tripping, stumbling, hitting outstretched boughs and fetching down on himself plunges of snow. Finally he brought up against a moss-covered giant of the wood, his lungs a furnace, his throat like burning brass.

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He sat down on a fallen log. The snow was floating and eddying and falling round him. Now and again a soft bough swept low and touched his cheek in a sort of cold caress. He thought he would lie down presently under the lee of the log and stay all night, he was so tired.

Perhaps sitting there, his head bent on his knees, Will did lose himself an instant; for he started suddenly as if from a dream of the Wild Huntsman and the Spirits of the Wood streaming by with lights and shouts in the forest.

He recalled directly Old Uncle's once saying that a person lost in the woods should on no account go to sleep, but should keep on moving. He rose, pulled up the collar of his reefer, pulled down the ears of his cap, and set out to keep moving. He had a singular feeling in doing so that somehow he was obeying Old Uncle and got a sort of comfort from it.

It was a mild storm, but Will was obliged to use a good deal of effort to walk in the damp snow. He felt that he must now be really making headway somewhere; and he trudged and trudged and trudged, quite sure his way pointed to camp at last, for if he were able to keep it up and go on he *must* skirt the whole lake before morning, and so come to the camp. And on he walked and walked.

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His legs ached, his back ached, his throat ached, his feet ached, his toes tingled. By and by he stumbled over another great log. What was this? His skates that he had dropped the time he had sat down and had come near falling asleep? Oh, it was the same log! He had come back to it! He had been traveling round and round in a circle!

Will sat down on the log again and leaned against the tree. In spite of himself the tears spurted forth. He was lost in the woods. He was going to freeze and die there. He was going to be buried in the snow. He would never see Aunt Susan again. Oh, if he had only been good to Ally when she held out her little well hand to him the other morning! The Spinning Song, that Janet had been playing when he threw down his axe, sent its sweet sound whirring in his ears.

Oh, if he could sit down by Aunt Rose again with his Greek! Oh! why had he been such an idiot? Why hadn't he understood that Old Uncle knew best? How tired he was! How hungry he was! Why had he left Aunt Susan's broiled chicken and slices of bread and jam, his own white bed, that crackling fire on the old winking and blinking knights-at-arms andirons, the boys' games, little Essie and Ally? Even Erminie and Bobbo, who regarded him as the torment of their lives, seemed dear to him at that moment. Oh! was it true that they were all so happy, so warm, so comfortable, never dreaming of him alone and lost and dying in these dark stormy woods full of wild beasts!

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Yes. It was all up with him. He had been a wicked boy; he must take what came. But how they would all feel! Ally and Essie would cry fit to break their hearts. Old Uncle and Uncle Billy—oh, it would be dreary in the Valley! And his dear, dear, dear Aunt Susan, the only mother he had ever known—the image of her pale sweet face was too much for him, and he was crying himself with all his might. And then, wearied out, and sending up now a prayer to Heaven that he might not die, and now a prayer that they might not feel too bad at home—all at once he was sound asleep, and the great hemlock-tree was bending down its branches heavy with snow about him, and sheltering him.

When at last, aroused by a disturbance about him, the cry of voices, the blast of horns, the flash of lanterns, Will sleepily opened his eyes again, he might have thought it was heaven, with some great light glowing on a heavenly spirit's face, only that he knew he deserved nothing of that sort! In another moment he saw that it was Aunt Susan, and without asking how she came there he threw himself into her arms.

The facts in the case were, that when Will had not returned to the camp there had been an alarm given. The whole body of men had gone out in search-parties after him and Pincher; for Pincher, too, was gone. It was one of these parties, passing in the distance, that had given Will his instant's dream of the Wild Huntsman.

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And Old Uncle, driving down from the upper camp, with a jingle of bells and flashing of sleigh-lamps, was passing just as a group of the men had paused wondering at the place not far from the wayside where for a circle of some hundred yards in diameter the snow was somewhat

trodden down around the old post-office tree (the very circle where poor Will had done his tramping), and naturally Old Uncle had stopped and come to see what was the cause of the excitement. Aunt Susan had alighted too, and followed, and had been first of all to see Will in beneath the broad hemlock boughs.

In that moment of joy and relief and gratitude, Will never noticed the big pea-jacket that had been spread over him and from which Pincher was shaking the snow.

"I'll—I'll go to Bowdoin, Uncle," Will was saying, standing between Old Uncle and Aunt Susan. "I'll—I'll learn the lines of the Greek ships by heart. I'll—I'll go to Bowdoin!"

Then he was in the sleigh, cuddled under the robes, ready for the drive to the lean-to of bark and boughs beside the long low log house of the camp, where Old Uncle and Aunt Susan were going to rough it for the night. [62]

"I guess he's cured," muttered Pincher to Old Uncle, handing up the reins. "I guess he's cured. I ain't been fur off none er the time. And I guess he's hed all he wants o' loggin.' And I'll warrant he won't run away to sea, nuther! He's cured."

X.

 [63]

THE CHRISTMAS-TREE ON THE CLIFF.

It was lucky for the Children of the Valley, as Maria said, that Master Will got home from the woods and put his heart into his books before Christmas-time. "There'd been no Christmas-tree," said she, "if that child'd got lost in the woods. I declare it makes my blood run cold a-thinkin' of them catamounts!"

But still the very day before Christmas had arrived, and the expectant little southern children saw with some dismay no preparations for a Christmas-tree about the house. They had, themselves, prepared the most elaborate gifts in their power for the grown-up people. Jack had made a wooden paper-knife for Old Uncle, whittling and sand-papering it to a fine edge; and Janet had made Uncle Billy a pen-wiper, and for its central ornament Ally had given her tiny glass goose, which Janet had fastened in; and Essie had made Aunt Susan a blotter, and pasted her best paper doll on the cover, daubing herself stiff with the mucilage. But except for the scarf of pink wool for Aunt Rose, in the knitting of which all had taken turns, they had not been able to do more; and they had decided to make an exchange of possessions for each other. [64]

"I'd rather give the paper-cutter to Will, now he's going to college," said Jack, a little wistfully, as twilight fell on Christmas Eve, and they were feeling a trifle misused. "Old Uncle won't want it, and he'll only grunt."

"He'll be very pleased inside," said Essie.

"Hurrah!" said Will, coming in just then, "you're all to be allowed to sit up, and we're all bound for a big sleigh-ride as soon as supper's over!"

"Isn't there any Christmas-tree?" asked Essie.

"Oh, yes! there'll be a Christmas-tree," said Will.

And then Aunt Rose swept them all out to their hot milk and zweibach, and the thin pancakes rolled in jelly, which were a special treat. And after that, there was a wild hustling up-stairs and into thick clothes and wraps; and the sleigh-bells were jangling and wrangling, and they were rushing out and in, and the hot soap-stones were at their feet, and the furs tucked round them, and Pincher was driving—and it was certain that the whole household were along, either in the big sleigh or the little ones, except Uncle Billy and Charlie.

The dusk was all about them and clear starlight over head; and soon silence fell upon the wondering little ones who seemed to themselves to be on the edge of some strange beautiful unknown other world. [65]

Pincher brought the horses to a walk, and drove them so carefully that there was hardly a tinkle of harness or bells as they climbed the steep snowy way. Far off and softly came the silvery peal from the tower of the little church below them. They wound round a projecting wall of the mountain—and there on the side of the great cliff, blazing with a myriad colored lights that hung on its huge boughs like some wonderful fruit, was the ancient fir-tree that had weathered centuries of storm and shine, holding up all its splendor to the dark skies, and answering the distant stars with emerald and ruby and topaz and sapphire sparks.

There was a shout from every voice, and then silence again. Essie burst into tears.

"What in gracious you crying for?" asked Will, leaning back to whisper.

"Oh! it's so beautiful," said Essie. "I can't bear it."

"It is so beautiful," said Ally, hugging her. "Oh, Essie! look again! and look again!"

And they looked again, and again; and they drove slowly up the way to see it from all sides,

making night glorious, and turned and drove slowly back. And all the time the Christmas bells rang out below, and the great tree held out its proud branches clad in living rainbows. Then, with many cries of joy, they went down and left its last sparkle round the cliff behind them.

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"Hold on!" cried a voice they knew. "If you would hear something to your advantage, hold on!" And after a little delay, Uncle Billy and Charlie came round the cliff, lugging a big box along, with as much of the paraphernalia of the battery as they could bring, and got it in one of the sleighs. Then after going back up the height for the rest, they piled into the sleigh with the children, and Uncle Billy took the reins and drove down the hill, as Will said, as if a comet were after them, while all of them sang at the top of their sweet shrill voices, "When shepherds watched their flocks by night."

"Oh! do you suppose," said Janet, when they had finished singing, "that what the shepherds saw was more beautiful than that tree full of jewels?"

"Of course it was," said Essie; "angels are more beautiful than anything—up in the dark sky—angels that the glory shone round!"

"Well, children," said Old Uncle when the sleighs stopped at the door, "how do you like my sort of a Christmas-tree?"

"O Uncle! Old Uncle! we like it; there was never anything so fine! It was just—just—"

"So I think," said he; "that fills my idea of a Christmas-tree. Not looking out for gifts, but just making the tree show forth praise. Still I suppose you youngsters would like a surprise or two, and Santa Claus would be disappointed if he found no stockings at the chimney-side. Hang them all up and see what will happen."

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And all of a sudden Old Uncle was swarmed over by a multitude of red sleeves and mittens, and cold cheeks and warm kisses, that took him as much by surprise as in a minute or two it did the owners of the sleeves and mittens and cheeks—to think they had ventured it!

XI.

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AUNT ROSE AND THE CHILDREN.

THE happy winter wore away. And one March day, under the lee of a rock, they found what looked like a little purple rose, the first hepatica, blooming in the wind and frost and raw air. The brooks were breaking their ice chains then, and racing away; and there was a sound of frogs singing, like silver bells; and look! here was a robin, and there went the flash of a blue-bird's wing. The buds that had pushed off the leaves last fall were swelling; the air was full of wings, full of song; the rocks were white with saxifrage, the grass slopes were thick with violets; and then came the rich pungent lilac scent every time the old trees shook their purple plumes in the wind; and after that the world looked as if it had spread its wings in the flowering of the apple-orchards; then came the bramble-roses, and summer was warm on all the hills.

"I don't know how there can be anything more beautiful than summer in this valley between the hills," said Aunt Rose. "How I wish all the children in the dark crowded city could have such air and sunshine!"

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"Oh, Aunt Rose, I wish so too!" said Essie.

"Is it very dark and crowded there?" asked Ally.

"Ally," said Aunt Rose, "once I saw a street so narrow that it was hardly more than a gutter, and the quarreling women in the high old rickety houses on either side could hit each other with their brooms. And there were little starved-looking children there among those women."

"Oh! couldn't we take some of them up here to have some of our summer?" asked Janet.

"Old Uncle wouldn't like it," said Jack.

"No, Old Uncle wouldn't," said Essie. "He thinks there's plenty of children here now."

"I don't know that," said Aunt Rose, reflecting a little while. "Once we had Fresh Air children here, a good while ago, and it didn't disturb him."

"Perhaps, then, he wouldn't mind," said Essie.

The thought of the children in the city was such a sad one to them all that Aunt Rose was sorry she had spoken of them. For there had been some melancholy in the season any way for Essie and Ally, as Bobbo, Ally's cat, had disappeared; and Essie's best doll, the one that always went to bed with her, had lost her head in crossing a brook while her little mother stopped on the stepping-stone to show her the picture of herself in the pool just there.

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It was in this melancholy time, when Essie and Ally were sitting in the garret one rainy day, and Essie had been telling Ally her dreams concerning the Children of the Hill—who were, to her imagination, not little darlings who had been laid to rest up there, but a sort of angel-people—that Aunt Susan had come up and had cried over the tiny shirt she took from the old bureau-

drawer and Ally had tried to comfort her.

"Some day," little Ally had said, when Aunt Susan had gone down, "some day I am going up to find the Children of the Hill, and ask them to give back Aunt Susan's baby."

And it was the very next morning but one that Ally was not to be found—as you read in the beginning of the story—and the whole house and place and Valley were in commotion, and no one knew where to find her.

XII.

[71]

THE FLIGHT ON A STREET-CAR.

It was in this same lovely summer-time, far down in that dark, crowded city of which Aunt Rose had told the Children of the Valley, that one night a little girl, with a little baby in her arms, was standing in the doorway of a house that looked ready to fall on her.

A trickle of dirty water ran down the middle of the cobble-stones in front. The night was hot; men were asleep on their carts drawn up beside the walls, women were asleep hanging half out of the windows above for a breath of coolness, and other women had made some sort of bed on the pavement for their sick babies, and had stretched themselves on the hard stones beside them. The little girl's home was in one room far up near the top of the house, a room that had no window in it, and out of it her mother had been carried to her grave the day before. The dark, small, airless place had grown dreadful with stifling heat; and she had taken the small baby brother in her arms, and crept down the long flights of stairs. Almost every other step was missing, and rats slipped along beside her.

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It seemed heavenly to get down into the open air, foul and hot as that sort of open air was. She stepped out on the cobble-stones, picking her way through the gasping people there, no one noting her or caring about her.

She had heard some of the women in the house say that she and the baby were to be sent to an Institution. She did not know what that meant, but felt in it something of a vague horror. It would be a dreadful fate for her and for the little new baby. A resolve to run away from it had filled her whole being. She had heard cruel stories of places where poor children, like her, were sent—probably they were Institutions.

One of the more tender-hearted people who had been there that morning had given her some silver pieces. She had clutched and hidden them, and now she was wondering how far away they would take her.

She wandered on from one to another of the feebly-lighted lanes and alleys, hushing the baby, giving it her finger to suck, shifting it from shoulder to shoulder, and throwing back a swift glance of terror now and again lest anyone followed; for her fears had grown so that it seemed as if the whole alley, the whole city, were in a conspiracy to send her to the terrible Institution.

At last, cautiously, stopping to look, to listen, slinking into doorways if any came along, slipping far outside every knot of roistering or quarreling men, so small and dark herself as to seem only a part of the shadows, she came out upon the broader street that led into a square. Down a cross-street she saw the lights of a street-car flash along. It was going somewhere—away from this. She walked backward to make sure no one watched while she got out one of her silver pieces, then turned and ran swiftly, noiselessly.

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A car, coming along at that moment, was stopping for someone to get off; and she clambered up the steps in the instant, disposed herself and the baby at one end of the seat, and held out her silver piece to the conductor as if she rode in cars every day of her life, although disturbed by his sharp glance.

The motion of the car was delightful. It soothed the baby off to sleep; and the wind of its movement was so refreshing that she could have gone to sleep herself. She passed the time wishing the car was never going to stop, and hearing the wheels sing over and over to some tune of the alleys: "She'll never go back no more. She'll never go back no more."

She was in a happy land between dreaming and waking, when the car came to a stop, and a rude voice called, "End er the line!"

It filled her with consternation for a moment. Far off a church bell struck. It seemed an act of Providence that the car in waiting just beyond was starting for somewhere farther on, and she ran again and climbed aboard.

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She had no idea where she was going; but it was into distance, away from the city, on and on.

She crept out when by and by the car turned into its stable; and after strolling on a bit farther, she lay down on a piece of grass and went so sound asleep in the warm night that she did not even hear the baby cry.

XIII. SALLY'S VOYAGE.

IT was broad daylight when the little girl awoke, and saw a policeman bending over her.

"Oh, yep!" she cried, springing up at once and adjusting the baby. "I'm on me way to de country wid de kid. I'se got de stuff;" and she would have showed him a piece of her silver if she had not feared he might take it from her. The sight of the policeman gave her a great scare—it seemed as though it were impossible to escape from the city bounds. But after a kindly word and laugh he went another way; and she presently saw a little shop where she bought some milk, and fed the baby with a great deal of gurgling on his part and of endearment on hers, refilled the bottle, and then took a look about her. There was water not far away, and ships and steamboats, and a crowd of masts and funnels.

A bold idea struck her. She went down on one of the long wharves, still shouldering the baby that had fallen asleep again, walked aboard the boat where she saw the most commotion, and sat down behind a lot of barrels. It was a freight steamer, and not twenty minutes afterward it cast off and was out in the stream and plowing its way steadily out to sea. [76]

She knew that she could not escape discovery. But she did not believe the men would throw her overboard, and she fancied that maybe they would give her something to eat. Really she was not thinking much of anything excepting that they must get away, get away from that dreadful Institution. Poor little girl, who would have been so comfortable with the clean clothes, good food, and kind treatment of the very Institution from which she was running away, if she had only known it!

Suddenly the baby set up his tune. And then you may be sure there was an uproar, and a throng of bearded faces over her, and a chorus of loud voices round her. She was bidden out on the deck, and stood there in the ragged gown that was her only garment, with her bare feet, looking at the sailors with wild but fearless eyes, out of a tangle of hair, and clutching the baby.

"Hushy, hushy, hushy," she said to the whimpering little thing, as she patted its back. "It's Sally's byby, it's Sally's byby. Dey sha'n't nab Sally's byby!"

And the long and the short of it is that they didn't try to "nab Sally's byby." But they gave Sally a good breakfast, and a good dinner, and a bunk that night to sleep in, and passed the baby round, and altogether treated Sally like a princess. One of them gave her a large silk handkerchief, several of them gave her silver dollars, and the cook made the baby a little slip out of his own old shirt. [77]

They did counsel among themselves, indeed, as to the possibility of adopting her and the baby as mascots. Sally overheard them, and became filled with new fright; for that meant going back and forth to the city, and perhaps being found by some of the Institution's agents.

To such an extent did this new fear go that, although she knew she was leaving kind friends, the moment she could escape observation after they were at the wharf in the distant port, Sally quietly slipped ashore and made off.

XIV. SALLY'S HILL JOURNEY.

SALLY had been a little Fresh Air child one year; and so, being very bright and sharp with her eyes, and quite capable of putting two and two together, she was not unfamiliar with the ways of getting about.

She soon found her way to the station, people gazing after her with her baby on her shoulder. She felt so much more respectable than before the cook of the steamer took out his big needle and thread in her behalf that she did not mind the curious eyes as she skimmed along.

At the station she got some crackers, and some fresh milk for the baby, in a dreadful hurry, lest this time it should be the sailors who would be after her.

At the ticket-office, after answering many inquisitive questions, she bought with her silver dollars a ticket that would take her a long way on the train that was going farthest from the city she had left in the first place.

But she was not without alarm, when, as she sat munching her crackers, the train began to back and fill, ran a mile or so, and then stood still a long while. She walked up and down in the aisle, looking out of windows anxiously at every turn, over the broad water where boats rocked pleasantly, and singing in a low voice to the restless baby on her shoulder: [79]

“Buy my pipers, pritty loidy,
I don’t darst go home, that’s true;
I won’t git no supper, loidy,
If ye don’t, and if I do.”

At last another train came along, some people hurried in, and then Sally’s train went puffing and blowing on its way; and the joggle jolted the baby to sleep, and by and by Sally too. She roused herself to give the conductor her ticket—the man looking at her searchingly; but when he came back to question her he found her asleep again.

It was a long, refreshing slumber that Sally had; and when at last the little old conductor told her this was the place to which her ticket took her, she skipped off the car, happy-hearted to think of all the long distance that lay between her and the city and the ship. She edged through the little throng always waiting at a station, who if they thought at all about her thought she belonged to some poor French Canadians, and hurried down the first road she saw. Then spying a foot-path leading up a hill, among low bushes, to a wood, she was over the fence in no time, and following it up and out of sight.

Then at last Sally breathed freely. She never thought of being afraid in the green afternoon wood. She kept the half-visible path by a kind of instinct. [80]

On and on, and up and up, Sally went. Then down and down on the other side, she made her way, sometimes in deep green gloom, and creeping under heavy branches; sometimes where a shimmer of leaves let her see a pale blue sky overhead. Once a young fawn looked at her through the boughs and fled away in a fright that made her laugh—as if anything need be afraid of her! Once a brood of little brown partridges scurried away under foot like a parcel of dead leaves. Once she stooped to smooth two little hairy things cuddled in a grassy hollow in the lee of a big, warm rock, who evidently did not like it; and it was well for Sally that their mother, who would not have liked it either, was off foraging and rolling in a berry-patch—for they were bear’s cubs.

All the way along Sally was conscious of a delicious sort of air, a scent of earth and flowers and spicy leaves that comforted her soul, although burrs and boughs and twigs and pebbles discomfited her feet, tough little feet though they were.

By and by the trees grew thin. She came out on a bright and open spot where a spring bubbled up and ran away in a tiny brook. A wooden trough, hollowed out of an old tree, stood beside the spring, half full of water in which the sun had lain all day.

As she sat down, Sally dabbled her fingers in the trough. The water was warm. In a moment she had off the baby’s poor little slip, and then gave him the most refreshing bath the little creature had ever had in his life. After it, she laid him down to kick and sprawl and crow and gurgle on a bed of soft warm moss, while she washed her own face and hands, and dipped her head in the spring, where the water made a glossy curl of every lock of her hair. [81]

This done, Sally took the bottle of milk out of the big silk handkerchief, tasted it to find if it were still sweet, and proceeded to give the baby his supper. She put the bottle afterwards in the edge of the running water to keep cool, and then wrapped him over and over in the soft handkerchief, having spread his little gown on a bush to dry, and laid him down on the grass. She rambled about a little while, picking and eating berries. Afterward she lay down beside him, putting her arm over him. Tired out with her long tramp and all her cares and fears, Sally slept till the baby woke her in the broad sunlight of the next morning. She ran for the bottle in the brook; but alas the little drop of milk was sour. She stayed long enough to wash the bottle; and then, without stopping for any of the tempting berries, she took up her march again.

The baby was crying lustily for his breakfast, when Sally saw the smoke of a farmhouse and with some hesitation drew near it. A man, coming from the barn, was just carrying in a foaming pail of milk. [82]

“Oh, if youse’d gimme de full of de bottle!” cried Sally.

“What for?” said the man gruffly.

“For de byby,” answered Sally.

“Why don’t you have your own milk?” said the man. “There, hold your dipper.”

But Sally hadn’t any dipper; and at that moment a thin, colorless woman appeared at the door, a look of wonder and then another of pity and sweetness sweeping over her face; and Sally and the baby were in the kitchen directly afterward.

“Where’d you come f’m?” the woman asked Sally.

“Down below,” said Sally, who had no notion of telling.

“Whar’ you goin’?”

“Goin’ on.”

“Got any mother?” twisting one of Sally’s curls.

"Naw."

"Nor father, either, I s'pose?"

"Naw."

"My land! Wal, you hev somethin' ter eat, an' then I'll see." And Sally had a breakfast that made her think of these people as one thinks of those in kings' palaces—only Sally had never heard of kings' palaces.

While she was "topping off," as the good woman called it, with pancakes and maple-syrup, her new friend fed the baby, and then brought a basin of warm water and soap with soft towels, and washed him carefully and rubbed his back, while he stretched and kicked and laughed. She got a little cotton nightgown that she had laid away in camphor, and put it on him. "Oh!" she said, "he's good enough to eat!" She took him out to show him to her husband. "Father!" she said. "He's jest the image of our little John!"

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"Can't help it ef he is," said the man, who evidently knew what she wished. "We can't afford ter be a-keepin' of tramps. She said she was goin' on. You jes' let her go on!"

The woman knew it was no use to say more. She came in with tears on her face. But she had Sally make herself decent, and she gave her a cotton gown that had once been pink and was now a rosy white. In it, though it was a little too long, Sally looked quite quaint. It had been the gown of the poor woman's dear and only daughter, who had died before the little John had died. And then this good, kind soul did up Sally's scratched and blistered feet in some ointment, with bandages, and dressed them up in a pair of little old shoes she had always kept. After that she put up a luncheon of fried bread and a piece of pie for Sally, and filled the milk-bottle, and Sally shouldered the baby and made off.

But turning for a look at the place where she had met so much kindness, Sally saw the woman crying, and she went back.

"Youse ain't no need ter feel bad," she said, as she put her arms round the kind friend's neck. And then suddenly, in a great fear of she knew not what, she scampered off as fast as her feet would let her. They were very tired and lame little feet now.

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XV.

[85]

THAT DAY WHEN ALLY WAS LOST.

THE morning had deepened into late forenoon before—going a little way, and resting a little while, and going on again, and stopping a moment to cry, and talking to the baby—Sally gave herself up to rest.

She had come to a place of velvet grass, a glen, that although shut in with green hills, yet gave her a sense of being high in clear sweet air. A stream trickled over some upper cliff in a thin waterfall that gave a murmuring sound. And as the baby was fretting, Sally thought it might be time for his second dinner; and almost before he had finished it, braced by the mountain air and weary with her walk, she fell as sound asleep as the baby did.

Sally opened her eyes an hour or two afterwards to behold, bending over her, the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

It was a golden-haired child with big blue eyes shining out of a flushed and smiling, wondering face.

Sally had heard somewhere, she did not know where, but very vaguely, of such a place as Heaven, of such a thing as an angel. Now she lay there on the soft warm grass, and looked up at the velvet blue sky, and smelled the wind wandering by laden with the breath of the wild sweet-brier, and remembered the wings of the low-darting birds, the murmur of the waterfall, and she came to the instant conclusion that this was Heaven, and that so her mother was not far off.

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"Say! Be youse an angel?" she whispered.

"Oh, I'm Ally!" answered the little creature. "I've come to find you. You're one of the Children of the Hill, I suppose, and here's the baby, the very baby! Come with me quick! Aunt Susan wants the baby!"

"What!" cried Sally in alarm. "It ain't Heaven den?"

"Why, no," said Ally. "It's Green Ridge. It's the basin where we have picnics."

"Who's Aunt Susan?"

"Why, she's—she's Aunt Susan at the house. She's real sweet. And she wants the baby."

"Is it de 'Statution down there?"

"It's the farm,—Old Uncle's farm," said Ally, "and Uncle Billy's farm."

"Oh, de farm-school!" cried Sally, sure now of evil mischance. "Well, I ain't goin', and you can tell 'em so!"

"Oh, but I want you to! I live down there—I'm one of the Children of the Valley. We have beautiful times. We learn lessons, a little while mornings, and then we have beautiful times. We're all learning to swim, and we had fireworks the Fourth of July. And there's Essie and Janet and Jack and"—just then old Brindle went across a pasture down below. "You aren't afraid of cows, are you?"

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"I ain't afraid o' nothin'," said Sally defiantly.

"I've got a little cow of my own. Wouldn't you like a little cow? I'll give you mine," said Ally fervently. "And Essie has a cat, Erminie; and she brings her kittens into the house for us to see. And there's beautiful dogs. And we take rides on a pony—Uncle Billy holds us on; you shall have my turn. And we feed the hens—there's a darling white hen with fifteen chickens," went on the little coxer. "And we have gardens and make flowers grow. Do the Children of the Hill make flowers grow? Essie and Janet think they do."

"Who's de Childurn o' de Hill?" asked Sally. "Youse sure it ain't no bloomin' Statution down there?"

"I don't know anything about a 'Statution. It's Old Uncle's farm."

"Perhaps it's a Fresh Air farm?" said Sally. "I know w'ot dat is. I was to a Fresh Air farm once. You bet it was nice!"

"This is nice," urged Ally. "'Tis a Fresh Air farm, I guess," she said triumphantly. "And Diane makes us such nice cakes, and gives us honey. There's lots of 'licious things down there."

"Do youse play tag?" interrupted Sally.

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"And goal, and ball, and Old Man's Castle, and see-saw, and—and—Essie'll give you her other doll if you'll come, and I'll help carry the baby down for you! Oh, isn't he a dear! I love a baby—a baby's better than a doll. You brought him back on purpose to Aunt Susan, didn't you?"

And then Ally's arms were thrown round Sally, and she was kissing the poor little bewildered face.

"I guess I'll come," said Sally, struggling up. "I want to see dis Aunt Susan."

They hurried on for a long way, down hill all the time, round a thicket, through a shivering birch wood, and taking turns carrying the baby.

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AUNT SUSAN'S BABY.

WHEN Uncle Billy and Pincher came round a bend of the tangled path, an hour or two later, cutting their way through the thicket here, and lifting the low boughs there, they stopped short at the sight of the lost Ally sitting on a log with Sally, whose feet could take her no farther. Ally, whose rosy face was a picture of delight, sympathy, and anxiety, was holding a tiny sleeping baby in her arms, and looking at it with eyes of unbounded love.

Being made to understand the case, that this was one of the Children of the Hill, only her feet were lame, who had brought Aunt Susan's baby back to her—Uncle Billy blew a blast on his megaphone to let the family know Ally was all right.

Then he took Sally in his arms, while Pincher followed with the baby, Ally keeping close behind. After a few intervals of rest, and much talk by the way, the little company got down the hill and across the valley, and at last reached the great farm piazza.

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So it came to pass that when Old Uncle and the rest, having heard the megaphone, came down from the wilds of Blue Top, there was Sally in the hammock, tired and white through all her sunburn, but with a look of infinite happiness on her face. For she had seen Essie run to meet Ally and throw her arms about her in an ecstasy of joy at her safe return, and Janet bringing her her little chair, and Will hurrying with the dinner that had been saved for her, and dividing it in two portions, one for herself and one for her. And Aunt Rose had wiped her warm and dusty face with a wet sponge, drying it with a soft towel, and kissing her when all was done. And Aunt Susan was sitting near her—very white and still had Aunt Susan been after listening to Ally's rapid exclamations and explanations. For Aunt Susan had come out on the lawn in wonder at the little girl Uncle Billy was bringing and the sight of a tiny baby in Pincher's arms, and Ally had run forward, all eagerness, with the strangest words:

"Oh, Aunt Susan, I've got you back your baby! This little girl—she is one of the Children of the Hill—she was bringing it home; and I met her and told her about us all, and how you had wanted it and wanted it."

When Old Uncle came up, Aunt Susan was holding the baby, who, none the worse for his out-

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door life, was looking up at her as if the first thing of which he had ever taken notice was the mother-love in her eyes.

But Aunt Rose had been down to meet Old Uncle.

"Oh!" Aunt Rose had cried, "there are two children here, right out of the depths—though how in the world they came here I haven't yet made out, except that the little girl—and she's the merest mite herself—lugged the baby all the way from the city. Ally was up there in the hollow and found them. It's fortunate that there are such good Institutions"—

"No, no, no!" interrupted Ally, who, very proud of herself, had also come to meet Old Uncle. "She can't go to a 'station. She's afraid of them. If she doesn't go back among the Children of the Hill, she's going to stay *here*. I asked her to. She belongs to me. I went up and found her! And she has brought Aunt Susan's baby."

Aunt Susan glanced up as Old Uncle approached. And Old Uncle stopped a moment, and looked at the smile on her face.

"If there weren't so many children here now," Essie was saying tremulously, half pleading.

"There's not a child too many!" said that surprising Old Uncle then, patting Essie's brown head. "All we needed was another little girl and the Baby. Did she bring that child the whole way in her arms? Well, she needn't carry him any farther. It wouldn't be possible for them to make any louder noise than we have now. They are going to stay with us, and make two more Children of the Valley."

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Transcriber's Note: Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

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