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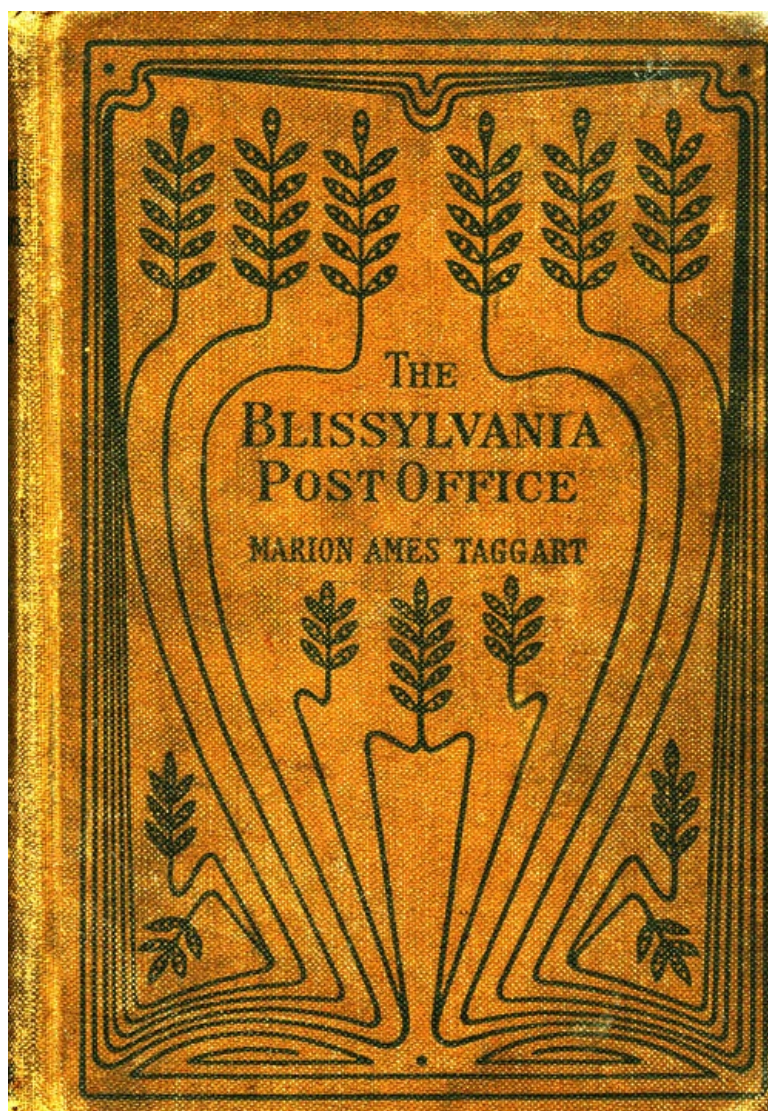
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLISSYLVANIA POST-OFFICE \*\*\*



THE  
**BLISSYLVANIA POST-OFFICE.**  
BY

# MARION AMES TAGGART.



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**BENZIGER BROTHERS,**

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## THE BLISSYLVANIA POST-OFFICE.

[5]

### CHAPTER I.

#### HOW IT BEGAN.

IT was wonderful that any one could have a bright idea on such a dark day. It had rained in torrents all of the night before and throughout the forenoon, and now that the rain had ceased, the sodden earth sent up clouds of steaming dampness to mingle with the thick fog descending, and they blended together like two gray ghosts of pleasant weather. The lilacs drooped in discouragement, and a draggle-tailed robin sat with hanging wings on the fence, uttering an occasional chirp of protest in such vehement disgust that every time he made the remark it tilted him forward, and agitated him to the tip of his tail. A slender boy lay on the hearth-rug in the light of the fire kindled to dry the dampness, the warmth of which was grateful, although it was almost June. He was recklessly pulling a stitch that was broken in the knee of his stocking all the way down to the ankle, and the gloomy expression of his face indicated a melancholy pleasure in

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the knowledge that he had no business to do this.

Tommy Traddles, the striped cat, sat before a plump little girl on the floor, whose sunny face no amount of bad weather could cloud, watching the hearth-brush in her hand, which she occasionally whisked to and fro for his amusement, and making uncatlike cooings in his throat if she forgot him for too long. Jack Hildreth, the boy on the rug, said he was a cat with a canary-bird attachment.

On the edge of a chair opposite the cheery little girl on the floor sat a long-limbed, dark-eyed girl, holding her gypsy face in her hands, her elbows on her knees, listlessly watching Amy Tracy and the cat. They were spending the afternoon with Margaret Gresham, Jack's cousin, who was kept in the house by a cold, and whose tiny figure was curled up in a big leather chair near the fire, and her pale face and big, eager gray eyes looked out from its brown depths in sharp contrast. [7]

"I'm going to ask St. Anthony to find the sun," announced the gypsy-like girl suddenly. She spoke through her closed teeth, not taking the trouble to remove her hands from her face.

"Not a bad idea, Trix," said Jack, laughing.

But their hostess looked shocked. "Why, Beatrice Lane, you shouldn't say that, it isn't right," she protested.

"Well, I'm sure it seems lost enough," retorted Trix.

"Nothing's lost when you know where it is," said Jack.

"I don't know where the sun is, except that it's somewhere in the sky," said Trix.

"It's just about there," said Jack, sitting up to point out of the window, and becoming more cheerful in the chance to show off to the girls. "It's sliding right down to the zenith."

"Horizon, Jack," interrupted Margery, laughing.

"Well, horizon, then; it doesn't matter," Jack said, annoyed. "It's getting ready to slip down to China, and it's more than ninety-five millions of miles away." [8]

"Good boy!" said Trix mockingly. "How much he knows! I don't care about the sun anyway, it's too late for it to shine to-day; but if I don't find something to do I'll eat that cat up, Amy."

Amy cried out in pretended fear, and gathered Tommy Traddles to her heart, but he remonstrated vigorously, and struggling free sat down in precisely the same spot, wrapping his tail around him, and looking as if he had never been disturbed.

"I was thinking," began Margery slowly, "of something nice."

"Charlotte Russe?" asked Jack, knowing Margery's weakness.

"Cats?" suggested Amy, alluding to another.

"Sister Aloysia?" inquired Beatrice, for Margery was devoted to her teacher, and, in school phrase, "had a favorite nun."

"It's something nice for us to do," replied Margery, with much dignity, "and it would not be for a day, but for always, and if you make fun of me I'll not tell you."

"All right, Margery, we won't, and do tell quick," said Trix.

"I wasn't really making fun of you, and I'm dying to hear," said Amy. [9]

"Tell ahead, Margery; hurry up," added Jack.

Thus urged, Margery sat up, putting down her feet, upon which she had been sitting, and smoothing her skirt to do honor to what she had to reveal.

"I was thinking," she began, "that we might form a club, we four."

"Like the A. G. L.?" asked Amy.

They had banded themselves into an Anti-Gum League, and wore its badge, designed and made by Jack, which consisted of a piece of gum stuck on a bent pin on the centre of a wooden disk, and preceded by the word "No," in large red letters, which of course made the badge read: "No Gum." The only trouble was that the gum frequently fell off, and had to be renewed, and it required chewing in order to mould it soft enough for the pin to enter. The duty of preparing the gum for the badges was unanimously appointed to Jack, and honor forbade his chewing longer than the flavor lasted, which was an agreeable circumstance, and one that made him entertain secret doubts as to his being a worthy member of the league.

"No, not like the A. G. L.," said Margery, replying to Amy's question. "The A. G. L. has a noble end, for chewing gum is a bad habit; but this would be more of a club, and only be for fun, though I think it would improve us." [10]

"Oh, what is it anyway?" cried Trix impatiently.

"There's a big tree down in the orchard," said Margery, "and it's hollow. I thought we might each take a character, and use that name for our letters, and Jack could fix up a box with partitions in

it, and we could put it in the hollow tree, and we'd have——"

"A post-office!" cried Trix, jumping up in great excitement, her dark eyes snapping. "Margery, it's a great idea."

"Hurrah for Margery!" cried Jack.

"It's splendid. Oh, Margery, you are so clever!" cried Amy, scrambling up rapidly, to Tommy Traddles' great disgust.

"When you do think, Margery, you think," said Trix, pulling Margery out of her chair. "Come on," and holding Margery's slender little hands in her strong brown ones, she pranced around the room in a triumphal dance, followed by both the others, while Tommy Traddles retreated under the sofa, whence he peered out at the performance with dilated eyes. [11]

He withdrew his head quickly as the four children fell breathless and laughing on the sofa to discuss and mature Margery's brilliant plan.

"What did you mean about names?" asked Jack. "You may write poetry, Margery, but you sometimes get mixed in talking prose."

"I mean this," began Margery. "Let's each take some character or name, and let's write to each other by these names instead of our own; it would be more fun. I'd like to be Mary Queen of Scots."

"Oh, I'll be Sir Brian de Bois Guilbert!" cried Jack, who in his twelfth year was beginning to taste the joy Sir Walter has to give an imaginative child, and revelled in constantly repeated reading of "Ivanhoe."

"I'll be Anthony Wayne, because I'd love to ride down the steps," said Trix enthusiastically; "or Lafayette, or Light Horse Harry, or Napoleon."

"O Trix, you can't be a man," expostulated Margery.

"Yes, I can. I'd like to know why you can't make believe the whole thing just as well as part of it. I'm as much like a man as you're like Mary Queen of Scots, or Jack is like Sir Whatever-his-name." [12]

"Oh, but——" began Margery, with the anxious line appearing between her eyes that always came there when she was worried.

"Now I think that it would be a bother to take any of these characters," said Amy, the peacemaker. "You know, all the letters would have to fit the parts, or they'd be silly, and I never could keep up writing *thee* and *thou*, and *wot ye*, instead of do you know, and all that kind of words. You'd have to write the way Shakespeare did, and I can't."

"Can't you? That's queer," remarked Margery, and the rest shouted.

"No, I can't," Amy continued, quite unconscious of a joke. "I'd like to be the good Lady Godiva myself, who saved her people from starving, but I couldn't keep it up."

"Couldn't you?" asked the others, and laughed again.

"No, I couldn't," reiterated Amy, who was the practical little woman of the party. "I say we just take names, and not characters."

"Well," assented Margery reluctantly, "I'll be the Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely Lake." [13]

"My goodness, Margery; no wonder you write poetry!" exclaimed Beatrice.

"I'll be——" but she got no farther.

"Now, Trix, please, *please* don't be a boy," cried Margery.

"Well, I think it's mean; I've wanted to be a boy all my life, and you won't even let me play one," grumbled Trix. "But I'll be a daring, splendid girl, then. Couldn't we take a name out of a book?"

"Yes; don't you think so, Amy?"

"I don't see why not," said Amy.

"Then I'll be Catharine Seyton, who barred the door with her arm when the mean Lady of Lochleven tried to break through into the queen's chamber. I heard my brothers reading about it," cried Trix.

"It's in 'The Abbot,' by Scott," said Jack, glad to show his acquaintance with literature, which Trix evidently considered grown up. "I'll take Sir Harry Hotspur," he added.

"Isn't that history?" asked Margery doubtfully.

"No, not exactly," replied Jack. "It's Shakespeare, too; I'll take only his part." Which, though not very clear, was satisfactory. [14]

"I'm going to be Mrs. Peace Plenty, a philanthropist," announced Amy, convulsing the rest.

"P. P. P.," gasped Margery, emerging from a sofa pillow with her usually pale face crimson. "O

Amy, you *are* so funny, and you never just seem to mean to be."

"Well, it's not so funny as that," said Amy, laughing good-naturedly.

"What is a philanthropist, Jack?" asked Trix. "How did you know, Amy?"

"It's a charitable person," said Jack.

"It's a person who loves human beings," said Amy at the same time. "I know, because papa said if I didn't mind my p's and q's I'd grow up to be one, and get on committees; so I asked him what it was, and when he told me I didn't think it would be so bad to be one."

"Well, now we have settled the names. Do you think you could make the box, Jack?" asked Margery.

"Of course I can," said Jack, looking with loving condescension at the anxiously puckered brow of his little cousin, who, though a year younger than he, was cleverer, yet made such mistakes as this question implied; probably because she was only a girl. [15]

"I'll make four divisions in it, and maybe I'll paint it."

"And make a drop-box, and nail it outside the tree for us to drop letters in with a slit in the top," said Trix.

"Just as you like, Trix," remarked Jack solemnly. "I for one don't mean to write letters with slits in the top. I'll make a slit in the top of the box, though, if you like."

"Don't be a goose, Jack," replied Trix, with dignity. "You know I meant that."

"We ought to have a name for our club," said Amy.

"Yes; I've been thinking of that underneath all the time we were talking," said Margery.

Jack stooped down and peeped under the sofa.

"I don't see how you could have thought *underneath*, Margery," he said; "I see only Tommy Traddles there."

"Now, Jack, don't be funny," said Margery, "and look out for smartness. You know aunty says you are troubled with smartness sometimes. I meant that underneath all we were saying I kept thinking of our name."

"Would Post-Office Club do?" asked Amy. [16]

"I know; call it the Happy Thought Club," cried Trix, "because it was a lovely thing for Margery to think of, and when we were half dead for something to do, too. And we can have it a secret from all the other girls and boys, and if we had the letters P. O. on our badge they'd know right off what they stood for. We'll have a badge, won't we?" she added.

"Let's vote on the name," said Margery. "All in favor of calling it the Happy Thought Club please signify it by saying aye."

Four voices instantly chorused "Aye."

"Contrary, no," said Margery, and paused. Deep silence reigned, and the clock on the mantelpiece struck once.

"I propose we have for a badge a blue ribbon, and get mamma to paint an envelope on it, with the initials of the club over it. Would that be nice?" asked Margery.

"Lovely; and now I must go, because that was half-past five that struck," said Trix, jumping up.

"So must I," echoed Amy.

They hastily bundled themselves into their waterproofs, and Amy was stamping her foot into her right rubber, when she paused with the other rubber suspended in the air, on the way to her left foot. [17]

"Why, there's Miss Isabel; we never thought of her!" she cried.

"Sure enough." "That's so." "Oh, our dear Miss Isabel," cried Trix and Jack and Margery together.

"You'll have to make five divisions in the box, Jack," said Margery decidedly, "for she's got to be an honorary member."

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE HONORARY MEMBER.

THE Miss Isabel for whom a fifth box in the post-office would be necessary lived in a charming old house, which had been built when Washington was a little boy. It had a large, old-time garden,

deliciously fragrant of box, syringas, and spicy border pinks, which the children thought the utmost perfection of all that a garden should be, and wherein it was their delight to wander. Miss Isabel was the youngest and only surviving member of a merry band of brothers and sisters, and she seemed too small to live alone in the great house, with its big, empty rooms filled with the saddest and only real ghosts—the memory of those who had occupied them, the echo of feet which had ceased to walk the earth, and voices silenced by the green grass pressing on the lips that death had sealed; and had she been other than Miss Isabel she would have been melancholy; but being Miss Isabel she was as sunny as the day was long. Her gentle life was too full of care for others' sorrows to find time to think of her own, and she was too loving a little soul to ever lack love. The children worshipped her; she was their playmate, counsellor, and ideal. They had the vaguest ideas as to her age, supposing that she must be pretty old, in spite of the fact of her playing with them almost like one of themselves, for they could not remember her other than she was then; but one does not have to live long in order to be always grown up in the memory of little persons of eleven years and less, and in truth Miss Isabel was still young.

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The children understood that at some time in her life Miss Isabel had not expected to live alone in the big homestead, but had looked forward to a newer home of her own, and that at the last moment something had happened to prevent her marriage.

Their elders said Miss Isabel had had "a disappointment," and the children, especially Margery, looked at her with pitying wonder, speculating on how it felt to have such a disappointment that it was spoken of as if written with a big D, and feeling, judging from their own sensations when something failed to which they were looking forward, that it must be very dreadful.

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It cleared off warm and beautiful after the rain, and in the afternoon the flowers and grass looked a week farther advanced than before the storm, and the discouraged robin darted at the worms in the soft earth with jubilant chirps, and retired to the elm to sing and swing in ecstasy. As soon as school was over the children started for Miss Isabel's. She met them on the broad door-stone, looking, in her soft pink muslin, like an apple-blossom that had drifted there.

"Oh, how pretty you are!" cried Trix, giving her an enthusiastic and damaging hug, to Margery's mute amazement. It was a perpetual wonder to her how the others could fondle Miss Isabel so recklessly. If Margery threw her arms around her or kissed her, it was when she had her all to herself, and though she laid deep schemes to walk near her, and sit where she could see her, and often stroked her gown softly on the sly, she never flew to her as Trix and Amy did. She was sometimes afraid that Miss Isabel would think that the others loved her more than she, but she need not have feared; Miss Isabel understood Margery.

"We've come to tell you the nicest thing." "We've made you an honorary member." "Margery's thought of something fine." "We're going to have a club," began all four at once.

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"Dear me!" cried Miss Isabel, laughing; "I shall never be able to listen to four at one time. Even a quadruped couldn't do that, you know, because he has four legs, but not four ears."

"Jack, you tell," said Trix generously, feeling it proper to resign the glory to the man of the party.

"Well, you know, Miss Isabel," Jack said willingly, "it's Margery's scheme, and we thought it so good we're going to call it the Happy Thought Club. We're going to have a post-office in Uncle Gresham's orchard."

"With five boxes, one for you," put in Amy, who had been hopping about wildly, first on one foot and then on the other, longing to speak.

"Yes, and we're each going to take a name and write letters to one another, and have a badge, and—and—oh, everything," concluded Jack, waving his hands, as if to include the universe.

"And you're to be in it, you're to be in it!" cried Trix and Amy, hugging Miss Isabel at the same time.

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"Of course she's in it; it wouldn't be much if she weren't," said Jack.

"What do you think of it; you haven't said a word?" asked Margery anxiously.

"But that was owing to circumstances over which I have no control," laughed Miss Isabel. "Here are you chattering like four of the blackbirds baked in the pie, with the other twenty flown away, and how could I say anything? I think it is a splendumphant plan, and that is a portmanteau word, such as Humpty Dumpty taught Alice in Looking-Glass Land, and it means splendid and triumphant. I am deeply sensible of the honor you do me, ladies and gentleman, in inviting me to join the club, and I accept with joy and gratitude." And Miss Isabel took her pink skirts in each hand, and dropped them a real dancing-school courtesy.

"Might one ask what names you have chosen?" she said.

"We were going to be people in history," said Margery. "I was going to be Mary Queen of Scots, and Trix wanted to be Anthony Wayne, or Lafayette, or Napoleon, or something else."

"Light Horse Harry," said Trix.

[23]

"Yes; but Amy thought it would be a bother to keep up historical ways of talking—I mean old-fashioned ways—so we decided to take a name, and not a character; so now Jack is Sir Harry Hotspur, and Trix is Catharine Seyton, and I am the Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely

Lake, and Amy is Mrs. Peace Plenty, a philanthropist."

"Well done, Amy!" cried Miss Isabel, laughing heartily. "All but yours are just the names that I might have guessed they would have taken, and yet yours is, perhaps, the most suitable of all."

"What will you take, Miss Isabel?" asked Jack.

"Why, I can't answer such an important question without thought," said Miss Isabel. "Can you suggest a name?"

"I never could think of a name nice enough for you," said Amy lovingly.

"I think it ought to be something like Good Fairy," said Trix, "only that sounds silly."

The color had been mounting to Margery's dark hair, and Jack said:

"Margery's thought of something. Let's have it, Peggy."

"I was thinking of Miss Isabel's name after I went to bed last night," the little girl said slowly. "I knew what it ought to mean, but you couldn't make it sound like a name in English, so I asked papa this morning if you could have any words for it in any other language that would sound like a name, and he told me some. And I think," she said, very low, "if Miss Isabel will, it would be nice for her to be Lady Alma Cara." [24]

Miss Isabel gave Margery such a look that her eyes filled with happy tears.

"I would never have dared take such a lovely name," Miss Isabel said, "but if my dear little Margery will give me it, I shall be proud to have it."

"What does it mean?" asked Trix.

"I think Dearest Darling is about what it would be in English," said Miss Isabel.

"That's you." "That's just the name." "Indeed, you are our dearest darling," said Jack and Trix and Amy. But Margery said nothing, feeling all warm and cosey inside, for she had named Miss Isabel, and her loving look had thanked her better than words.

"Now, how about a postmark?" asked Miss Isabel.

"We never thought of that," said the children. [25]

"Well, it seems to me that since we have all taken names, it would be nice to play that our post-office was in some town with a pretty title, and not postmark our letters with the real name of the town like ordinary letters," said Miss Isabel.

"But how can we postmark at all?" asked Jack.

"If you don't mind, I will have a stamp made," said Miss Isabel, "and the postmaster or postmistress can have an ink pad, and stamp each envelope, like the real office."

"Oh, isn't that fine," "Oh, you blessed, little Miss Isabel!" "Didn't I say she ought to be called the good fairy?" "You always think of *such* things," chorused her visitors.

"Then that's settled," continued Miss Isabel. "Now, what shall we call our town? If this is the Happy Thought Club, wouldn't it be a good idea to call the place also something that meant happiness?"

"Joyberg," remarked Margery thoughtfully.

"That wouldn't do; sounds like June bug," said Jack decidedly.

"Happiness Centre," suggested Amy.

"That is good, but a trifle long, Amy," said Miss Isabel. [26]

"How would Bliss-sylvania do?" asked Jack. "It's like Pennsylvania, you know, and would mean *bliss* and *woods*, and that would be saying that we had fun in the tree in the orchard."

"I don't know," began Miss Isabel doubtfully, but was overwhelmed by a chorus of applause from the three little girls, whom the name struck favorably.

"But how could we get on with so many s's in the middle?" asked Amy; "there are three right together."

"We could easily drop one, if that is the only drawback," said Miss Isabel, "and write it B-l-i-s-s-y-l-v-a-n-i-a. That is often done in spelling, and is called elision of a letter."

"It is lovely," cried all the little girls. "Jack, how did you come to think of it?"

Jack tried to look modest.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "It just popped into my head."

"Like all great thoughts," added Miss Isabel. "We will make you mayor of Blissylvania, Jack. How about postage-stamps, girls and boy?"

"Oh, must we have stamps?" they asked. [27]

"Why, certainly not, if you would rather not; but I thought it would be more fun," said Miss Isabel. "I could paint some—say, a dozen for each of us, and then they need not be cancelled, except with a pencil-mark that would easily rub off, so they would last a long time."

"It would be much nicer, but you ought not to bother, Miss Isabel," said Amy.

"It is no trouble; I'll do them in the evening, and if Jack makes the box, and you all do lots of things, I ought to do something. An honorary member must be an honorable member," said Miss Isabel, smiling. "May I ask you to go into the arbor in the garden while I ask Mary to make some lemonade and bring it to us with cake, that we may eat and drink to the health of the Happy Thought Club of Blissylvania?"

The children passed through the great hall, and out the door opposite the front one, which admitted them to the beloved garden. On the way they decided for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time, at least, that their Miss Isabel was the *dearest thing*, and that there was no one on earth quite like her.

This decision had hardly been arrived at when she rejoined them.

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"When shall we begin?" she asked, bending her head under the wistaria vine drooping above the entrance to the arbor.

"I'm going to make the box to-night, and we thought we'd get the thing up and everything ready to-morrow," answered Jack.

"Yes, and begin Monday," added Margery. "You see this is Friday, and we shall have all day Saturday to get ready, and Sunday is a nice day to write letters, for we all go to children's Mass at nine, you know, and can write all day."

"Stopping to eat, I hope," laughed Miss Isabel.

"We are going to give you box number one, because—oh, because you are *you*, and an honorary member," said Jack. "And Margery's to have two, because she thought of the plan——"

"And you'll have to have three, because you named the town, Jack," interrupted Margery.

"And Trix and Amy will have four and five," resumed Jack.

But Miss Isabel, foreseeing possible danger, interposed.

"I wouldn't have any rewards of that kind," she said. "I'd have Blissylvania a real republic, with every one equal, and draw lots for numbers."

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"So would I," echoed Margery heartily. "I don't want to be first because I thought of the plan."

"I'd like to do something to celebrate the club," cried Trix, balancing on one foot on the seat of the arbor. "I'd like to do something queer."

As she spoke the board, which was loose at one end, flew up and sent Trix flying first upward, and then into a collapsed heap under the seat.

"You've done it!" shouted Jack, in ecstasy—"you've done the queer thing!"

"O Trix, are you hurt?" cried the other two girls anxiously.

Trix's eyes were on a level with her knees, for she had fallen through, doubled up like a jack-knife.

"I fell down," she remarked, vainly trying to extricate herself.

"I thought I heard something drop!" cried Jack, rolling over in spasms of laughter, while Miss Isabel, laughing, too, at Beatrice's funny appearance and remark, helped get her up.

"I think we'd better go home," said Amy. "When Trix gets crazy there's no telling what will happen."

[30]

"It has happened," remarked Jack, looking down whence Trix had emerged. "O jolly me!"—Jack's favorite and appropriate exclamation—"O jolly me, Trix, you killed a mud worm. I knew you didn't like them, but you needn't have sat on him so hard."

"O Jack, I didn't! O Jack, where?" cried Trix, running to look. "Oh, yes, I did! Oh, please look and see if there's any of him on me!" she cried, spinning round and round wildly, in a vain effort to see the back of her own dress. "Oh, the dreadful thing!"

"See here, Trix," said Jack, "I thought you wanted to be a boy. No boy would make a row about such a little thing as sitting on a mud worm."

Trix disdained to answer.

"We ought to go, it's getting late," she said instead. "Good-night, Miss Isabel."

"Good-night, dears; good-night all of you," said Miss Isabel, kissing each happy face twice over, except Jack's, who stood for the dignity of his sex, and was not kissed, even by Miss Isabel—that is, unless no one were looking. "You shall have the post-mark and ink-pad to-morrow afternoon, and I am very grateful to you for letting me join you."

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"Grateful! Pooh!" cried Jack, voicing the sentiments of them all. "We couldn't get on without you."

## CHAPTER III.

[32]

### A NARROW ESCAPE.

SATURDAY morning Jack appeared whistling energetically as he triumphantly balanced a box on his left hand, and swung another in his right. He was early, but the three girls were earlier, and had swept the dead leaves from under the apple-tree destined for the office, and had cleared out the hollow which was to hold the box, to the noisy indignation of a woodpecker and his dame who had chosen the tree for a summer residence.

Jack was hailed with a cry of rapture.

"Here's the office!" he shouted, breaking into a run as he saw the little girls; "and this is the drop-box."

So saying he stubbed his toe on one of the many rough places in the orchard, and boy and boxes went headlong in three directions.

"I see it is a drop-box," remarked Trix dryly, getting square on the account of the previous night. [33]

"O Jack, have you broken them?" cried Amy, while Margery stood still in mute anguish.

"Guess not; no, they're all right," replied Jack, gathering up his burdens. "Aren't they just James dandies?"

The girls, who had renounced slang with gum, pronounced them "lovely" and "beautiful." One was a starch-box, divided through the middle into an upper and lower section, the upper partitioned into three pigeon-holes, each numbered, and the lower half made into two divisions, likewise numbered. The box was painted a wood brown, with the words "Post-Office" in white over the top, and the numbers were also white.

Jack had wanted to paint the box red, but Amy had convinced him that it would be in greater danger of discovery in such a bright color, and he had yielded to prudence.

The second box was red, however, for Jack had literally stood to his colors in this case, maintaining that all Uncle Sam's drop-boxes were red, and Blisssylvania's must be no exception to the rule.

This had a slit cut in the top large enough for letters to pass through, and was not less admired than the post-office. [34]

"But how shall we get parcels in?" asked Margery, and Jack explained that for this it was only necessary to lift the lid, which would not be fastened. Every one found this arrangement perfectly satisfactory, and the office was nailed into the tree by Jack at the cost of only one bruised finger, while the girls executed a sort of war-dance around him in irrepressible satisfaction.

The drop-box was fastened on a stump ten or twelve feet from the office, which made it still more like a real post-office, for, as Margery explained, the postmistress could play she was a postman collecting and bringing in the mail when she took the things out of the drop-box, and needn't pretend she was postmaster till she began sorting them at the apple-tree.

Nothing could have been more encouraging than the morning operations, but in the afternoon the H. T. C. and the town of Blisssylvania narrowly escaped a catastrophe that would have been like an earthquake, sweeping the fair city from the earth.

It all came from the honorary member's generosity.

True to her promise, Miss Isabel hastened down to town in the morning early, and ordered the stamp made for the postmark. It was to be of leaden type, that allowed the changing of date each day, and as the type was already in stock the shopkeeper promised to deliver it that afternoon. Margery's mamma had painted the badges according to the design selected at the first meeting, only substituting a white carrier-pigeon as the device instead of an envelope, because, as Margery explained to the others, "it was more poetical than an envelope and prettier." The badge was of beautiful blue ribbon, the pigeon painted in white, surmounted by the initials of the club—H. T. C. And it may be stated here that unsatisfied curiosity as to the secret moved the other school-children to derision, and Jack, Margaret, Beatrice, and Amy were called the "Highly Tightly Cooing Pigeons," shortened for convenience to "The Doves." [35]

The four were wrapped in admiration over their beautiful badges, when the postmark arrived. Each one tried it in turn, and at every impression the magic circle enclosing the words, "Blisssylvania, June 8th, 1896"—for the date was set ready for the first use on Monday—seemed more entrancing. They all repaired to the orchard to see if it worked equally well on the big stone which they had selected for its table, and here the little cloud appeared that rolled up into a storm. It was such unutterable bliss to press the stamp on the ink-pad, and then make the impression on the white paper, that the office of postmaster suddenly seemed to each one the [36]

honor most to be coveted in all the world.

"I wonder how we shall decide who is to be postmaster," remarked Trix casually, as she reluctantly gave Amy the stamp to try.

Each face reddened slightly; evidently they had all been thinking of the same thing.

"I don't see how a girl can be postmaster," said Jack.

"Pshaw! We can be postmistress, and it's all the same," said Amy, speaking sharply for her.

"I should think it was more a man's place," continued Jack.

"It's a place for a girl that is strong and quick, and like a boy," said Trix hastily.

"I live right here, where I could look after it," said Margery, bringing the discussion from abstract views on suitability to the personal application they were all secretly making. [37]

"That's the very reason why you shouldn't be postmistress!" cried peace-loving Amy, ruffling her feathers. "You shouldn't have everything."

"Oh, you're no good for it, Peggy!" said Jack, with easy scorn. "It needs a boy, and I'm the only boy; so of course I've got to be postmaster."

"Well, I like that," cried Trix, with eyes flashing like a whole woman's-rights convention in one small body. "Every one knows girls are heaps quicker and smarter than boys. I'd be a better postmaster than any of you, if I do say so."

"You! You're too harum-scarum; you'd lose half the mail!" cried Amy. "I'd be a much better one, and you know it."

"Well, I'd not lose the mail!" said Trix, trembling and stammering in indignation. "You think I'm harum-scarum because you're such a poke."

"Well, there's no good you girls fighting about it, because I'm the boy, and I'm going to be postmaster!" remarked Jack, with such maddening certainty that the girls turned on him in a body.

"You'll be nothing of the sort!" screamed Trix, stamping her foot. [38]

"You won't touch my letters!" cried Amy.

"If you were a gentleman you'd not want to take a lady's place!" said Margery, with withering scorn. "No gentleman ever sits down when a lady hasn't a seat."

"I'd like to know who wants to sit down?" demanded Jack.

"If you felt as you ought, you'd want your cousin to be postmaster," said Margery.

"Well, I don't; so there!" said Jack.

"Who does?" asked Trix, deserting her ally and turning on Margery. "You've got the office in your orchard, and that's enough."

"If I'd known that you'd all have been so selfish I'd never have said have a post-office," said Margery, turning away to hide the tears which always would come when she was angry, spoiling the effect of her most telling remarks.

"You're selfish yourself, because you want it as much as we do, and that is why you think we're selfish," said Amy, with so much truth that Margery could not retort.

"You're the meanest three in the world!" cried Trix.

"That counts me out, for you girls are the three, and Trix is the worst!" shouted Jack. [39]

"If I was half as mean as the rest of you I'd go to some old-clothes man, and try to sell myself," said Amy, the mild.

"You wouldn't get much," said Trix, not realizing her retort was rather against herself.

"I think I don't care about a post-office," remarked Margery, with quivering lips. "I think I'll not be in it, and if you want one you can have it some other place than my orchard."

"I don't want one," said Trix.

"It's a stupid thing anyhow," said Amy.

"No one with any sense would ever have proposed it," said Jack.

"Then we'll give it all up," said Margery, in a low voice. A quarrel was not a little thing to her, as it was to the others, but an awful tragedy. And at this terrible moment Miss Isabel came down the orchard, looking as fresh and calm as if there were no such thing as anger in all the world. It did not require her keen eyes to see the flushed faces and trembling lips, and feel the electricity in the air, but she discreetly pretended to observe nothing.

"Good-morrow, brave Sir Hotspur, noble Lady Catharine Seyton, kind Mrs. Plenty, fair Lady [40]

Griselda," she said.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Isabel," responded four melancholy voices, from which joy seemed forever fled.

"I see the postmark came. I was uneasy lest it fail to arrive, and came over to ask about it," continued Miss Isabel cheerfully. "Is it good? Oh, yes; those are very clear impressions you made. Do you know, I like the name Blissylvania much better than I thought I should?"

No answer; the children were beginning to feel dreadfully ashamed, for though they were perfectly at ease with Miss Isabel, they cared too much for her good opinion to be anything but their best before her.

"I brought the stamps," continued Miss Isabel, with persistent, cheerful blindness. "Here they are."

Jack had been digging a hole with his heel ever since Miss Isabel had arrived, and it required his entire attention. Giving an extra deep backward thrust, he said without looking up:

"It's a pity you took that trouble, Miss Isabel, for we're not going to have a post-office after all."

A sob from Margery followed this remark.

[41]

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Miss Isabel, looking from one gloomy face to another, and drawing Margery's, which was hidden from her, on her knee.

"Well," said Trix desperately, "we're all mad. We got into a fuss about who would be postmaster, and we decided to give the thing up."

"What do you mean; you couldn't decide who should be postmaster first?" asked Miss Isabel. "Of course you intend to take turns in office?"

Jack, Trix, and Amy glanced at each other, and Margery stopped sobbing to listen. Simple as this solution of the difficulty was, no one had thought of it.

"We didn't mean that; we thought some one would be postmaster all the time," said Jack.

"Oh, dear me, I should think you would get into a fuss if you tried to decide who was to have the fun all alone," laughed Miss Isabel. "And so you were going to give up the whole thing, and cheat me of all the pleasure you promised me because you did not hit on such a simple plan! And last night we decided that Blissylvania was to be a real republic, with every one equal! Look up, little Marguerite; you are a daisy too wet with rain just now. Don't make mountains of molehills, children; it is much wiser to make molehills of the mountains we have to climb in life. Now, I think each would better be postmaster a week at a time, and draw lots for the order of serving. Or, perhaps, it would be better still to have the term of office last but three days, for then the terms will come around quicker."

[42]

She did not add that this would give each a second chance to serve in case they tired quickly of the new play, but she thought it.

"Shall we draw lots for turns now?" she asked, reaching for the white paper on which they had been making impressions before the storm broke.

"Yes, Miss Isabel," said Jack and Amy and Trix meekly, while Margery sat up pale and trembling, and began to dry her eyes. The others glanced at her wonderingly; they never could understand why Margery seemed half sick if she had been angry or had cried.

Miss Isabel wrote the numbers, and they drew, Amy number one, Trix two, Margery three, and Jack four.

"Now please show me the boxes. Why, they are very nicely made, Jack; did you do it alone?"

[43]

"Yes, Miss Isabel," said Jack, beaming, all trace of anger melted in the sunshine of her presence.

"And look, Miss Isabel, here's the drop-box," cried Amy. "You put letters through the slit in the top, and when you have a parcel you lift the cover and put it inside."

Miss Isabel laughed.

"That is a wee bit like the story of the man who made a large hole for his cat to go in and out, and a small one alongside for the kitten. But it is certainly the nicest kind of a post-office, and I think, perhaps, that I shall get more pleasure out of it than any of you." Which was a much truer prophecy than Miss Isabel herself dreamed. "We are to write letters to-morrow, and begin Monday, are we not?"

"Yes; oh, what fun!" cried Trix, catching Amy around the waist, and waltzing her about the old apple-tree and back again.

No one but Margery seemed to remember "the late unpleasantness;" she stood a little apart, very pale, but trying to smile.

"Do you know, I think it is unusually warm for the sixth of June?" remarked Miss Isabel. "I wonder if I could get any one to walk down to Bent's to eat ice-cream with me?"

[44]

Jack turned a somersault at once.

"Don't try if you don't want to succeed, Miss Isabel," he said.

"Come, then, every one of you," she cried merrily, "for I do want to succeed. And I propose that we wear our beautiful new badges, for we are to go in a body as a club."

"Let me pin them on, please," said Margery. She had been longing for a chance to beg pardon, and saw it here. "I'm dreadfully sorry I was so cross, Jack," she whispered, pinning the badge, and at the same time rubbing her cheek on his gray jacket.

"Oh, that's all right, Megsy. You're never much cross," he whispered back, and would have liked to have kissed her little white face, for he dearly loved his cousin.

"Please forgive me, Trix, for being so mean," she whispered, as she reached her, and Trix stared at her for a moment in amazement.

"Why, I forgot all about it," she said. "I was meaner than you anyhow." And she kissed her.

Amy put her arms around Margery before she could speak. "It's all right, Margery; forgive me, too," she whispered. [45]

And so, at peace with all the world and each other, the Happy Thought Club, that had so narrowly escaped destruction, sallied forth to eat ice-cream.

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## CHAPTER IV.

[46]

### THE MYSTERIOUS TENANT.

THE opening of the post-office was a great success. Amy, who was the first to go into office as postmistress, had a busy time for the three days of her term. Every member of the H. T. C. wrote the other four one letter a day with praiseworthy regularity, so there were twenty letters daily for the postmistress of Blissylvania to handle, not to mention packages and papers, and the invisible city of Blissylvania did more mail business than many of Uncle Sam's offices in far-off country places. There was a slight falling off in mail on the second day of Trix's term, which followed Amy's, for Jack found so much and such regular correspondence exhausting to mind and body, and was first to complain that he had nothing to say. It was even found, when the ladies compared notes on the fifth day after the office opened, that he had basely written one letter, and copied it three times—Miss Isabel requiring a different style of composition—but they had agreed to feign ignorance of this action, charitably excusing it on the ground of boys' well-known deficiencies. [47]

There was difficulty about Margery's address. She insisted that the whole title and address must be used, but Jack declared it was expecting too much of any one to write on the small space of the back of their letters, which for economy's sake were so folded as to serve instead of envelopes: "Lady Griselda, At the Castle of the Lonely Lake, Blissylvania, New York," which was what Margery desired.

They compromised, following Miss Isabel's suggestion, on "Lady Griselda of the Castle, Blissylvania, New York," because, as Miss Isabel pointed out, there could be no mistake, there being but one Lady Griselda and one castle.

Taken altogether, the post-office could hardly have succeeded better, and if there were any danger of its losing charm, it was saved by a new interest arising, which gave a novel topic for conversation and supplied Jack with the needed subject for correspondence.

It was a little after eight o'clock on the sixth morning after the post-office opened, and Margery was practising. She was as faithful in this as in everything else, and to the inexpressible wonder of her playmates no strategy or coaxing could get her to leave the piano before her time was up. This seemed to Trix, who seized any excuse to shorten the hated task, little short of insanity, and a new proof of the queerness that they all recognized in dreamy, sensitive Margery. They did not understand that Margery was an unconscious philosopher, and since the thought of an unfulfilled duty would spoil her pleasure, preferred to secure a thorough good time by clearing away any possible hindrances to one. [48]

Trix came into the room, and finding Margery at the piano, sighed.

"I suppose there's no use talking to you until you're done," she said, throwing herself in a big chair. "And I've the most interesting thing to tell you."

Margery shook her head.

"How long must you practise; till half after?"

Margery nodded, the nod coming in well on an accented note. Up and down went the nimble fingers, playing an exercise, with the metronome ticking on the piano. [49]

Trix fidgeted and wriggled down in the chair, and pulled herself up, watching the clock the while.

"Margery, it's *such* an interesting thing," she said plaintively at last.

"In ten minutes," sang Margery to the accompaniment of the scale. "Play with Tommy Traddles while you wait."

"Oh, Margery, *won't* you stop?" cried Trix, after three minutes had passed. No answer but *arpeggios*. "Margaret Gresham, you're chewing gum," cried Trix, resorting to strategy.

"I am not," said Margery, coming down in flat contradiction and a false chord at one and the same time. "I'm chewing the side of my tongue."

"Why don't you have a cud?" asked Trix, delighted at having trapped Margery into speech. But she was not to be caught again.

Shaking her head she began playing her new piece, which, true to her principles, she had left till the last. Finally the tiresome clock struck once. Trix sprang up.

"You shall not finish that page," she cried, catching Margery around the waist and pulling her off the stool. "You said half-past, and it is half-past; so stop." [50]

"But I *must* finish that page, Trix," she protested. "Unfinished tunes I can't stand."

"Well, you'll have to," declared Trix. "Listen to me. The Dismals is rented!"

"The Dismals" was the children's name for a very large, untenanted place called the Evergreens.

"Why, the Dismals is never rented!" cried Margery. "It hasn't had any one in it since we were born."

"Yes; but it has now," replied Trix. "There is a man there, and he lives all alone. Our waitress, Katie, told me about it last night. I thought I'd never go to sleep for thinking about him. Katie knows a girl that saw him go through the hedge and disappear under the Dismals' pine-trees. There is something queer about him; Katie says so. They don't know whether he's crazy or whether he's wicked, or perhaps he's both. Katie says we may all be murdered in our beds. She says she thinks he's a robber who has come from somewhere, and is to make the Dismals his den. But Katie says some think he's a murderer hiding there, and again some think he's got the evil eye." [51]

"What's that?" asked Margery, shuddering; "another eye, or what?"

"No, you goose," cried Trix; "it's an eye that looks just like others, only it's kind of set and stony, and when people look at it they're never lucky any more."

But this had not the effect Trix anticipated.

"I don't believe that," said Margery; "that sounds like a ghost story, or something of that kind. Besides, if there were an evil eye it couldn't hurt us, for we wear our medals, and if we met him we'd just hold on to them and say Hail Marys till he went by."

Trix was staggered.

"Katie didn't say so, and Katie's a Catholic," she remarked.

"Yes; but Katie doesn't understand," said Margery. "You ought to teach her not to be superstitious, Trix."

This was taking the conversation into the realms of morals, and Trix wished it to be only thrilling.

"Well, what if he's crazy or wicked?" she demanded.

"That's different," replied Margery promptly. "We'll be late for school; wait till I get my hat and catechism, and we'll talk about it going along." [52]

She came back in a moment, and the two little girls went out into the June sunshine on their way to the convent, where they were to have a catechism instruction, though it was Saturday.

"I think myself it's much more likely he's crazy, or a robber, or something awful," Trix resumed. "You see, no one who was all right could live alone in such a dreadful place as the Dismals."

"You don't suppose he's some exiled prince come over from Europe and hiding there?" suggested Margery.

"They don't have exiled princes now," declared Trix.

"Oh, yes they do; the last of the rightful princes of France died not very long ago; papa said so."

"Well, if he's dead he can't be at the Dismals," said Trix. "I tell you, Margery, this man is some dangerous character, and I shall be afraid of my life to go to bed."

"I'm not afraid now talking about it, because I think maybe he's unfortunate, and not wicked, but when night comes I shall be afraid to go to bed, too," Margery agreed. [53]

The Evergreens, or "the Dismals," lay out of their way to school, but attracted to it by their very fear, the children turned aside in order to pass it, and then raced by it as fast as their feet could carry them, casting fearful glances over their shoulders as they ran. That afternoon among the

mail in the Blissylvania post-office was the following circular, in duplicate copies, addressed to Lady Alma Cara, and Mrs. Peace Plenty, and Sir Harry Hotspur. It ran:

"Dear Madam (or Sir): Having heard that a dangerous or mysterious character has come to live alone in the Evergreens, which we call the Dismals, we feel it our duty to warn you that you may fear to be robbed or murdered by this strange person, and that you should be on your guard. Yours respectfully (signed), Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely Lake. Lady Catharine Seyton, Postmistress of Blissylvania."

The circular had the desired effect. Mrs. Peace Plenty was panic-stricken; Sir Harry Hotspur vowed to wear his sword henceforth when he went abroad, and warned all wicked men that they'd better look out, for he would use it, and Lady Alma Cara promised to take Hero with her whenever she could if she went out. Hero was her big St. Bernard, and objected to much exercise in summer. [54]

Lady Alma Cara did not seem disturbed by the awful rumors as to the strange tenant, but she was far too wise to tell the children that she thought there was no danger, knowing well that this was an opportunity for them to make much of, and that there was a certain pleasure in their fear. By Sunday the reports of the mysterious tenant had multiplied, not lessening in horror. Margery held her medals tight as she passed along the streets, though her terror was moderated when Winnie, the cook, reported that he had been in the back of the church at the first Mass, but had slipped out before any one could get a good look at him. Jack and Trix pointed out to Margery with much pains, that this showed that he was even worse than they supposed, because he came to church only to pretend to be decent, but could not stay to face honest people.

Sunday night the sensation reached a tremendous pitch. The children had taken tea with Trix, and had been entertained by Katie with the latest news of the stranger. He did not live alone, after all; it seemed that he had an old woman for housekeeper, and though it was not certain who had seen her to report her appearance, it was quite certain that she had a hump, and never went out in the grounds of the Dismals without a broomstick, which proved, so Katie thought, that she was a witch. As to the man himself, he walked with his head down, and Katie had heard that he cast no shadow, and the children wondered what kind of folks it was cast no shadow. The children did not know, but they did not like to ask, feeling sure they must be the most awful people possible, especially since they had never seen such, and shuddered at the thought. Katie, a fresh-faced, pleasant little girl with no notion of doing them harm, but with an amiable desire to be agreeable, responded to their cries for more, with tales of banshees and witches till their blood froze in their veins, and they left for home in an agony of fear and went to bed in dumb suffering. Had they spoken their fears their misery would have been short, but none of them mentioned the matter, and so no relief could come. [55]

Each made a characteristic preparation for the dangers of the night. Jack took his toy pistol and sword to bed, hoping in case of alarm the invader would mistake them for real ones. Trix laid the ice-pick and fire-tongs on her pillow, and hung a bucket of water, to which she had tied a string, over her bedroom-door. Amy put her rosary, crucifix, and prayer-book under her pillow, and made sure that she had on her medals and scapular, and then got an extra pillow and blanket to muffle her ears, which, as the night was warm, had its drawbacks. Poor, nervous little Margery sprinkled all her bed with holy water, collected every pious object which she possessed, and took Tommy Traddles to bed with her, that in case of danger she might protect him. To all the others sleep came soon in spite of fear, but Margery lay cold and wakeful until the twitter and stirring of the birds outside her window, and the first rays of dawn brought the hope and comfort of another day. [56]

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## CHAPTER V.

 [57]

### THE INVASION OF THE AMAZONS.

MARGERY arose from her night of terror armed with the courage of desperation. There were two letters in the post that morning addressed in her stiff little handwriting to Lady Catharine Seyton and Mrs. Peace Plenty. They were precisely alike, except in the address, and ran thus:

"The Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely Lake requests you to meet her at the elm at the corner of the convent grounds after school to do something for the public safety."

Margery herself carried them to school and gave them to their owners, for it was her first day as postmistress.

"They were marked 'Immediate,' so I delivered them," she said to Trix and Amy, in the character of postmistress, with fine assumption of ignorance as to their contents.

Amy found her waiting with Trix when she appeared at the trysting-place a trifle late. [58]

"Now she's come; what is it, Margery?" demanded Trix, who never could endure waiting, and had been fuming because Margery would not speak until Amy had arrived.

"It means that I can't stand this another moment," Margery burst out, glad to express her

feelings. "I wouldn't be so scared every night as I was last night for anything. I want you to go with me to the Dismals, and see if that man's as bad as Katie says."

"I wouldn't go for the world," declared Amy, blanching at the thought.

"Nor I," echoed daring Trix. "You're such a scared cat, Margery, I don't see what you want to go for."

"It's because I am a scared cat," said Margery. "I'm afraid not to go. I should think you'd dare what I dare, Trix Lane, when you're always talking about being a boy."

"I suppose Jack would think we were brave," remarked Trix slowly.

She and Jack were engaged in a sort of perpetual "stump" as to which should outdo the other.

Margery saw an advantage here.

[59]

"Of course he would," she said. "He'd never dare say again that girls were cowards."

"But I am," said Amy candidly, "and I couldn't say I wasn't. Still, if you go, Margery, I'll go with you."

"You dear thing," cried Margery, giving her an enthusiastic hug.

"I'll go; I'd like to," said Trix hastily, trying to retrieve her reputation.

"Then we'll start right now," Margery declared. "Don't you see that I'm afraid to go, but I'm more afraid to stay away, because we *must* know what's there? If I had to lie awake nights thinking about the hump-backed witch and the evil eye without seeing them I'd be a raving lunatic."

Margery meant lunatic or maniac, it is not clear which.

The desperate band of amazons started valiantly down the street. As they neared the Evergreens their pace slackened, but they did not halt. Margery, the coward, went steadily on, and the others were ashamed not to follow. They entered "the Dismals" by a less frequented way than the gate—in fact, they crawled through an opening in the fence, and concealed themselves not far from the back door, in the long grass that had not been cut for many summers.

[60]

"My heart beats so I know he'll think some one's knocking," whispered poor Amy, and to Margery's additional alarm Trix giggled hysterically.

"Oh, keep quiet, and just pray," she whispered.

Presently an old woman appeared, and the agonized trio noted that she carried a broom. But she certainly was not hunchbacked, but a slender, tiny old woman, with a smiling face, and she began using the broom in a most un-witchlike manner to clear off the back stoop.

In spite of themselves the children felt a little reassured, but their fear returned when they saw a man come around the corner. He walked slowly, and they soon saw that this was because he read as he walked. A spaniel ran ahead of him, and came back, barking wildly.

"Why, Sheila, I'm ashamed of you," said the man, closing his book, with one finger inside, and shaking the little volume at the excited dog. "How often must I tell you that I will never help you to catch birds, and much less in June, when they have families to look after?"

[61]

His voice sounded kindly, and even sweet; his eyes were brown, and looked affectionately at the little dog. As Amy said afterward, "Neither looked like an evil eye." Comfort began to come to the three palpitating little hearts in the grass, and though they dared not whisper it to each other, the conviction struck them that there must have been a mistake. Just then Sheila, the spaniel, ran towards them, barking in quite a different tone, and so sharply that her master turned to follow her.

"That does not sound like birds, Sheila," he said. "What have you found?"

In an agony no words could represent the three valiant amazons lay quaking till they saw that the little dog had really scented them, and was leading her master straight to them. Breaking cover like three startled quails they precipitately took to their heels, to the surprise of both dog and man.

"Stop!" shouted the stranger. "Don't run, children; Sheila won't hurt you."

"But you might," thought the children, and fled faster, all their fear returning in their flight. Margery and Amy cleared the hole in the fence in rapid succession, but Trix, not liking to wait her turn to go through, tried to climb over, and stuck fast on a paling.

[62]

"If you leave me I'll die!" she shrieked to the other two, who were making off at a great rate. They turned and saw her face purple with fright, while the old woman, the man, and the little dog on the other side saw her long legs kicking so wildly that they looked several pairs instead of one. With heroism, genuine, if unnecessary, Margery and Amy stopped and turned back to their imprisoned comrade. They reached her head just as a hand touched her back. With a scream that made them sure that she had at least been stabbed, Trix made one last, desperate effort to get away, and was still.

"Let me help you," said the man gently. "Pray, don't be so frightened. Indeed, my little dog would

never hurt you, and as soon as I can get you off she shall apologize for frightening you so badly."

So saying he extricated Trix's dress, and set her on her feet. His touch was so careful that Trix plucked up heart to look at him. He was not old, he was not ugly. Trix felt sure that if she had met him elsewhere and otherwise she should have liked him. [63]

"Weren't there more little girls?" he asked, laughing. "It seemed to me a dozen started up from the grass when Sheila barked."

"Two, sir," Trix murmured faintly. "They are on the other side."

He came closer, and looked over.

"Please come back a moment, and let Sheila apologize," he said, and Margery and Amy dared not refuse.

They crawled back, and the man turned to the dog.

"Sit up, Sheila; say you're very sorry," he commanded.

Sheila sat up at once and whined.

"Now go shake hands all round," said her master.

Sheila rose on her hind feet and walked to each in turn, offering her little brown right paw, which they accepted, almost forgetting their fears.

"Now won't you come back and rest?" asked the man.

"Oh! no, thank you," the three little girls said in chorus, as if they had been rehearsing it, turning at once towards the opening in the fence.

"Then good-by," said the man. "Sheila and I are a bit lonely here, and we should be very glad to have you come again—when you can stay longer," he added, with such a merry twinkle of the eye that Trix could not help responding with a laugh, and all replied, "Thank you," in much better spirits, and went away quite enchanted with the mysterious tenant. [64]

The more they thought over their adventure, the more they found their new acquaintance delightful, and the faster they hurried to look up Jack to vaunt their courage to him, and tell him the facts about their bugaboo. Great was Jack's amazement as he listened, and his admiration for their pluck was satisfactory even to Trix.

But the next day Jack had a piece of news for them that restored the balance of importance among them, and re-established Jack's self-esteem, which had been a little lowered by the brave deed of the girls.

"Well, what do you suppose I know?" he asked, coming down the orchard where the girls were putting the post-office to rights, the day after the invasion of "the Dismals."

"That wouldn't take long to tell," replied Trix saucily.

"You may have seen the man at the Dismals, but I know who he is," Jack continued, ignoring Trix. [65]

"Who?" cried each of the girls.

"Guess," said Jack.

"An escaped bandit," exclaimed Trix.

"An officer of the society that takes care of animals," said Amy, who had been much impressed by the stranger's goodness to Sheila.

"An exiled prince," cried Margery, returning to her first idea.

"All wrong!" shouted Jack triumphantly. "Not even warm. I'll tell you what happened last night. I was reading in the library, and papa and mamma were there, and pretty soon I went to sleep. And after a while I woke up enough to hear them talking, and papa said: 'Well, it must be that he has some motive for coming back here, for no one would choose to live in such a dreary place as the Evergreens without reason.' That woke me up, and I pricked up my ears to listen. 'You know it was his grandfather's place,' mamma said; and papa said: 'But, my dear, people rarely live alone in a tumble-down house for their grandfather's sake.' Mamma said: 'No, I think as you do, it must be something to do with Isabel that brought him back here. Then papa said: 'It would be queer if they were to marry, and be happy after all this time, like story-book people.' And mamma said she loved Miss Isabel so much, and she was so good and sweet, that she should be more glad of happiness for her than for almost anything else in the world. And she said she thought Mr. Robert Dean was a good man. And then my old book tumbled down, and mamma said low: 'Don't let Jack hear anything of this;' and she said to me: 'Jack, dear, don't you think you'd better go to bed?' And I didn't think so, but I had to go. And now, do you know who that man is?" [66]

"No," said Amy, bewildered.

"Why, is he Mr. Robert Dean?" asked Trix, immediately adding: "I don't know who Mr. Dean is, though."

But Margery looked greatly excited.



"Is he the one Miss Isabel was going to marry, ever so long ago, when she was going to live in that house near yours, Jack?" she asked.

"Right you are, Peggy," said Jack. "He's come back to take Miss Isabel away, I'll bet you, and so he is a robber, and we were right in the first place." [67]

Trix assented cordially.

"He'd better not try to take Miss Isabel off!" she said fiercely.

Amy and Margery took another view.

"May be she likes him, and would be glad to see him again," said Amy. "Maybe she'd rather have him come back."

And Margery said firmly: "I don't want any one to take Miss Isabel away, but if she would be happier, we must not say one word."

"Much he'd care what we said," muttered Jack wrathfully.

"Yes," said Margery, "but we mustn't say it anyway. We'll go to see him, for he asked us to, and we'll see if he is nice, and then we won't care if he does marry Miss Isabel. We'll be glad because she's glad, and we won't let her know once how we feel about it."

Margery's voice had been growing more and more quavering, and as she ceased speaking she sat down on the grass and cried as though her heart would break. The others looked at her in silence.

They could not make up their minds to give up Miss Isabel, even for her happiness; but, on the other hand, they could not cry so tempestuously at the thought of losing her. [68]

"Never mind, Margery; you'll have us," said Amy, sitting down by her and putting her arm around her.

"Yes; but you're none of you Miss Isabel. But I'll be glad, very glad," said Margery, with a fresh burst of tears.

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## CHAPTER VI.

 [69]

### FURTHER ACQUAINTANCE.

WHEN Mr. Robert Dean opened his front door in response to a faint ring at the bell, and saw three little girls and one very rosy-faced boy standing on the step, he had no idea that it was a self-appointed committee of investigation, and that his character was to be tried by a very exacting standard. Yet such was the case.

Following Margery's suggestion, Beatrice, Amy, and Jack had gone with her to call on the new tenant, to see if by any possibility he could be good enough to be Miss Isabel's husband, in case that were his object in coming to the Evergreens.

The visit was a difficult one, and was made still more so by the committee not finding Mr. Dean in the grounds as they had hoped to do, and thus being obliged to walk deliberately up the steps and ring the bell.

Mr. Dean looked down on them with some surprise, and Margery said faintly: [70]

"We've come to call on you, sir, as you asked us."

"Oh, yes; we've met before," said Mr. Dean, recognizing Trix's black eyes, and laughing as he remembered the plight from which he had rescued her. "I am very glad to see you and so I am sure will Sheila be. Will you kindly walk into my parlor, like four pleasant flies, though I think I am not a spider."

The children thanked him, and followed him into the old house. The parlor was darkened, and their host went to the window and threw open the blind. The light revealed a room furnished in the taste of more than fifty years ago. Haircloth chairs were ranged at intervals around the walls, a carpet strewn with immense roses covered the floor, and the wall-paper in panels representing a tiger hunt so fascinated Jack's wondering gaze that he became quite lost in its contemplation. Margery had perched herself on the haircloth sofa, which was so slippery that she had to hold herself on by the bolster-like ends, for her feet did not nearly reach the floor. She rejoiced when she was rescued from her precarious situation by their host turning from the window with the words: [71]

"My name is Robert Dean. Will you please tell me yours, that we may begin properly?"

All the others looked toward Margery, feeling that as it was her expedition, it was for her to do the honors.

Margery gladly slipped down on her feet.

"This is Beatrice Lane; we call her Trix," she began.

Mr. Dean made a profound bow.

"And the name suits her, if one may judge by appearances," he said.

"And this is Amy Tracy, and my cousin, Jack Hildreth."

"And you?" suggested Mr. Dean. "I should like to call you something too."

"I am Margaret Gresham," said Margery, blushing.

"I think you would be much more comfortable if you would take this low chair that my grandmother embroidered, rather than perch on that abominable sofa again," said her host, handing Margery a small ebony chair with a carved back and a seat of faded satin embroidered with flowers dim with time. [72]

"Thank you," said Margery, with profound inward gratitude. "It seems a pity to sit on it if your grandmother embroidered it."

"It has been used a great many times, and was made for another Margaret, who for many years has been out of the world where things grow old and fade," replied Mr. Dean. "My father had a sister who died when she was just sixteen. This chair, I have been told, grandmother embroidered for her on her fifteenth birthday."

"How lovely to have it still!" said Margery, rising to look at the flowers again. "I am not eleven yet—not till October."

"That is a great age," said Mr. Dean, smiling. "And now you really do not know how glad I am that you came to-day. I was feeling a trifle blue, and wondering if I should be lonely all my life, and just then the bell rang, and four good fairies appeared. By the way," he added, starting up boyishly, "suppose we go into the garden? Sheila can come there; I dare not let her in here for fear of my housekeeper. She is a little woman, and I am a big man, but I am afraid of her. You see she was my old nurse, and I got into the habit of minding her when I was small. I think that she makes pretty good cake, though I am not the judge of cake that I was when I was younger. If you will go into the garden I'll ask her to give us some, and get your opinion." [73]

He led the way through the side door, and the children found themselves at once in such a dear old garden that four "Ah's!" of satisfaction arose.

"What a beautiful, lovely old garden!" cried Trix. "It is as nice as Miss Isabel's."

Mr. Dean turned quickly.

"Do you know Miss Isabel?" he asked.

"Know her!" cried Jack. "She's our best friend."

"And she's lovelier than any one else in all the world," added Trix, with defiance in her voice, remembering who he was and for what he might be there. But Margery kept her big gray eyes fastened on his face, and saw the color come there and his eyes grow moist.

"So she is, Beatrice," he said. "You are fortunate to have her friendship."

Something in his voice melted all Margery's distrust; she slipped her hand confidingly into his. [74]

"We love her more than all the world," she said softly. "We have a club, and her name in the club is Alma Cara."

Some sure instinct always led little Margery to divine the right and kindest thing to do. Mr. Dean looked down on her pale face and earnest eyes.

"And I believe you are the one who named her," he said. And from that moment, though he grew to be very fond of the three other children, Margery was his especial pet and friend.

Mr. Dean left them after this, and returned, bringing the cake and Sheila. The little dog was introduced to Jack in proper form, shook hands with each of her guests, walking over to them on her hind legs to do so, and graciously accepted cake from the children, first sniffing each piece cautiously, like the dainty, well-fed creature that she was.

Mr. Dean touched Amy's badge inquiringly.

"Might one ask what that means?" he said.

"It's a secret," began Amy, looking hesitatingly at the others.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Mr. Dean. [75]

"But I think we could tell Mr. Dean, couldn't we?" suggested Margery.

"Yes," replied all the other members of the club promptly. There was no question but that the investigating committee had made up its mind, individually and collectively, to a favorable report on the stranger.

"It is the Happy Thought Club," explained Amy, indicating the initials on her badge; "and we have a post-office."

And each adding a bit of information, the story of the post-office was told him. Mr. Dean laughed heartily over the names.

"What fun you must have!" he exclaimed. "If I come to return your call, will you show me the post-office?"

"Oh, yes," cried Margery. "I am post-mistress this week. And, you know, we have one honorary member, and she's Miss Isabel, and her name is the Lady Alma Cara. No matter what we do, we always have Miss Isabel, because we can't get on without her."

"It is not easy, my little maid, to get on without Miss Isabel," said Mr. Dean gently. "What would you do if you could not see her, or speak to her, or write to her for ten year?"

"We wouldn't stand it: we will always keep her," cried Trix, firing up, and regarding this as a direct threat from him whom she was still ready to regard as an enemy. But Margery understood. [76]

"I'd hardly be able to breathe," she said pityingly, laying her hand on her new friend's coat-sleeve; "but I'd know it would be better by and by."

"You dear little atom," said Mr. Dean, putting his hand on her dark hair, "it is no wonder that you at least have a white dove on your badge."

In a moment Mr. Dean spoke again, quite cheerfully:

"Now I have been thinking of something while we have been sitting here. I cannot tell how long I shall be at the Evergreens; it may be all summer, it may not be a month. It depends on whether I succeed in what I came to do. I should like to see as much of you as I can while I am here; do you suppose that if I asked you to tea some day before long you would all come?"

"Oh, yes, sir; we'd like to, if we may," said all four children heartily.

"I think that your mothers will allow it," said Mr. Dean. "You see you do not know me, nor I you, because you were all babies when I went away from here, but I knew your mothers and fathers. Now are you not surprised?" [77]

Jack blushed painfully, but Trix said, with great presence of mind:

"I don't think that I ever heard them speak of you."

"Very likely not——" Mr. Dean was beginning, when Amy interrupted him.

"We were afraid of you," she said, in spite of the warning kicks and frowns of the others. Amy had a tendency to frankness that was at times wholly uncontrollable. "We had heard from Trix's waitress, Katie, that you had the evil eye and your house-keeper was a witch, so the day before yesterday, when Sheila found us, we were hiding in the grass to see if you were so bad."

The others watched Mr. Dean anxiously to see what effect this dreadful revelation of Amy's might have, and were relieved when he threw back his head and laughed merrily.

"Well done!" he cried. "I had no idea that I was alarming the neighborhood. I am glad that you decided in my favor, as I suppose you did, since you came to see me."

"Oh, yes; don't mind that nonsense," said Trix, and Margery, rising to go, held out her hand, saying, "I think we shall be real friends." [78]

"Thank you," replied Mr. Dean, bowing over her little fingers as if, as Trix afterwards remarked, "she had really been the Lady Griselda of the Castle."

"Good-by," said the children; "we've had a beautiful time. Come and see us, and we'll show you our post-office."

"Good-by, my dears; thank you for coming, and come often," said Mr. Dean, as he held the garden gate open for them, and watched them go away, while Sheila "shook a day-day with her tail," as Amy said.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Trix, as they walked towards Miss Isabel's, whom they had not seen for four whole days, because she had been away.

"He's all right," said Jack comprehensively.

"I think he's nice," said Amy emphatically.

"He's the nicest man, except my father, I ever saw," announced Trix.

Margery sighed gently.

"I like him," she said, "and I'm sorry for him, because I think he's lonely and feels sad. He's most as nice for a man as Miss Isabel is for a lady." And praise could go no further. [79]

Miss Isabel welcomed her fellow-members of the club heartily.

"We've something very interesting to tell you," said Amy, the moment the salutations were over.

"I am all attention," said Miss Isabel, coming to sit down before them.

"We've been making a call at the Dismals, on Mr. Dean," said Trix.

Miss Isabel sprang up again and went to the window.

"And he's very nice, Miss Isabel," added Margery conscientiously. "We were afraid of him because we heard that he was a robber, or had the evil eye. So we went to see, and it isn't any of it true, and to-day we went to call on him, and we're going to take tea with him soon. He's kind, and he has the loveliest little dog, and he seems not very happy, and we're sorry, because he's nice."

Miss Isabel turned and came back to them.

"And what about the post-office?" she asked, ignoring the new acquaintance.

Trix and Jack stared, Margery looked hurt, and Amy murmured in helpless bewilderment:

"It's very well, thank you."

[80]

Suddenly Jack brightened.

"Were you thinking what I was?" he asked. "You know I could easily move those partitions over in the lower row of the post-office, to make it hold another box like the upper row."

"I am afraid I don't understand, Jack," said Miss Isabel.

"Why, then we could ask Mr. Dean to be an honorary member, too," explained Jack.

"Oh, yes!" cried the three girls.

"I'm sure he'd be delighted; he seemed so interested in the office," said Amy.

"Should you mind?" asked Trix. "May we?" while Margery said nothing, but looked eager.

"My dear children, you may do anything you like, and will you do one favor for me?" said Miss Isabel. "If it is not too much trouble, will one of you bring my mail to me every day? It is getting so warm, I shall not feel like going down."

"Why, we'd love to," they all cried.

"Let me do it all the time," begged Jack.

"You will all come; I want you all," said Miss Isabel, rising. "You won't mind if I say good-by? I—I feel tired. Good-night, dears; come back as soon as you can."

[81]

She kissed each one lovingly, but there was no mistaking the fact that she was impatient to be left alone.

The children went down the street in wondering silence, which Amy was the first to break.

"Miss Isabel's sick," she said.

"She didn't care one bit about our visit to the Dismals," said Trix.

"And she always cared for everything we cared for," complained Jack. "She's not one bit like our Miss Isabel; I guess she thinks Mr. Dean's bad."

"No," said Margery decidedly; "Miss Isabel's good to bad people. Never mind; she loves us just as much. I think Miss Isabel's not happy to-day. I wonder why nice people are not always happy? Now, I'm sure Mr. Dean's nice, but he seems sad, and to-night our dear Miss Isabel's troubled. We'll ask Mr. Dean to join the post-office—that was a good idea, Jack—and then he won't be so lonely, and we'll love all Miss Isabel's troubles away. Oh, dear," sighed Margery wistfully, "I'd like to make the whole world happy."

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## CHAPTER VII.

[82]

### A NEW MEMBER.

MR. DEAN returned the children's visit without loss of time. He found them assembled in Mr. Gresham's orchard, and was given the seat of honor on an old stump, while he was shown the beauties of the post-office. His admiration for this institution satisfied even the children's enthusiasm, and when it had been exhibited from every possible point of view, Margery turned to Amy and said:

"Tell him."

"No, you tell him," said Amy.

"Jack ought to tell him," said Trix, "because he thought of it."

"Yes, tell, Jack," echoed Margery and Amy.

"Now what is this mystery?" asked Mr. Dean.

"It's nothing much," Jack replied, blushing furiously. "You see I thought—we thought that you might like—oh, I mean maybe you'd be another honorary member." [83]

"Of the post-office, the H. T. C.?" asked Mr. Dean.

Jack nodded. "If you don't think we're too little for you," he added.

"I should be delighted," replied Mr. Dean, rising to bow. "It is rather if you don't think I am too big for you. But I'll tell you a secret. I grew up outside, but inside I stayed a boy—do you see?"

"Yes, I see," cried Amy. "What a lovely way to grow up! I mean to be a woman that way, too."

"That's like Miss Isabel," remarked Trix, but Jack, with an eye solely on the business in hand, said:

"We'd like lots to have you join if you will."

"I feel honored, and I accept with much gratitude," said Mr. Dean, and even Trix's sharp eyes, which were always on the watch lest she were laughed at, could see nothing but pleasure in his face.

"Now you'll have to choose a name," cried Amy, jumping around in high glee.

Mr. Dean considered a moment. "I think, on the whole, Oliver Twist would be an appropriate name for me this summer," he said, with humorous melancholy. [84]

"Oliver Twist? What is that? Sir Oliver Twist, or plain Mr. Oliver Twist?" asked Trix.

"Are none of you plain Mr. or Miss; are you all a knight or lady?" Mr. Dean inquired.

"No; Amy is Mrs. Peace Plenty, but the rest of us are lady, and Jack is Sir Harry Hotspur," answered Margery gravely.

"And your Miss Isabel?" suggested Mr. Dean.

"Oh, she is Lady Alma Cara; it would never do for her to be plain *Mrs.*," said Trix.

"I suppose not," assented Mr. Dean, with a queer little quirk of the lip. "I like 'plain Mrs.' rather well myself sometimes, however. But I shall have to be just Mr. Oliver Twist; it would never do to turn poor hungry Oliver into a knight. Amy and I will be the every-day people, while you others do the nobility for us. And I should like to know when you are all coming to take tea with me? Will the day after to-morrow suit you?"

"Yes, thank you," replied the children.

"Then that's settled. And, Jack, do you know a boy who would go fishing with me to-morrow after school?" [85]

"I think I do," said Jack, looking up with a beaming face.

"Then will that boy come along with me now, and get his mother's permission to go?" inquired Mr. Dean, rising. "And, by the way, at what time do we come for our mail?"

"We came at first before school," said Trix, "but it made us so late that now we come after school, when Miss Isabel used to come."

"Does Miss Isabel usually come at this hour?" asked Mr. Dean, brushing his hat carefully.

"She's not coming at all now," said Amy. "It's getting so warm, she says, that she would like us to bring her mail to her."

Something like a shadow crept over Mr. Dean's face; Margery thought that he looked hurt.

"We are to take her mail to her in turn; we agreed to that," she said, coming close to him. "We'll all take turns going."

He smiled at her sadly.

"All of you whom she wishes to see," he said. "Good-by till the day after to-morrow, then, and thank you for this honor more than I can say. Come along, Jack." [86]

Trix watched them enviously as they disappeared.

"That's why I hate to be a girl," she said. "No one thinks you ever want to go fishing, and I love it just as much as Jack does."

"Isn't he splendid!" cried the other two, disregarding her woes, and she cheered up in agreeing with them.

The tea was a delightful occasion, and the new member proved an acquisition beyond words, for now there frequently appeared in the boxes a card signifying that there was a parcel too big to go into the box, which might be had on inquiry of the postmaster. The new member devised this

plan, and he was generally the sender of the parcels. These varied in contents from delicious candy, plants, books, toys, and all sorts of treasures, to six downy ducklings sent to Margery because she had expressed a desire to have some.

This funny parcel was considered by the others as a good joke, but Margery took it seriously, and her gratitude was unbounded.

"Dear Mr. Twist," she wrote in acknowledgment. "I cannot tell you how much pleased I am. If there is anything I can do to show you how much I like my lovely little ducks, and how I thank you, tell me what it is, and I will do it." [87]

The reply came the next morning, and Margery found herself taken rather painfully at her word.

"Most Noble Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely Lake," it ran. "There is a favor which I could receive at the hands of your ladyship which would give me the keenest pleasure, and your generous offer makes me bold to ask it. I have heard that you write poems. Will you be so very kind as to send me some of your work through the post-office? I should be most grateful for the favor, and treasure the poems as a precious memento of your ladyship's goodness."

This letter threw Margery into an agony of excitement.

"Who told him?" she demanded sternly, looking with dilated eyes over the edge of the missive.

"I may have just mentioned that you wrote poetry that day that we went fishing," said Jack sheepishly. "What's the harm, Peggy?"

"Yes, what's the harm?" echoed Amy, who was much impressed by the request. "You do write poetry, and it's lovely." [88]

"Oh, don't be a goose, Margery; there's no harm in Mr. Dean knowing about it," said Trix. "Anyway, he does know, and you've got to send him some, so what shall it be?"

"I have to do it, but I don't like to," sighed Margery, tasting the trials of geniuses with indiscreet friends. "What shall I send him?"

"The Knight," said Jack promptly.

"Rome," said Trix.

"Rome' is unfinished," objected Margery.

"Millie Maloe," said Amy.

"I'll send 'The Knight' and 'Millie Maloe,'" Margery decided, and the next morning's mail contained a thick letter for Mr. Oliver Twist.

"Dear Mr. Twist," this letter ran, "the Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely Lake sends two poems to you, as you asked her to. She hopes you will excuse mistakes in 'Millie Maloe,' because she was only eight years old when she wrote it, and 'The Knight' one she wrote last spring; and I am sorry Jack told you, because I don't like to be silly, but she is glad to do anything to please you because you are so good to us." [89]

#### MILLIE MALOE.

All alone she is wandering,  
All alone in the snow;  
Lost in the pathless forest,  
Poor little Millie Maloe.

The tall trees shake above her,  
And the winds whistle and sigh,  
And poor little Millie is shiv'ring,  
And she thinks she's going to die;

And she falls asleep on the dry leaves  
Covered o'er with snow,  
But is waked by darling Rover—  
Ah, happy Millie Maloe!

The dog is bending o'er her,  
And a sleigh is drawing near,  
And soon she's with her father,  
Who clasps his baby dear.

#### THE KNIGHT.

In a nameless grave does the good knight rest.  
He has fought for the cross, and so he is blest.  
Far away, in a castle grim,  
His wife watcheth and prayeth for him.  
Her baby son around her plays  
And tosses the beads while she prays.

A message comes from the Holy War  
Breathing of love for the son he ne'er saw.  
Days after another one comes—  
He's dead! "God pity the sorrowing ones."

The Lady Griselda received a polite note of thanks for the favor thus shown Mr. Oliver Twist, and the matter was forgotten. [90]

School closed, and the fresh warmth of June gave place to the fierce heat of July. Gentle Miss Isabel was ailing, and the children divided their time between her and their new friend. Even Jack, who was less observant than the girls, discovered that though no subject was as welcome to Mr. Dean as whatever they might have to say of Miss Isabel, she did not care to hear them talk of Mr. Dean, and it puzzled them sorely to account for such hardness of heart in her who never before failed to throw herself wholly into their interests.

It was an unusually burning day, the sun beating down with terrible heat, and not a breath stirring the drooping leaves, when Trix, who was postmistress that week, handed a magazine to Margery with her other mail. It was from Mr. Oliver Twist, and she tore off the wrapper hastily, for everything from him was sure to be interesting.

It was a child's magazine, and as she turned its pages she stopped suddenly, and grew so pale that Amy dropped her doll, to the great danger of its precious nose, and flew with Trix to her side. [91]

"What is it?" they cried.

"Look!" gasped Margery.

They followed her finger pointing, and there in the glory of type was "Millie Maloe" and "The Knight," signed with her own name—Margaret Gresham.

The girls nearly fell over in their wonder and awe, and Margery looked so white and excited that they really feared she would faint.

"Jack, come here!" cried Trix and Amy, waving their hands wildly to Jack, who appeared that moment in the gate. "Hurry! oh, hurry!"

Jack ran over to them.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Mr. Dean's sent Margery's poetry to the magazine. Look at it!" cried Trix, snatching the magazine from the hands of the dazed authoress.

"Oh, jolly me!" cried Jack, much impressed. "Why, you're a writer now, like—like—oh, those people what write poetry for the papers."

"I'm going to find mamma," said Margery, rising in solemn ecstasy; "and then I'm going to thank him."

Having rejoiced her family with a glimpse of her greatness, Margery went forth, attended by her admiring cousin and friends. First they went to the Evergreens—they had determined never to call the place "the Dismals" again, since it had become so pleasant to them, and, they wakened Mr. Dean from the nap into which he had fallen over his book, overcome by the great heat. [92]

"You are very good to me; I came to thank you," said Margery simply, kissing him as she spoke.

"Did you like it, little white dove?" he asked, taking the poetess on his knee. "You are such a grave dove, and so still when you feel glad or sorry that it is hard telling when you are pleased."

"I like it *very* much," said Margery earnestly—"I like it more than I can say, and when I grow up I mean to write all the time."

And there was told the secret that Margery had never uttered, for she did not tell her dreams as the others did.

"We are going now to show the magazine to Miss Isabel," said Margery, slipping down.

"To Miss Isabel?" repeated Mr. Dean. "Let me tell you something. I am going away." [93]

"Oh!" cried four pained voices.

"Yes," continued Mr. Dean, "I mean to go next week. You are sorry, my dear little club, and I am sorry to leave you. You tried to make me live in Blissylvania, but it has been no use. I am going away."

"Oh! not forever," cried Trix, while Amy's lips quivered, and Jack stooped to lace his boot.

Mr. Dean did not answer.

"You'll all write me, and we shall be friends wherever I am," he said instead.

But Margery, unstrung by her previous joy and this keen sorrow, threw her magazine from her in a passion of tears. "You shan't go, you can't go!" she screamed. "What's the use of being famous,

or writing poetry, or doing anything, if you can't have the people you love?"

Mr. Dean gathered her up, hushing her like a baby.

"I don't know, my little Margery," he said. "I have been trying to answer that question, but I can't."

They were four tear-stained and swollen faces that appeared before Miss Isabel a little later. The joy of seeing Margery's verses in print was forgotten in their sorrow over their threatened loss. Miss Isabel rejoiced at Margery's glory, but her words awoke no enthusiasm in return. [94]

"You'll be glad," said Amy, almost bitterly, "so I suppose I'd better tell you why we don't care any more about the verses. Mr. Dean's going away."

Miss Isabel flushed and grew pale.

"Why should I be glad if you feel badly?" she asked gently. "I am sorry for you, for I think that you were having good times with him."

"It's not that, Miss Isabel," said Margery, with indignant vigor. "We love him."

And Miss Isabel kissed her.

"It's very strange," remarked Trix on the way home, "how if you have one thing you can't have another. We got the post-office and Mr. Dean, but Miss Isabel's been so queer all summer, it's been almost like not having her. And now Margery's poems are published Mr. Dean is going away. I think everything is crooked, and I don't know whether we're having a good time this summer or not, in spite of the post-office and all our fun."

Margery walked on in a brown study, so lost to her surroundings that she ran into Butcher Davis's big Newfoundland dog, which always sat in the middle of the sidewalk, and would not have moved if the President and the Queen had come along arm in arm, and she begged his pardon, to the amusement of the other three. [95]

"I thought he was some one else," she said, arousing herself, while Jack shouted with laughter.

"What's the matter, Megsy; writing another poem?" he asked.

"I won't tell you," she said. "I've had an idea."

"Tell us; how queer you look!" cried Trix, giving her a little shake of impatience.

"I won't tell any one on earth; so there!" said Margery, with entire decision. "I want you all to make a novena for me, and begin right off to-night. I want you to pray for my plan, but I won't tell you what it is."

"Have you a plan, Margery?" asked Amy, who regarded Margery as a superior being, whose thoughts were beyond the ken of ordinary mortals.

"Yes, I've a plan," replied Margery.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

[96]

### MARGERY'S PLAN.

THE next morning Margery ate her breakfast of rolls and a bowl of blueberries and milk without in the least realizing what she put into her mouth. Her family was used to her abstractions, which usually ended in the announcement of some wonderful discovery or new verses, and paid no attention to her far-away look on this particular morning. She did her practising as faithfully as ever, but with such evident forgetfulness of what she was about that her mother came all the way down-stairs to ask her to defer it to another time, when her thoughts should be untangled. Accordingly she arose and went up-stairs, brushed her hair, and braided it with great care, donned her clean blue chambray with her favorite white ruffles, and went forth in solemn excitement towards the Evergreens, to unfold her plan to Mr. Dean.

She found him in the library putting his books and magazines in a case, in view of his coming departure. Margery's face clouded at the sight, but brightened again when she remembered that she had come to stay him. [97]

"Why, what brings you so early, little dove?" asked Mr. Dean, brushing the dust from his knees as he rose to welcome her. "And all alone? How is it that you have flown away with none of your flock?"

"I did not want the rest," replied Margery. "I came to see you about something important."

"And I am very glad to have you all to myself," said her friend. "Come here, and sit by me on the sofa. You will not slip off of this one as you do from that slippery hair-cloth thing in the parlor. Now, what is the great matter that you have to tell me? Anything wrong with the post-office?"



Margery arranged herself beside him on the sofa, crossed her ankles, smoothed her dress, clasped her hands in her lap, and immediately unclasped them to remove her hat, folded them again, and was ready to begin.

"You see," said Margery, "I was thinking about your going away, and about Miss Isabel."

Mr. Dean looked rather startled.

"That is a queer subject for your thoughts, Margery," he said. [98]

"I think that you are sorry that you are not friends with Miss Isabel," Margery continued.

"I am very sorry that I am not friends with Miss Isabel," Mr. Dean repeated gravely.

"Now I think Miss Isabel doesn't know," said Margery.

"Doesn't know what, little dove?" Mr. Dean asked.

"I don't know, but she doesn't know something," Margery replied. "Miss Isabel's this way: if anybody does anything she doesn't like, she always forgives them right away, before they ask her to, and if anybody's bad she says maybe they aren't what they seem. Now you're nice, and yet you're the only one she acts so queer about. I've puzzled and puzzled over it, and I can't see why it is, but I know she doesn't understand. I think you're friends all the time, only it's all horrid."

"Well," said Mr. Dean, smiling a little, "I think it's rather horrid myself."

"Yes," assented Margery. "Now why don't you send her a letter through our postoffice, and tell her how badly it makes us all feel?" [99]

Mr. Dean sat up straight, and looked at her.

"I never once thought of the little post-office!" he cried.

"You're both members," Margery went on, "and you're the only ones who haven't written to each other. Now don't you think Miss Isabel would be pleased if you wrote her through our little post-office? Maybe she feels slighted."

"Margery, it's an inspiration," cried Mr. Dean. "And I could address it to Miss Alma Cara."

"Oh, yes, you'd have to, because that's her post-office name, only it's not *Miss*, it's *Lady* Alma Cara. And you know it would be all part of our play, and yet it wouldn't, because it's dreadful not to be friends with people; but she wouldn't mind so much if you wrote her that way."

Mr. Dean was walking up and down the room by this time, and he came over and stood before Margery.

"Did you ever hear that Solomon was a little girl before he grew up?" he asked.

"I never heard about Solomon when he was little, but I guess he was a little boy," replied Margery. [100]

"Well, I am sure that he was a little girl with a pale face and blue dress, and that some good fairy made him into a king when he was big enough, and the same good fairy brought him here to me to-day, once more in the form of a little girl," said Mr. Dean.

Margery laughed.

"Do you think it is a good plan?" she asked delightedly.

"Good plan, Margery?" cried Mr. Dean. "Solomon himself could have thought of no wiser. I'll try it, and you will carry Miss Isabel the letter." He took her face in his hands and kissed her hair. "You dear little soul," he said, "I think that you will grow up a second Miss Isabel."

And Margery felt that in all her life she could never again have such praise as this.

"Will you write it soon?" she asked, putting on her hat, and pulling its elastic from the ribbon on the end of her braid.

"You'll find the letter in to-morrow morning's mail," replied Mr. Dean. "I shall be in more of a hurry about it than you are."

"And if you and Miss Isabel were friends you wouldn't go away, would you?" asked Margery wistfully, turning back in the doorway. [101]

"In that case I promise to stay—oh, no one knows how long," said Mr. Dean; and Margery ran down the walk with hope and joy speeding her steps.

She found Tommy Traddles watching for her return, for he was devoted to his little mistress, and sat at the door on the lookout, and crying for her when she was out, which was proof that she made life pleasant for him when she was at home, for if any animal appreciates being treated with attention it is the cat. He arose, welcoming her with loud mews, alternating with the softest murmurs, and jumping up on a table, where he could rub his head against her cheek, and give her hands sundry pats with his white paws. Then he ran away and hid behind the door, solely for the pleasure of jumping out at her, and then waited for her to hide, which she did behind the sofa, and when she cried "Coop!" Tommy Traddles came creeping softly to look for her, and when

he found her, sprang up on the sofa, and gave her a pat, instantly running away to hide himself, as if he said, "Now you're *it*; come find me." When hide-and-seek grew tiresome, Tommy Traddles went to get the stick which was his favorite plaything, and brought it to Margery in his teeth, laying it at her feet, and rubbing his head against her, and making the most coaxing murmurs to induce her to whisk it about for him to run after. Margery never could resist his pleadings, and cat and child had a delightful frolic until both curled up on the big sofa, and fell into a long summer noonday sleep. [102]

The afternoon seemed interminable to Margery, so full of impatience was she for the hour when her plan should be carried out. Jack, Trix, and Amy came over for three-cornered puss-in-the-corner and old-man-among-your-castle after tea, which helped her through the few hours that lay between then and bed-time.

When her friends had gone Margery slipped down into the orchard, through the wet grass, regardless of low shoes and damp ankles. She opened the drop-box—it was her turn to be postmistress—and thrust her hand down to the bottom. One letter was there, a big, thick one. She took it out; yes, she was right. Even by the starlight she recognized Mr. Dean's fine, clear hand. While they were playing he had come in the orchard gate and posted it. [103]

She ran with it to the house, but she knew before she held it under the gaslight that she should find it addressed to Lady Alma Cara, Blissylvania, New York.

"Now if only Miss Isabel will forgive him, and he can stay here, and we can all be friends," thought the little conspirator.

She took the letter to her own room and put it under her pillow. The moon peeped in a little later and saw a small figure in its white night dress kneeling by the bed, and praying very hard for the success of the plan that might give happiness to the two friends whom Margery loved best. It was long before she went to sleep, and when she did it was to dream that Tommy Traddles had joined the club, and that instead of wearing the dove badge, he had two white wings growing from his striped back, and was flying over the orchard to take Mr. Dean a message from the President, saying that he had been appointed postmaster of Blissylvania, at Miss Isabel's request. And all night long she wakened at intervals to slip her hand under the pillow to make sure that the plump letter was still safe.

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## CHAPTER IX. [104]

### ONE HONORARY MEMBER TO THE OTHER HONORARY MEMBER.

TOMMY TRADDLES was aroused from his morning nap by the shock of seeing his little mistress appear at half-past five all dressed and ready for the day. He welcomed her with his usual salutation of soft murmurs, rubbing his head against her, which she interpreted to mean on this occasion, "Why are you dressed so early?"

"I couldn't sleep, Tommy," Margery answered; "I have so much on my mind."

By six the entire household was awake, for Margery began to practise energetically, that there should be no hindrance to her starting to take the letter to Miss Isabel as soon as breakfast was over.

Mary, Miss Isabel's old servant, told Margery that Miss Isabel was in the garden, and the little girl ran quickly through the big hall and down the box-bordered paths to find her.

Miss Isabel was watering and tending her lilies. She looked pale and ill as she bent over the tall stalks, in her white morning gown, dusting the glossy leaves, and showering them from her little watering-pot. Margery thought that she had never seen her beloved Miss Isabel look so weary and sad, and fear for her health for a moment drove all thought of the letter from her mind. [105]

"Dear Miss Isabel, are you ill?" she cried, running to throw her arms around her.

Miss Isabel brightened as she turned to meet her.

"Why, my Margaret!" she cried; "you startled me! What a very early bird you are! No, I am not ill, only a trifle tired, and perhaps a little sad."

This recalled Margery to her errand.

"I brought you a letter, Lady Alma Cara," she said.

Miss Isabel set down the watering-pot, and put out her hand.

"Was it a special delivery that you came so early?" she asked.

"I think it was," said Margery, "though it was not marked."

Suddenly Miss Isabel dropped her shears and sponge, and sat down on the old gray stone bench, [106]

beside which the lilies grew white and stately; they were not as white as Miss Isabel's face as she looked at Margery.

"What is this, Margery?" she asked.

"Mr. Dean wrote it," began Margery, very much frightened. "He is going away, and we can't bear it, and he wants you to be friends, and so do we, for then he would stay, and he has told you all about it, so that you'll be nice to him, as you are to everybody else, even—even *worms*," said Margery, inspired to this comparison by looking down at the lilies' roots. "Please, *please* don't be angry with him any more, Miss Isabel. You're the nicest of anybody in the whole world, except mamma, and he's the next nicest."

Miss Isabel was sobbing.

"Go back, dear Margery," she whispered. "You must go away now."

Margery was dreadfully frightened. She knelt at Miss Isabel's feet, and pulled her hands from before her face, peering under a lily to look at her.

"Are you angry?" she implored. "Only tell me that; are you angry?"

"Yes," said Miss Isabel, suddenly laughing in a queer sobbing way; "why didn't you bring this letter before?" [107]

And Margery went away, pondering over this incomprehensible answer. As she walked slowly down the street she saw Trix and Amy coming to meet her. Trix's face was tragic; her cheeks were crimson, her lips set, her brow dark, and her eyes full of dumb misery. Amy's comfortable, rosy little countenance was stamped with sympathetic sorrow. Margery saw that something dreadful must have happened.

"What's the matter?" she called out, as soon as they could hear, running to receive the answer.

"I have been sent with a note to your house, and I'm to stay with you all day till three, and if I go out I'm not to go near home," replied Trix in an awful tone.

"Going to spend the day? I'm glad. What's the matter, Trix, that you look so solemn," asked Margery.

"Don't you know what that means?" demanded Trix, in such a horror-stricken manner that Margery trembled and shook her head.

"I'll tell you, then," said Trix. "You know mamma fell down-stairs three weeks ago and sprained her ankle?"

"Yes, I know that," said Margery. [108]

"Well, the doctors are coming to-day to cut her leg off," declared Trix, and Margery gasped, as did Amy, though she had been told this before.

"How do you know?" demanded Margery, recovering from the shock.

"I'm sure of it," Trix replied. "I've heard how they do those things. They send the children out of the way always, and mamma thought I would never guess, and it would be easier for me to come home and find her leg gone than to be there and smell the ether and hear her groan, and I *know* that's it, and I shall die, I shall die!"

Margery and Amy looked at each other, feeling helpless in the face of such a calamity as this.

"Did you say anything to my mother?" Margery asked at last.

"No, I gave her mamma's note, and that will tell her," said Trix. "I didn't want her to know I knew, because they were trying to keep it a secret from me."

"It's awful!" shuddered Margery. "You'd better come home with me, Trix, and we'll try to do something to forget it."

"Forget it!" cried Trix, turning on her indignantly, as they began to walk onward. "Do you think you could forget it if you knew those horrid doctors were cutting off your mother's leg, and she had to go on crutches forever? Perhaps they're coming with their knives this minute." [109]

Margery looked faint, Amy began to sob, and Trix quivered from head to foot.

"We shall all go crazy if we think of it," said Margery, bracing herself. "It may not be that at all."

"I tell you I know it is," asserted Trix, so confidently that Margery yielded the point.

"Well, come home, and don't let us talk of it," she said. "I know some people walk very nicely with crutches, and it doesn't hurt to have a leg taken off, because they use ether."

But there was no consoling Trix, and the task of entertaining her proved a heavy one. Jack came, and heard the story with so much excitement that the others were wrought to a higher pitch than ever.

"I'm going to be a doctor myself when I grow up," he announced. Jack would have had more lives than a cat to follow half the callings that at different times he thought that he should like to

follow. "I'd like to cut off legs. Now, don't you fret, Trix; your mother'll be all right in a few days, and crutches would only be fun. Think how fast I can go on stilts, and that must be about a million times harder, for you don't have even one foot on the ground. I've thought of a good play. We'll pretend this house is a castle besieged by the enemy, and I'll be a scout. I'll go around by Trix's house every half hour, and come back to let you know how it looks." [110]

This idea was hailed with rapture, and was about to be carried out, but just as Jack had reached the front gate Mrs. Gresham's voice was heard from the window.

"Jack! Jack!" she called.

"Yes, Aunt Margaret," replied Jack, pausing.

"If you are going out, don't go near Mrs. Lane's house," said his aunt.

So that plan was never fulfilled. Luncheon made one of the hours pass a little better, but after luncheon Trix's restlessness became uncontrollable. She wandered in and out of the house; she accepted Amy's proposition to make a visit to the church and pray for her mother, but, as Amy remarked, "did not seem to feel any better after it." She quarrelled with Jack, and almost fell out with Margery, for she teased Tommy Traddles till that confiding cat fled in terror, and altogether led her friends such a life that no prisoners could long for freedom more eagerly than they longed for three o'clock to come. It never occurred to one of the four to lay their trouble before Mrs. Gresham, and she being busy did not discover its symptoms. Children are such queer little beings that they will sometimes suffer all sorts of misery without a word, and in this case the feeling that there was a secret to be kept from them made them unwilling to betray their knowledge of it. [111]

At last it was ten minutes to three, and Trix could go. Amy, Margery, and Jack accompanied her.

"I don't smell ether," remarked Amy as they went in the door.

Katie, smiling with all her might, showed them into the parlor. Mrs. Lane, looking very bright and happy, stood by the window; she turned at once, and came swiftly forward to meet the children.

"Look, Trix!" she said, and pointed to a piano standing in all the glory of new polish over at the end of the room.

"For me!" gasped Trix. [112]

"Yes, for you. You see now why I sent you off," said her mother. "I didn't want you to see it until it was all in place."

Trix had longed for a new piano, but she did not know whether to be glad or sorry; the revulsion of feeling was too strong.

"And you didn't have your leg cut off, after all?" asked Jack.

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Lane in bewilderment.

"Trix thought you were having your leg cut off, and that was why you sent her away," explained Margery. "We've had an awful day."

"You poor, poor child!" cried her mother, taking Trix in her lap, in spite of her great length. "Why didn't you tell Mrs. Gresham?"

And for the first time in that hard day Trix burst out crying, though she explained that it was because she was so glad.

"To think that we've had such a dreadful day for nothing," said Jack, in profound disgust, as they left the house.

"Why, Jack Hildreth, I'm ashamed of you; one might think you were sorry that Mrs. Lane wasn't a cripple," cried his cousin.

The children parted at their respective homes, and Margery went around by the orchard to look at the post-office, for throughout the troublous day she had not forgotten her anxiety as to Miss Isabel and the letter. She met Miss Isabel coming out of the gate as she went in. She was all in white, with a bunch of sweet peas at her belt; her face was glowing with color, her eyes shining. Margery did not stop to consider how strange it was to find her there now when she had ceased coming to the post-office; she only stood still in wondering amazement at the change in Miss Isabel since morning. Miss Isabel put her arms around her, and nearly kissed her breath away. [113]

"You little dove of good tidings, my dear little Margery, how can I love you enough?" she cried.

"Have you answered?" asked Margery eagerly.

"I posted a note just now, and it was addressed to Mr. Oliver Twist," said Miss Isabel, and fairly ran away.

Margery went at once to take it out of the box. It was alarmingly thin, and her heart sank. Still, you could not always judge letters by the outside, and she ran with it all the way to the Evergreens.

She found Mr. Dean marching up and down the walk, "just as if he were expecting some one," thought Margery. [114]

"A letter, Margery?" he cried, as soon as he saw her.

"Yes, but it's very thin, and yours was so thick," said Margery, not wishing him to be disappointed.

He snatched it from her and tore it open while she stood by trembling with eagerness to know whether he was to stay or go, and whether Miss Isabel had been so cruel as not to forgive him, and to make the children lose their kind new friend. It was a tiny note, but it took Mr. Dean ten minutes to read it, with bowed head, and only his shoulders visible to anxious Margery. Then he straightened himself, and turned towards her such a happy face that her heart leaped with joy.

"I shall not go away, my little dove," he said simply.

"Then Miss Isabel isn't angry any more?" asked Margery.

"No, and it is your blessed little plan that saved us," said Mr. Dean. "You dear little dove of peace and good tidings, you brought the olive branch."

"And now I can keep you and Miss Isabel?" asked Margery.

[115]

"You can keep me; I'm not so sure about Miss Isabel," said Mr. Dean.

"I'm not afraid of losing her," laughed Margery happily. "Oh, I'm so glad, I'm so glad you can stay!"

"What shall we do to show how glad we are?" asked Mr. Dean.

Margery considered the question seriously.

"Let's kneel right down and thank God," pious little Margery suggested at last, and as there was no one there to see, the big man and the little maiden knelt down on the grass under the pines with their Gothic arches, and said a most sincere prayer of thanksgiving.

"But are you sure it is all right; it was such a little note, and yours was so thick?" said Margery as they arose.

"All right; it was little, but it was enough," said Mr. Dean, taking out the note and refolding it carefully to restore it to his pocket. And Margery went home pondering the mysterious ways of grown people. She was quite sure that she should never have been satisfied with such a tiny note in reply to a long letter.

Margery went to bed early that night, needing rest after a long and wearing day. She lay in her little white bed looking out at the soft summer twilight in which her two friends, whom she had been the means of reuniting, were that moment walking and talking after a separation of ten years. The stars shone down on her peacefully, and the one bright one that she called "her star" looked right into her eyes.

[116]

"It's glad, too, that everything is happy, and Mr. Dean is going to stay. It's smiling good-night."

And smiling back to it, Margery passed into happy dreams.

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## CHAPTER X.

[117]

### A PICNIC.

TRIX and Amy were twins—that is, as they explained to everybody, one was eleven and the other ten, and they weren't the least bit of relation to one another, but both their birthdays was the same day, the eighth of August. On the afternoon of the seventh four small notes appeared in the post-office addressed to Lady Catharine Seyton, Mrs. Peace Plenty, Lady Griselda of the Castle of the Lonely Lake, and Sir Harry Hotspur, stating that the favor of their company was requested for a day in the woods on the following day by Lady Alma Cara and Mr. Oliver Twist, in celebration of the birthday of Lady Catharine Seyton and Mrs. Peace Plenty. The recipients of this invitation showed their joy with less dignity of manner than one might have expected from their lofty titles. Sir Harry Hotspur immediately climbed a tree, and sat whooping on a limb for a few moments before descending in a somersault from a lower one. Lady Catharine Seyton, regardless of her eleven years, danced a sort of impromptu skirt dance, in which Lady Griselda joined, and Mrs. Peace Plenty hopped on and off the apple-tree stump, which served as a seat, fully twenty times without stopping, which was undignified in a well-known philanthropist.

[118]

The eighth dawned fair and lovely, though rather warm. The four children met at Miss Isabel's gate, where she and Mr. Dean were awaiting them. Amy brought her doll Rose Viola along, for, as she justly remarked, she did not see why growing up need make one forget old friends, and for her part she meant to play with Rose Viola till she was twenty. A three-seated wagon stood waiting them as they came up to the meeting-place, and hampers of the most exciting appearance stuck out all round under the seats.

"Trix and Amy are the guests of honor to-day, because it is their birthday," announced Mr. Dean. "Up with you first, lassies, and many happy returns of the day."

The drive to the woods was a delight in itself, so fragrant was the air, and so beautiful the roadside with the bright flowers of August, and the blackberries showing red through the vines, with some black as jet, and here and there the leaves beginning to bronze. [119]

The last of the drive was through the woods, and the shrill voices hushed as the great trees darkened the road, and the wheels rolled almost noiselessly over the fragrant carpet of brown pine needles. They left the horse and his driver at the last point where driving was possible, and lading themselves with the contents of the wagon went on afoot.

"There is a spring not far from here," said Mr. Dean. "I came prospecting the other day, and I thought that would be the best place for us to pitch our tents, for I expect to be both hungry and thirsty."

The spot that Mr. Dean had selected for their use was the prettiest in all the woods. Though the fierce heat of the sun, penetrating even the thick hemlocks, had dried much of the delicate leafage, the spring had here kept the moss bright and green, and the brakes and ferns grew tall and lovely in all the hollows.

The children drew long breaths of satisfaction as they paused here, and stooped to lay their burning cheeks on the cool pillows of moss. Miss Isabel sank down with a happy sigh, caressing a fern at her side with her delicate fingers, as if it were a little baby's hair. But her guests were not disposed to be quiet long. [120]

"Now what shall we do?" said Jack, starting up after fully three minutes and a half of silent enjoyment of the peace and refreshment of the spot.

"What would you like to do first?" asked Mr. Dean, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Eat," said Jack promptly.

"I knew it," cried Mr. Dean, laughing, "and to be quite honest, I am hungry myself."

"Open the small hamper," said Miss Isabel. "I provided a little lunch and a big lunch, and we may have the little one first."

The "little lunch" proved to be hard-boiled eggs, thin bread and butter, and bottles of milk, with ginger cookies for dessert. The last crumb vanished speedily, for although the girls had laughed at Jack for being hungry the very first thing, they were quite ready to take their share of the luncheon.

"And now I've thought of a splendid play," announced Trix, removing the crumbs from her lips in the most simple, if not the most elegant manner, by the tip of her slender red tongue. "Miss Isabel and Mr. Dean must be a queen and king, and we will be their subjects, and they must send us to explore the countries around their kingdom, and do all kinds of brave deeds, and we must come back to report them, and then they must send us again. Some of us can discover countries, and some report on the plants, and fruits, and things in the neighboring kingdoms, and some must kill dragons and all those things." [121]

"Isn't that a great play, Trix!" cried Jack in ecstasy. "I'll kill dragons."

"I'd like to discover," said Margery.

"I'll report the flowers and things," said Amy.

"And I want to be a knight sent out to have adventures," declared Trix. "Will you play that, Miss Isabel? Will you, Mr. Dean?"

"By all means," replied Mr. Dean.

"I'd like it very much," said Miss Isabel.

"Then you sit here," said Trix, in great delight. "Wait till I make your throne with these shawls. And now we'll kneel before you, and you must send us on these expeditions. And remember, we're all knights, because girls can't do such things." [122]

Four faces were raised to the sovereigns seated on the empty lunch-basket and a rock, while four knightly figures, three in bright gingham and one in knickerbockers, knelt to receive their commands.

"Sir Harry Hotspur," began the king, "there is a monstrous dragon devastating our kingdom on the west. Take thy trusty sword and slay this monster, bringing me its head, and fail not, as ye be a good knight and true."

"Yes, your majesty," replied Sir Harry, rising and backing from the royal presence, and then starting westward at a pace that plainly showed how his horse was plunging beneath him, as he waved his pine sword in his right hand and blew an imaginary trumpet in his left.

"And you, Sir Percival," the queen said, "go abroad to the kingdoms adjoining our domain, and bring me tidings of the kinds of fruits and plants that flourish in those foreign parts, and if possible bring me also specimens of these."

"Yes, your majesty," replied rosy-cheeked Sir Percival, trying to rise gracefully as the first knight had done, and getting entangled in her pink gingham skirts. [123]

"And, Sir Philip," the king said, "don't light armor and select your trustiest steed, for it is my will that you go to discover new countries, if such there be, for the honor of our name and the increase of our kingdom."

"Sire, I will go right gladly," replied Sir Philip loyally.

"And you, brave and bold Sir Guy," the queen said, "ride hither and yon seeking adventure for the glory of knighthood and the succor of the unfortunate."

"Your majesty, I obey," replied Sir Guy, making a profound bow, and doffing a helmet that looked uncommonly like a shade hat with yellow daisies.

The band of knights began returning in what seemed like two or three minutes, but which was a period of from three to five years.

Sir Harry bore the dragon's head, which he presented kneeling to the king.

"It was a dreadful fight, your majesty," said the panting knight. "All around the dragon's cave lay men's bones."

"Think ye they were the bones of the victims which he had devoured?" the king asked. [124]

"I am sure of it, your majesty, for I barely escaped," said Sir Harry; "but at last I gave one terrible stroke, and his head rolled at my feet. Here it is."

Jack had had a hard time digging up the root which represented the dragon's head.

"You have our royal thanks," said the king, "and you shall learn that one monarch at least is not ungrateful."

Sir Philip was the next to arrive. He—or she—knelt at the feet of the king.

"Well, Sir Philip," he asked, "were you successful?"

"More than I expected to be, my liege," replied Sir Philip. "I found a large continent north of this kingdom, and an island to the east. They are inhabited by a singular race, but the chief with whom I talked is willing to embrace Christianity, so I doubt not they will be loyal subjects of your throne."

"Well done, valiant Sir Philip," said the queen; "permit me to decorate you with the Isabellan medal," and she pinned in the gathers of the blue gingham shirt-waist which covered the breast of this knight a large round leaf, bearing the word "Honor" pricked in it with a pin. [125]

"And here comes Sir Guy," cried the king.

Sir Guy came running, his hair was unbraided, and his cheeks flushed, and his dark eyes bright.

"I found a lovely maiden chained to a rock, and four ruffians about to stab her. I made them all fly, and here is the maiden," and Sir Guy produced a little white kitten mewling feebly.

"Oh, Trix, give her to me!" cried Margery.

"No; I'm going to keep her myself," said Trix, dropping the rôle of Sir Guy. "I found her, and you've got Tommy Traddles, and I haven't any kitten. She's most starved: Mayn't I give her milk, Miss Isabel?"

"Of course you may. You really did have an adventure," cried Miss Isabel. "Perhaps it is a fairy birthday present, Trix, and she is an enchanted princess. But at last here comes Sir Percival. Good Sir Percival, we began to fear you had perished."

"Here are all the flowers and fruits I could find," said Sir Percival, presenting an enormous bunch of all sorts of blossoms. "But here is something else I found, and it looks like shells—see;" and Sir Percival, who was not as good as the rest in keeping up what Margery had called "historical ways of talking," held out something to the queen. [126]

"A fossil!" cried her majesty. "Sir Percival, I congratulate you; you have really made a discovery. Where did you find it?"

"Oh, need I be Sir Percival any more? It's so hard to talk that way. I can't tell you unless I can be myself," implored Amy.

"Oh, pshaw! you can't pretend worth a cent," said Jack in disgust; but Miss Isabel said, "Why, of course; we don't want to do anything for fun when it is no longer fun. Tell on, Amy."

"You know that little hill over there beyond the spring," began Amy, much relieved. "They've been taking out some rock on the side, and I was looking there when I found this lump of something that looked like mud, and when I took it up I found it was hard, and it had all these shells in it. They look like scallop shells, but they can't be, because they are in the woods. What are they, Miss Isabel?"

"The shells can tell us," said Miss Isabel, putting the lump of clay to her ear and pretending to listen. "I'll tell you what they say. It is this shell that is speaking; it says: Many ages ago, before Adam was made, there was a great lake where these woods now are, and this shell lived in the water, and was the house of a little mollusk, like shells nowadays. And once there came a great [127]

commotion in the waters and something like an earthquake in the land, and when it was over the lake was gone, and in its place was a valley, and the hill was thrown up, and beautiful great plants of such kinds as grow now only in the tropics began to flourish, for it was very warm. And the shell says it found itself thrown up into clay-like mud, and pretty soon the mollusk died, for it could not live out of the water. And then it grew very cold, and great glaciers went crashing and cracking, and sliding to the sea over this very spot where we now sit. And then the land in the northern latitudes sank, and made the climate warmer again, and the glaciers began to melt, and as they melted they dropped great quantities of stone and gravel and soil made of the stones their awful strength had ground up, and the hollow where the lake had been was filled up, and the little shell says it was imbedded in the soil made by the passing and breaking up of the glacier, and a great boulder fell on top of it, dropped by the glacier, and which was taken out of the hill only the other day, and once more this little shell saw the sun. And it says it wonders to see such creatures as we are, for though more ages ago than we can imagine it saw great animals much larger than the elephant wandering here, it never before saw anything that could understand its wonderful history, for when it last saw light God had not made man."

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"Oh, Miss Isabel, is it a fairy story?" "Oh, Miss Isabel, is it true?" cried Trix and Amy together.

Margery almost sobbed in excitement; she stretched out her hand for the fossil.

"I can't think so far back," she whispered. "Before God made man!"

But Jack said, "I know; that's geology, and it's splendid. I mean to study it when I get big."

"It is all true, dears," said Miss Isabel, "and no one can 'think so far back,' nor take in the wonders of the story. And it is geology, as Jack says; but no fairy story, Amy, is half so lovely and interesting as the story that nature tells."

"Do you know that nature is telling me a story about little Jack Horner, and I think I should like to put my hand in that hamper and pull out a plum—in other words, I'm hungry, Isabel," said Mr. Dean.

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So they all attacked the "big luncheon," and when they had eaten all the chicken, and rolls, and cake, and fruit that they possibly could, and had given the white kitten the bones, they were disposed to rest, and all but Amy lounged on the moss in every attitude of perfect ease. Suddenly Miss Isabel asked, "Where is Amy?" And that moment a faint scream came as answer to her question. Everybody ran towards the direction whence the sound came. There stood poor little Mrs. Peace Plenty up to her knees in black mud, and if she tried to extricate one foot the other only sank the deeper.

"I came to get some water," she sobbed, "and when I came around here behind the spring to see what it looked like I got stuck."

"Never mind, Amy, we'll pull you out," said Mr. Dean cheerily. "Jack, help me drag this dead tree over."

They swung the fallen trunk around, and with that to stand on soon pulled Amy out, and set the poor child on firm land again, though with both her low shoes gone, and her skirts in a sorry plight.

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"It's lucky that it is time to go home," remarked Miss Isabel, as she took off Amy's stockings to rub her feet. "You must carry her to the wagon."

Mr. Dean obediently shouldered the little girl, and they started in procession out of the woods.

"I am glad the hampers are empty," remarked Mr. Dean. "Mrs. Peace Plenty is a solid little body."

The drive home in the long, warm rays of the afternoon sun warmed Amy thoroughly and restored her shaken nerves.

"I never had such a lovely birthday in all my life, and I thank you ever and ever so much," said Trix, as they set her down at her own gate.

"And you have had a whole long eleven, too," laughed Mr. Dean.

"I have had such a good time I can't tell you," said Amy, in her turn, as she was deposited at home. She was a funny figure standing there barefooted, the black mud of the woods dried on her skirts and hands, clutching her stiff stockings, her precious fossil, and Rose Viola to her breast.

"Many happy returns, many happy returns," Mr. Dean, Miss Isabel, Jack, and Margery called back to her as they drove away.

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"I'm afraid there won't be many returns of her shoes," remarked Jack. "But in spite of that it's been a perfect picnic."

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## CHAPTER XI.

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## A WEDDING.



MR. DEAN was to marry Miss Isabel, after all! The tidings came to the children as a blow at first, and they, especially Margery, felt that it was almost taking advantage of their confidence, since that was not at all the end they had in view in seeking to have Mr. Dean stay at the Evergreens. But in time they grew reconciled to the arrangement, and even came to see that it was the best one possible, for now they could visit both Miss Isabel and Mr. Dean at once, instead of dividing their time between them. It helped them to see that this wedding was a desirable plan, that the day appointed for it was Margery's eleventh birthday, October fourteenth, and that all the little girls were to be bridesmaids, and Jack best man, in spite of his being but twelve years old, for Miss Isabel declared that this must be a club wedding, since without the H. T. C. it might never have come about.

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Four pairs of little bare feet sprang to the floor early in the morning of October fourteenth, moved by the thought that Margery was eleven years old and it was Miss Isabel's wedding-day, and they sped to the window to see what sort of weather it was. Nor was one likely to sleep late when a dress of softest pink mull, with a big picture hat to match, lay like a kind of rosy dawn on a chair ready for the bridesmaid to put on. And Jack had gone to bed with his first long trousers laid where his eyes could rest on them the moment they opened, and with his patent-leather shoes in shining glory on the hearth, and he arose in a flurry that was still dignified, feeling that much of the success of the wedding lay on his shoulders. The weather was all that it should be; a soft haze rested over all the earth, the leaves were blazing in the glory of their October colors, and there was that wonderful hush upon nature that comes when the harvest is over, the work done, and summer pauses lingeringly, as if dreading to say good-by.

There was only happiness in each little heart that lovely morning; all doubt had been removed from the children's minds, and they had learned to see what a delightful thing it was that their Miss Isabel would no longer be lonely in the old house. "For," as Amy sagely remarked, "when we were there we couldn't tell how lonely she was, because we *were* there, and she wasn't lonely, but when we were gone she must have been sad, and now we shall know that when we aren't there Mr. Dean will talk to her till we come back."

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At half-past ten three pink skirts fluttered out of a carriage at Miss Isabel's door. The Mass was to be at eleven. It would have been dreadful to have been late, and they had all insisted on their privilege of seeing Miss Isabel first in her bridal dress. Very sweet and lovely she looked with the white veil crowning her bright hair, and such a peaceful look on her face that Amy cried out as she kissed her, "You look so good, Miss Isabel, as well as pretty."

Miss Isabel had three little boxes all ready containing her gifts to her bridesmaids, and when they opened them, behold there lay before their delighted eyes a dear little dove in pearls, so that the only regret that they felt in wearing their pretty pink dresses, that the blue badge with the dove was forbidden them, was more than taken away. Miss Isabel fastened the pins in the soft ruffles around each little yoke, and whispered to her bridesmaids that these were badges of her love, as well as reminders of the club and the happiness that had come from it. And she satisfied Trix's solicitude for Jack by assuring her that he had a pin precisely like theirs for a scarf-pin.

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Then she kissed each face under its big mull hat, gathered up her gloves, and they all went down to get into the carriages to drive to the church, whence Miss Isabel should return Miss Isabel no longer. The little church was filled, for Miss Isabel had many friends, and everybody was deeply interested in this wedding because they knew it was the happy ending of an old story. And everybody knew, too, that it had come about through the children's club, and the old women in the side aisles nudged each other as the Lohengrin wedding march pealed through the church, and whispered, "There they are; there are the children," as the three little maids in pink came slowly down the aisle, preceding Miss Isabel on the arm of her uncle, who had come all the way from Chicago that on this great day she might have the arm of one of her kindred on which to lean.

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And Mr. Dean met her at the sanctuary gate, looking very proud and happy, with Jack beside him suffering torture from his stiff collar, but enjoying himself immensely none the less. Then Miss Isabel and Mr. Dean entered the sanctuary, and Mass began.

It did not seem long to the excited children before the organ once more pealed forth, this time in the jubilant strains of Mendelssohn's wedding march, and they were proceeding down the aisle in twos, Trix and Amy, Margery and Jack, and behind them Mr. and Mrs. Dean, while audible exclamations of "God bless her!" came from the humbler friends to whom Miss Isabel had given help and happiness, and tearful smiles and loving looks followed her from those to whom she had given happiness also, though they had not needed alms.

The old house looked beautiful on their return. All the rooms were filled with palms and white and golden chrysanthemums, and the sun lit up the place into splendor.

"I believe they built these old houses just for weddings and balls; I never knew it could look so fine," said Jack to Margery, pausing on the threshold, and feeling without understanding why that the dignified old rooms were made for grandeur.

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At the wedding breakfast Margery, as first bridesmaid, sat at Mrs. Dean's right hand, and Jack at Mr. Dean's left, Trix next to him, and Amy next Margery. They found that for once in their life they had enough ice-cream and dainties, and Jack leaned over and whispered to Trix, "I've taken my watch out, and I can't get it back," which remark caused Trix to choke in the most embarrassing manner over her last spoonful of ice.

Jack had hardly succeeded in the difficult task of restoring his watch to the tight vest, and was sitting back at peace with all mankind, when he heard Mr. Dean saying something so dreadful that he could not credit his own ears. He looked up; Mr. Dean's eyes had a twinkle in them that Jack had learned meant mischief, and he certainly was saying:

"Mr. John Hildreth, my best man, will make a few remarks on this happy occasion."

Jack sank back farther, looking painfully red and frightened, but Trix poked him energetically.

"Get up, Jack; he wants you to make a speech," she whispered. "You've got to do it. Pooh! what do you care; you know most of the people here." [138]

Jack arose; his very ears were crimson, and his voice trembled.

"Ladies and gentlemen," poor Jack began.

"Hear! hear!" cried one of the guests, in what was meant for encouragement, but had the opposite effect.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jack said again, "I didn't know best men had to make speeches. I never made a speech."

Here the poor child stuck fast, and Mrs. Dean whispered to her husband to be merciful and tease him no more, while Trix in a stage whisper said, "Go on, say something about the weather, the breakfast, and Miss Isabel, or Mr. Dean, or anything."

"I think we have very nice weather for a wedding," Jack went on, acting on this hint; "and once I heard a saying, 'Happy the bride that the sun shines on.' And we've had a fine breakfast, and enjoyed ourselves very much, and I couldn't eat another bit. And we all love Miss Isabel so much, that at first we didn't want Mr. Dean to marry her, but after we got acquainted with him we didn't mind, because he's most as nice as she is. So we were willing—I mean Margery, and Trix, and Amy, and me—and I—to have her marry him, and we're all perfectly satisfied, and we think they've had a nice wedding, and we hope they'll have a great many more." [139]

A great deal of laughter and cheering greeted this happy ending, under cover of which Trix whispered:

"O Jack! you goose; why did you go and spoil it? The rest was splendid. They can't have a great many more weddings; people don't keep getting married."

"Some people do," retorted Jack. "Isn't there a tombstone in the cemetery that says, 'Here lies Amos Barnes, and Amelia, and Frances, and Rosa, and Harriet, wife of the above?'" However, Jack got upon his feet again, quite emboldened by his success. "I didn't mean we hoped they'd have a great many more; I meant we wish them many happy returns of the same."

And not even Trix could see why the guests laughed again, but they applauded heartily, and Mr. and Mrs. Dean told Jack that his speech was very nice, and they thanked him very much. So Jack felt rather puffed up, and tried hard not to look as if the eyes of the world were on him; and under cover of the applause for Jack, Mr. and Mrs. Dean arose and slipped away up-stairs, and presently they reappeared, Mr. Dean carrying an umbrella and a travelling shawl, and Mrs. Dean dressed all in soft dove-gray with chinchilla collar, and the children saw that she had pinned on her breast the blue badge of the H. T. C. And that one little act explained why they had so loved Miss Isabel, for even in that exciting moment she remembered to give them pleasure. From the foot of the stairs, all down the long hall, and out the door, even while Mrs. Dean paused to kiss her small bridesmaids, swarming eagerly around her, she was pelted with a shower of rice, and it rattled on the top of the carriage as the door shut, and Jack hit the back with an old slipper provided for that purpose, and then the wheels rattled down the gravel of the driveway, and Miss Isabel was gone. [140]

A feeling of desolation crept over the children; the girls' eyes were full of tears, and Jack felt a lump in his throat, for though they knew that Miss Isabel would be back in two weeks, it seemed horribly like giving her up. But the situation was saved from becoming melancholy by Amy's small brother, who, standing quietly in his white dress and blue kid shoes, had been watching the departure from under his waving mop of golden hair. He now trotted off to the parlor, and returned with the hearth-broom. [141]

"Well, if nobody else is goin' to get married, I dess I'd better thweep up dis rice," he remarked, and everybody laughed, and the solemnity of the moment was broken up.

Fifteen minutes passed, and most of the guests had gone, when children began arriving, and more and more, till Amy, Trix, Margery, and Jack were completely puzzled to see all their schoolmates enter. But Mrs. Gresham explained the mystery by telling them that it was a plan of Miss Isabel's to surprise Margery, as it was her birthday, as well as Miss Isabel's wedding-day. So she had asked Mrs. Gresham to help her, and the orchestra was to remain, and the children were to have a party for the rest of the afternoon. This exciting information drove all thoughts of loneliness out of the children's heads, and soon the big rooms were filled with gay little figures, dancing to the liveliest music under the stately palms and bright golden chrysanthemums. And so while the cars were whirling their dear Miss Isabel away to begin her new life, her loving thought gave Margery a happy ending of her birthday, and made the children feel that she was still too near them to be lonely, and that the time would be all too short for them to plan the welcome [142]

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## CHAPTER XII.

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### THE END OF THE YEAR AND OF THE POST-OFFICE.

CHRISTMAS had come and gone, and it was the last day of the year. The Christmas tree still stood in the bay-window, and Tommy Traddles had not ceased to find delight in setting in motion with his paw the decorative balls within his reach on the lower limbs, and eying wistfully those that hung higher. The fire burned brightly on the hearth, and the snow fell swiftly and silently outside, drifting like a white veil across the window, and heaping itself on the sills.

Margery sat watching it listlessly, swinging the curtain cord, and wondering what made the others so long. The post-office had languished of late, having been crowded out of mind by the holiday preparations and the colder weather. No one would confess to being tired of it, but sometimes there were two or three days between the delivery of mails, which were steadily growing lighter; indeed, no one but Lady Alma Cara and Mr. Oliver Twist were still faithful correspondents.

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At last Trix and Amy came running in the gate, and Margery sprang to meet them. They stamped the snow off in the vestibule, and took off their things in the hall, where Trix had a struggle with her rubber boots, which, as she needlessly observed, were growing too small for her.

"Now what shall we do?" demanded Trix, as they came into the sitting-room, bringing with them such an atmosphere of out-of-doors that Tommy Traddles retired to the hearth-rug.

"Why, I'm looking for Jack," answered Margery. "He has some secret which he wouldn't tell me, but he said he'd come over this afternoon surely and tell me. He said it was half good and half bad, and I can't think what it can be."

"I don't believe it's much," said Trix sceptically. "Jack has such lots of notions."

But Margery shook her head.

"This is something," she began, when Amy interrupted her.

"I hear him now, coming through the back way," she said, and had scarcely spoken when Jack appeared, half a dozen cookies in each hand and busy with another.

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"Winnie's baking," he explained, not very clear in speech, "and I helped myself. They're prime; have one," and he offered each girl a cookie with princely generosity.

"Now, Jack, what's your secret?" demanded Margery. "Are you going to tell me to-day? Mind those crumbs; this room's been swept this morning."

Jack nodded energetically, signifying in pantomime that he would tell them as soon as the cookies had disappeared; so there was nothing to do but wait for this to happen with what patience they could summon. At last the final morsel vanished, and after a provokingly elaborate brushing of his knees, and careful sweeping up of crumbs with the hearth-brush, Jack seated himself on the edge of a chair, and looked from one to the other.

"Oh, tell me, Jack; hurry up!" cried Margery, while Trix threw a down pillow at him, which he caught, saying:

"Thank you," putting it at his back. "Do you want me to tell you, Megsy?" he asked. "Well, I'm going away to school."

A thunderbolt in the midst of the snow could not have produced greater consternation.

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"Jack!" cried all three in tones of horror. "You're not."

"Yes, I am; papa has decided. I am going next Monday."

"To boarding-school?" asked Trix, regret at his going and envy struggling in her face.

"Yes; you see, papa thinks I can prepare for my First Communion better in the school than here, and you know I want to make it with you next June."

"Oh!" cried Margery, who had been sitting in speechless grief, a little ray of light breaking into the gloom of her face. "Then you're not going far?"

"Oh, no; only in town. I can come home at Easter, and June will soon be here," replied Jack.

"And we can write to him," said Amy, trying as usual to see a bright side.

"But it will be so lonesome without Jack," said Margery, her voice quivering, for she had never had a brother, and this cousin had been all to her that a brother could be.

"It's a pity he must go," said Trix, tilting one foot up and down on the toe of her slipper, which

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she thus slipped on and off at the heel in a pensive manner; "but as Amy says, we can write to him, and the post-office will be more fun again," thus admitting by implication what no one had been willing to confess, that the post-office was less delightful than at first.

Silence followed this remark. Amy and Margery looked at one another.

"We should have to take the post-office in the house," Trix went on, continuing her line of thought. "No one could go down into the orchard for mail all winter."

"And what house could we put it in?" asked Margery. "None of us wants to be postmaster all the time now, though we did at first, and it would be a nuisance for any of us to have to go into some one else's house to take care of the mails."

Neither liked to be the one to propose discontinuing it, but Jack did not mind, because since he was going away he could not bear his part in it that winter in any case.

"Why not give up the post-office?" he asked. "We'd be the H. T. C. just the same, and you're all sick of it anyway."

"You are too," said Trix, indirectly admitting that she was.

"Well, even if I weren't, I couldn't play post-office this winter," Jack replied. "I say, let's get the post-office in here, and burn it for a farewell ceremony, and then if we want to have another I'll make one next summer. Anyhow, this one's warped." [148]

Trix cheered up.

"Let's," she said briefly.

"Burn our post-office!" Amy gasped.

Margery looked happier.

"And I could write an ode, and we'd read it while it burned. But you'd have to ask Alma Cara and Mr. Oliver Twist first, Jack, because they're members. You go there, and while you're gone I'll write the ode."

"First let's vote on whether we burn it or not," said Jack. "All in favor of burning the post-office please signify it by saying aye."

"Aye," said Trix and Margery unanimously.

"How do you vote when you want to and don't want to?" asked Amy.

"You decide which you want more," said Margery.

"O Amy, you goose, we'll have another next summer, if we want one, and what's the use of a post-office without Jack," said Trix impatiently.

"Sure enough," said Amy. "Well, I vote aye, then." [149]

"Now once more," cried Jack. "All in favor say aye."

"Aye," cried the four voices.

"Now, Jack, run up to Mr. Dean's while I write an ode," said Margery, and Jack went.

"They say give it up till next summer, and then decide whether to begin again," announced Jack, returning out of breath. "They say better not drag on if it's burdensome. I'm going down to the orchard to get the post-office."

"How shall we burn it?" asked Amy, when Jack came back.

"I've been thinking of the ceremonies on the way," Jack replied, depositing the post-office on the floor. "I say we all march around it three times in silence, and then each of us lay our hand on it once for farewell. And then I'll make a speech, and then we'll each take a corner and carry it to the fire and lay it on the coals, and we'll stand around and watch it burn while Margery reads the ode."

"It's awfully solemn," said Amy, shuddering.

"It's fine," said Trix. "Ode done, Margery?" [150]

"Yes, it will do," said Margery, giving a last wild flourish with her pencil.

"Come on then," said Jack. "Move the table."

They pushed the table out of the way, and three times the members of the H. T. C. encircled the doomed post-office in solemn silence, after which each laid a hand on its top as a farewell greeting. Then with a gesture commanding silence Jack began to speak.

"This office, ladies, has served us long and faithfully, and many are the pleasures it has given us. We owe to it that our dear friend, Mr. Oliver Twist, is still with us, and it has made the Lady Alma Cara happy and done a noble work in the six months of its life. But the year is ending to-night, and the office is to end with it, because each has lasted as long as it can. We say farewell to this happy year, and we are glad that it was so happy. And we say farewell to our good post-office,

and we are glad it was so good. I for one shall keep its memory dear even in the new scenes to which I am about to depart. And if the H. T. C. has a new post-office next summer we shall still love and cherish the recollection of this one, to which we now say good-by. Girls, take a corner each." [151]

Amy sniffed outright as she lifted her end, and Margery looked excited, while Trix whispered to her, "I think Jack will be a priest, he preaches so splendidly."

They bore the little post-office to the grate, and laid it on the coals. It was wet with snow, and sputtered, and steamed awhile before it kindled. At last a little tongue of flame ran along the roof, and came out at one of the boxes.

"Now, Margery, begin your ode," whispered Jack. "Read slowly."

Margery read:

"Sweet post-office, though you are dear,  
The hour has come to say good-by;  
You end now with the ending year,  
And we stand here to see you die.  
You served us well in summer's heat;  
You changed two foes to man and wife;  
We ran to you with hurried feet,  
Because you were our joy in life.  
Though you are warped, we do not spurn;  
We love you still, though you are bent,  
And standing here to see you burn  
We read to you our hearts' lament.  
The New Year comes to-morrow morn,  
When one brave dove far schoolward flocks;  
In June, if a new office's born,  
We'll think your spirit's in the box,  
And thus you will be with us yet;  
Old office, we will hold you dear;  
Our first friend we can ne'er forget,  
So good-by, old office, and Old Year."

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This ode, in spite of its halting in some of its feet, was hailed with rapturous approval by Margery's audience.

"There goes the last end of the office," cried Jack excitedly.

"And our post-office is over," said Amy sadly.

"And Jack's going away," added Margery.

"Only till June, and then we'll have a new office and Jack back again," said Trix.

"And the Happy Thought Club's going to last forever," cried Jack.

"Let's give three cheers for the H. T. C. as a close of the exercises. Hurry up before the box is quite gone."

The cheers were given, and then four figures curled up on the hearth-rug to watch the last embers of the post-office fade away, and build castles in the air for the future achievements of the H. T. C. in the New Year so close upon them.

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